

The “Doomed Bastards” in the Dungeon of Graves

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Foreword

This story was original posted as a serial on the ENWorld (www.enworld.org) Story Hour forum from August 2006 through August 2008. Like my earlier stories, *Travels through the Wild West* and *The Shackled City*, it is based upon the *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset (in this case, the 3.5 edition of the rules).

This story is centered on the dungeon included in the *Rappan Athuk Reloaded* adventure boxed set published by Necromancer Games. I have set those materials in a world of my own creation. While this document may be freely distributed, no portion of it should be sold or otherwise used for profit. All other rights are reserved by the author.

Book 1

Chapter 1

ROLL CALL

The column emerged from the low hills like a line of ants. The sounds of boots tromping on the dry earth and the swirl of dust in the air above them announced their arrival. There were well over two hundred men in the column, all clad in the colors of the Grand Duke of Camar. The omnipresent dust and the stale afternoon light made the orange and gold of their uniforms blend together into a dull brown.

Riders surrounded the column, lightly armored scouts mounted upon fast destriers. At the head of the column a half-dozen men clad in finery and mail rode, followed by long lines of armored foot that snaked back into the hills behind them. At the center of the column the formation bulged outward, the soldiers gathered around something not quite visible within the mass of men. Behind that knot came a large iron wagon that creaked loudly on overloaded axles, drawn by four massive Eremite plowhorses that each stood almost as tall as a man from hoof to shoulder. The end of the column was marked by another three wagons, these of a more mundane sort, and about two dozen packhorses attended by wary handlers.

As the soldiers emerged from the obstructing hills, the leaders in the vanguard broke away, and rode forward. The territory beyond the hills grew flatter as it extended to the east, although one could not quite call it a plain. Hidden from view, beyond the gentle undulations of the region, lay the sea, a mere four leagues distant.

The six riders rode ahead until they reached the edge of a depression that lay across the company's line of march. The dell was not large enough to present a real obstacle, perhaps a thousand feet from one end to the other. Its low point was a mere fifty or sixty feet below the rim. But the six men stared down into the hollow for quite some time in silence, before turning to watch the arrival of their men.

The column split as the leading elements reached them, the men spreading out into positions indicated by their sergeants until the vast majority of them had been organized into rough lines facing the six riders. The knot of men at the center of the formation remained a bit back, and behind them the hard lines of the lead wagon were visible.

The soldiers had been wary coming out of the hills, but now they all bore expressions that were part caution, part terror. From their formations they couldn't quite see into the dell, but even so most of them did not look in that direction, even when one of the six leaders, a man clad in the decorative insignia of a full Camarian colonel, turned toward them and spoke.

"Bring forth the prisoners."

The large cluster of men in the center of the company came forward. Behind them, the iron wagon creaked as it too began to move.

The circle of soldiers emerged from the ranks and opened, forming a semicircle facing the officer. These men carried crossbows, the heavy Camarian arbalests with crossbars of quality steel. The barbed steel heads of their quarrels were pointed at the four men now visible in the center of the circle. While these four were a diverse lot, they had something in common; all were burdened with heavy manacles linked with lengths of sturdy chain. Some of the four met the gaze of the colonel with resentment, or anger, while others glanced away, whether in shame or at fear of what was to come.

The colonel took out a scroll bound in gold ribbon from a pouch at his waist. He unrolled it and opened his mouth to speak, but another of the riders interrupted him. If the colonel wore a look of military splendor, this man—a full decade younger than the soldier—was clearly a noble lord. His clothes were not merely expensive, they were ornate, and the slender rapier at his belt bore numerous precious gems embedded in its hilt.

"Bring out the others as well. I want them all to hear this."

"I do not think that is a good idea, m'lord," the colonel began in a quiet voice, but the other silenced him with a shake of his head. Nodding, the colonel made a gesture to his soldiers. The wagon creaked forward again, until the four prisoners had to shuffle aside or be trampled by the massive horses. Its handlers turned it until the back of the wagon faced the six riders. As it turned it became obvious that the wagon had two solid iron doors, one on each side.

The colonel made another gesture, and the ring of crossbowmen partitioned off the four prisoners while another line of troops came forward to surround the wagon. The nobleman's face took on a look of anticipation mingled with amusement, but the worry of the soldiers did not ease as they took up their positions.

"The sylvan, first, I think," the noble said.

The colonel nodded. Two burly men armed with iron-shod clubs and rings of keys came forward, and worked the locks on one of the doors. There were three locks and a chain fastening the portal, so it took about a minute to finish the task. One of the guards took up a ready position, as the second tugged the reluctant door open with a loud creak.

A stir rose up through the soldiers. The noble leaned forward in his saddle to see what the others had; the cell was empty, except for a set of iron manacles lying on the wagon floor.

"How in the hells..." the colonel began.

"You imbecile, it's a trick," the noble said. "Look out!"

Even as he shouted the warning, a lithe body darted out from the narrow space above the door in the wagon. The guards, completely surprised, futilely tried to grab the streaking form, which landed in a crouch between them and shot forward into a twisting somersault. More soldiers rushed in, spears lowered to pin in the figure, but it shot past them, leaping into a surprised soldier and kicking off his chest, knocking him down as it catapulted away.

More soldiers rushed forward to grab the fast-moving figure, but before the situation could develop further, another one of the riders intervened. He'd prodded his horse forward during the brief fracas, spreading his arms wide. He was clad in a half-robe of gray cloth that failed to conceal the fine suit of silvery mail links underneath. In one hand he held a silver sigil shaped into a miniature of a burning torch. The symbol dangled from a short length of chain, jingling slightly as he moved. In the other hand, he carried a light mace with four wide steel flanges.

"*Invotatus!*" he yelled, pointing the head of the mace at the tumbling figure. Instantly, in mid-leap, the escaping captive's muscles froze, and he fell hard to the ground. A half-dozen soldiers were on him in a flash, restraining him.

"Nice work, Valus," the noble said, with a grin. "I knew there was a reason we brought a priest along with us. Colonel, if you please, continue."

"As you say, Lord Sobol." The colonel wiped his brow with a patch of kerchief before gesturing for his men to take up positions on the far side of the wagon. They repeated the earlier process, and the two guards tensed as they opened the door this time, wary of a trick.

This time, they were disappointed. The figure that emerged from the cell did not appear threatening at all. He was a mature man, perhaps in his fifties if not older, the effects of long captivity showing clearly on his bony frame. There was a collective titter in the surrounding soldiers, a slight rise of voices that sounded of surprise, dismay, and anger.

“Order!” the colonel said, his loud voice cutting through the background noise. The soldiers fell silent as the prisoner blinked against the sun, lifting one hand slowly to shade his eyes as he looked around the scene. His gaze fell upon the nobleman and colonel, and hesitated there for a moment before he lowered his eyes and walked forward, joining the other prisoners as they were chivvied forward.

“Proceed, colonel,” the lord said.

The colonel used his legs to boost himself in the saddle, as he again lifted the scroll. Unrolling the tight length of parchment, he began to read in a loud, dignified voice. There was still the creak of harness, the slight shuffle of armored men shifting about, but otherwise it had suddenly grown very quiet.

“Prisoners of the Grand Duke,” he began, “You all stand here having been fairly tried and found guilty of capital offenses against the citizens and the laws of Camar. Your lives are forfeit for your crimes, but in his benevolent mercy, the Duke had decided to allow you to earn remission of your deserved punishments through service to the ducal throne.”

“Right nice of His Grace,” one of the prisoners interrupted. He was a hard-edged man who did not look all that different from the soldiers surrounding him. Even in a ragged tunic of old wool he wore the look of a veteran warrior, and the smirk on his face did not disguise the hard edge in his penetrating green eyes. His hair and beard had been recently cut in a hasty and irregular fashion, giving him a savage look, but that impression was belied by the calm poise with which he carried himself.

“Perhaps it is only fitting that we begin with you, Corath Dar,” the colonel said. “You might have had a promising future in the Duke’s legions, had you not been discharged with disgrace for repeated instances of insubordination. Your record as a mercenary was... impressive, but it is doubtful that anyone would have been interested in retaining your services after you’d murdered the four men that took out your last contract.”

“I did the job. I didn’t get paid,” he said, spitting loudly. One of the soldiers laid the butt of his spear across the fighter’s back. Dar staggered forward but quickly straightened, and shot a malevolent glance back over his shoulder before turning back to the colonel and his mounted companions.

The colonel gestured, and two soldiers drove the second captive forward. This one was a half-orc, clad only in a soiled loincloth. His frame bulged with muscles, taut beneath a yellowish hide that was slick with sweat and caked dirt. His bare skull was covered with

an elaborate tattoo, one that superimposed the features of a snarling bear over his face. The decoration was cleverly done, making it seem as though the man's protruding, yellowed tusks were the teeth of the bear. He bore twice again as many chains as the other captives, and in his case, it still looked like it wasn't enough.

"Ukas Half-Orc," the colonel said. "You are a newcomer to Camar, and yet in just a few days within our borders, you amassed quite a list of offenses. A drover's leg broken in an altercation on the street, which according to witnesses was unprovoked. Less than an hour later, eleven men critically injured in a brawl at the Dancing Dragon, two of whom would have died from their injuries had not a priest been present in the room. Immediately thereafter: two guardsmen killed, four others injured, during your apprehension. One of your fellow prisoners strangled in lockup, and a baliff's neck broken in the courtroom where your sentence was pronounced."

The half-orc said nothing, crossing his massive arms across his chest. His chains jingled alarmingly, and the armed men around him shifted their weapons warily.

"You seem to be a violent man, Ukas," Lord Sobol added. "I think you will find adequate opportunity to express your... feelings... in this place." He chuckled, as the colonel moved on to the next man in the line. This prisoner was still youthful, likely only a few years beyond twenty, with a pointed black beard, olive skin, and narrow features that bespoke an ancestry other than the fair Camarians.

"Zafir Navev," the colonel went on. "You stand convicted of trafficking in the Black Arts."

"I violated no law," the reedy man responded. He spoke the common language with a slight accent. His arms were bound tightly behind his back, drawn tight through iron rings set into the metal band around his waist, the arrangement not even leaving him enough slack to shrug. "My powers are innate, and do not come from any compact with forces from the lower planes."

"The elders of the Guild of Sorcery held a different view. You have been convicted of diabolism, and of conjurations of Entities most foul."

"The fool masters of your Guild will regret their actions," the warlock said, but he did not resist as the soldiers seized his arms and drew him roughly back into the line.

"Licinius Varo," the colonel said, indicating the next man in the row of prisoners. This one was a plain-looking man of middling years, who if cleaned up might have been mistaken for a merchant or common tradesman. He apparently had not been a prisoner long enough to fully erase the pads of flesh at his cheeks and jowls, although his bindings had mercilessly chafed at his wrists and ankles. "You were a man of faith, respected by your peers and the common folk alike. Yet you threw it away for the chance to offer loyalty to the foul cult of Dagos. Not only did you flout the Duke's law that proscribed the worship of the Dark Creeper, but you were apprehended in the midst

of an unholy rite, covered with the blood of innocents. Just the description of the scene in your indictment is enough to sicken me, and raise the gorge in my throat.”

“Know that I would have rather seen your entrails cut from your body as you hung upon the Wall of Regret,” the mounted cleric said.

“Tut, tut, Valus,” Varo said. “Were we not taught that the precepts of the Shining Father were founded upon forgiveness, and understanding?”

“You are not worthy to speak His name,” the cleric said with disgust. “May the screams of your victims follow your soul down into the pits of Hell, Varo.”

The next prisoner was the captive from the wagon that had tried to escape, only to be foiled by Valus’s *hold person* spell. The darting figure that had so confounded the guardsmen was revealed to be an elf, but one so dirty and disheveled that the creature seemed more animal than sentient. He had braided his hair into a tangle of convoluted knots that formed no apparent pattern, and hundreds of tiny cuts, some still covered with fresh scabs, covered his naked body. The elf had tried to escape the moment the cleric’s spell had worn off, and had been bludgeoned by the soldiers holding him. He now hung from the firm grasp of two soldiers, his head lolling, only half-conscious.

“Elf,” the colonel said. “You stand convicted of the destruction of property, arson, and murder, specifically of two settlers from the outpost at Greathold. Your people may not all be appreciative of the terms of the treaty between your race and the citizens of the Duchy, but that is no excuse for the slaughter of innocent people, especially the two children whose hacked bodies you left behind. You have not yielded your name, even under duress, but the soldiers have named you ‘the Mad Elf’, and that appellation seems as appropriate as anything else.”

The elf’s only response was a faint groan.

The colonel shifted his attention to the last captive, the old man that had disembarked from the prison wagon. He straightened, summoning up some reserve of dignity that transcended his poor condition and ragged, soiled garments.

“Velan Tiros. Former Marshal of the Western Reaches, commander of the Third Legion, victor at Ravenford and Greenrise, holder of the Bronze Cluster, Silver Cluster, and the Golden Starburst for Valor. You stand convicted of the crime of High Treason against the Grand Duke, and the lawful government of the people of Camar. It saddens me to say it, sir. You were at one time one of the greatest among us. Your example...”

“Yes, yes,” Lord Sobol interrupted. “You made your choice, Tiros, and your bid for power failed. I hope you can sleep with the souls of the men you betrayed on your conscience.”

“I regret nothing except that I was unsuccessful,” Tiros said. For a moment it looked as though he wanted to say more, but finally he lowered his head in silence.

The lord reined in his horse, turning the animal around until he stood silhouetted against the lip of the dell, the last rays of the fading sun shining resplendent upon his brightly colored clothes and their bejeweled decorations. “You men are already dead,” he said to them. “But the Duke is giving you the chance to earn your lives, and your freedom. Perhaps even wealth, coin enough to depart Camar forever, and buy your own kingdoms abroad.” He fixed his eyes upon Tiros, although he continued to speak to all of them. “I am sure there are places far enough away that even the storied tales of woe of such a lot as you rogues are unknown.”

He gestured to the colonel, who ordered his soldiers forward. They came reluctantly, driving the prisoners forward ahead of them until they stood almost on the very edge of the rocky slope leading down into the hollow below. The prisoners looked for the first time upon their destination.

The depression was a graveyard. Ancient slabs of bleached granite gathered in clusters across the landscape, marking hundreds if not thousands of old graves. Three mausoleums of weathered stone that bore a greenish tinge in the late afternoon light were located in the hollow, each huddling apart from the others. A thick, musty odor hung in the faint hint of breeze that wafted up from below.

“There is your mission for the Duke, and your chance to escape the fate that your actions have chosen for you. The task demanded by the Duke is simple: loot Rappan Athuk, the Dungeon of Graves.”

Chapter 2

THE MISSION

“You’ve got two hundred swords; clear out your own damned dungeon,” Corath Dar said. A dozen crossbows shifted toward him, the steel heads pointed at various important parts of his anatomy.

“While my companion’s words are hasty, I fear that his sentiment is accurate,” Licinius Varo said. “You are sentencing us to execution, just by a different method.”

“That is no less than what you have earned,” the colonel said. “This way, at least, you have a chance... if not to survive, at least to offset some of the weight of your crimes in the next life.”

“Ah, but the fate of my soul is already set—is it not, Valus?” Varo replied.

“This world will be well rid of your soul, regardless,” the priest said.

“What about these?” Dar asked, holding up his manacled wrists.

“Set them loose,” the colonel said. As the jailors stepped forward, the officer lifted a hand. “Not him,” he amended, noting the half-conscious elf.

“It’s going to be a real bitch if we have to carry him,” Dar said dryly.

“The Mad Elf will be attended to in a moment,” the colonel said. He gestured to another of the riders, an officer of lesser rank, who dismounted and went over to the soldiers holding the elf, digging something out of a heavy leather satchel at his side.

“Are you just going to send us in as we are, without weapons?” Velan Tiros asked, rubbing his abused wrists as he was unshackled. The soldiers had formed a half-circle around them, facing the slope that led down into the graveyard.

“Fear not, Marshal,” Lord Sobol said. He alone seemed to be unaffected by the thick air of tension in this place, and in fact seemed to be taking amusement from the entire scene with the prisoners. “Your army will not be sent into battle unarmed.”

Four soldiers came forward, each carrying the end of a heavy tarp. The tarp was burdened with a collection of assorted weapons and pieces of armor. Behind them a fifth soldier was leading a packhorse loaded down with a number of old leather packs.

With a loud clatter, the soldiers dropped the tarp in front of the prisoners and withdrew. Dar was the first into the heap, drawing out a longsword that had clearly seen better days. The crossbowmen tensed again, but if the fighter noticed it, he didn’t show it.

“This stuff is junk,” he said, smacking the blade with a fingernail.

“I am sure that a fighter of your talents will make the most of what is available,” Lord Sobol said.

Varo reached for the handle of a mace, only to be pushed aside as the half-orc barbarian drove toward the pile. He tossed aside a few miscellaneous items, then drew out a chain shirt that he slapped over his shoulder. He walked over to the soldiers that were unlatching Zafir Navev. The men guarding the warlock started turning in alarm, their weapons coming up, but the half-orc ignored them, yanking the heavy manacles and attached chains even as the last lock popped open. Navev cried out and clutched his wrist as the heavy bracer sliced the flesh. Ukas jangled the assembly in his hand, snapping one of the warlock’s manacles through one from his own set. With the two sets thus joined, Ukas swept the impromptu weapon around in a trial arc that would have broken a few skulls had not the soldiers hastily dodged back. Satisfied, the half-orc tucked the ends of the chain into the clout of his breechcloth and began to tug the

armor shirt over his ample torso. The garment didn't quite fit, but the barbarian merely grunted, grabbing onto a seam and tearing a number of the links apart.

"Our companion will be useful in encounters where subtlety is not necessary," Varo said in an aside to Dar. The fighter grunted in assent, as he adjusted the straps of a breastplate taken from the pile.

Velan Tiros had taken another breastplate, but was having difficulty managing the weight. Varo moved to help him, but the old man turned away from him, pulling the armor over his head and tightening the straps himself. The result was almost comical, as the heavy armor hung loosely from his emaciated frame.

"What of bows?" he asked the colonel.

The officer shook his head. "No missile weapons."

"That will put us at a tactical disadvantage."

"Ah, come now, Marshal!" Lord Sobol said from behind him. "Surely a commander of your caliber will be able to adapt to the situation. What is it you military types say... 'respond to the evolving battlefield?'"

Tiros did not reply, but merely buckled a swordbelt that might have been as old as he was around his waist.

"Just for my edification, what's to stop us from just walking across that valley, wait for nightfall, and just keep going?" Varo asked. Dar bit off a curse; clearly he'd been thinking the same thing.

"A reasonable question," the colonel asked. "First off..."

"First off," the nobleman interrupted, "we're not going anywhere, priest. This little army is going to surround this valley, and we're going to stay until you come out of this pit. If you try to make a break for it, Valus here will demonstrate the persuasive power of a *flame strike*."

"Second off. Any of you feel a ticklish feeling over the last week, the feeling like someone's watching you? Well, you are being watched. The Duke is taking an interest in you... and likewise the Guild," he added, with a telling glance at Navev. "Do not think you can skulk off and evade your fate."

"Why do I get the feeling I am not going to like 'third off'?" Dar asked, stabbing two daggers into sheaths tucked into his belt.

"Third off," Lord Sobol said, with a wry grin, "We've been dosing your meals with crystal death powder during this expedition."

“Bastard,” Dar said, his hand dropping to the hilt of his sword. An inch of metal slid free; several spears were lowered, and Valus lifted his holy symbol in readiness.

Varo stepped in between them, his eyes narrowed. “So the antidote is another reward for our service, I presume.”

“Indeed. I would say that you have about four days before you start to feel its effects. Maybe a full week before the shakes start in earnest. The end result is quite... unpleasant, as I am told.”

“I am half minded to see how many of you I can take with me,” Dar said, standing easy, but with his hand still resting on the hilt of his sword. The half-orc grunted, as if ambivalent to whether he got to bash heads here, or in the dark tunnels of the legendary dungeon an arrow’s flight away.

“Consider your options, mercenary,” Valus said. “The Dungeon of Graves is said to contain a king’s fortune. And the Duke has sworn that you may keep the excess of what you bring out, minus the standard treasure-tax of seventy-five percent.”

“How generous of His Grace.” But he let his hand slide from his hilt.

Two of the soldiers had unloaded the packhorse during the exchange. “We have provided enough food and drink for six days, along with lamps, rope, and other things you will need,” the colonel said, indicating a half-dozen worn leather packs.

Varo had gone over to a leather satchel laid a bit separate from the other supplies. “Parchment, quills, and ink,” the colonel said, as the cleric bent to examine the bag. “The Duke would like a map of the complex.”

“Looking for another summer chateau, is he?” Dar asked. “A nice, quiet place where he can get away from the stresses of the capital?”

“I require my vestments, my sigil, my other relics,” Varo said. “Without them, I am far less effective.”

“Your unholy devices were burned,” Valus said. “You will do without their taint.”

“No healing at all? Do you wish to even make a pretext of letting us complete this mission successfully? Does the Duke want the Dungeon of Graves sacked, or not?”

The other cleric just sat his horse stoically for a moment. The others had paused in their preparations, and were watching the exchange, obviously interested in its outcome. Finally, Valus drew out a small case of polished ebony from one of his saddlebags, and tossed it to the other cleric. “Very well. We spared these from the flames.”

Varo caught the oblong box. He popped it open for a moment, and scanned the interior. He looked up at Valus for an interval, then packed the case into the satchel, and slung it over his shoulder.

“Let’s get this over with, then,” Tiros said. Something subtle had shifted in the marshal’s attitude. He still looked a bit ridiculous in the oversized armor, and the tightly-cinched swordbelt dangling at his waist. But there was something else, too, a hint of an old fire that burned in his eyes as he walked over to the packs.

One of the soldiers picked up the lightest of them. “Here you go, Lord Marshal,” the young man said quietly, helping the old veteran slide his arms into the straps. As Tiros was adjusting to the weight, the young soldier squeezed his arm before they separated, so quickly that none of the others noticed.

“What about elf-boy?” Dar asked.

Two soldiers still held onto the elf, who was now conscious and standing on his own two feet, if a bit unsteadily. Another two men stood behind them, their swords drawn and jabbed into the prisoner’s back. The officer that had dismounted earlier had fixed a heavy bronze collar around the elf’s neck, which the elf was trying unsuccessfully to dislodge. The collar bore no obvious lock, and now appeared to be a single unbroken band of metal.

“Every general needs an adjutant,” Lord Sobol said. The officer that had installed the collar upon the elf came over to Tiros, and gave him a bronze ring.

“What is this?”

“The collar contains a binding enchantment,” Valus explained. “It was created by the Guild. The ring is the focus. If the elf gets more than twenty feet away from you, it will start to feel a great discomfort. If it persists, at about forty feet it will start to feel an agonizing pain, sufficient to incapacitate it. The ring will also protect you from it; any pain it inflicts upon you will be reflected tenfold through the collar.”

Tiros looked down at the ring in disgust.

“I would wear it, if I were you,” Lord Sobol said. “You’ll need him, in there, and if you don’t wear it, you’re like as not to get a dagger shoved up your ass while you sleep.”

The marshal put on the ring. The guards holding the elf released him and backed away; the elf merely stood there sullenly, his body tensed as if ready to explode in any direction.

“If he breaks again, a hundred royals to the man that puts a bolt through his heart,” the nobleman said.

“You don’t have much daylight left,” the colonel said.

“Well then. Let’s go find some trouble and kick some ass,” Dar said.

“May we meet in the next life,” Varo said, with a mocking bow at Valus.

The half-orc rattled his chain and followed. Navev looked sullen, but he went with the others. The elf followed Tiros, his long fingers still probing at the collar around his neck.

The six doomed men started down the slope, moving into the outer reaches of Rappan Athuk.

Behind them, the riders watched, as the foot soldiers began to fan out in squads around the perimeter of the vale. The sounds of sergeants shouting orders vied with the quiet gusts of the afternoon breeze. Those that remained began organizing a camp, unloading the pack horses and getting entrenching tools out of one of the wagons.

“Do you think they will find the others?” Valus asked.

“I do not want to think about what they will find,” the colonel said. “Doomed bastards,” he added, in an undertone.

The noble heard him. “Doomed bastards, I like that,” he said with a chuckle. “Good fortune, Marshal Tiros!” he shouted after the departing figures, already fading into the hints of mists that clung persistently to the valley floor despite the afternoon sun. “Good fortune, Company of the Doomed Bastards!”

Chapter 3

INTO THE PIT

As the nobleman’s shout echoed over the dell, Dar glanced over his shoulder. “When I get out of this, I’m going to show that prick who the real bastard is.”

“Where are we going, anyway?” Navev asked, as they moved past the first cluster of gravestones. The rough-carved granite blocks were cracked with age, and if there had been any writing on the slabs, it had been worn away by the elements and the passage of time.

“The entrance is in the south mausoleum,” Varo said.

“How do you know that?” the warlock asked.

“Rappan Athuk is the most famous dungeon in Camar, and perhaps in the world,” the cleric said. “There is a fair body of knowledge extant about the place. And in any case, my order tries to pay attention to knowledge regarding our rival sects.”

“What do you me—“ Navev said, only to be cut off as a loud crash made all of them jump. The source of the noise was Ukas, who had smashed one of the headstones with his chain as they’d walked past. The half-orc offered a toothy grin as they all looked at him for a moment, before they continued their careful descent into the hollow.

“Bet all those damned soldiers jumped as high as we did,” Dar said with a slight grin. He looked at the elf, who had been roughly paralleling their line of march, but in a haphazard way, skittering around in a ring that was centered approximately twenty feet from Velan Tiros. “Damned bugger’s making me nervous,” he said.

“As I was saying, Rappan Athuk is a place of legend, rumors, and tales of wild invention,” Varo went on. “By all accounts the complex is incredibly extensive. But what lies below... in truth, you likely know as much as I, wizard.”

“I am not a wizard,” Navev muttered, but he’d already turned away from the conversation.

“We should share whatever information we have,” Tiros said. The old commander was having difficulty, and his breath was coming in harsh rasps. He was already slowing them down, but as none of them were yet in the mood for haste, no one offered a complaint. “Even a scrap of useful intelligence, an obscure detail, may help us survive in this place.”

“Who or what are we likely to find in there, cleric?” Dar asked.

“If the rumors are even half true, terrible, terrible things, warrior. The place was once the lair of a foul cult of the demon lord Orcus; they once ruled over much of this region, and were finally driven to ground at this place. There was a fantastic battle, after which the army of Good followed the cult’s survivors into the dungeon, to finish the job. Most were never heard of again. A good many lie here still, no doubt,” he added, gesturing to the graves that were now thick about them.

“Any other ways in?” Tiros asked.

“I believe that there is a well on the far side of the depression, that provides access to part of the complex,” Varo said. “But the rumors I have heard suggest that the well is not the best route.”

“Even I have heard that, in the taverns,” Dar said. “Don’t go down the well!”

“We may heed that advice for now,” Tiros said, as they passed near to one of the smaller mausoleums, still a considerable structure of massive granite blocks tinged a faint green. “But it is a good idea to know all our options.”

“Taking command, marshal?” Dar asked. “Because you should know I’ve got a slight problem with authority.”

“I do not want to command anyone,” Tiros said. “But if we don’t work together, we’re not going to be anything more than another mark on this place’s long tally of slain heroes and brave fools.”

“Well, I’m neither, so I think we’re okay for now,” Dar returned. “Damn it, elf, stop that skittering around!” he yelled, angrily pushing forward, forcing the others to hasten to keep up. He only went a short way, to a nearby cluster of graves that rose up before them, before he came to an abrupt stop. The others came up to find him staring at a particular grave.

The earth here had been freshly disturbed, the shallow grave lying open and waiting. But it was the granite marker that the fighter was looking at. The stone was in as poor a condition as the others surrounding it, but an inscription had been freshly chiseled in the mineral, precise marks that formed words in the common tongue.

MARSHAL VELAN TIROS
1311-1365

“Well now, that’s interesting,” Varo said, as they gathered around the grave.

“But... how...” Navev said. Ukas walked by, and shouldered Tiros, knocking him off-balance. The old marshal staggered forward into the shallow grave, only narrowly avoiding catching himself before he pitched forward head-first into the headstone. The half-orc guffawed as he continued past. As he moved out of the way they could see the mad elf watching them from behind another headstone, the creature’s wild eyes shining brightly in the late afternoon light.

“Quite the wit, that one,” Varo said after the departing half-orc.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dar said, as he helped Tiros out of the grave with a proffered hand. “I wouldn’t put it past that twice-damned Sobol to have sent a soldier ahead to mark that stone.” None of the others looked like they bought that explanation.

“I need a moment,” Tiros said, leaning against the tall headstone.

“I have some minor curatives available to me,” Varo said, pausing. Dar and Navev had already moved to follow Ukas, and the elf had disappeared once again.

“I will be fine. Just a moment,” the marshal said, shrugging out of his pack.

The cleric nodded and followed the others.

Tiros knelt, grimacing as his battered knees protested. He unlaced the top of the pack, and quickly surveyed the contents. It did not take him long to find what had been added, under the greasy wrappings that contained preserved military-issue trail rations.

It didn't look like much. A tattered scrap of old linen, wrapped around a small bulge. As he carefully opened the wrap, Tiros saw that it was in fact a soiled linen glove that had seen better days. It had protected a tiny vial of thick glass that contained a scant quantity of deep blue liquid.

"Thank you, my friends," he said, clutching his prize in his fist, tight against his chest.

The marshal looked up to see that the others had gathered in front of the primary mausoleum. Varo glanced back at him, and he managed to wave—while concealing the glove and the vial in his other hand.

He quickly resecured the pack and rose. As he got back to his feet, using his body to block the view of his companions, he opened the vial and downed the contents in a single gulp. Then he slid the glove on over his right hand, and moved to rejoin the group.

The huge mausoleum rose up ahead of them. As Tiros approached, he saw that this one was considerably larger than the other two, but it was sunk into a hollow deeper than the rest of the dell, masking its true scale until they had gotten close. Weathered stone steps led down to a set of tall iron doors in the front of the structure; there were no other exits that they could see from this vantage. The entire building was carved with sinister scenes, culminating in a line of malevolent-looking gargoyles of dark green stone that were irregularly spaced around the perimeter of the mausoleum's roof. The company watched those decorations carefully, but none of them so much as quivered as they approached.

"Are you all right?" Varo asked.

"I am fine," Tiros said. The cleric raised an eyebrow; the old man did in fact look much improved, as if the effects of his imprisonment had been washed off of his frame. The others, their attentions drawn to the mausoleum, did not appear to notice.

"I trust this not," Dar said. He bent down and picked up a piece of rock that had come off a crumbling gravestone. His hand snapped out, and the rock caromed off the face of one of the gargoyles.

"What are you..." Navev began, but Tiros cut him off with a raised hand. The six of them stared up at the gargoyles, waiting.

And then the one that Dar had struck slowly turned its head.

“Damn it, I hate it when I’m right,” Dar said, as he whipped his sword out of its scabbard. Eight of the gargoyles rose out of their perches, wings spreading out wide behind them.

Chapter 4

THE MAUSOLEUM

The gargoyles lifted into the air, their intent obvious.

“Bows would have been right handy about now,” Dar said, drawing his sword.

“Form a defensive ring!” Tiros shouted. But the gargoyles were already diving to the attack, and his companions were already launching their own counters.

Navev had claimed a wickedly-spiked morningstar from the weapons provided by the Duke’s men, but he made no move for the ugly weapon stuck into his belt. As he looked up at the green gargoyles, his eyes began to shine with a red glow that cast the lines of his face into stark relief. As his hands came up, each likewise was surrounded by a faint scarlet nimbus that seemed to emanate from within his flesh.

The warlock’s brought his hands together, and as the heels of his hands slapped, his fingers spread wide, the twin glows coalesced into an orb of coruscating red and black energies. The glowing sphere erupted from his grasp as soon as it was formed, flying up to strike the lead gargoyle solidly across its right shoulder. The creature screeched as the *eldritch blast* ripped into its unnatural hide.

Unfortunately for Navev, his attack made him the primary target. Two gargoyles swooped down upon him, lashing out with their hind claws. One clipped the side of his head, opening a bloody gash an inch long in his scalp. The blow staggered him, and he fell back, the gargoyles in hot pursuit.

Ukas let out a roar as he charged forward into the fray. Unconcerned by any tactical concerns, he merely swept his chain up into the torso of the nearest gargoyle as it dove, putting his full strength behind the swing. The gargoyle was hit hard enough to reverse the momentum of its dive, flying back several feet before it could recover. A second gargoyle swept around and came at the barbarian from behind, tearing a wicked series of gashes in his thick left bicep with a sweep of its claws.

Dar and Varo moved back to back as a trio of gargoyles landed around them and leapt to the attack. The fighter adjusted his stance to face two of them, scoring a hit with his

sword that appeared to have no effect upon the creature. “How in the hells are we supposed to kill these things?” he asked no one in particular.

The last gargoyle dove at Tiros, blocking his route to Dar and Varo, its hind claws extended toward the marshal's eye sockets. The old commander dove to the side, but he could not avoid a painful cut at the base of his neck as the claws tore blindly as his back. For a moment the gargoyle nearly had a grip on him, but then he fell free. The creature flapped its wings and landed a few feet away, turning to grin maliciously at the overmatched warrior.

“The marshal is in difficulty,” Varo pointed out, narrowly evading his foe's first rush.

“I have my own problems!” Dar said, grimacing as he took several gashes to his less-protected arms. Thus far he was keeping his two foes at bay, but only barely.

Navev tried to flee, but one of his foes flew ahead of him and landed in his path. Behind him, the other was fast approaching, intending to cut him off. With no place to go, the warlock hit his foe with another *eldritch blast* at close range. The energies of the sphere savaged the gargoyle again, blasting a swath across its torso, but it was clear that the creature could absorb a fair amount of punishment.

Navev screamed as the two creatures leapt upon him.

Ukas grunted as gargoyle claws tore at his limbs. Blood was running down his arms and legs from several shallow gashes, but the half-orc, lost within a blind fighting rage, paid those little hurts no heed. The gargoyle in front of him was still hovering, slashing with its hind claws, while the one at his back was coming at him with claws, horn, and bite.

Taking up his chain, the barbarian swept it up into the injured gargoyle before him. The creature tried to dart back, but one end of the chain, weighted by an iron manacle, looped around its neck. The monster squeaked as Ukas heaved, yanking the gargoyle out of the air, and swinging it around until it collided into its companion. Both creatures fell to the ground, and Ukas released the chain as both of them got tangled up in the improvised weapon.

Dar felt a cold chill spread through his body as one of the gargoyles facing him scored a pair of hits with its claws. The wounds were not serious, but for a moment he felt his muscles going numb, his guard coming down. A surge of desperation filled him, and he barely fought off the effect.

“They have some kind of foul power!” he yelled to the cleric behind him. “Can you counter it?”

“If I had my sigil, perhaps,” Varo said. His foe, seeing that the cleric's weapons could not harm it, surged eagerly forward. Varo waited, letting it cut him across the body, his

armor absorbing most of the force of the blow. The attack still hurt... but not as much as the gargoyle did a moment later, as the priest of Dagos seized the creature's wrist, and unleashed the power of an *inflict serious wounds* into it. The gargoyle screamed and pulled back as nasty cracks appeared in its arm and shoulder.

"You hurt it?" Dar asked over his shoulder, keeping his attention focused on his two adversaries.

"Yes, but not enough," the cleric replied, as his enemy snarled and came at him again.

Tiros regained his footing just in time to meet the gargoyle's renewed assault. Thus far, he had not even reached for the old sword at his belt, but as the gargoyle leapt at him for another attack, he snapped his fingers—the fingers of his right hand.

Out of nowhere, a longsword of brilliant blue steel appeared in the old marshal's hand. The gargoyle, surprised, nevertheless continued its attack, only to scream as Tiros slashed the blade across the side of its body. The sword seemed to sing as it rang against the monster's stony flesh, and a huge crack erupted in its side.

The gargoyle staggered back, newly cautious.

Dar caught a glimpse of the marshal fighting off the gargoyle out of the corner of his eye. *What in the hells?* he thought. He didn't have time to consider further as one of his foes, overconfident at the fighter's ineffectiveness thus far, leapt at him with claws extended toward his throat. The fighter quickly recovered and dodged, driving his sword up into the gargoyle's side. The creature's resistances absorbed much of the strength of the blow, but the critical hit nevertheless had obviously hurt it.

Unfortunately for Dar, the attack gave the creature's companion an opening, and it leapt at him, tearing vicious gashes in his body as it threatened to bear him down beneath the fury of its assault.

A final cry came from the direction of Navev, and was suddenly cut off. The warlock had vanished beneath the flapping wings and emerald bodies of the attacking gargoyles. But now he reappeared as the two monsters flapped their wings and lifted into the air. They carried the motionless and bloody form of the warlock between them, Navev hanging limp in their claws as they slowly lifted him upward toward the roof of the mausoleum.

Chapter 5

THE GUARDIANS

“We are pretty damned screwed,” Dar said, as he struggled to keep his feet as the gargoyle ravaged his back. He was already starting to feel woozy from loss of blood.

But then the weight fell away from him. He spun to see the gargoyle frantically struggling, trying to dislodge the weight of the Mad Elf from its back. The elf had gotten a dagger from somewhere, and was thrusting it in rapid succession into the gargoyle’s neck. Thus far he didn’t seem to be doing a lot of damage, but he’d certainly distracted it.

There was no time to be grateful for his opportunity, as Dar’s second foe surged at him again. “To the hells with it,” the fighter growled, shucking his shield and taking up his sword with both hands. He met the gargoyle’s rush with a loud cry, using his full strength to drive the blade hard into its chest. The sword hit the creature’s stony hide and kept going, piercing its chest. Dar kept pushing, driving the gargoyle back, ignoring its claws as they tore at his arms. He didn’t stop until the crossguard of the sword met its skin, until the gargoyle toppled over backwards. Its body cracked, crevices expanding outward from the terrible wound, and it crumbled into dust as it died.

“Well, that’s one,” Dar said, swaying as he stood over the creature’s remains.

Varo’s enemy, stung by the cleric’s power, regarded him with a new caution. The priest just stood there, waiting, a nasty look in his eyes. For a full second, two, the adversaries just watched each other. Then, with a shriek, the gargoyle rushed forward. Varo again just waited, and as the gargoyle slashed at him, he reached forward and seized the creature’s skull with his hands. Once more the dark power of his god flowed at his call, and the gargoyle staggered as cracks spread out across its head. Its black eyes flashed, and its body came apart as the second *inflict wounds* spell ended it.

Navev, paralyzed by the claws of the gargoyles, could do nothing to avert his death as the gargoyles took him from the field of battle. But even as he lifted higher into the air, he felt a sudden weight tug at him.

The gargoyles felt it too, and looked down to see Velan Tiros holding onto the warlock’s ankle, the aged marshal’s weight dragging the two of them down despite the efforts of the two gargoyles. The marshal’s magical sword shone in his other hand, but the gargoyles were too far out of reach for him to bring it into play. For a moment, the scene was almost comical, the two creatures and two humans fluttering along drunkenly, lurching back and forth in the general direction of the mausoleum. That image lasted only until Tiros’s original foe slammed into the marshal from behind. The gargoyle had been seriously wounded, but when Tiros had gone to Navev’s aid, it had been quick to rejoin the fight. The force of the impact was enough to jar Navev from the grasp of the two flying gargoyles, and all three of them—Navev, Tiros, and Tiros’s enemy—fell hard to the ground in a heap.

Tiros’s sword went flying from his grasp. He tried to stand, but took a claw hard across the face, and collapsed. He did not get up.

The two gargoyles that had seized Navev flapped to the ground almost casually a few feet away. The one that had taken down the marshal got back to its feet, and reached down to put a final end to what it had begun.

All three gargoyles turned as a loud cry echoed across the battlefield.

Ukas the barbarian came rushing forward, holding a massive granite grave marker above his head. The gargoyles shrieked and turned to face the charging half-orc, but all the first one got was fifty pounds of stone slammed down upon its head. The blow drove the gargoyle's skull down to where its liver would have been, if it had been a normal creature. The creature crumbled and came apart, its gemstone eyes clattering to the ground at its feet.

The other two gargoyles swung out to flank the barbarian, their claws extended. Ukas took a beating, blood spraying from his wounds until his attackers were splattered with red smears. But somehow the barbarian remained standing, swinging blindly about with the headstone. He clipped a gargoyle hard across the shoulder, knocking it back, but the blow also was the final straw for the beaten old slab, which came apart in a shatter of debris.

As if that wasn't bad enough, another shriek announced the arrival of yet another gargoyle behind him. The creature still trailed the barbarian's chain, tangled hopelessly around its leg, but it still looked as though it had a lot of fight left in it.

Ukas turned and saw it coming. The barbarian's left eye was swollen and covered with blood, half blinding him, and his left arm was a mess of shredded flesh, with the white of bone showing at one gory point. But the half-orc raged on, and he laughed as more foes came upon him.

Swarming upon the half-orc, the gargoyles failed to notice another threat, until it was standing right behind them.

"Hey, ugly."

The gargoyle turned in time to take two feet of blue steel through its gut. The gargoyle screamed and collapsed as Dar drove Tiros's magical weapon into its body. The second gargoyle broke away from the half-orc and leapt at the fighter from the side, but Dar whipped the sword up and took its left claw off at the wrist.

"Damn," the fighter said, grinning now despite his still-serious wounds.

Varo had helped the elf put down the last gargoyle on their side of the battlefield, using another spontaneous *inflict wounds* spell to kill the creature. The elf skittered off as the cleric ran toward the others, careful to give the still-battling combatants a decent berth as he made his way toward where Tiros and Navev had fallen.

The remaining gargoyles continued to press their attack. Ukas seized one in a chokehold, tightening his grip even as it continued to savage his limbs with its claws. Dar was struck by the other claw of the one he'd hurt, and he nearly went down, barely recovering in time to avoid its next rush. It leapt into the air and dove down on him, and it was luck more than anything else that brought his sword up in time to meet its descending body. The two collided, hard, and this time when the fighter fell, he groaned and lay there, unable to rise.

The gargoyle stepped forward, itself critically hurt. No blood came from the severed stump of its right hand, but cracks covered its body from the rough treatment it had suffered.

It reached for Dar, but then its head exploded as an *eldritch blast* caught it an inch below its right ear. Navev lay in a bloody heap, the red glow shining eerily from his eyes, but at least he was moving.

The battle was over. Ukas stood over his last foe as it crumbled, wavering as his rage began to wane. He would have died, most likely, had not Varo reached him in that moment with a healing spell. Even with that intervention, he could barely stand.

Tiros, likewise battered to within an inch of his life, recovered his sword from where it lay beside the bleeding Dar. The cleric, now armed with a slender ebon wand, came to the fighter's aid next, and brought him back to full consciousness. The fighter looked at both the wand and the marshal's sword, which vanished with a flick of his wrist.

"Been holding out on us?" he asked, the comment directed to both the cleric and the marshal. He started to rise, but only made it to a crouch as blood oozed anew from several deep gashes in his arms and torso.

"Hold still," Varo said, applying more of the magic of his device. "This wand and another were in the box that Valus gave me. They are among the least potent of their kind, but they will save your life if you stop floundering about and let them work."

"What about that sword?" Dar said.

"One of the guards smuggled it to me," Tiros said. "We should get moving—the mists obscure this place, but no doubt the Duke's men monitored the battle, and if they suspect that I hold *Valor*, they will no doubt take it as a prize for their master."

Dar wiped a hand over his face; the gesture only ended up smearing more blood across his features. He grimaced, and stood. With more of Varo's healing taking effect, he could now do so unassisted. "How much power does that thing have?"

"It was fully charged, but another battle like that, and that will be it," Varo said, returning to Tiros and Navev.

“Damn,” the fighter said, looking around. “We haven’t even gotten inside yet, and already we’ve gotten our asses kicked.”

“At least we survived,” Tiros replied. He looked tired, but also determined as he wiped blood of his arms with a dirty rag. Varo healed him until all of his cuts stopped bleeding and sealed shut, then turned to help Navev. The half-orc recovered his chain from the ruin of the last gargoyle. There was no sign of the elf, but they could almost *feel* him nearby, watching. And in any case, as long as Tiros wore the ring bound to the mad creature’s collar, there was no place else he could go.

All that was left of the gargoyles was green rubble and their gemstone eyes, ovoids of black jet. Dar started picking up the latter, dropping the precious stones into a pouch.

“What are you doing?” Tiros asked.

“Getting paid,” the mercenary answered.

Chapter 6

THE SEPULCHER

Once they had recovered from the ordeal of the battle, the Doomed Bastards turned their attention back to the mausoleum. The great iron doors were carved with desperate scenes of violence; great demonic things were represented in the cold metal. All of the companions, with the exception of Varo, shuddered at the sight. The expression on the cleric’s face was unreadable, but something powerful burned in his eyes as he scanned the graven portals.

The huge portals were secured with an obvious lock in a recess within the seam that joined the doors. Tiros went forward, wary, and knelt to examine the mechanism, careful not to touch anything that might be trapped.

“Dwarvish, I think,” he reported, after a few moments. “Pretty complex. In good condition, all things considered.”

“We should have the elf open it,” Dar said. “He’s supposed to be the thief, right?” They all turned to look at the elf, which shrank back under their scrutiny. He looked ready to bolt, magical collar or no.

“I don’t think that he will be of much use in this matter,” Varo said. “Generally even exceptional rogues need tools for this sort of thing.”

“Well, Ukas then,” Dar replied. The half-orc flicked a booger in the general direction of Navev, who jumped back. Then he hefted his chain, and smiled as he started toward the door.

“No, wait,” Tiros said. “Wait!” he repeated, stepping in front of Ukas to block the half-orc’s progress. The barbarian looked down at the man—a full foot shorter than he—with a growl at being deprived the opportunity to smash something. “I just want to check one thing first; it won’t take but a minute or two.”

“Given the likelihood of traps in this place, I think that caution might be the best course,” Varo said. “Especially since the first obstacle proved so... challenging.”

“Fine, let’s go,” Dar said, turning to follow Tiros as the marshal led them back up the steps to the graveyard. “But best be quick. I don’t want to be stuck in this place after nightfall, and I doubt the soldiers will be welcoming us to their bivouac.”

The old warrior’s destination wasn’t far off, and was in fact visible from the top of the steps, a dark shadow situated more or less in the center of the dell. It was a statue, a stone monument that resolved out of the fog and twilight into the shape of an armored dwarf. The figure was weathered, with the details of its carving worn away by the passage of years. But there was still something noble in the ancient figure’s bearing, and its stance, with a battle axe at the ready, suggested that it might leap off its pedestal into the fray at a moment’s notice.

“Well?” Dar asked.

“I saw this as we were coming in,” Tiros said. “A dwarvish monument, and a dwarvish seal on the entrance? I thought it might be significant.”

“For this you dragged us over here?” Dar began, but stopped as the mad elf crept forward. The others watched as the ragged creature reached the pedestal, and started moving around it in a slow circuit, running his fingers across the stone.

“What’s he—“ Dar said, only to be interrupted by a raised hand from Varo.

A moment later, they heard a clearly audible click, and a small stone panel popped open in the side of the pedestal at the dwarf statue’s feet. The elf reached inside, and drew something out. He started to stuff it into the folds of his rags, but Tiros was there quickly to take custody of the prize.

“What is it?” Dar asked.

Tiros held it up so that they could see it, a metal object that shone dully in the poor light. “A key.”

* * * * *

The iron doors swung open with a loud creaking noise.

The interior of the mausoleum appeared to be a single large chamber. As the doors spread open they could see that the walls of the place were easily five feet thick, reinforcing the impression of solidity that the structure conveyed. The floor was made of ancient gray marble, covered in cracks that formed patterns of striation across its surface. There were various objects scattered about, mostly bits of crushed stone, fragments of bone, and other detritus of no value.

The only feature of note was a stone sarcophagus set upon a raised dais on the far side of the chamber. The room was unlit, and the far corners were lost in deep shadows that could have concealed anything.

“We’ll need some light,” Dar said. “Varo?”

“Once again, without my focus I cannot be of assistance in that regard,” the cleric responded.

“Looks like we do it the old fashioned way then,” Tiros said, shrugging off his pack. He drew out a number of torches, tucking a few into his belt before he focused on the last with flint and steel. It only took a few moments before he had a bright flame burning on the brand, driving back the shadows and fully revealing the empty outlines of the chamber.

Dar had started toward the stone coffin. “I would not recommend disturbing the dead, not in this place,” Varo said.

“Bah,” the fighter countered. “There might be something of value in there. Or maybe that’s where the entrance is.”

“That may very well be, but I would still leave it until there is no other option. Remember who this place is consecrated to.”

“Orcus, you said. So what?”

“Among other things, the demon lord is known as Prince of the Undead.”

Dar gave the sarcophagus a second look. He muttered something not quite discernable, but he kept his distance as the companions spread out and searched the room.

Once again it was the elf who uncovered the way. A loud scraping noise drew the attention of the others to where the poor wretch was drawing his dagger across several seams in the floor. At first glance, the marble slab appeared identical to the others

surrounding it, but on closer examination they could see that the gaps around the stone were wider, and not filled with dust and old mortar like the others.

“He’ll never get that open,” Dar observed. “Ukas?”

The half-orc grunted and came forward, his chain clattering loudly. The elf hissed and drew back as the barbarian lifted his weapon and brought it down in a powerful arc that ended with the heavy iron manacles clattering hard against the stone. One of the metal bracers broke from its chain, and went skittering across the chamber. But the blow had cracked the stone, and as the dust from the impact settled they could see a fist-sized hole in what was now revealed as a secret trapdoor.

Tiros brought the torch close to the hole, and was rewarded with a flicker of the flame. “Looks like this is the way,” he said.

“Stay alert,” Dar said. He took up a position near the slab, his sword poised, and nodded to Ukas to lift the trapdoor. The half-orc pushed his fist through the opening and heaved, sliding the heavy stone slab away and dropping it to the ground with a loud crash. They could now see that the space below was a shaft that descended out of the range of the torch’s light, with rusty iron rungs set into the stone at even intervals.

“Well, who wants to go first?” Dar asked. He looked around at the others, but no volunteers were forthcoming.

“Right,” the fighter said, sheathing his sword. “Give me another torch,” he said to Tiros. Once he’d lit the brand, he leaned over the opening, scanning the shaft. Apparently he was satisfied with what he saw, for he dropped the torch into the hole. The flickering brand fell about thirty feet before it landed on the ground, sputtering fitfully as it lay upon bare stone. They could see that the floor of the shaft appeared to open onto a larger passage, but could not discern anything else from their vantage.

“No time like the present,” Dar said. He started down the shaft, testing each rung before putting his full weight onto it. The others followed, with Varo right after Dar, followed by Ukas, Navev, and the mad elf. The elf went down the shaft head-first, barely touching the rungs as he slid down close on the heels of the warlock.

Tiros was the last to essay the shaft. He waited until the others had cleared it, then lowered the torch into the opening. “Torch coming down!” he warned, then dropped the light. As the brand fell, the darkness seemed to surge around the marshal like a malevolent presence. The iron doors stood partially opened—was that a flicker of movement in the entry? He held himself still, and thought he heard a faint scrape of leather against stone. Or it could have been anything, even a figment of his imagination, stimulated by the arcane horrors of this place.

“You coming, marshal?” came Dar’s voice from below. “Your little friend is getting real antsy down here.”

Tiros had tensed his hand, ready to summon *Valor*. But even if he wasn't imaging it, what could he really accomplish, if a threat was lurking outside? The hairs on his arms prickled; it was as if the darkness was smothering him, holding him pinned against threats just beyond his perception.

Lowering himself carefully into the shaft, Velan Tiros entered the dungeons of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 7

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

"Why the delay?" Dar asked as Tiros joined the others at the base of the shaft.

"I thought I heard something," the marshal said, as Varo handed him his torch. "Could just be the acoustics of the place playing tricks."

"This place is... foul," Navev said, rubbing his arms.

"It's just another dungeon," Dar said, thrusting his torch at the warlock. "Here, hold this."

"I do not need light to see. And I need my hands free to work my magic," Navev said.

"Well, *I* need my hands free to use my blade, and you'll damned well appreciate it when a snarling monster is trying to claw its way to you, wizard."

"I'm not a—" Navev began, but he trailed off at the look from the warrior.

"Here, I will take the torch," Varo said. "I am no warrior, in any case."

With that issue resolved, the group moved out, with Ukas in the lead. The passageway at the base of the shaft ran off in only one direction, roughly east of the mausoleum. The tunnel was hewn from solid rock, and as they progressed, they could make out dark smears along the walls, which grew more prolific as they continued.

"Bloodstains," Varo pronounced, after a brief examination.

"Wonderful," Dar said.

They continued for almost a hundred feet, in single file, before Tiros's light revealed an end to the passage ahead. There was an uncovered pit there, a dark square about five feet square.

"Another shaft?" the marshal inquired.

"Only one way to find out," Dar said. They moved cautiously forward. But before they reached the edge of the pit, a massive noise filled the passage, and the walls of the tunnel began to tremble.

"What is it?" Navev shouted, his eyes glowing with held power as he stared about wildly.

"Sounds like an earthquake!" Tiros said, steadying himself. A few feet away, the mad elf clutched his head, and rolled back and forth, moaning.

"It is coming from back there!" Varo exclaimed, pointing his torch back toward the entrance. And then, they heard other sounds, these instantly recognizable.

Screams.

"Damn it," Dar muttered, pushing past them as he ran back toward the entrance shaft. The others followed, bringing the torches with them. The light reached Dar just as he reached the shaft. The fighter had drawn back suddenly, and as the others joined him, they saw why.

Blood, a bright pool of splattered scarlet, covered the ground in front of the warrior. It continued to drip down from above.

"Give me that torch," Dar said, yanking the light from Varo. The fighter sheathed his sword and lifted himself up into the shaft, holding the burning brand up before him.

They could see the source of the red shower at once. A set of thick metal bars had emerged to block the top of the shaft. Beyond the bars, slabs of stone had been ground together by some massive mechanism—the source of the noises they had heard before. Crushed against the bars by the force of the trap was the mangled remains of a man. One arm, barely squeezed through the narrow gap between the bars, dangled down into the shaft, trailing a dying trickle of crimson. A few droplets splattered onto Dar's helm, as the fighter stared, grim.

"I would guess that the entire mausoleum was a massive death-trap," Varo said. "The slabs rose up from the floor; it is possible that the entire interior was crushed. That would explain the pulverized stone and smashed bones we found in the crypt."

"But why didn't we trip it?" Navev asked.

Dar clambered back down. “We had the key. Clearly Sobol sent some goons after us, to follow us in. That must have been what you heard, marshal.” Tiros nodded. Dar continued, “They probably touched something they weren’t supposed to, or did something else to trigger the trap.”

“Poor bastards,” Tiros said.

“Pricks didn’t help us when we were fighting for our lives against those damned gargoyles. As far as I’m concerned, they got what they had coming.”

“Still, they likely had as much choice in the matter as we did,” Varo mused.

“Well, there’s only one way forward, now,” Dar said brusquely. Returning the torch to the cleric, he pushed through them again, leading them once more down the corridor.

Chapter 8

INTO THE DUNGEON

The first thing they noticed was the stench.

It blasted them as soon as they had levered open the secret door at the base of the pit. Navev had been violently ill, and all of them, even Ukas, had not been immune to its effects. The foul odor suffused the dungeon like a miasma, and after a while seemed to seep into their very pores to become one with their skin.

The complex they entered seemed more like a natural cavern than a worked complex, at least at first. Rough, uneven crevices spawned off the main tunnel, most of which dead-ended or became too small to navigate after just a few feet. Following the main spur, they came to a doorway with a rotten wooden door, banded in heavily rusted iron, frozen open on broken hinges. Beyond that the passage forked off to the left and right. Bearing right, they found themselves in a small rectangular room. A few rotting animal corpses—rats, it looked like—and another wooden door in the far wall were the only notable features.

“Gods, this... smell,” Navev said, as they fanned out to examine the place. The warlock was pale, and looked ready to void his stomach again.

“It’s hardly worse than the back allies of Camar,” Dar said, although his expression betrayed his own revulsion at the potent odor.

The warlock paused before a rat corpse. The light of Varo's torch showed white spears of bone jutting from the ragged fur. His lips tightening, Navev lifted a boot to kick the noisome object away from him.

Varo grabbed him, suddenly. "I wouldn't do that," the cleric said. The priest cast about and picked up a sliver of wood about a foot long lying nearby. He used the scrap to prod the rat corpse, turning it to reveal the ugly green ooze that covered the bones, slowly eating away at the remains.

"Green slime," Varo reported. "You would have lost your boot. If you were lucky. I would recommend additional caution, were I you."

He turned away, and Navev turned paler, if that were possible.

On the other side of the room, Dar and Tiros were involved in an argument. "You're a naïve fool," Dar was saying, as Varo walked over to them. The mad elf watched from a crouch a few feet away, his eyes glowing in the torchlight.

"Perhaps," the marshal acknowledged. "But that we are all here together by compulsion does not justify this." He lifted his hand, showing the binding ring given him by the cleric Valus above, and Varo nodded as he grasped the subject of the controversy.

"That elf would as soon kill you, kill all of us, as soon as look at you," Dar said. "He bears us no loyalty or allegiance."

"As if any of us do," Tiros said with a wry smile. "We are bound together only for the needs of survival, warrior. I will not keep a slave, even for the sake of this company."

He pulled off the ring. The elf's eyes remained fixed upon it, the metal glimmering bright in the light of Tiros's torch.

"Give it to me, then, if your conscience is so unsettled," Dar said. "I'll keep the wretch under control."

Tiros shook his head. "The ring was given to me; in this case, the decision is mine." Without waiting for a reply, he tossed the ring to the elf. The creature leapt up and snagged it in mid air. His momentum carried him between the two fighters; he hit the ground running, and was gone from the room before any of them could so much as take a breath.

"Damn it, I hate it when I'm right," Dar said. He pointed a finger at Tiros's chest. "It's on your head then, marshal. If that creature comes for your head in the deep of the night, I'll not stand in its way."

Turning, the fighter joined Ukas at the door. The half-orc looked enquiringly at the fighter. "Hell, have fun," Dar said.

With a guttural roar, the half-orc disintegrated the portal into splinters and broken iron fragments.

“So much for the element of surprise,” Tiros said. “I imagine every inhabitant of the dungeon heard that.”

“In this case, the decision was mine,” Dar said, leading them into the passageway behind the door.

The corridor was unremarkable, culminating in another door more or less identical to the first. Having made his point earlier, Dar merely gave this door a shove, revealing another rough-hewn chamber beyond.

This place was likewise in poor condition. A faded carpet barely more than wisps covered the floor, upon which a wooden coffin in equally bad shape rested upon a display stand that sagged beneath its weight. Pieces of assorted trash were scattered about the room. A large crack in the wall gaped in the rear corner to the right, while to the left a staircase led down to another area beyond the range of their torchlight.

“Watch for traps,” Tiros warned. “I like this not.”

But after a cautious search, the room did not appear to hold any concealed dangers. After verifying that the crevice narrowed quickly beyond the ability of any of them to squeeze within, the companions turned to the staircase. The stairs did not extend far, and appeared to open onto another chamber below.

Without waiting, Dar started down the steps, his sword at the ready in his hand, his shield raised to cover his torso.

He had nearly made it to the bottom when his left foot crashed through a false step. His leg slammed hard two feet down into a hidden compartment, utterly destroying his balance. As his body fell forward, however, something held the limb pinned, and Dar’s face twisted in a grimace of intense pain.

“Bastard sons of whores!” he exclaimed.

The cry was echoed a moment later by a cacophony of loud squeaks, as a dozen rats the size of bloodhounds erupted from the lower room and came charging in a mass up the stairs.

Chapter 9

BLOOD AND SHIT

Dar, still obviously in pain but unable to move, lifted his sword into a ready position as the giant rats surged forward toward him.

Before the first creature could get close enough for the fighter to strike, Ukas leapt forward, hurdling over Dar and landing at the base of the stairs five feet away. The half-orc's boots crushed a rat that was too slow to get out of the way, and as the creatures leapt at the barbarian's legs, he started swinging around him with his chain in wild abandon. Rats squeaked loudly, took incredible blows from the iron manacles that weighted the ends of the chain, and were hurtled away, their bodies broken. Several rats nipped the half-orc's muscled legs with their jutting teeth, gouging out thumb-sized hunks of flesh from the limbs of the massive warrior. But those wounds only drove Ukas to a greater frenzy, laying about him with wild abandon.

Tiros squeezed past Dar as the fighter impaled a rat on his sword. Another leapt over its dying companion, aiming for his wrist, but he swiftly snapped the weapon up, smashing the rat hard under its jaw with the iron ball at the base of the sword's hilt. The rat fell hard on the next step, its body quivering violently.

"Are you pinned?" Tiros asked.

"No, I'm leaving my foot there because it's so damned comfortable! Aaargh!" he cursed, as his movements worsened the pain in his trapped leg. Another pair of rats crept forward, warier now, but they hesitated as Tiros summoned *Valor*, and stepped forward to block their path to the injured warrior.

"Try not to move," Varo said, as he crouched beside Dar. He lowered his torch. "Looks like a reverse-spike trap; they've got your foot pretty good. I'll have to cut them away for you to get free." He looked up at the fighter. "This may hurt."

"Just do it," Dar replied, his jaw tight.

The intensity of the rat attack was fading now, as Ukas continued his onslaught. Only a few rats from the original rush were left alive, and as the last few slipped on the bloody floor, the barbarian reached down and grabbed a rat that was trying to latch onto his ankle. With a triumphant roar, the half-orc stuffed the rat into his jaws, crushing its neck with a loud cracking noise. Ukas lifted his head so that the rat's blood coursed down his cheeks and across his breast, then he shook his head, tossing its corpse aside.

Tiros slew the last two in quick order, and as the chaos of battle settled Varo helped Dar work his leg free of the pinning trap. The warrior leaned on the wall, grimacing as the priest cleaned the wounds before applying healing from one of his wands. "I feel weakened," Dar said, propping his weapon against the wall next to him and flexing his sword hand.

“The barbs were poisoned,” the cleric explained. “I can help you, but I want to cleanse these wounds first, lest you add a disease to the list of things that I will need to treat. Ukas, too... rat bites are known to fester.”

The half-orc, covered in blood, merely grinned and walked away.

Dar, benefiting from a *lesser restoration* from Varo, straightened and took up his sword again. He looked over his shoulder at Navev, who’d hung back at the rear during the brief melee. The warlock’s eyes flickered red briefly before returning to their usual deep brown. “Keep up the good work,” Dar said, his voice thick with sarcasm as he joined Ukas and Tiros in the area ahead.

With the rats defeated, the companions examined the room at the base of the stairs. This one was smaller than the chamber above, and was occupied primarily by old bones. An intact skeleton sat propped up in a chair facing them, across a small wooden table that lay in the middle of the room. For a moment the companions regarded the skeleton warily, but it did not stir as they approached, and Varo shook his head, indicating that it was not animated as an undead creature. There was a faint tapping sound that echoed softly off the walls, difficult to place.

As they got closer, they could see that the skeleton and the table were covered with trails of large red ants. There was a deck of cards laid out on the table in front of it, with one skeletal hand extended toward the deck.

“Ah, looks like he lost,” Dar said.

There didn’t appear to be anything of value in the room, so they crossed to the exit on the far side. As the light of the torches drove back the darkness, the source of the tapping was revealed as a metal plate lying on the ground near the wall to the right. A slow but steady drip of water from a crack in the ceiling above provided the noise. A corridor seemed to extend beyond to the left and right just ahead. Ukas stepped forward, his foot poised to kick the annoying plate aside, but as he stepped forward into the arched exit, the floor suddenly dropped out beneath his feet.

“Ukas!” Tiros cried, leaping forward, Dar and Varo only a step behind.

They looked down to see Ukas clinging to the edge of the pit with one muscled hand. The shaft fell a good twenty feet below them, and was clearly deliberately designed as a trap; the cover was already beginning to slowly creep shut, operated by some hidden counterweight mechanism. A solitary explorer would have likely found himself trapped, even if he’d managed to survive the initial fall.

Dar and Tiros were able to help the barbarian out of the pit. There was enough space around the sides of the trap to pass safely, although the rim was narrow enough to make it dicey if one was in a great hurry. By the time that Navev slipped past, the pit door had closed almost halfway.

“Don’t forget it’s here,” Dar said, as they started down the corridor to the left. In that direction the passage quickly ended in another doorway, this one empty save for a collection wreckage that only barely resembled a door. Several arrows jutted from the stone jam, and directly beyond, several skeletons lay splayed across the floor.

“Looks like a battle happened here,” Varo commented, as they carefully moved into the room.

This place was larger than any of the chambers they had explored thus far, easily forty or fifty feet across. The outline of the room was uneven, and again resembled a natural cavern rather than a worked chamber. The foul odor was even stronger here than in the other rooms. There was a ruined wooden object along the wall to the right, an old desk by the look of it. Dar moved over to it; he barely prodded it with his sword before it toppled to the side, even more broken than before.

“By the Father’s puckered arse, this place is more cleaned out than the Duke’s jail on Hanging Day,” the warrior said.

“Must you blaspheme?” Tiros said.

“In case you didn’t notice, this ain’t exactly the High Sanctum, marshal,” Dar returned. “The gods have shat upon us, so forgive me if I don’t give ‘em much ado.”

“Not all of the gods have abandoned you,” Varo said. The cleric had crossed the room and now stood along the far wall to the left. “Over here.”

The others joined him. As they drew near, the cleric prodded a space of the wall with his torch. “Look.” The flames flickered slightly.

Tiros examined the spot indicated. “A secret door here. It looks like it wasn’t closed all the way.”

“Somebody got careless, maybe,” Dar said. He gestured to Ukas, and the half-orc pulled a stone slab about four feet high out of the wall. Beyond, a narrow corridor stretched out into darkness.

“Oh, gods, that even worse,” Navev said, holding his hand in front of his nose.

Dar and Varo exchanged a look. “What do you think?” the fighter asked.

“Secret doors are not easy to construct,” the cleric said. “Invariably they conceal something important.”

“Yeah, I was afraid you were going to say that,” Dar said. Sliding his sword into its scabbard, he took the torch from Varo and slipped through the door. The others followed.

“I have a real bad feeling about this,” Navev said. He did not linger behind, however.

The corridor turned to the left before opening onto another room. This chamber, smaller than the last, was roughly ovoid. The odor, a mélange of fecal smells mixed with the sweet sticky stench of rotting flesh, was overpowering here. The only thing of note was a long stone platform in the middle of the room. The function of the place was evident in the three head-sized holes arranged in a row across the edge of the platform. The one in the middle was provided with a seat of clean white stone; marble, perhaps. It seemed wholly out of place in the foulness of its surroundings.

“A shitter. Wonderful,” Dar said. “‘Something important,’ eh, priest?”

“This place is obviously populated by sentient inhabitants,” Varo said. “Someone kept the toxin on the stair trap fresh, and obviously someone has made an effort to keep that clean. Unintelligent monsters are not quite so... diligent, in their toilet hygiene.”

“We should still search,” Tiros said. “We cannot afford to miss anything important.”

“Yeah, well you can go check out those holes, marshal,” Dar said. “Damn it, this place is really starting to get on my nerves.”

Tiros and Varo started a quick survey around the perimeter of the room. Ukas, meanwhile, crossed to the marble seat. Tugging off his breechclout, he seated himself upon the “throne.” A series of clearly audible noises rose from the seat.

“I would have thought that nothing could have made this place more disgusting,” Navev said, still holding his nose shut.

Dar watched Tiros and Varo as they completed their search. “Can we go now?”

Ukas grunted a last time, and shifted to rise. To his surprise, however, the half-orc found that he could not get up. He grunted, leaning forward, a look of confusion on his face.

“Hey, what’s wrong with—“

The barbarian’s confused look became one of pain and alarm as a cascade of foul liquid spurted out from around the edges of the seat, and up between his meaty thighs. The stuff had the consistency of explosive diarrhea, an ugly brown mess of stinking, tainted pollution. As Ukas cried out in distress, the brown slick became streaked with garishly bright red.

For a heartbeat, the companions could only stand there, stunned. Finally Ukas began to topple forward, but they could see that the stone “seat” remained affixed to him, the white marble already beginning to meld back into the corrupt brown mass that rose out of the sewer hole below. The half-orc looked at them, pleadingly, as the... thing... flowed up onto him, absorbing the lower half of his body into its fetid mass.

Chapter 10

THE DUNG MONSTER

The companions watched in horror as a monster resembling a mass of living, amorphous crap rose out of the latrine and onto the hapless Ukas.

Finally, as if waking from a dream, Tiros shook his head and stirred to action. “Get him!” he yelled, rushing forward to the half-orc’s aid. Varo, caught behind the creature during his search, hurried back around the stone bier to the front of the room, while Dar drew his sword and rushed at the creature from the flank opposite the onrushing marshal. Navev, calling upon his power, fired a bolt of red energy into the bulk of the creature. The *eldritch blast* blasted a black scar a foot long across the surface of the monstrosity, but within seconds the roiling surface of the creature had obscured the mark, leaving it as it was.

More of the creature continued to surge out of the hole. It was huge, a massive blob taller than a man, and it continued to spread outward. Tiros ran toward Ukas, whose body was engulfed in it up to his chest now. The half-orc saw the marshal and cried out—or tried to; when his mouth opened wide only a spray of blood came out. Tiros seized the half-orc’s outstretched hand and pulled with all his strength. On the other side of the creature, Dar laid into it with his sword. But despite the strength of the fighter’s swing, the impact was like smacking a mass of oozing tree sap. The sword slapped into the creature’s mass and stuck to it. The creature’s movements tore the hilt from Dar’s hand, and almost immediately the blade began to sink into its body. Navev, still standing in the room’s entrance, hit the monster again with another blast, but again the warlock’s power seemed to have little effect upon the thing.

“UKAS!” Tiros cried, his entire body tensed with his effort to draw the trapped barbarian from the body of the monster. Now the only thing visible was the half-orc’s face, and the outstretched arm that Tiros continued to pull. His efforts were having no apparent effect, as the monster continued to spread out over the remaining parts of Ukas’s body, but the marshal refused to give up.

Ukas’s eyes were wide; for an instant the human and half-orc locked gazes. Then, as the light in those eyes began to fade, brown ooze swept out of the barbarian’s throat, out over his jaws, and across his face.

A moment later, Tiros fell back, landing hard on the stone floor. He looked down to see Ukas's arm still in his grip, its end a white and red mess stained with brown.

The creature began to slurp forward, looming over him. There was another flash of red, another *eldritch blast* that hit it full on, and slowed it for less than a second.

Tiros felt a numbing fear fall over him. He'd fought on gory battlefields and sent men he cared about to their deaths, but he'd never confronted anything like this before. He felt his gorge rising, and knew that in another second, he would join Ukas in utter destruction.

Then Varo was at his side, pulling him to his feet. Dar was there as well; as the creature lunged forward, a massive pseudopod forming out of its mass, the fighter met it, taking the blow on his shield. The fighter staggered back from the force of the blow, which landed with a meaty smack. His feet slid on the floor as the monster drove him back, and then he started to go the other way, as its sticky mass got a grip on the shield, and it began drawing it into its body. Dar frantically tore his arm free of the straps on the back of the shield, and staggered back just in time to avoid being sucked in as well.

"Run!" he yelled. "Run, on your lives!"

The companions needed no urging. Navev was already gone down the corridor out to the main chamber, and Tiros, having finally regained a sound footing, staggered after, with Varo at his side. Dar was only a step behind the cleric, glancing over his shoulder to see the hideous creature flowing slowly after them.

The fighter reached the secret door to find Tiros and Varo waiting. "Warlock!" the marshal said, as they helped Dar through and heaved the door shut. "Your power... target the mechanism... we have to seal the door!"

Navev came forward, a bewildered look on his face. Varo indicated the points to target, and the warlock summoned his magic, blasting into the substance of the portal. Shards of rock went flying. Dar stepped back, drawing his dagger.

"Will that hold it?" the fighter asked, as the companions drew back, forming a half-circle around the portal.

As if to answer the question, dark runnels of brown liquid began seeping out around the jam of the secret door. For a second or two they trailed down the stone, seeping out from the gaps around the door. Then, with a sick wrenching noise, the door collapsed outward, and the dung monster poured out into the room.

Chapter 11

FLIGHT

“It’s still coming,” Varo said, glancing back over his shoulder.

“Damn it, those doors barely even slowed it,” Dar said. He looked slightly winded, but was far better off than Tiros, who had slumped against the wall, his body heaving as he fought for breath.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Navev said. He started for the corridor on the far side of the intersection, but Dar cut him off.

“Idiot! Where do you think you’re going? Have you forgotten the bars, and the crusher trap in the mausoleum?”

“Maybe the trap has reset by now.”

“If you want to take the chance of being caught in a dead-end, with that thing filling the entire passage behind you, go right ahead. We haven’t gone this way yet,” Dar said, indicating the passage that branched off to the right. There might be another way out, or at least some way to slow that thing’s pursuit.”

“Are you all right?” Varo asked Tiros, but the marshal shook off his offered arm, and straightened. He looked pale.

“Let’s go.”

They made their way down the rough passage, bypassing a few side branches that quickly narrowed into impassable slits. They didn’t have to go far, however, before the main corridor opened onto another chamber. This one was also nearly barren, with only a large wooden coffin lying against the far wall. Some more narrow cracks were evident along the walls, but the only real exit was another passage mouth in the far wall. They quickly moved in that direction, but as their light reached the dark opening, it revealed a pile of rubble—a total collapse.

“Dead end,” Dar said, grasping his dagger tightly.

“What... what are we going to do?” Navev said. “That thing will be on us in a few seconds! There’s no place else to go! What do we do?”

“We sell our lives as dearly as we can, boy,” Dar said, smiling grimly as he drew out his second dagger, and tested the weights of both by flipping them over, letting the hilts slap into his palms.

“Maybe we can get around it,” Tiros said, looking around the room.

“To what end?” Dar replied. “We can’t keep running. We’re faster than that thing, but look at us... we’re beat, and we won’t be able to go much longer without a rest.”

“I would have thought that you, at least, would have offered a more tenacious resistance.”

“Look, marshal,” Dar began, his voice growing more angry.

“Gentlemen,” Varo said, from the entry, where he’d lingered back. “If we are to have a plan, I suggest we implement it now. I can hear the creature approaching.”

Tiros looked at Dar, who crossed his arms. “Well, marshal? You’re supposed to be the strategic genius.”

Tiros scanned the room. “Navev,” he said. “Stand by the left wall. I want you to draw the creature with your blasts. Keep it near the wall.”

“What? I’m not going to be a sacrificial...”

“We’ll all get out of this alive, if we work together,” Tiros interjected. “Dar. You and Varo, take up a heavy rock or two from that rubble, as heavy as you can carry and still move fast.”

“What will that accomplish?” Dar asked. “Throwing rocks isn’t going to faze *that* thing.”

But Varo had divined the marshal’s purpose. “The pit?”

Tiros nodded. “It probably won’t stop it, but it may give us enough time to get away. I’ll try to keep it distracted. Navev, once it comes halfway across the room, run behind that coffin, and around to the others. Dar and Varo will be slowed, but they should have a chance to get a slight lead if we can delay it for a few moments. And once we’re ahead of it again, we should be able to outdistance it.”

Navev still looked uncertain, but Tiros said, “Can you do this, warlock? Our lives depend on it.”

Navev nodded, but his hands were still shaking as he took up the position ordered by Tiros. Varo and Dar were already gathering their stones, and Tiros paused to pick up a handful of fist-sized rocks of his own.

The dung monster rolled into view, its amorphous form making a sick slurping sound as it moved across the floor. The stench came with it, a rolling wave that instantly fouled the air in the chamber. It hesitated a fraction of a second in the entry, before it started sliding toward Tiros.

“Now!” the marshal shouted.

Navev’s eyes glowed a bright crimson as he started hitting the monster with *eldritch blasts*. The other three held their position near the rubble pile, and the monster shifted and started moving toward the warlock, along the wall.

“Draw him...” Tiros said. “Keep it up,” he added, as the warlock fell back, hitting the dung monster several more times. The blasts seemed to have an effect, or at least they left a visible mark, but the creature seemed to heal the damage almost at once.

“Now!” Tiros said. Dar and Varo darted past, staying close to the opposite wall. The monster started to move toward them, but Tiros hit the creature with a thrown rock, and Navev blasted it again, drawing its attention back.

“Circle around!” Tiros said to Navev. The warlock fled, narrowly avoiding a prodding pseudopod that swept through the air in his wake. Tiros was ready at the coffin, and as the monster surged forward he upended the rotting wood object into its path. The coffin slowed it barely a second, but it was enough for the warlock and marshal to break free, and keep running toward the exit, the monster in close pursuit.

They had barely made it back to the entry intersection before they caught up to Dar and Varo. The fighter was struggling with the weight of a stone that had to weigh over a hundred pounds. “I assume it’s coming?” the cleric asked.

“Oh, we got its attention,” Tiros said. He sent Navev up to clear the way, while he himself brought up the rear, conscious of the sucking sound that was growing louder in the corridor behind them.

They made their way back through the complex of rooms. “Hey, warlock, remember to step over that broken step!” Dar shouted ahead. But they made their way without difficulty back to the edge of the pit. Navev and Tiros helped the others with their burdens, easing around the perimeter of the pit.

“Here it comes!” Varo yelled, gesturing with his torch.

The dung monster surged forward, slow but certain in the determination of its approach. Bits of stone and wood clung to it, detritus picked up in its pursuit but not yet absorbed. It came straight at them, and as it had before, it spread its body around the edges of the pit. As its weight triggered the trap door mechanism, the central mass of its body sagged downward for a moment, but the adhesive properties of its hide allowed it to continue to move forward.

“Now!”

Dar and Varo hurled their boulders square into the center of the creature. The sudden boost of weight caused the center of the creature to sag into the mouth of the pit, stretching out the edges that still clung tenaciously to the edges. For a heartbeat the four men held a collective breath, but then with a “plop” sound the dung monster tore free, and plummeted into the pit.

“The lid!” Tiros urged, but Dar was already moving. He had unslung his sword belt, and dropped to the ground, using the loop of the belt to catch the edge of the pit’s lid. With Varo helping, he pulled the lid up, using the trap’s natural counterweight to help him draw the heavy mechanism shut.

“That won’t stop it,” Varo said.

“No,” Tiros said. “But it might give us a few seconds.” He indicated the one remaining passage, the broad corridor that stretched out to the south. Leaving the pit, the companions hurried in that direction, moving deeper into Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 12

RATS!

The Doomed Bastards followed the hallway for about a hundred feet, before the worked tunnel gave way to a rougher, uncut corridor tight enough to force them to walk single-file. Dar, rearmed with Tiros’s old longsword and Varo’s heavy shield, took the lead. There were more than a few concerned glances over shoulders, back into the darkness behind them. Each of the four were all too aware that if this corridor reached a dead end, they might find themselves confronting the dung monster again, this time with no hope for escape.

But after another sixty feet or so, the corridor opened onto a much larger cavern. This one was several times larger than any of the rooms they had encountered thus far, its far side beyond the range of the feeble light cast by their torches. There was a breeze here, a constant rush of air that made the flames of their brands dance and weave. In addition to the noise of the wind, there was another sound, which Varo identified as made by fast-moving water.

“Some sort of underground river, perhaps,” Tiros said, as he warily cast his torch around, trying to get a better view.

As he shone the light to the right, it revealed a low wall formed of a mound of stone rubble that blocked the mouth of a passage to the west. A loud squeaking noise came from that direction, and as the globe of light extended out over the barrier, it revealed the shadowy outline of a humanoid figure, which appeared to be swinging a weapon

wildly around it. The squeaks intensified, making it pretty clear what the individual was struggling against.

“Help me!” came a woman’s voice. “The rats... they’re everywhere!” To punctuate her statement, she let out a sudden cry of pain, and the shadow-figure staggered forward, toward the far edge of the mound.

Tiros at once summoned *Valor*, and rushed forward. Varo and Dar exchanged a look, and followed. Bringing up the rear again was Navev, who looked about nervously, as if expecting an attack at any moment, from any direction. Given their experience in Rappan Athuk thus far, his sentiments did not seem entirely inappropriate.

As Tiros came forward—keeping a close eye out for any snares or traps—the light of the torch cast the scene in more detailed relief. The shadowy figure was revealed to be a human woman of savage aspect, her dirty brown hair falling about her face and shoulders in a tangled mess. She was clad in a tattered tunic further marred by rips and dark stains, although the rapier she bore looked functional enough. She was surrounded by a ring of dire rats, over a dozen of them, which pressed in at her, dodging her clumsy swings and nipping at her heels.

She looked up and saw Tiros approaching. “Help me!” she urged again, just as a rat leapt onto her leg and latched its teeth onto her garment. The woman let out a shriek and fell back over the far lip of the barrier, falling out of sight. The rats, rather than turn toward the new threat, followed after her.

Tiros reached the edge of the mound, and started up, *Valor* shining brightly with a blue tinge in the reflected light of his torch. Rocks clattered at his steps, but the marshal determinedly made his way forward, his magical sword at the ready.

Dar and Varo came up behind him. Dar started after Tiros, but Varo forestalled him with a hand on his shoulder. “It’s a trap,” the cleric said.

“You think?” the fighter said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Tiros had reached the top of the rubble heap. He, too, had obviously sensed something wrong, for instead of rushing forward he paused. The squeaking had grown eerily quiet.

For a heartbeat, an eerie and utter silence fell over the cavern, save for the quiet rushing of water behind them.

Then Tiros cried out and staggered back. An arrow had blossomed from his shoulder, piercing his breastplate. At the same moment, a small object came hurtling down from above, landing atop the rubble heap a few feet from where the marshal stood. As it struck, the thing exploded, releasing a cloud of fine dust that swirled in the air around Tiros, obscuring him momentarily from view.

The dust quickly dissipated in the cavern breeze, but its effects were immediately obvious. Tiros, already in distress from the arrow jutting from his shoulder, staggered back, his body wracked by a fit of desperate coughing. The marshal's movements caused him to lose his footing, and he slipped over the edge of the wall, landing hard on his back to slide down to where Varo and Dar had fallen back, wary of whatever toxin was in the packet of dust. *Valor* likewise clattered down the stone heap, coming to a rest a few feet away. The marshal's torch remained near the top of the mound where it had fallen, its flame guttering weakly.

The squeaking return, redoubled now in intensity—and growing rapidly closer.

“Damn it, I hate it when I’m right,” Dar said. “Get him up!” he said to Varo, tucking his sword into the crook of his shield arm, and reaching down to help the injured marshal to his feet. But Tiros’s coughing had worsened, and he couldn’t even stand under his own power. Varo took his weight on him, lifting the old warrior’s arm across his shoulders and dragging him back toward the cavern entrance.

An arrow knifed down from above and beyond the wall, narrowly missing Dar’s face and clipping the inside of his shield as he started to turn back. The archer that had shot Tiros apparently had a perch somewhere high above, which meant that their position was even more tenuous than it had first seemed. Or rather, make that archers, he amended, as a second shot whistled past him, missing his head by a scant few inches. As he brought his shield back around, the fighter dropped his sword, which clattered loudly on the stone at his feet.

“Damn it all...” he said. His mood darkened yet further as he looked up to see a horde of giant rats, *lots* of giant rats, crest the top of the mound and come surging down toward him.

Chapter 13

JARVIK’S GIFT

A blue flash caught the fighter’s eye. Action preceded thought, and before he could consider it, he’d reached down and grabbed the marshal’s sword. As with the first time he had grasped *Valor*, in the battle against the gargoyles in the graveyard above, he felt a cold chill pass into him from the blade, as if the sword was somehow taking a part of him as a price for using it. But there was no time to consider the matter further, as the rats swarmed over him.

The sword was perfectly balanced, and it cut through the rats like a hot knife through butter. The first rat that leapt at him was cut in two, and he continued the sweep into a second, severing its spine and knocking it roughly to the ground. But the other rats took

advantage of their comrades' sacrifice to come at the fighter from all directions. Dar felt pain explode in his legs as several bites tore through the fabric of his trousers and the old leather of his boots. A few rats tried to jump onto his back, and only a quick spin kept them from getting a hold that might have proven disastrous. Individually, the rats were not too tough, but the damned things weighed almost fifty pounds. Dar knew that if he slipped and lost his footing, the rats would tear him to pieces in a matter of seconds.

Stabbing another rat to death, he pushed his way through the ring and ran after the others. He staggered and almost went down as a rat dug its teeth painfully into the back of his left ankle, narrowly missing his Achilles' tendon. He kicked out reflexively, and the rat went flying. The others continued to harry him as he rushed after Varo. He saw Navev, surrounded by a nimbus of pale red light, blasting rats as they rushed at him. Apparently he wasn't the only one in trouble; for some odd reason the thought gave him a moment's pleasure.

Something heavy latched onto his tunic from behind, and again he had to stop and fight for his life as the rats surged at him again. He swung around, ignoring the one dangling from his back as he carved up another pair trying to make mincemeat out of his ankles. He'd left bloody footprints behind him, he saw, and for a moment he wondered just how much blood he had left to ooze out on the stones of Rappan Athuk.

Varo had managed to get Tiros into the relative shelter of the entry corridor. The marshal was still hacking weakly, and his lips were stained bright with blood. Varo tried to prop him up against the wall, but as he tried to call his magic, a dark form came rushing out of the shadows behind him. It slammed into Varo; the cleric's torchlight glinted for a moment on steel, and then the cleric cried out and fell forward to the ground. Tiros, unable to do anything to help him, slumped against the wall, splattering droplets of blood upon the stone as he continued to hack up bloody bits of lung.

Dar saw the new enemy strike down Varo, too late to intervene. The thing had the features and ragged fur of a giant rat, but it was humanoid, armed with a rapier and a malicious intelligence that shone in its eyes as it lifted its weapon to finish the injured cleric.

Before he could strike, Navev blasted the wererat from point-blank range. The creature snarled and lunged at the warlock with surprising speed. Navev tried to retreat, but he couldn't get more than a few feet before the creature thrust the tip of his rapier through the links of Navev's chain shirt. The warlock yelled in pain and staggered back, just in time for three dire rats to leap onto him.

The wererat sensed Dar coming and spun to face him. The wererat was quick, but not quick enough to avoid a sweep of *Valor* that cut a shallow gash across its furry chest. The blow would have killed a normal man, but the wererat only twisted its rodent's lips into a mockery of a smile.

“You cannot hurt me, weak little man. I will make a present of your head to Fiilaar... she hates you humans, above all things.”

“I’ll give her a gift,” Dar snarled, swinging his sword in another attack that the wererat nimbly dodged. The creature’s counter drove a hot wedge of pain into the fighter’s side as a few inches of steel pierced a weak spot in his armor.

The wererat suddenly stiffened and let out an angry shriek. Dar looked down and saw Varo lying on the ground, his hand clasped tight around the wererat’s ankle. Jagged rents had opened in the creature’s leg as the cleric’s *inflict wounds* spell had run its course. The wererat, snarling, kicked the cleric in the face, and Varo released his grip, rolling back.

Dar felt another bite tear into his calf muscle, but by this point the pain was almost lost in the wild rush of the battle surge. He knew it would hurt plenty once the battle was over, assuming he survived. The rats behind him were a worry; Varo had proven that the creature could be hurt, but it had also proven that it was a skilled fighter.

But then a loud whistle pierced the cavern. Almost immediately, the rats disengaged and fell back in the direction of the stone barrier. The wererat’s expression turned to one of surprise, a look that quickly turned to an angry snarl.

“Looks like your buddies have left you to rot,” Dar said. Always one to take advantage of a sudden turn in the fortunes of battle, he lifted his sword and lunged forward to strike.

But the wererat moved even faster. It darted inside his reach, and snapped its huge jaws around the wrist of Dar’s swordarm. Dar was wearing a bracer, but despite that he felt a crushing pain as the creature bit down hard.

For a few seconds the two struggled, Dar trying to pull his hand free, the wererat tightening its grip. It thrust its rapier at the fighter’s belly, but this time the stroke was turned by the curving plate of Dar’s armor. With his shield just a hindrance now in such close quarters, the fighter hurled it off his left arm.

A red light flared around the wererat’s shoulders, and it staggered into Dar. The creature did not release its grip, but Dar opened his hand, letting *Valor* drop. The sword did not fall far. The mercenary caught the hilt in his other hand, and immediately drove it deep into the wererat’s chest.

The creature’s grip finally eased, and it stared into Dar’s eyes with a look of surprise. It tried to say something, but it was clearly dying, and whatever last words it may have had ended up as a soft hiss as it collapsed on its back, kicked a few times, and then fell still.

Dar looked down at the body, and then at his injured arm. The bracer was dented, and there was blood, a fair amount of it, that ran down his arm onto his hand.

“Damn it, that’s all I need,” he said. Realizing that he was standing out in the open, the fighter quickly stepped forward into the shelter of the corridor, out of the line of fire of the wererat’s friends over by the barrier. Varo was already on his feet again, and his wounds were already closing as he channeled healing power into himself. Then he turned to Tiros, who was barely clinging to the stone wall, still coughing weakly. Bright red blood ran in a slick down the stone, and likewise covered the marshal’s jaw and the front of his tunic.

“Anything you can do for him?” Dar asked, as he glanced cautiously out into the chamber. There were no other signs of pursuit, but he knew that the rats and their masters were still out there. He glanced at the body of the wererat, and was surprised to see that the corpse had been replaced by that of a small, dark-skinned man, naked save for a scrap of dirty tunic and a belt that supported a small pouch and the scabbard for his rapier.

“The fit will have to run its course; my arts cannot counteract the effects of that dust,” Varo explained.

“Will he live?”

“Possibly.”

Dar turned to see Navev, looking pale. His tunic was streaked with blood from several rat bites, and he was favoring his side where the wererat had stabbed him.

“Saw you got a few of the bastards,” Dar said. “We might find a use for you yet, wizard.”

“What do we do now?” Navev asked. Varo took out his healing wand, and attended to their injuries, touching the glowing blue head of the device to their various wounds.

“Well, unless you want to go back and tussle with that fecal monstrosity again, I suggest we find a way to get past those rats,” Varo suggested.

“They’ve got a fortified position,” Dar said. “In case you didn’t notice, those arrows came from above the barrier; it looks like they have a commanding view over most of the damned cavern. And our general’s busy coughing up his lungs over there.”

“I noticed,” Varo said. “It looked like there were two, maybe three archers. And the woman, of course.”

“Yeah, I haven’t forgotten her,” Dar said. The marshal’s sword didn’t quite fit into his scabbard, so he leaned it against the adjacent wall. As soon as he released it, he felt the warm surge of life energy flow back into him again.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, that blade doesn’t agree with me for some reason.”

“I am not surprised. It is an axiomatic weapon.”

“A what?”

“It is aligned to Law. Created to destroy chaos.”

“Great,” Dar said to Varo. “Well, he can have it back, when he can stand, anyway.”

“Guys,” Navev interjected, softly.

The cleric looked critically at the fighter’s arm. “The wererat bit you?”

Dar nodded. “Yeah, I know, just what I need, right now.”

“The full moon was a few days ago, so we have some time. Assuming that you contracted the disease, I may be able to treat it, given a divine focus and the time to replenish my spells.”

“Well, assuming I’ll survive the hour, we’ve got more pressing problems.”

“Guys,” Navev repeated.

Varo finished healing Dar’s wounds, and looked down at his wand. “Depleted,” he said. “I have the other, but once that one is finished, we will be in a... situation.”

“As opposed to what we’re in now?”

“Guys!”

“What?” Dar asked.

The warlock looked a little frantic. “Do you hear that?”

They quieted and looked around. Dar poked his head back out into the cavern, but the rats were being quiet, for now. The sound of the underground river was still there, but there was something else, a squishing sound that was all too familiar.

And it was coming from the corridor behind them.

And getting louder.

“The dung monster,” Varo said, his words a pronunciation of dread.

Chapter 14

REMATCH

“We’re trapped between them!” Navev exclaimed.

“Yeah, we know that,” Dar said, picking up *Valor* and straightening. “I guess we do this the hard way, then.”

Tiros turned away from the wall, wheezing. He looked like death, with pale skin and blood caking his jaw. “Need... distraction...”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to work here, marshal,” Dar said. “Those rats have the exit covered, and I don’t think that the dung monster is going to want to chat.”

Tiros shook his head. “Enemy... of... enemy...”

Varo nodded. “Wait... I think I see what he has in mind. I think there was a flask of lamp oil in one of the packs...” He slung off his burden and hastily dug through it.

“Hurry, I can smell it!” Navev said.

“I don’t know what you have in mind, marshal, but this is going to be really grim,” Dar said. Tiros didn’t respond, but he managed to stand, still clinging to the bloody wall. He didn’t ask for his sword back, but instead drew his dagger. He looked as though he would collapse at any moment.

Varo found what he was looking for in Navev’s pack; a clay jug that smelled of oil. He opened the flask, and looked around for a moment before pointing at the dead wererat. “Drag him over here,” he said to Dar.

“Something tells me I’m not going to like this,” the fighter said, darting out into the open for a moment and seizing the dead man by his ankle. No arrows shot out at him, and a few seconds later he had the wererat’s corpse in the shelter of the corridor mouth.

Varo poured the oil liberally over the man’s back, soaking his ragged shirt. Almost off-handedly, Dar plucked the man’s purse from his belt. “Now what?” he asked.

“The archers appear to be placed in cave mouths a good ten or more feet off the floor of the main cavern,” Varo said. “But they are all on the far side of the barrier, in the passage. That means that they have a limited field of view of the far side of the cavern.”

“Yeah, but they got a nice clean line of fire for everything up to that point,” Dar said.

“That, my friend, is where you come in.”

“I knew I wasn’t going to like this.”

Navev, who had been positioned deeper in the corridor, came back to them in a rush. “It’s here... it’s coming, I can see it!”

Ten seconds later, the companions burst out into the cavern. Dar carried the dead wererat on his shoulder, the creature’s back alive with flames. A greasy plume of gray smoke trailed behind him, sick with the stench of burning flesh. The fighter ran toward the stone barrier with his passenger.

Arrows erupted from the tunnel, where dark forms could just be seen on ledges high above the ground. One stabbed into the center of the wererat’s back, while a second grazed Dar’s helmet, causing the fighter to stagger and nearly lose his momentum.

From behind the warrior, an *eldritch blast* from Navev shot up into the passage. They couldn’t see if it scored a hit, but it certainly drew a response, as an arrow came streaking out toward the warlock. The missile came dead-on toward the center of Navev’s chest, but at the last instant the arrow impacted the shifting red aura that surrounded him, and glanced aside as if it had hit a steel shield.

Varo and Tiros, the latter keeping up through pure will alone, rushed across the room, using the fighter’s charge as a distraction. The marshal carried *Valor* again, and he seemed to draw some strength from the weapon’s blue shine. Navev was only a few steps behind. Another arrow missed him outright, and he hurled another bolt of energy before he joined the cleric and marshal in the cover offered by the far wall of the corridor, out of the line of sight of the archers in the passageway.

Dar ran forward to the edge of the mound of rubble. With a loud cry he hurled the burning corpse of the wererat forward onto the berm. He staggered back, a few licks of flame clinging to his arms and shoulders, the left side of his face stained with soot. He saw his sword where he’d dropped it earlier, and picked it up just in time to see a familiar sight: the giant rats, surging down toward him.

This time, Dar didn’t stick around; he turned and ran toward the others. His luck finally broke, however, when an arrow slammed into his left leg with enough force to penetrate the limb fully, the bloody head jutting from the far side of the limb.

“Son of a bitch!” the fighter exclaimed, limping toward where the others waited. Navev spotted the archer, a wererat in hybrid form leaning out from a ledge just inside the mouth of the passage. The warlock fired a blast at him, catching the archer by surprise. The bolt of energy caught it just below its right knee, and knocked it off balance. The creature let out a cry as it toppled forward, and fell out of sight to the ground beyond the stone barrier.

The dire rats, meanwhile, charged down the rampart and in pursuit of Dar, moving far faster than the critically injured fighter.

And then, the dung monster appeared.

The massive blob of taint swept forward over the stone into the chamber. It immediately turned to its right, absorbing the corpses of the nearest slain rats as it came. The dead bodies formed a trail that led right toward the mound of stones, where the body of the wererat continued to burn.

“There...” Tiros said, pointing. From the light of Varo’s torch they could now see the stream that bisected the chamber, running swiftly from their right to left, emerging from a dark opening and vanishing through another in the far wall. The stream was only about ten feet across, but in their current condition, it looked like a lot farther.

Dar was still coming toward them, hacking rats as he came. The dung monster was halfway to the barrier, and drawing closer. There were no more wererats visible, although none of them could see what was going on in the passageway from their current vantage.

“We’ve got to get across,” Tiros said.

“We’ve got to help Dar,” the cleric said. He lifted his mace and ran forward, smashing one of the rats clinging to the fighter’s legs. Dar, his face a mask of agony, lifted his sword to kill another, but the rats suddenly broke and fled, screeching as they sped out of the vicinity of the approaching dung monster.

“They’ve got the right idea,” Dar gasped, as Varo helped him to where the others waited on the edge of the stream.

“You’ll never make it like this,” Varo said, laying him down. “This *will* hurt.”

The fighter gasped as the cleric straightened his wounded leg. “Why must you always... belabor... the obvious.” He clenched his jaw, but still let out a cry of pain as Varo grabbed both ends of the arrow, snapped off the end, and pulled it through the wound. He immediately followed with a *cure moderate wounds* that closed the wound and restored some color to the fighter’s cheeks. “That’s the last of my higher-order spells,” he announced. “Best to avoid getting seriously injured.”

“Words of wisdom,” Dar said. The dung monster had reached the barrier, and surged up it, enveloping the smoking form of the dead wererat. “Time’s up. If we give it a choice, it’ll go for the easy prey.”

Without further discussion, the companions waded into the stream. The current was strong, pulling at them, but the bracing chill of the water shocked them into an added burst of vigor. They made their way across—all save Navev, who started to falter, dragged down by the current. The warlock was shunted toward the far exit despite his frantic struggles, and his story would have likely ended there, had not Dar rushed along the far bank and seized his tunic before he could disappear from view.

“There’s not time for a pleasure swim, wizard,” he said, dragging the soaked man onto the shore.

The companions gathered, and looked around. This side of the cavern was smaller than the far side, but it still extended for a good fifty or so feet back from the stream’s edge. There were no obvious exits, except for a few small tunnel openings too small to accommodate them. They gave those obvious rat-holes a careful look, but nothing stirred to threaten them.

“The dung monster’s gone across the barrier,” Varo noted.

“I hope it enjoys rat,” Dar muttered.

The companions were exhausted, but they knew that this position was too exposed to risk rest. They drank from the stream and washed the blood and filth from their garments. Tيروس collapsed on the ground and did not stir.

“He’s been poisoned, badly,” Varo said to Dar. “Both from the arrow he took, and the effects of that dust.”

“Can you help him, like you helped me before?”

“Yes, but I need to rest first, and regain my spells.”

“Well, I don’t think this is...”

“There!” Navev said, pointing. They all turned to see the dung monster, returning across the barrier. The stone rise gave it no hindrance whatsoever. It came down to the bank of the stream, absorbing the last few rat corpses. The companions drew back, ready to flee again. But the monster merely hesitated a moment at the edge of the water, then turned and headed back to the corridor toward its lair.

“You were right, marshal,” Dar said. “It won’t cross running water.”

“It may just be sated,” Tiros said. “I wouldn’t wager on it being incapable of surmounting that obstacle as well; if nothing else it could climb the walls and get across that way.”

“The rats may be back at any moment,” Varo said. “We should see if we can get past, while they are still at bay.”

Working together, the four men made their way back across the stream. They carefully approached the stone rampart, but there was no sign of the wererats. They crossed over, eyes on the empty ledges above. The passageway beyond led to a set of broad stone steps that led downward into darkness.

Beaten, battered, and blooded, the Doomed Bastards moved down to the second level of the dungeons of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 15

THE MAD GUARD

Keeping an eye out for pursuit from the wererats and their minions, or from the dung monster, the companions moved deeper into the dungeon.

The stairs opened onto a long chamber from which numerous doors offered exit. Tiros had lit another pair of torches from Varo’s expiring brand, but they had gotten wet during their brief immersion in the stream, and they cast a smoky, fitful light.

This level had its own distinct odor as well. “Smells like piss and smoke,” Dar said, as they moved fully into the room, looking around for anything of interest. Other than the four doors, there place seemed utterly empty.

“We need to find a secure place to rest and recover our strength,” Tiros said.

“Well, pick a door,” Dar said. “One’s as bad as the next, like as not.”

“Let us go this way,” Varo suggested, leading them to the right, where a short corridor heading off the room ended in a door.

“Why that way?” Navev asked.

Varo shrugged. “They say that if you ever find yourself lost in a maze, just place your hand on the wall to your right, and keep bearing right when confronted with a choice, and you’ll find your way out.”

"I don't know if this place follows any of the usual rules," Dar said. But he followed the others as they made their way to the door. The door was similar to those they'd already encountered, if in slightly better condition. Varo listened at the portal for a moment, then nodded to Dar.

The door opened onto a corridor that ran perpendicular to the one they'd been following. Navev turned to the right, but Varo forestalled him with a raised hand.

"Do you hear that?" the cleric whispered. The sound was faint, coming from the left passage.

"It sounds like breaking sticks," Tiros said. "Or bones, maybe."

"We'd better check it out," Dar said. "Whatever it is, I don't like the thought of it coming up on us from behind."

They moved cautiously down the left passage, Dar in the lead, followed by Varo and Tiros, with Navev bringing up the rear. After they'd gone about twenty feet or so, they could see that the passage opened onto a larger chamber ahead, at the edges of their torchlight. The sounds had stopped, and the smell of urine had grown noticeably stronger.

As they approached, they could see that the chamber appeared to be roughly T-shaped, with a slightly narrower alcove to the west. Their light revealed a great deal of assorted trash scattered about the place, mostly old bones and other bits of long-dead creatures. A heap of noisome matter formed a nest of sorts on the far side of the room to their left. As they entered, their attention was drawn to a long metal spike embedded in the wall, pointing out toward the middle of the room.

None of them spotted the figure lurking in the shadows to the left of the entry until the moment that it stepped into the light of their torches, and brought a massive club down squarely across Tiros's back. The marshal was flung halfway across the room, and he landed in a limp heap, unmoving.

His attacker, a wild-looking man with bulging muscles, clad in a rancid tunic of old hides, screamed and leapt forward to do the same to the rest of them.

Dar dodged a wild swing, countering with a sweep of his sword that slashed through the hides protecting the man's torso, opening a gash in his belly. The crazed attacker turned on the fighter with a wild fury, but before he could strike again, Varo reached in and touched him on the shoulder. A spray of blood accompanied the tearing of his flesh as the *inflict light wounds* spell worked its effect upon him. The barbarian spun around, smashing the end of his club into Varo's face. The cleric staggered back, momentarily stunned by the sheer force of the impact. The man looked strong despite the insanity that shone in his eyes, but the reality of his prowess was even greater, each of his blows landing with the strength of a giant behind them.

Navev, faced with the full force of the man's wild stare, stepped back and brought up his hands. In that moment, his eyes glowing red, his hands surrounded with a sheen of power, one could believe the charge of demon-worship levied against him by the mages of Camar. The barbarian took the *eldritch blast* straight to the chest, blasting a black mark in his hide armor, but he barely flinched.

For all his rage, however, the creature could not ignore Dar thrusting seven inches of cold steel into his back.

The barbarian screamed and tore free. Dar lifted his shield, ready for the inevitable counterattack, but the mad creature turned and fled to his nest in the back of the room. He crouched there, his hands lifted above his head, gibbering something incomprehensible at them.

"Such madness," Varo said, shaking his head to clear it. He drew out his second healing wand, and rushed to the side of the unconscious marshal.

"Yeah, well, he's going to have a much bigger problem in a few seconds," Dar snarled, striding forward, his sword clenched tightly in his right hand. The barbarian cringed.

But just as Dar was approaching striking distance, the barbarian reached into the mess of its lair, and drew out a ceramic jar that he hurled into the center of the fighter's breastplate.

Dar lifted his shield, too late, as a green ooze splattered over his armor. A gob of the stuff landed on his cheek, where its nature became immediately obvious.

"Green slime!" he yelled, staggering back. He dropped his sword and shield, and started trying to get out of his armor. As the slime began to eat away at the metal, he drew a dagger and scraped at the spot of the substance on his cheek, taking a good hunk of flesh off along with it.

The barbarian rose, lifting his club once more.

Another *eldritch blast* caught him along the side of his head, blackening the entire left side of his face. The barbarian lowered his head and charged.

Navev held his ground, and summoned his power once more. Red and black streaks flowed around his hands, coalescing into a point of energy cupped between his hands.

The barbarian and the warlock struck at the same time. Flows of energy slammed into the madman, drawing red streaks across his neck and jaw. He screamed, but the impact did not abate the force of his charge. He slammed into Navev, catching up the warlock like a child, driving him before him. There was no way for him to escape; he may as well have been strapped to a wagon rolling down a hill.

Until they hit the wall.

The spike hit Navev square in the middle of the back. It tore through his body, and a foot of bloody iron exploded out from the center of his chest. The barbarian's momentum carried him forward, and he too was struck, the bloody tip catching him just below his left breast, driving between two ribs.

For a moment the two foes hung there, in a mock embrace. The barbarian reached up, slowly. He placed a bloody hand on the warlock's face. He held it there, for a moment, and then pushed with the last fading remnant of his strength. Navev's head jerked back, and the barbarian fell from the spike, landing in a bloody heap on the floor.

Zafir Navev's head lolled to the side. For an instant, his eyes fluttered. He looked down at the bloody ruin protruding from his chest.

And then he died.

Chapter 16

AFTERMATH

Varo, having stabilized Tiros with a charge from his *wand of cure light wounds*, rushed over to Navev. But one look was enough to tell that it was too late.

Metal clattered on stone as Dar's breastplate, already half-dissolved from the green slime, fell to the ground. The fighter tore off his leather vest and the shirt beneath, throwing them to the ground a few feet away. He checked himself quickly for any more signs of the deadly substance, then turned to Navev and Varo. Tiros groaned, but did not stir; Varo's healing magic had saved his life, but it hadn't been enough to restore him to consciousness.

Varo lifted the dead warlock from the spike, and laid him out on a bare patch of ground. He looked up at Dar. The fighter looked grim; his entire left cheek was a bloody ruin, and blood continued to drip down his face to streak his bare torso. Varo lifted his healing wand.

"Help the marshal first," Dar growled. "If anything heard that battle, and comes to investigate, we'll need his sword."

The fighter came forward to stand over the dead warlock. "I swear, Sobol, you're going to pay," he snarled.

He turned to see Varo helping a still-groggy Tiros to a sitting position. “What happened?” the marshal asked. He saw Navev and the barbarian, and his expression darkened.

“You got sucker punched, and we’re down to three, now,” Dar said, as he walked over to where he’d dropped his sword, earlier, in his frantic efforts to get out of his armor. He got his pack and shield, checking both for any signs of the green slime. His tunic and leather vest had not appeared tainted at first, but when he prodded them, he saw that a spreading green patch had appeared and was rapidly growing through both garments.

“Wonderful,” the fighter said. “It just gets better and better, in this place.” His jaw throbbed, and he felt a bit lightheaded—probably from the blood he’d lost.

“We need to find a place to rest, now,” Varo said, coming over to Dar. He touched his wand to the fighter’s cheek, stopping the bleeding as a new layer of pink flesh formed over the self-inflicted injury. “Tiros can barely walk, and the gods know how many diseases and poisons are waltzing around in your bloodstream. And I would strongly recommend that we not rely too much upon this,” he added, indicating the wand. “Once it is depleted, then all we have for healing is my limited complement of spells. We need to find a place to hole up, rest, and recover our strength.”

“All right, but not here,” Dar said. “Too exposed, no way to secure the place from outside.”

The three surviving Doomed Bastards made a quick but thorough search of the chamber. The barbarian’s hides offered at least some level of armor to replace Dar’s ruined breastplate, but they were infused with an utterly foul stench, and the fighter refused to wear them. Instead, Dar took Navev’s chain shirt, which even with the gaping holes in the front and back, offered much better protection than bare flesh.

They did find a key on the madman’s person, although no locks in the room to match it. Varo pronounced the barbarian’s metal-shod club as magical. Dar initially took no interest in the weapon, but Tiros couldn’t even lift it, and Varo said that it was too large and awkward for him to use. So the fighter tore a few strips of cloth from Navev’s tunic, and created a harness to bear the magical club slung across his back.

A search of the barbarian’s bedding turned up a smattering of copper coins, a gold bar, a tattered old leather-bound book, and two more ceramic jars that were likewise filled with green slime.

“Those could make useful weapons,” Tiros observed.

“No way I’m going to carry jars full of green slime,” Dar said.

“I will take them,” Varo said. He also took the book, which he identified as an arcane spellbook.

“Too bad, the wizard could have used that,” Dar said.

“He wasn’t a—“ Tiros began, but he shook his head and gave up.

Dar picked up the gold bar. “Finally, some decent treasure. This has to be worth a few hundred coins, I’d guess.”

“I could put that to more immediate use,” Varo said.

“What?”

“As I have said, I need a divine focus to fully utilize most of my powers,” the cleric said. “I believe I can use that bar to fashion something usable.”

“With what? I haven’t been paying full attention, maybe, but I think I would have noticed if we’d passed a forge.”

“Leave that to me.”

The fighter looked uncertain for a moment. “We’ll have a much better chance of survival with a fully-prepared cleric,” Tiros pointed out.

“Damn it, all right, all right,” Dar said, slapping the bar into Varo’s palm. “But the next time we find something juicy, I get first dibs.”

“Of course,” Varo said. He was tempted to point out that the spellbook he carried was likely worth several times the value of the gold bar, let alone the magical club that the fighter bore, but he elected to keep that information to himself, for the moment.

The companions divided the supplies from Navev’s pack as best they could. “What about him?” Varo asked.

“We don’t have the wherewithal for a proper burial,” Tiros said. “He was a comrade in arms, and will be missed, but we cannot afford to delay.”

“Moving words, marshal. You’re going to make me cry,” Dar said.

Varo bent over the body and did something. When he was finished, they gathered and set out once more. This time their goal was simple, to find a place where they could hide and rest.

They retraced their steps to the door and continued down the passageway. They quickly came to another door, and this one was set with an iron lock with a hole that roughly matched the shape of their key.

“Well, let’s see what mister Tall, Dark, and Crazy was hiding, shall we?” Dar said, inserting the key in the lock. They could hear tumblers clicking in the lock mechanism, and then the door opened easily to the fighter’s pull.

A horde of giant rats exploded out of the darkness beyond.

Chapter 17

RESPITE

Dar tried to slam the door, but several rats were caught in the jamb, squeaking and crawling over each other in a frenzy to get out. More rats were hurling themselves at the door from inside; it took all of Dar’s strength just to keep the door from bursting open.

Tiros summoned *Valor*, and started stabbing the rats stuck in the doorjamb. One managed to force its way through, and leapt at the marshal’s legs. Varo was there, smashing his mace into the creature’s back, and it landed hard on the ground, quivered a bit, and died.

“Priest!” Dar exclaimed. “Help me keep the door pinned!”

Varo assisted Dar, while Tiros continued his slaughter of the rats trying to get out. The dead bodies kept them from closing the door completely, but while new rats continued to squirm up atop the heap of corpses, only one more made it out into the corridor, only to get stabbed through by Tiros.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, but which in actuality was only a little over a minute, the surge stopped. Dar and Varo warily opened the door. Other than dead rats, the only thing visible in the room was racks of empty shelving. There was a human arm attached to the back of the door, held in place by a dagger thrust through the palm. There wasn’t much left; apparently the rats had taken care of everything that was in their reach.

Tiros leaned against the wall of the corridor, only sheer will keeping him from collapsing again. “I... cannot...”

“All right,” Dar said. “I guess this is where we camp. Varo, let’s see what we can do with these bodies.”

Fifteen minutes later, the three men slept, lost in a dreamless black bred of utter exhaustion.

* * * * *

Dar woke to a sense of disorientation that quickly dissipated. He'd been a campaigner too often to be a deep sleeper, but this time, he had dropped off a deep precipice and had sleep as heavily as he had in his life. He hadn't meant to sleep at all, intending to keep a watch while the marshal and cleric restored their strength, but he'd been just too damned exhausted.

"Well, I guess we're still alive," he whispered. It was dark; the torch they'd left burning had obviously gone out. He found flint and steel by touch and managed to get another lit, driving back the darkness.

The storeroom was unchanged. That was a relief, anyway; he'd half expected to ignite the torch to see a few dozen monsters standing over them. It would have been in keeping with what Rappan Athuk had thrown at them thus far.

Tiros and Varo still slept. Dar's mouth felt like someone had jammed an old rag into it while he slept; he found his waterskin and took a deep drink. Then he broke out some rations and ate his fill.

They had enough supplies left for a few more days, at least. They'd filled their skins at the underground stream, and while he wasn't keen on having to go back up there, he was pretty sure they'd find other sources of water here in the dungeon. Rappan Athuk's dungeons teemed with life, it seemed, and there had to be ready sources of water about to support such abundance.

He realized Varo was awake, looking at him. The priest didn't stir, or stretch, or make any other movements to announce his waking. He was just asleep one moment, and awake the next. It was creepy, Dar thought. There was a lot about the man that gave him pause, but he had to admit that without the cleric's company, they would all have died a few times over already.

Varo finally did get up. He looked at Tiros.

"Let him rest," Dar said. Varo nodded, and helped himself to some food.

"So what next?" the fighter asked, when the cleric had finished.

"I need to attend to a few ritualistic matters," Varo said. "Then... well, I suppose we continue our search for a way out of this place."

The priest took up his pack and the torch, and moved a short distance away. Dar left him his privacy, but when he caught a glimpse of flashing gold, he couldn't help but move closer.

"What are you... hey!"

The priest was using a pointed piece of stone to apply tiny dots of green slime from one of the ceramic jars to the gold bar. The slime quickly started to spread, eating away at the metal; when it reached the point Varo desired, he quickly splashed the torch over it, destroying the corrupt substance.

Without looking up, Varo said, "This is a very delicate operation. Please do not distract me by speaking."

"But... you're ruining the gold!"

"It is necessary," Varo said. "You will not complain when I can use my powers to keep you alive."

The fighter had no answer to that. He returned to the other side of the room. Tiros had not stirred, even when he'd shouted.

Dar ate a little more while he waited. Once he'd finished his crafting, the cleric placed the torch on the ground before him, and bent low, folding himself until his forehead touched the ground. He remained in this position for the better part of an hour. Dar, bored, spent the time dozing, taking a whetstone to his sword, and whittling at a stick with the last of his daggers. Finally, the cleric came back over to the others. The gold bar—shaped now in the vague form of a horned creature with massive, outstretched arms—dangled from his neck by a leather thong.

"It looks like a lump of shit," Dar said.

Varo seemed nonplussed as he sat down. "Let me explain in simple terms why it is not a good idea to make those kinds of statements. The success of my spells depends on my association of my focus with the power of my god, Dagos. If, for example, I were trying to remove a foul affliction from the body of a comrade, and I mentally made the connection you just made, then the spell would likely fizzle, falter, fail. In such a case, the person receiving the divine intervention would be, to put it simply, screwed."

"Why are you here, cleric?"

Varo looked up at him, his eyes glimmering in the torchlight. "Why, the same reason you are, fighter."

"Yeah? And why I am here?"

"Fate."

For a moment, the two shared a long look. Finally, it was Dar that turned away. "Are you ready to move out, then?"

"I am ready."

Dar gave Tiros a kick. The marshal groaned. "Wake up, sleepy," he said. "We're moving out."

The companions broke camp. Tiros received several *lesser restoration* spells from the cleric, which greatly improved his drawn and haggard appearance. Varo also treated Dar, restoring the stamina he'd lost from his close contact with the green slime.

"This place makes a good strongpoint," Dar said, as they gathered up their packs. "We can fall back on this place if we need to rest again."

"We shouldn't dawdle," Tiros said. "Time is not on our side."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you forgotten the crystal death? I certainly have not."

"I thought the cleric could deal with that."

"I can keep the effects at bay, for a time," Varo said. "But I am not yet powerful enough to fully purge the substance from our bodies."

"Wonderful," Dar said. "Like I didn't have enough to worry about already."

They moved to the door. After listening for a moment to ensure that the corridor beyond was clear, Dar unlocked it, and opened the door.

The torchlight revealed a gathering of a half-dozen hideously ugly, green-skinned humanoids that stood facing the door, waiting. A sick odor of carrion hung over them.

Before he could act, the first creature lashed out at the fighter with its claws. The wounds were not severe, but Dar staggered back and fell to the ground, paralyzed.

The ghouls rushed forward, eager for blood.

Chapter 18

THE TOUCH OF DEATH

Tiros summoned *Valor* and stepped between the first charging ghoul and Varo. The marshal took a hit, but he fought through the paralyzing effect of the ghoul's claw, sweeping his sword around in an arc that intersected with the ghoul's gut. The

axiomatic blade opened the creature's body like a sack of meal, and the undead monster collapsed, thrashing wildly.

The marshal's intervention gave Varo the few seconds he needed to lift his new divine symbol, and call upon the power of his patron. The golden idol flashed, and for a moment, the light of the torches was replaced with a strange radiance that erupted from the device. Everything was bathed in a violet radiance that cast everything in negative relief; the combatants were brighter outlines in a surrounding blackness that wasn't quite normal dark. The strange light lasted only a heartbeat, but when it faded, it seemed to seep into the ghouls. The creatures' rush instantly halted, and the undead cowered, raising their arms to shield themselves from Varo's sacred object.

All save one. That last ghoul hurtled past its rebuked companions, bringing with it a foul stench that washed over the humans like a sour memory of the level above. Tiros gagged, but he held his ground as the ghast crouched and sprang. *Valor* came down to strike, but the ghast was faster, and it laid heavily into the marshal, seizing his arms with its claws even as it lunged in to bite him on the shoulder. Tiros cried out and stiffened, and as he fell to the floor the ghast stepped over him, its yellow eyes fixed upon Varo.

The priest stood before it, and lifted his sigil once more. "Dagos commands you," he said, thrusting the golden idol into the undead creature's face. The dark light flared once more. The ghast snarled, hissed, and gnashed its teeth, but it did not attack.

Varo held it, maintaining his power over the creature. He knew that if he moved even a step closer, the rebuke would shatter, and it would tear him to pieces. Sweat began to spring out on his forehead. The creature's stare was hateful, and he knew it was fighting him with everything it had.

Finally, he heard a scrape of metal on stone. He didn't turn, but he knew that Dar was getting back up.

"Dar, kill this one first," he said.

With the ghast unable to defend itself, the fighter made swift work of it. Tiros was moving again, shaking off the effects of the paralysis. Dar turned to the four remaining ghouls, and hacked them to pieces.

"That was a close one," the marshal said, recovering his sword and returning it to the extra-dimensional space inside his *glove of storing*.

"Too damned close," Dar said. "Wonder why they just didn't break down the door."

"This way, they got surprise," Varo said. "I think it is a good idea not to underestimate the foes we might encounter in this place."

The companions set out once more into the dungeon. Almost at once they spotted another door on the right side of the passage. This door was also locked, and this time the barbarian's key did not fit the lock. They improvised, and Dar proved quite an able locksmith putting the madman's magical club to good use. With the lock sundered, the door swung open to reveal an abandoned and empty storeroom similar to the one they'd camped in. This room had a door on the far side, however, and when they opened that one, they found a narrow staircase that descended steeply to another level.

"Looks like it's going in the opposite direction from where we want to go," Dar said. He was turning away from the doorway when Tiros stopped him. "Wait. Do you smell that?"

There was in fact a different odor coming up from below, decidedly different than the stink of stale piss and smoke that they'd grown accustomed to here. The smell was musty, and not entirely pleasant, but there was something else to it that the three tried to identify.

"It is not unlike the odor of a forest floor in autumn," Varo finally said. "And there's moisture in the air; I think there may be another river or stream in this direction."

"Down, bad. Up, good," Dar said.

"Let's at least take a quick look," Tiros said. "It may be a way out. If we do encounter something, we can come right back; these stairs are fairly defensible, and one person could hold back far greater numbers from above."

Dar grumbled, but Varo agreed with Tiros, and the three descended. The stairs twisted several times in their course before opening onto a much larger, natural space. The smells were much stronger here, and they could see fungi and lichens growing on the cavern walls ahead at the edges of their torchlight, and hear the familiar sound of running water that they'd encountered on the upper level previously.

And there was something else.

"I hate it when I'm right," Dar said, as they looked up at the stone archway that marked the entrance to the cavern. Written upon the stone, in letters that glowed slightly in a pale green, was a warning.

Beware of purple worms! Spiegel, the Arch-Mage.

"Maybe we should examine the upper level more thoroughly," Varo suggested.

This time, no one disagreed with him.

Retracing their steps, the trio continued their exploration of the second dungeon level. They found another storeroom, this one ravaged by fire. They poked through the debris a bit, found nothing of interest, and continued their search.

The corridor came to an end ahead, with two doors visible, one to the right, and another straight ahead. The first door revealed another long passageway, one that extended as far as their torchlight without interruption. For the moment they left that one and turned to the far door, which creaked open to reveal a small chamber with walls and ceiling of packed earth. Some dirt trickled down from above as the door opened, and they could see a few small cracks along the walls that didn't appear to go anywhere, as well as a more substantial passage that twisted out of sight to their left.

"This doesn't look very safe," Tiros said.

"Well, I'm no dwarf, but I have to agree with you on this one," Dar said. "Let's check out the passageway."

They started to turn around, but before they could get fully reoriented the door to the side passage crashed open, and an angry-looking ogre stepped through.

Chapter 19

A SURPRISE FOR AMBRO

The ogre loomed over Varo, and while it had expected trouble on the far side of the door, it took it a second to notice the cleric standing right beside it.

That brief moment was enough for the cleric to reach out and touch the ogre on the hip, and unleash an *inflict serious wounds* upon it.

The ogre let out a terrible cry as negative energy coursed through its body, ravaging it from the inside out. The monster reached out and locked a meaty fist around Varo's neck, yanking the cleric off the ground. Dar and Tiros were already rushing forward, but the ogre was quick to handle the priest, hurling him into the corridor wall to its left. Fortunately Varo hit the wall at an angle instead of head-on, but the impact was still considerable, and he fell hard to the ground ten feet away, somewhat the worse for wear.

The ogre turned back to the onrushing warriors, and it brought down its heavy club as they entered its reach. The pair dodged, and the weapon slammed harmlessly into the floor between them, albeit with enough force to crack the ancient stone.

The fighters struck at almost the same instant. Tiros's thrust with *Valor* hit the ogre's thick belt of layered hides, and failed to penetrate. But it distracted the ogre slightly, and that was enough for Dar to slice its leg open to the bone with his own attack. Blood exploded from the terrible wound, and as the ogre turned to face the second fighter, the crippled leg collapsed under its weight. The ogre fell forward, and it was helpless to stop Dar from driving a killing thrust into the back of its neck.

Tiros looked through the open door, and saw a shadowy figure already vanishing beyond the radius of his torch. "There goes another one," he said.

"I'll get it," Dar said, stepping over the dead ogre.

"No," Tiros said, grabbing onto him before he could dart through the door. "There could be more of them, and Varo's down."

"If there's more of them, they'll be back here soon enough," Dar said, shaking himself free of Tiros's grasp.

"Yes, but we can fight them on ground of *our* choosing."

Dar grunted, but didn't offer further protest as he went to help Varo. The priest, it turns out, was more dazed than seriously hurt, and a *cure* spell quickly brought him up to full strength once again.

"We probably don't have a lot of time," he said. "We should get ready."

* * * * *

Ambro was in a sour mood.

The ogre was not one for introspection, but he could not help but feeling that he was being slighted. He had managed to construct a mental picture of his kin deeper in the dungeon being lavished with gifts of gold and magic and elf heads, while up here, where was Ambro? Watching rats and ghouls and that crazy human. Ambro regarded Marthek as filthy and wild, which was something, given the ogre's own challenges when it came to hygiene. But he'd seen the human take down another ogre once with a single blow of his club, and that was something to respect, at least. Ugmo had been a real prick, and he'd had it coming when he taunted the madman, but it was still something to see a little human knock down an ogre several times his size, and even more to see the ogre not get up. Some of Ambro's fellows had wanted to get some payback after that incident—and Ambro had wanted to get his hands on that club—but the priests had given strict orders that the human was not to be touched, so the ogre had to swallow his indignation and pass on the word to his troops.

But Ambro was no common ogre. Deep inside what passed for a brain, he had a sour suspicion that he was being denied the grandeur to which he was entitled. He felt he

was already stronger than old chief Mahrg, who had led his tribe into this place, this pit deep within the ground that went on and on and on. Mahrg had promised that service to the Great Demon Lord would bring them wealth and power. It hadn't brought much to Mahrg except an early grave. If they'd still been in the world above, Ambro might have succeeded Mahrg as chief, but here, in the Dungeon of Graves, there were only rats and ghouls and madmen.

This morning he'd had his troops count their last pay ration that had come up from the priests. Ambro had come to suspect that the priests were cheating them. Ogres weren't very adept at counting, so the operation had already taken several hours, and looked like it wasn't going to be completed any time soon. Utto, who'd always been pretty clever for an ogre, had suggested lining up the copper coins in rows on the floor. That had taken a while, but the problem of actually counting the coins remained. Since the average ogre couldn't count past five, all of their efforts thus far had come to naught. Utto, something of a prodigy, had once counted to eleven, but Ambro had suspected that the ogre, a little smaller than the rest of them, had some orc in his ancestry.

Ambro was getting pretty frustrated, so he felt some relief when Grutz rushed back from his patrol to report that an army of knights had entered the dungeon, and had hacked Zukar to pieces over by the dirt room. The ogre actually smiled as he picked up his greatclub.

Ambro felt like smashing something.

* * * * *

The corridor door exploded into a spray of wood splinters and iron fragments. Some of the latter hit the far wall with enough force to embed into the stone.

A huge ogre stepped through the new opening. It looked down at the corpse lying on the ground. The ogre lay face down on the stone, a pool of its own blood spreading out from the terrible wounds in its leg and neck. Footprints in blood—human-sized footprints—led away from the body, over to the nearby door to the east. The door to the dirt room was open slightly.

The ogre moved forward, letting several other ogres into the passage behind it. It pointed to the footprints, and grunted something in the harsh Giant tongue.

The ogres—there were four in all, massive, ugly brutes, armed with huge clubs and crude javelins—readied their weapons eagerly. The one that had fled before was in the rear, in the position of shame. Its attention was focused on the leader, so it didn't see the door to the storeroom back in the passage behind it open silently.

“Hey, ogre!”

The ogre turned around, just in time for a ceramic jar to strike it solidly in the middle of its face. The ogre jerked back, stunned, as a sticky green goop splattered over its face. It reached up to pull the stuff off its eyes, but only succeeded in smearing the slime around more, and coating its fingers to boot.

Then it started to scream.

“Don’t like that, do ya?” Dar yelled. He hurled his other jar at the second ogre as it pushed past its suffering companion, but the throw went wide, and the jar smashed on the ground behind it, splattering gobs of green slime across the corridor.

The ogre lifted a javelin and hurled it at the fighter. Dar tried to dodge back, but the missile clipped his right arm just below the shoulder. An inch to the left and the hit would have taken off his arm; as it was, the impact spun him around and nearly knocked him down. Blood sprayed from the wound as the javelin landed on the ground a few feet further down the corridor.

“Get in here, Dar!” Tiros yelled from the storeroom. The other ogres were slowed as they tried to avoid the splattered slime on the floor, and their suffering companion, but the big one in the rear was shouting at them now, trying to force his way through.

Dar lurched toward the door, and through it. As soon as he was clear, Tiros slammed the door and used Dar’s club to pound a dagger into the jamb. “Are you all right?” he said to Dar, as the fighter tore off a strip of cloth and hastily tied it around the bleeding wound.

“I’m fine,” the fighter said. Varo was on the other side of the room, facing the door, but he did not move to help the injured warrior.

Tiros had another dagger ready, and was about to reinforce the door when something hard crashed against it. The door buckled but barely held. Dar and Tiros retreated to flank it, drawing their swords. Tiros looked at Varo and nodded, but the priest was already lost within the intricacies of a spell.

The door was hit again, and this time came crashing down off its hinges. An ogre stepped forward into the room, looking for enemies.

As soon as it cleared the threshold, Dar and Tiros struck. This time it was Tiros who scored blood, as he stabbed *Valor* deep into the ogre’s side. The ogre yelled and turned toward the marshal, which caused Dar’s initial attack to glance off its hides and miss wide. Angry yells came from the other ogres in the hallway; the first one was blocking the door.

An explosion of red mist drew the ogre’s attention back to its front. The cloud dissipated within a second, revealing a large, ferocious ape. The creature resembled an oversized gorilla, but its eyes glowed faintly crimson, and a smell of brimstone hung about it. The

summoned creature gave up three feet and several hundred pounds to the ogre, but it didn't hesitate, leaping at the giant and tearing with its claws. The ogre, caught by surprise, reared back. It bashed the ape with its club, but it didn't get its full strength behind the swing, and the ape's fiendish resistances allowed it to weather the blow.

Another shout came from the outside passage. The ogre in the doorway tumbled forward, pushed hard from behind; it stumbled and fell, still tangled with the ape. Another ogre, the hulking leader, stepped forward into the crowded space.

Once again, Dar and Tiros struck. With the ogre flanked, it could not effectively defend against both attackers, and this time both swords bit deep into its body. Even an ogre would have been hard-pressed to absorb that kind of damage.

But Ambro was not a common ogre.

With a roar, the giant smashed the haft of his club into Dar's face. The fighter staggered back, stunned, blood pouring down his face from his broken nose. There was nothing he could do as Ambro brought the club around in a follow-up swing that crushed into Dar's chest, knocking him roughly back into the wall. For a moment he just stood there, pinned against the hard stone by the force of the impact, and then he pitched forward, landing face-down on the bare stone floor.

Chapter 20

BLOODY RECKONING

Tiros stabbed *Valor* into the ogre that had taken down Dar. Once again he hit, and once again the axiomatic blade bit deep, but the ogre seemed to have a limitless stamina. The monster started to turn, and Tiros knew that Dar was far tougher than he... and that the ogre had taken him down in a single attack.

But there was naught else to do but fight on.

He got a momentary respite as Varo's summoned ape, having finished off the first ogre, sprang forward to attack the leader. As the ogre swept its club around it seized onto its arm, digging its teeth deep into the ogre's hairy flesh. The ogre snarled, and smashed its other fist down hard into the ape's brain pan. The creature instantly went slack and collapsed to the ground, dissolving back into a red mist that left not even a smear behind on the stone.

Varo rushed forward to aid the stricken Dar. The ogre, having dealt extensively with priests, perhaps sensed that this harmless-looking foe was a serious threat. As Varo entered its reach, it swung its club around in a wide arc. Varo seemed to have

expected the attack, though, for he dodged low, the powerful stroke missing him by scant inches. The club smashed into the wall where Dar had been flung a few seconds previous, sending bits of stone and wood flying.

Tiros knew that a lot depended on the cleric getting Dar back into the fight. “Over here, you stupid brute!” he yelled, thrusting *Valor* home for the last time. Tiros’s arms felt like rubber, and the blow barely cut the ogre’s skin, but he could feel the power within the sword thrum within his hand, and he knew that the beast felt the power of Law tearing through its corrupt body.

He certainly got its attention, as it turned, and delivered a truly punishing blow that locked Tiros back against the wall. *Valor* fell from his limp fingers and clattered to the ground; the world began to spin around him. It was only through a superhuman effort that he clung to consciousness. Through the haze that clouded his vision, he could see the ogre lifting the club for another swing that would finish him; he could hear its shout, like something heard from the end of a very long tunnel.

So be it. I gave it my all, he thought.

But then a familiar voice cut through the haze, and returned him to sudden clarity.

“I got something for you, bitch.”

The ogre’s club went flying from its hands as Dar slammed his club into the joint of its elbow. The ogre roared in pain and rage and turned on the fighter, reaching out with its other hand to grab the human’s head. But Dar wasn’t done yet. He brought the club up and with a violent yell brought it down with all his strength onto the front of the ogre’s skull.

There was a loud crack.

The ogre’s hand swept out, but Dar easily avoided it. The ogre staggered a step to the side. It looked around, its eyes unable to clearly focus on anything.

Then it toppled over, landing with a loud crash upon the ground.

Dar regarded the body, then the club. “You know, maybe this isn’t such a bad weapon after all.”

Varo had gone to help Tiros, and with his healing wand brought him back around to full consciousness. Dar took a cautious look outside; there was another dead ogre lying a few paces away, its head and arms covered in patches of bright green slime.

“Weren’t there more of them?” he asked. “Not that I’m complaining.”

“Maybe you scared them off, taking out the big guy,” Tiros suggested.

“Maybe, maybe,” Dar said.

“That was extremely close,” Varo said. “I fear that my spells are nearly depleted once again.”

“How are we doing on the wand?” Tiros asked.

“About half of its power remains,” the cleric replied.

“We’re going through healing like a soldiers through a barrel of ale,” Dar said.

“There is nothing we could have done differently,” Tiros said. “This place is deadly, and we cannot wander about battered and injured.”

“And when the healing runs out?” Dar asked.

Tiros picked up *Valor*, and returned it to storage within his magical glove. “We will deal with that as best we can when it happens,” he said.

Dar and Tiros searched the bodies of the ogres, turning up only a handful of coins of meager value. Varo treated their wounds, and they set out once again.

Giving the slime-infested ogre a wide berth, they made their way to the corridor that led south, from which the ogres had come. Their torches shone on a glistening trail of bloody footprints, these ogre-sized, which continued in that direction for as far as they could see.

After about sixty feet, they came to a door on the side of the passage. This portal was quite different from the doors they had encountered thus far. Set into a recessed threshold, this door was of polished ebony wood, reinforced with bands of flawless steel that did not show the slightest trace of rust or decay. As if that wasn’t enough, there were golden runes set into the door, framed by patterns set in delicate filigree.

“Now, this is interesting,” Dar said. Taking a closer look at the door, he exclaimed, “Hey, this is inlay, real gold!” He drew his dagger, but Tiros stopped him.

“Look, I’m not a mage, but even I’m smart enough to see that this door is bad news,” the marshal said.

“Bah, it’s just a door. Right, Varo?”

The cleric hadn’t spoken since they’d encountered the portal, and he continued to stare at the runes as if his companions were not there.

“Varo? Can I hack up this door or not?”

“The runes are in the infernal script,” the cleric said. His fingers traced the patterns of the odd letters, but he was careful not to touch them. “Although the words are unfamiliar. Except for...”

His finger stopped over a complicated spiral of golden lines and whirls. “Saracek.”

“It is a name?” Tiros asked.

Varo finally broke his connection with the door and looked at him. “Yes,” he said. “This is not the way we want to go.”

“What? C’mon, that’s got to be a few hundred coins worth! You’re killing me here, Varo!”

“Consider that the gold is still here, undisturbed,” Tiros said. “Why didn’t the ogres take it, or the barbarian, or the wererats?”

“That which rests beyond this door is far greater than what any of us can handle,” Varo said. “I will not stop you if you wish to defile it, but I will not stay nearby, either.”

The cleric lifted his torch and continued down the passage. Tiros went with him, but Dar lingered a moment, licking his lips as he gave the golden inlay another long look. But as the torches of the others began to cast the corridor around him into deep shadow, he sighed and hurried to catch up with the others.

The corridor continued straight for quite a long distance, maybe as much as two hundred feet from the door where the ogres had initially appeared. Finally the passageway turned right, revealing several additional doors on both sides of the corridor ahead.

The bloody footprints went directly to the first door on the left, which was slightly ajar.

“Ware an ambush,” Tiros said quietly, as they approached the partly-open door. Dar reached it first, and gently prodded it open with his sword.

The room beyond was a rectangle about the size of the storerooms they’d found earlier. This one showed clear signs of recent occupation, and they could have guessed at its occupants even before they saw the ogre sitting propped up against the wall in the corner.

The creature was in terrible shape. Its left leg ended just above the knee, surrounded by a pool of blood and lumps of bright green slime. The ogre’s hands, what was left of them, were likewise covered in slime. Its fingers were mere nubs, and the stuff seemed to pulse as it continued to consume the body, replacing flesh with more of its own matter.

“I would guess that it stepped on a bit of slime on the floor during the attack,” Varo said. “It may not have even noticed, at first, until the substance ate through its boot. Clearly by the time it detected the threat, it was already too late. Once the stuff gets a good grip on the skin, the only real solution is to burn it off.”

“I can abide a quick kill in the heat of the melee, but gods, I wouldn’t wish that fate on anyone,” Tiros said. Even Dar shuddered, and his cheek twitched.

And then the ogre stirred.

The three companions jumped, even though the ogre barely moved, its head twitching slightly. Its eyes fluttered, not quite opening, and a sound, weak and terrible, rattled in its throat.

“Put an end to it,” Tiros said, his voice thick, turning away.

Dar nodded, and thrust his sword into the ogre’s throat, careful to stay clear of any of the patches of slime. The ogre let out a last hiss, and fell still.

Dar drew back and cleaned his blade. The three Doomed Bastards looked down at the body of the ogre for a long moment in silence.

“I hate this place,” Dar finally said, summing up the feelings of all of them.

Chapter 21

THE PROMISE OF ESCAPE

Varo said that the slime would eventually consume the entire body of the ogre, so they carefully burned away the clinging green ooze from its hands and from the stump of its leg. The smell of burning ogre flesh that quickly filled the room wasn’t much of an improvement, and they were grateful when they could turn away from that task and search the room.

There were two exits from the room, a door in the far wall and a narrow tunnel, little more than a hole in the wall, to their left. For some inexplicable reason, the ogres had lined up several hundred copper pieces in three matched rows across the floor of the room. The coins were not worth the effort of carrying them, especially given their present burdens, so the three left them where they lie and chalked up the whole thing to yet another example of the bizarre nature of Rappan Athuk.

The small tunnel looked like it might go somewhere, but it was cramped enough so that it would require them to go through on hands and knees. Leery of that option, they left it for the moment and turned to the far door.

The door opened onto an even smaller room. The stench of ogres here was almost overpowering, and a great heap of furs suggested that at least some of the ogres used this chamber to bed down. There didn't look to be anything of value here, but Tiros recommended that they give the room a thorough search. Dar grumbled, but the marshal's foresight was proven valuable when they turned up a few interesting items. Of most immediate note was a greatsword of masterwork make, and with thin lines of gleaming alchemical silver etched into the steel along the edges of the blade.

"That would have been useful against the wererats, no doubt," Varo observed. Tiros had no interest in the weapon, so Dar added it to his growing arsenal. They also found a small crystal bottle containing a bright blue elixir, which Varo took, and a last discovery that Dar found more interesting than even the sword.

"By the gods," he said, uncorking the thick bottle of cloudy brown glass, and sniffing at the contents.

"What is it?" Tiros asked. "Another potion?"

"A thousand times better, my friend." The fighter took a draught from the bottle, which was about half full. He immediately took on a contented look, and let out a sigh. "A crime that such a thing was wasted on ogres, but I will forgive them this once, since they saw fit to leave this here."

Varo took a sniff of the bottle. "Brandy," he said. Dar did not offer a drink, and the cleric did not request one.

"Great," Tiros said. "That's all we need on top of everything, is to have you drunk to boot."

"Suck it, marshal," Dar said, his tone light, but his eyes hard. "You've got twenty years on me, and while maybe I can't run a command tent as well as you, when it comes to this," he patted his sword, "you're in no position to bitch me out." He laughed, and after taking another swallow of the liquor, tucked the bottle into his pack. For a moment Tiros looked as though he would challenge the fighter over the bottle, but then he thought better of it, and instead turned and left the room.

After a brief debate over whether to press on, or explore the small tunnel in the back of the room, the companions decided to at least give the tunnel a look before proceeding. Dar, in a better mood now with a gill of distilled wine working its way through his system, agreed to take the lead. He took off his pack, shield, and extra weapons, laying them carefully by the entrance. Tiros handed him a torch. Drawing his sword, he held it in

his other hand as he leaned into the entrance, listening for the telltale sounds of dire rats before proceeding.

But the tunnel was quiet, and no enemies surged out of the darkness to attack as he crawled down the tunnel. The tight warren shifted to the left, and after about thirty feet opened onto a large, low-ceilinged room. The chamber was irregularly shaped, and the worked stone of the rest of the level had given way to rough walls of packed earth. Expecting an attack, the fighter carefully shone the torch around the room. The place had two exits, both small tunnels like the one he had just traversed. There were some marks in the floor that might have been prints left by creatures; they were too muddled to make out. But otherwise, the room was empty.

“Anything?” came Tiros’s voice from the tunnel.

“All quiet, for now,” Dar reported back. “Hold on a second.” He turned to the nearer of the two tunnel exits. Probing it with his torch, he saw that it started sloping steeply down almost at once. A faint breeze from below caused the light to flicker slightly.

“Wrong direction again,” he muttered to himself. He turned away and headed over to the other tunnel mouth. Once again, the light of his torch fluttered as he thrust it into the opening, but this time, the flame revealed a shaft that rose precipitously up.

Dar took a deep breath, and after breathing the fetid air of Rappan Athuk, with its odors of piss, shit, blood, and death, it was like he’d taken a bath.

Grinning, he returned to the original tunnel opening.

“You guys had better come in here,” he said. “And bring my stuff. I think I’ve found a way out of this shithole!”

Chapter 22

A PROMISE BROKEN

Dar grunted and braced his arms against the packed earth of the shaft. After the initial fifteen yards or so of ascent, which had been steep enough, the rising tunnel had become nearly vertical. Dar was a decent climber, but he was tired, the gear he carried was dragging him down, and the tight confines of the tunnel were not giving him much space to maneuver. That could be an advantage; he’d already avoided falling twice by the simple expedient of thrusting his arms and legs out to grip the sides of the shaft.

The slight gusts of fresh air that wafted down from above gave him added strength, however, and cemented his determination to win free of the confines of Rappan Athuk.

He had no idea if it was night or day, above; the shaft twisted and turned enough that he probably wouldn't know until he rounded the last bend. Or maybe the shaft opened onto a cave; probably occupied by a nest of fierce monsters, given his recent luck.

Dar grinned and adjusted his sword. He would welcome such a fight, as long as there was light at the end of the tunnel.

His foot landed on a seemingly solid clod that disintegrated as soon as he put his weight upon it. Instinctively he thrust his arms out again, but this time, the packed earth gave way at his touch, and he couldn't stop himself from sliding downward. The slide became a fall, clods of dirt exploding around him as his armored torso shot down the shaft. It was all he could do to protect his face; he couldn't even turn over onto his back.

Tiros and Varo dodged back as he shot out of the tunnel mouth, and rolled to a stop, coughing and covered in dirt.

"Are you all right?" the cleric asked.

Dar didn't answer, pulling himself up—grimacing as the motion pulled something already strained in his back—and turned back to the tunnel.

"Give it up," Tiros said. "You've already fallen twice, and you're going to break your neck."

"I am getting out of here," Dar said, in a tone that brooked no disagreement.

"Without the rope that Ukas was carrying, it's too difficult," Tiros said, his own voice thick with weariness. Even if you do get out, what about the rest of us? And what about the extra gear? Even leaving your pack with us, you couldn't do it, Dar. And the wilderness around Rappan Athuk is not a friendly region by any measure."

"I was getting close, I could feel it," Dar said. "If we stay here, we're dead. You know that as well as I."

"Perhaps I can help," Varo said. "Given another chance to rest and recover spells, I could summon a small elemental that could help make the ascent more manageable. Set footholds, the like. It wouldn't be here for very long, but it could help."

Dar nodded. "At least somebody agrees with me. You might want to stick around and loot this place, marshal, but I've had enough, treasure or no."

Tiros did not respond, but he looked troubled.

They made their way back to the ogres' chambers. Varo suggested that they might want to check the doors they'd seen back in the outer corridor, but Dar refused.

“Why push our luck? The last few times we’ve opened doors, we haven’t had much luck, have we? I say we turtle in here again, let you get your spells back, so you can call your mental friend, and then we get the hell out of this dump.”

It took all three of them working together, but they got the dead ogre’s corpse in front of the door leading to the outer passage. With that doorstop in place, they retreated to the inner room. The place was almost too foul to abide, but after they dragged most of the rancid furs out of the room, they could just stand it.

“I’d sleep in shit if it meant getting out of here,” Dar said. Now that the promise of escape had coalesced into a concrete plan, he seemed to be in a much better mood. He even offered to take the first watch. Despite that fact that they had last slept just a few hours before, Tiros and Varo were out again within moments.

Varo woke once more to a darkened room. He could sense Dar a short distance away. “Any trouble?” he asked.

For a moment, there was only silence, and the cleric wondered if the fighter had fallen asleep. “No trouble,” Dar finally said. “Quiet as the grave.”

The cleric touched his divine focus, and summoned a globe of soft *light* that filled the room. Tiros lay nearby. Dar was sitting against the wall, looking a bit haggard.

“You were up all night?”

“Night, day, what does it matter, in this place. I’ll get my fill of sleep when we get out of here.”

“It will take some time for me to pray for my spells,” Varo said. “Get some sleep.”

Dar nodded. He took out his bottle, and took a long draught from it. He didn’t bother to take off his chain shirt, but merely slumped down, and was snoring gently within a few moments.

Varo waited for a few minutes, and then went to the door. Careful not to make any noise, he opened it and went out into the outer room. The dead ogre was starting to reek of decay, but Varo paid the stench no heed. Sinking into a kneeling position, the cleric abased himself before his god, calling upon the divine potency of Dagos to infuse him with power.

It took the better part of an hour, but the deity answered his call.

Varo rose and walked over to the tunnel entrance. The *light* spell had expired, so he paused to summon another one, fixing the radiance to upon the end of his mace. Without his gear or armor, it took only a few seconds to make his way through the

passage, into the room of packed dirt. He paused to pick up a clod of black earth, one of those dislodged by Dar's earlier efforts to climb the shaft to the sunlit world above.

For a moment, Varo regarded the dark opening pensively. Then he began to cast a spell. The words of power seemed to swell within him, demanding to be shouted at the world with all his might, but he was used to resisting that temptation, and the sounds made barely a whisper as he completed the complex incantation.

There was a momentary pause, a gathering of power, and then a cloud of mist coalesced before him, dissolving to reveal a truly massive badger with silver fur. The creature, almost six feet long, regarded him coldly.

"I know you do not appreciate being summoned by one such as I, creature, but I require a simple service of you."

The badger merely looked at him.

Varo pointed toward the tunnel mouth. He held up his hand, the one holding the clod, and crushed it in his fingers, letting the dirt sift between them to the ground below. Then he said something to it, soft words in a lilting, sing-song that may or may not have been a comprehensible language.

The dire badger turned, and proceeded into the tunnel. It barely fit inside the opening, but its strong claws pulled it inside, and soon it was gone from view.

Varo didn't wait around. He crossed back to the exit, and returned to the rooms where the others slept.

Chapter 23

BACK ON TRACK

"Damn it, what happened?"

Dar's question was met only with silence; it was obvious what had happened, or at least the results were. The three companions stood in the rough dirt chamber, facing the shaft that led to the surface.

Or at least what *had* been the shaft. The opening was clogged with rich brown earth, and a few probings had indicated that the collapse was complete, and continued as far back as they could reach.

"We'll dig it out," Dar said.

“With what?” Tiros said. “Our hands? Face it, the chance has passed. Clearly someone or something knew we were here, and it decided that we weren’t going to get out of here.”

“It is possible that our presence here is being monitored,” Varo said. “Remember the gravestone, above.”

“Damn it,” Dar said, throwing down his shield. “If they know we’re here, why don’t they just attack and get it over with? Bring the bastards on, and be done with it.”

“You didn’t hear anything?” Tiros asked Varo.

“No, but when I am lost in my prayers, I am heavily distracted,” Varo said. “And the door in the ogre quarters was likely thick enough to absorb anything but the noise of a raging battle.”

“What about your elemental?” Dar asked. “Can it dig through that?”

“Perhaps, given time, but the summoning spell is very brief in duration,” Varo explained. “It would take days, at best, assuming that most of the shaft is still intact above.”

“We don’t have days,” Tiros said. “I’ve already begun to feel... weakened. It might just be this place, all the fighting, the bad food, but I don’t think so.”

Varo nodded. “The crystal death. I can delay its effects, but only at the expense of most of my available higher-order spells. I may eventually be able to purge our bodies of the substance, but at the moment, that ability is beyond my powers.”

“So damned close,” Dar muttered.

“We’re all frustrated,” Tiros said. “But we’ve got to keep going. There’s got to be more than one way out of this hellhole.”

“Just let me find some of those priests of Orcus,” the fighter hissed, taking up his shield once more, and leading them back toward the exit.

Dragging the ogre corpse away from the outer door, the three men made their way back into the main passage. They checked each of the three doors they found in the opposite wall. The small rooms beyond were each odd and unique. In the first, they found a magical broom sweeping dust and dirt into a mound in the center of the place. In the next, they found a heap of construction supplies, including a large stack of weathered wooden boards, a set of assorted tools, and a box of iron nails. The items were old but still useable. The last door opened onto a room filled with a horde of rats. Three of the largest attacked the companions, while the others ran about wildly, squeaking in a crazy cacophony. Dar took out some of his earlier frustrations upon the

creatures, and when they left the room was a bloody mess of torn up corpses. None of them had suffered any injuries.

Beyond the three rooms, the passage continued straight on for some distance before turning right. Directly ahead, the corridor continued about twenty feet into a dead end, while to the right, they could just see another door at the end of the passage in that direction.

“I believe that we have come full circle,” Varo said. “If I am not mistaken, that door leads back into the room where we first entered the level.”

“So we’re back to square one,” Dar said.

“Not quite,” Tiros said. “There were a few more doors in that first room, as I recall, and there’s still the dirt room near where we fought the ogres, and that black door, the one with the gold.”

“I haven’t forgotten that one,” Dar said.

Varo lingered, looking down the short dead-end passage.

“Sense something?” Tiros asked.

Varo shook his head. “Not really. It’s just—”

“Trouble!” Dar hissed, drawing his sword. The others turned as the door down the far corridor creaked open, and a pack of ghouls appeared.

Chapter 24

ON THE OFFENSIVE

The ghouls—seven of them, their mottled hides covered with crusted blood—seemed equally surprised to see enemies here. They carried burdens, great hunks of raw meat, and one carried a leg that had obviously formerly belonged to the ogres they’d fought the day before. But the undead monsters were happy to throw down their haul in favor of fresher fare, and as soon as they spotted the Doomed Bastards, they charged down the hall in a chaotic rush.

“Keep them off me,” Varo said calmly, as he lifted his holy symbol. Dar and Tiros took up positions stood side-by-side in front of him him, the marshal summoning *Valor*.

“Wait for the rush, and strike as one,” Tiros said.

"I *have* done this before, marshal," Dar said idly, spinning his sword around his wrist before taking up a ready pose.

The ghouls ran forward, slaving, a sight designed to cast fear into the heart of the most stalwart warrior. But Dar and Tiros, already blooded to the horrors of Rappan Athuk, held their ground. The ghouls closed... thirty feet, twenty feet, ten. The ones in the front tensed to leap...

The dark radiance erupted from Varo's divine symbol, as the cleric unleashed the power of his patron. That unholy glow overwhelmed the power of the entity that had created these wretched creatures, at least temporarily, and the first four ghouls cowered, arresting their charge and falling back before that aura.

"Yeah, that's right, you bastards!" Dar exclaimed. "Now you're Dagos's bitch!"

"More coming!" Tiros warned, as the last three ghouls pressed past their fellows and surged forward to press the attack. Tiros met the first with a thrust from *Valor* that pierced its chest. Blue energy from the sword surged into the undead monster's corrupt body, and it collapsed backward, shrieking. Dar hit his as well, but while he tore a deep gouge across its torso, the ghoul continued its attack, digging its claws into the fighter's arm. Dar grimaced, but was able to fight off the cold paralysis of the ghoul's touch.

The last ghoul leapt over its fallen companion and came at Tiros. Before the marshal could recover, it sliced its claws out at his face. Tiros dodged back, but still took a pair of cuts just over his left eye. As blood sprayed from the wound, he stiffened, paralyzed.

"Varo!" Dar yelled, trying to keep the ghoul he was facing at bay, while he shifted toward the one that had taken Tiros.

The cleric's answer came in the form of another wave of energy that filled the corridor. Once more the ghouls succumbed to the cleric's power, staggering back as they were rebuked. Dar was quick to take advantage, cutting down the one he'd already injured, then spinning to slice off the leg of the one that had threatened Tiros. The other ghouls, still cowering, did nothing as the fighter worked a bloody swath through their ranks. Varo tended to Tiros, but the marshal was fine, recovering from the effects of the ghoul paralysis by the time that Dar had cut down the last of the creatures.

"Well, that was fun," Dar said, cleaning off his sword.

"Those damned things seem to be everywhere," Tiros said. He turned to Varo, who was examining one of the creatures. "I do not favor your beliefs, cleric, but it is a simple truth that without your power, these undead would have slain us twice over, now."

"Where the hell are they coming from?" Dar asked.

"I suspect that they have a lair somewhere on this level," Varo said. "Look at this group. They have just fed. They crave the flesh of intelligent beings, and while they prefer the living, they will feast upon just about anything."

"Intelligent? Those ogres?" Dar asked. "Couldn't have been much of a meal."

"So you think that they were returning to their lair," Tiros said to Varo, ignoring the fighter.

"It is most likely."

"Why wouldn't they have eaten the barbarian, or the ogres? Before now, that is."

"Ghouls are ferocious and implacable, but they are still among the lesser undead. If there are priests of Orcus still here in Rappan Athuk, they are probably under their command."

"So we find the lair, maybe we find the priests?" Dar asked. Varo nodded.

"Well, obviously none of the rooms we've found thus far would really serve," Tiros said. "Maybe the black door?"

"I don't think so," Varo said. "And it's way on the other side of the level. Why would the ghouls take such a long route around?"

"Well, let's look around here, and see if we see anything," Tiros suggested.

The three men spread out, looking for any clues. It was Dar who found the secret door, located near the end of the dead-end corridor they'd just passed. The hidden portal wasn't that well hidden, with flecks of blood crusted on the edges of the stone. Once the fighter identified it, it was a fairly easy matter to pull it open, revealing a rough-hewn passage beyond. They knew almost at once that they'd found what they were looking for; as soon as the door cracked open an overpowering stench rushed out over them, like a concentrated distillation of the odor that hung about the ghouls.

"Gods, that's foul," Dar said. "The wizard would have liked this, I'm sure."

Nothing stirred in their torchlight, but the passage quickly twisted out of sight ahead. "Wait a moment," Tiros said. "Are you certain this is a good idea? We don't know how many of them there may be in there."

Varo nodded. "It is a risk, but at least this way we fight at a time and place of our own choosing. If we can keep them at bay long enough, I should be able to rebuke the creatures."

"How many more times can you call upon that power?" Tiros asked.

“Dagos is with me,” Varo said. “I can use his power six more times today. And I still have my summoning spell; I can use it to conjure creatures that will hopefully give us a little more time.”

Tiros looked at Dar. The fighter said, “I’m tired of running around like a kicked dog, waiting for whatever new monster is getting ready to jump out and give us a beating. The bastards may kill us, but damn it all if I’m not going to take a bunch of them out with me.”

“All right,” Tiros said. “Let’s do this.”

The three of them moved silently into the corridor, the secret door closing behind them. As it shut the foul air closed in around them, covering them like a second skin. The corridor was ragged and uneven, but they could see that there was a door up ahead. Even from where they were standing, they could see that the door fit awkwardly in its frame, with large gaps around its edges.

Dar gestured for the others to shield their torches, and they approached slowly and cautiously. They could hear noises coming from beyond the door, nasty chittering accompanied by the crunch of breaking bones.

Silent, careful not to so much as kick a stray rock, the three men crept into position. Varo lifted his divine symbol and called upon his patron.

Almost at once, the timbre of the noise coming from beyond the door changed, and they could hear the sounds drawing nearer.

“They’re coming!” Dar hissed.

Chapter 25

THE LOST LEGION

The door burst open. Beyond lay a large room, but they could only see part of it due to the angle of the door. But their vantage was enough to see a horde of ghouls, their leathery hides foul with dirt and old blood, clambering over each other to be the first to get their hands on the living flesh that they could smell from the corruption of their dank lair.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, there was a stronger, sickening stench that came with the rush, suggesting that at least some of the creatures were ghosts.

Dar lifted his sword, but Tiros held him back. Even as the two men waited, Varo finished his incantation, and a pair of oblong insects, each almost six feet long, materialized in the tight confines of the corridor in front of them. They were beetles, their gray carapaces marked with spots of white that seemed to glow uncannily bright in the light of their torches.

The beetles immediately attacked. The first seized the first charging ghoul, seizing its left leg at the knee with its mandibles. With a crushing squeeze, the beetle took off the creature's leg. The ghoul fell forward onto it, trying to claw past its armored carapace, but for the moment, it was unsuccessful.

The second beetle lifted its body and fired a spray of acidic droplets into the gathered mass of undead. The stuff started burning the flesh of the undead creatures that it touched, but the majority were still beyond the door's threshold, and were not affected.

"Damn it, I could really use a bow right about now," Dar said.

"Just watch for any that get past the bugs!" Tiros returned.

The ghouls surged forward again, leaping at the beetles. One tried to bypass them entirely, jumping between them, snarling at the humans behind. But the distance was too great, and the monster stumbled on a beetle as it landed, pitching it forward to fall at Dar's feet.

"Happy birthday to me," the fighter said, stabbing the monster in the back. But not only did his thrust not kill it, but the ghost surged forward, seizing Dar's ankle in its jaws. Dar yelled as it bit through his boot. He pulled free before the creature could do more than superficial damage, but to his horror Dar felt the familiar icy cold chill spread upward through his body from the abused limb, and his muscles tightened, freezing him in place.

The ghost snarled and seized onto the fighter with its claws, pulling itself up. It opened its jaws wide, eager to tear open its helpless foe's throat. But before it could finish him, Tiros laid into the creature with *Valor*. The ghost shrieked and turned on the marshal, but before it could attack again, Varo lifted his sigil and unleashed a wave of crackling violet energy through the hall.

The ghost froze, and the two closest ghouls did as well. But more were coming; one of the beetles was already down, with a ghoul ripping its head off with a noisy sound of crunching hide, and the second was oozing pale liquid from a number of ugly wounds.

Tiros knew that he had to buy Varo some more time. Ignoring the cowering ghost, which was temporarily reduced as a threat, he stepped in front of Dar and raised *Valor* in a high defensive stance. He did not have to wait long, as a pair of ghouls surged forward around the still-struggling beetle and came at him. He stabbed the first in the throat, seriously damaging it, but not enough to stop it. He paid for that a moment later

as both creatures laid into him. The one he'd hurt drew its claws along his arms, opening long but shallow gashes in the skin, while the second lowered its head and tried to take him down, biting at his side just above the hip. He felt the dark power of the ghouls' touch surging through him, but with duty and desperation fortifying him, he was able to resist their paralysis.

Letting out an uncharacteristic shout, he thrust *Valor* up with both hands through the injured ghoul's body. The undead monster was knocked back as the sword transfixed it, and it fell to the ground, destroyed.

Once again, the cleric's power surged, and once again ghouls and ghosts were caught within the unholy web of energy. The second ghoul that Tiros was fighting mewled and fell back, while two ghosts that had been poised to leap upon the hard-pressed fighter likewise retreated. The number of rebuked creatures choking the hallway now worked to their advantage, as it made it increasingly difficult for the others to get to them. But thus far, there seemed to be an unending supply of them, and more still crowded in the doorway to the chamber.

The beetles were gone, torn to pieces and dissolving into nothing as their bodies returned to whence they came.

Another ghoul, its face scarred with acid burns, came at Tiros. He met its charge, avoiding a sweeping claw, but then another came at him from the left, the sickening stench declaring it a ghost. It moved with incredible quickness, and it briefly snared the old marshal's off-arm in its slaving jaws. Tiros screamed and tore free, and once again barely resisted succumbing to its paralysis. A third creature tried to get past him, to get at Dar or Varo, but Tiros blocked it with his body, taking yet another hit in the process. The aged warrior's limbs were now covered in streaks of scarlet, and the strokes of his sword were becoming wild as blood loss began to take its effect upon him.

Dar's angry shout announced the fighter's return to the fray. He ran a ghoul through, driving it before him to the ground. His follow-up sliced through the ghost's body, opening a wound that would have disemboweled a normal man. Tiros took advantage, taking off its left arm at the elbow with a wild swing from *Valor*.

But somehow, it fought on, driven to a frenzy by the press of battle. The other creatures were crawling over the bodies of their cowed peers, knocking them down in their haste to rend warm flesh.

Varo rebuked them a third time, but it was clear that the cleric's strength was beginning to fade. This time, the ghosts snarled and resisted the surge of negative energy, although several of the remaining ghouls succumbed. There were only a few left that were still attacking, including a pair of ghosts that were engaged in close quarters with Dar and Tiros.

The ghost that Tiros had “disarmed” shrieked and leapt for the marshal’s throat. He tried to get away from it, but it still managed to seize his shoulder, biting down with enough fury to penetrate the shoulder plate of his armor. Driven back by the violence of the attack, the old general finally succumbed to the icy chill of paralysis, and he fell to the ground, the ghost on top of him.

The other ghost came at Dar with an all-out attack. Its claws dug into the fighter’s torso, and even as the hapless warrior’s body began to tighten, it caught his wrist in its jaws, biting down hard. Dar, paralyzed, couldn’t even scream as his sword was wrenched from his grip, and he too fell hard.

The ghosts had their victims under their control, but for all their bloodlust, they had an even greater hatred for the one that had rebuked their kin. Both creatures, their jaws trailing gobs of bright red, looked up, and fixed their hateful eyes on Varo, now standing alone in the corridor.

Chapter 26

BLOOD

The ghosts came forward toward Varo, eagerness flaring in their shining yellow eyes. A last ghoul, unwilling to pass up easier prey within reach, reached with equal eagerness for the helpless form of Velan Tiros.

Varo showed no fear or doubt as he lifted his symbol once more. “Dagos commands you, you pathetic wretches! As you were small before His gaze in life, so are you nothing before Him in death!”

Violet energies flared. For a moment, had his companions been able to see him, Varo would have resembled something far different than the unassuming, ordinary-looking priest that they knew. Power surrounded him like a cloak, and the ghosts, despite their fury and passion and hate, could not withstand it.

Fortunately for Tiros, the last ghoul succumbed to it as well.

Varo looked down the corridor. Ghouls and ghosts were everywhere, unable to approach him; but likewise he knew that he could not go near them either, lest he sunder the effects of the turning. Dar and Tiros were on the far side of the two nearest ghosts; he could not go to them.

“This will be close,” he said, taking his mace into his hand. He waited, as seconds passed.

Dar groaned. At once, Varo's voice cut through the corridor with the stentorian echo of command. "We don't have much time; the first rebukes will begin to fade within moments. You must destroy them all, now."

The fighter pulled himself to his feet. He looked around for his sword, lost in the clutter of bodies, but finally just drew out the heavy club he'd taken from the dead barbarian guard. "Which ones go first?"

"I do not know... just start killing," Varo said.

And Dar did. He didn't stop to help Tiros, who after a few more heartbeats stirred as well, pushing the cowering ghoul off him. He hacked it down with *Valor*, but it was Dar that slew the rest, surging down the corridor like a madman himself, crushing skulls, knocking broken bodies left and right into the rough passage walls. He ended with the two ghastrs still facing Varo, taking one down with a blow that smashed its head like an overripe melon, and following with a sideswipe that caved in the torso of the second.

"Is... that... all?" he asked, his chest heaving.

Varo nodded. He touched Dar, channeling healing energy into him. He did the same for Tiros, granting him a more potent spell that closed the terrible wounds that he'd suffered in the brief but violent battle. The short passage resembled an abattoir, with blood and bodies everywhere. It sucked at their boots, as they walked. Varo was the only one not splashed with it. Tiros, still suffering from the sickening effect of the ghastrs' presence, bent over and voided his stomach.

"Come on," Varo said. A hint of the power he'd summoned still hung about him, giving him an added measure of presence. "Let's see what these monsters were guarding."

The room beyond the door was shaped like a giant five-pointed star. A smaller pentagram was set into the floor in the middle of the room, surrounded by battered wooden coffins, some little more than scraps of wood clinging together hopefully. There were bones everywhere, layered almost half a foot deep in some corners of the room. There were also numerous mounds of assorted trash, and the occasional glint of metal from their torches. The place smelled absolutely foul, and was almost as rank as the chamber where they'd encountered the dung monster, above.

"No exits," Tiros reported, once he'd given the room a quick scan.

"What have we here," Dar said, kicking a pile of refuse and lifting a short sword. The weapon was cast in an antique style, with a thick crossguard and a dense single-edged blade, but to his surprise, when he tested it he found it still razor-sharp.

"This is Olmaran steel," he said. "This sword has to be ten years old, if not twice that. A masterwork blade."

Varo, standing at the edge of the pentagram, looked around. "I would imagine that these monsters have been collecting from the remains of their victims for quite some time," he said. He looked sad, but he turned away from the others, perhaps unwilling to share the source of his gloom.

"Hey, there's gold here... a lot of it!" Dar reported. Tiros, looking around, had come up with a light steel shield that was etched with the sign of a rearing lion. "There does seem to be some useful material here, but it will be hard to find it with all this junk about."

"You got a more pressing appointment?" Dar said, kicking away more bones as he continued to search. In addition to the sword, he'd filled a small sack with coins, and he uncovered more as he kept sifting through the mess.

"I can help," Varo said. The cleric cast a *detect magic* spell, and began pointing to areas where magical auras were located.

The spell revealed a good deal. They found a quiver of arrows buried under a heap of bones that radiated magic, a punching dagger, a throwing axe, a hefty warhammer, and three vials that contained magical potions. Varo took the potions, while the two fighters argued over the weapons. Tiros, equipped with *Valor*, had little interest in most of the weapons, but he took the throwing axe, and a silvered but otherwise mundane dagger that he turned up. Dar took the rest of the weapons, except for a heavy mace that was also of masterwork quality, that he turned over to Varo as a replacement for the shoddy weapon he'd drawn from Sobol's cache. The fighter also found a shortbow with a still-viable string, obviously a recent acquisition by the ghouls, and a new breastplate to replace the suit he'd lost before.

"Now I feel properly dressed," Dar said, as he rejoined the others. The fighter was positively bristling with weapons, with several jutting from his belt, slung across his back, or sticking out from his backpack.

"Can you handle all that weight?" Tiros asked. The fighter had found a good quantity of gold and silver coins among all the trash, and once he'd filled his sack, he'd just started dumping handfuls into his pack.

"Don't worry about me, marshal."

They'd searched the room for more secret doors, but it didn't look like there were any other exits.

"I guess it's back out into the dungeon," Dar said, as they gathered again near the door.

"We need to find water soon," Tiros said. "And we're almost out of torches."

“Cheer up, marshal,” Dar said, as they made their way out. “We’re alive, we’re armed to the teeth, and we’re reasonably rich. It could be worse.”

He had no idea how right he was, as the three of them made their way back into the main corridors of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 27

RUNNING IN CIRCLES

Tiros could not move. His lungs felt like they were on fire with every breath, and he felt like he was drowning, all of his efforts barely sucking in enough air to keep him alive. Every now and then he coughed, and those moments were the worst, ending with him gasping desperately for air.

“Is he going to live?” came a voice. Familiar, yet not quite identifiable. All he could think about was the pain, and everything else faded into the background.

“I do not know. He is fighting hard, but there is barely any strength left in him.”

“I know. I only caught a bare whiff of that stuff, and I feel like I’ve been on a two-day bender. What in the hells was that crap?”

“Yellow mold. It is exceptionally... toxic. If he succumbs, we will have to burn the body, or it will become dangerous to us as well.”

Tiros felt like he was falling, the voices swirling away as he fell into a weird semi-conscious haze. In that narrow space between life and death, images formed, as recent events replayed themselves in his mind...

* * * * *

After the desperate battle with the ghouls, the three survivors of the Doomed Bastards had taken their new gear and returned to the corridors of Rappan Athuk. They made their way back into the entry room through which they had first entered the level, cautious lest they encounter either the wererats they had fought above, or the implacable dung monster. But the room was as empty as the first time they had entered it.

There were two doors that they had not explored last time. Choosing the first, they had found a corridor that had twisted around several bends before depositing them in a small crypt. There were several somewhat fresh bodies decomposing in the chamber; a

dead human woman lying in an open stone coffin, and what looked like a goblin sprawled out on the ground next to it.

But before they had a chance to investigate the bodies, a rumbling sound from an arched exit in the wall to the right had drawn their attention. They crept to the entry to find a passage occupied by an iron ball festooned with hundreds of spikes. The odd device was rolling up and down the corridor seemingly of its own volition. As it had approached the companions had drawn back cautiously, but it slowed as it neared the arch, and ultimately retreated back in the opposite direction. They had watched it complete several such circuits before they retreated back to talk.

“Well, that’s the stupidest trap I’ve ever seen,” Dar commented. “You’d have to be as dumb as Ukas to walk into that corridor.”

“Perhaps there is something valuable on the far side,” Varo noted.

“We should investigate the other door first,” Tiros said. In the weird haze of his dying dream, it was as if he hovered over himself, watching himself speak. “If we do need to go this way, perhaps we could rig a shield using the materials in the storeroom we found earlier.”

In his disembodied state, Tiros saw Dar kneel to search the body of the dead woman. He was merely an observer, and so he could not warn the fighter, could not do anything as he watched Dar rear back, looking down at his hands in horror. The fighter spat a curse.

“What is it?” the then-Tiros said, coming over to him. But Varo was faster, lifting his torch to shine it on the fighter’s hands. There were... *things* bulging under the flesh, moving...

“Rot grubs,” Varo said. “Do not move,” he said to Dar.

“But what are you.... aah!” the fighter yelled, as Varo thrust his torch at the fighter’s hand. Dar jerked back. “What in the hells are you doing?”

Varo did not hesitate. “The grubs are burrowing deeper as we speak. If they get deep enough within your flesh to avoid the flame, you are dead. You have seconds to decide. I will heal you afterwards, but this is the only way.”

Dar looked wide-eyed at Tiros, then back at the cleric. He nodded, and thrust out his hands.

The fighter’s screams echoed loudly in the crypt.

Afterwards, Varo was as good as his word, and he used his divine powers to heal the fighter’s blackened hands. The grubs were all destroyed—or at least Tiros had

presumed so, since he didn't drop dead—but there had been a haunted look on Dar's face as they left the crypt and retraced their steps. The fighter had confronted the various horrors of Rappan Athuk with a grim stoicism, but somehow this, where a careless touch could mean a slow and certain death, had unnerved him.

The other door back in the entry room had led around in a circle that had ultimately connected with the corridor of the rolling ball. It had also contained the black skeletons.

The dream-Tiros watched as the creatures came up behind them, disgorged from a secret room that they had missed in their exploration. Their bodies were a flawless ebony, each carrying a pair of ancient shortswords that were surrounded with the faintest hint of a cerise glow. A foul aura surrounded them, and their torches dimmed as the creatures drew near, as if the light itself sought to flee at their arrival. They ignored Varo's rebuke, laying into them with their weapons, striking with expert strokes that avoided parries and clipped through armor. There were five of them in all, and for a moment it had looked like the three humans were doomed. Watching the battle again, Tiros felt a tremor as he recalled feeling just that, as a pair of skeletons flanked him, cutting deep gashes in his torso with their blades. His own strike with *Valor* had been almost useless, as the creatures lacked skin or organs to cut.

Then Dar had laid into them. The fighter fought with a berserk insanity, dropping his shield and nearly useless sword, and taking up the magical club that he'd won from the mad barbarian that had murdered Navev. The weapon proved deadly effective where Tiros's sword had not, and the fighter had reduced the first skeleton to bone shards within moments, immediately slamming into the next.

Even so, it had been close, damned close. By the time that the last skeleton had fallen, all three of them had been covered with trails of their own blood. Varo and Tiros had worked together to bring down one of the monsters, but Dar had destroyed the other four. The fighter staggered, and would have fallen had not the others caught him. A jagged shard of bone from one of the creatures stuck through Dar's right bicep, dripping blood, and one of his ears hung from a slender dangle of flesh, nearly hacked from his head from a blow that had shorn off the cheek-guard of his helmet.

"I hate this fucking place," Dar had said.

After Varo had restored them as much as he could—using up the last charges of his wand in the process—they had continued their search. They briefly revisited the chamber where they had fought the barbarian, only to find that both bodies, his and Navev's, were gone.

"I'm sure the ghouls had a nice meal," Dar had said, but now, as the dream-Tiros watched himself and the others leave, he felt a cold chill, and suddenly he wasn't quite sure.

Having circled the level, the three had elected to check one of the rooms they had passed, the packed-dirt chamber near where they'd first encountered the ogres. Leery of the uncertain-looking ceiling, they made their way into the corridor on the far side of that room. The place proved more sturdy than it had looked at first glance, and they soon found themselves in another large cavern.

Memory began to return as the dream-Tiros watched the three men enter the place. The scene began to blur, and he felt himself falling into a soft gray. But he forced himself to watch what happened next.

The place was full of fungi of all shapes and descriptions, clinging to the walls, forming mounds that turned the floor of the cavern into a subterranean forest. But the three men's attention had been focused on the more obvious feature of the place, one that had given them immediate hope.

"Sunlight!" Dar exclaimed. The shaft was narrow and diffuse, and it came from the far end of the place, from a deep cleft in the ceiling, but the source of the light was too... *pure*, to be anything else than that.

The screaming that had followed the fighter's words came from the ground, the wall, everywhere; it was as if Rappan Athuk itself was shouting its defiance at this new hope that had shown itself to the three men.

In response to the piercing shriek, the three could see movement among the dense knots of tall fungi stalks. A dozen man-sized, shuffling things, resembling nothing more than animate, purple-colored toadstools, emerged from the forest and shuffled toward them. Long violaceous tendrils dangled from around the perimeter of their bloated caps, probing the air.

Varo was screaming something that the others couldn't quite hear over the continued shrieking. The cleric shoved past Dar, who was waving his sword in a wary defensive stance, and grabbed something off the floor. Tiros hadn't gotten a good look at it before, but now as he hovered above the scene he could see that it was the corpse of a giant rat. Or at least what was left of it; half of the creature's body had rotted away.

Varo hurled the rat at the approaching mushrooms. The dead creature hit one of the toadstools, and was immediately tangled up in one of the creature's tendrils. Varo's message got across clearly this time; they could all see the thing fall to pieces, the flesh coming apart, sloughing off the rat's bones to fall in limp heaps before the fungus-creature.

Just in case they didn't get the message, Varo grabbed Dar's arm and pulled him back. The creatures were moving slowly, but they were within twenty feet now, and their tendrils began to extend toward them, seeking.

Tiros could only watch the dream-image of himself as he drew back in alarm. Now he could see the dense patch of yellow growths that he stepped into, and the cloud of violent mist that exploded out from the mold, engulfing him.

That was the last that he remembered. The scene dissolved into gray, and Tiros fell back into the cold embrace of oblivion.

Chapter 28

TOUGH DECISIONS

With a start, Tiros was thrust back into consciousness. This time, he was aware of his surroundings, although it was as if someone had hung a cloth of thin gauze over his eyes; everything was fuzzy, indistinct. He was lying on his back, and he could not move, not even to turn his head. His breath still rattled in his throat, but at least he could breathe; he was alive.

The voices that he'd heard earlier were still there, talking quietly a short distance away. Dar and Varo.

"We should go back, once you've restored the marshal," Dar was saying. "We're close to the surface, if natural sunlight could make its way into that cavern."

"And how do you presume we make it out, without rope, or climbing tools?"

"Think of a way. Maybe the marshal will have some ideas. Maybe we can build something, with those construction supplies in that other room... a scaffold?"

"It might work, if that cavern were not populated by the violet fungi, the patches of yellow mold, or the shriekers, which will bring every wandering monster within a mile down upon us. I would not even be surprised if the Duke's men could hear them, above."

There was a clatter of metal on stone; it sounded like Dar had thrown something across the room. "Well at least I'm trying. Do you want to get out of here, or not?"

"Believe me, I want to get out of here as much as you—"

"What..." Through a supreme effort, Tiros managed to speak. The one word was all he managed to get out before his weakened body forced him to focus on breathing, but Varo had heard him. A moment later, both the cleric and the fighter—or at least he assumed it was them; they were barely outlines to his damaged vision—appeared above him.

“You really want to live, I’ll give you that, marshal,” Dar said.

“Can you take water?” Varo asked. When Tiros nodded, the cleric helped prop him up, lowering a nearly-empty skin to his lips. The cold liquid made Tiros start coughing again, but it was worth it; the stuff soothed his ravaged throat, and seemed to clear away the worst of the fog that clouded his senses.

The marshal looked around, but still couldn’t see clearly enough to discern their surroundings. “Where... where are we?” he managed to ask.

“Jammed deep up the asshole of a fucking demon prince, that’s where we are,” Dar said.

“We’re back in the locked storeroom,” Varo said. “It seemed like the most secure location on the level. We’ve cleared everything else.”

“Not everything,” Dar said. “There’s still the black door.”

“You must trust me when I tell you that the only thing that lies in that direction is death,” Varo replied.

“Bah. Death lies behind every damned door in this place. You’ve been less than forthcoming, priest.”

“Without my powers, you would both be dead, several times over,” Varo said. “If you find my companionship too trying, you are welcome to set out on your own, mercenary.”

Dar scowled, but didn’t say anything more.

“No... other... exits?” Tiros asked.

“Nothing that we could find,” Varo replied. “But to be honest, we haven’t done much other than recover from the fungus cavern. We narrowly managed to get you out of there; Dar got a whiff of the mold spores that took you down, and was hit by one of the violet fungi tentacles as well. We managed to drag you out of there just in time, before they could overwhelm us; they followed for a short distance, but couldn’t get through the door to the outer passage.”

Dar smirked, although Tiros thought that his features were somewhat haggard. “I guess I’m just made of sterner stuff than you, marshal.”

Tiros nodded. Exhaustion surged back over him; just the brief exchange had stolen all his strength. Varo saw it. “Just rest. We seem to be secure here for the moment; once I rest again I will do my best to restore you and Dar.”

“And then what?” the fighter asked.

Tiros managed to cling to consciousness for a few more seconds. “And then, we keep going,” he said. “That’s all we can do.”

And then he was asleep.

Chapter 29

BEWARE OF PURPLE WORMS!

The glowing green warning was still there, unchanged since their last visit.

“Damn it, I don’t like this,” Dar said.

“In general, I would agree that descending further is not the ideal course,” Varo said. “But for the moment, the unproven option is also the least deadly.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t purple worms huge and incredibly deadly?”

“If we remain quiet and don’t draw a lot of attention to ourselves, maybe we won’t encounter any,” Tiros said.

The three men moved warily forward under the stone archway with its glimmering warning, into the vast cavern beyond.

“If I never see another mushroom, it’ll be too soon,” Dar said, giving the densest cluster of fungi a wide berth. Growths were visible everywhere, but were a lot smaller and more sparse than in the cavern they’d entered above. Still, they kept a very close eye out for anything that moved of its own accord, or for any patches that looked as though they could be yellow mold.

All three men looked tired, with ragged beards and eyes sunken in their skulls. Their supplies were running low, although Varo had told them that he could invoke the power of Dagos to create artificial foodstuffs. As that would cut into the cleric’s healing power, which was now all they had to rely upon for dealing with injuries, they continued eating the stale trail rations they’d been given, for now.

After another night’s rest, Varo had once again treated their wounds, purging Tiros and Dar of the lingering effects of their encounters with the monstrosities of Rappan Athuk. Healing Tiros, in particular, drained a great deal of the cleric’s available power, and the old marshal was still a bit unsteady when they broke camp to continue their explorations of the dungeon.

“There’s one thing to be said for this constant struggle for our lives,” Dar said. For the moment, he’d given up on his old and battered sword, and had slung his shield across his back in favor of the huge club he’d already used to great effect against the black skeletons.

“Yeah, what’s that?” Tiros asked.

“Damned if it doesn’t make you sharp. After a few days in here, I feel as though I’ve gotten better in melee than in two years of mercenary service. Knowing that even touching something casually can kill you keeps you on a razor’s edge.”

“Rappan Athuk is a proving ground,” Varo said from a short distance away. “It is a crucible within which the raw ore is seared, and any impurities are burned away. What you have left is steel, ready to be fashioned into a weapon.”

“But steel can break just like anything else,” Dar said, at the same time that Tiros replied, “Steel is inflexible... it either withstands, or shatters.” The two men looked at each other, and after a moment Dar chuckled softly to himself.

“Damn, if I’m starting to sound like you, marshal, then we really got problems,” the fighter said.

The cavern expanded ahead, opening onto an even larger space that extended far beyond the dim glow of their torches. The sound of running water was louder, now, and came from somewhere directly ahead of them. As they moved forward, they could see another stream, this one almost ten feet across, and flowing with a swift current to their left.

“Let’s fill up our water bottles, while we’re here,” Tiros suggested. The marshal, still keeping an eye out for any hints of danger, knelt beside the stream. The water was bracingly cold, but it felt refreshing as he cupped his hands and filled them, splashing the water across his face, washing away some of the dirt and blood crusted on his features.

“Careful, the river’s probably full of demon-spawned death-killer evil bastard devil fish,” Dar said.

“I had forgotten what it was to be clean,” Tiros said, sitting back on his haunches.

“We should get the water and get clear,” Varo suggested. “Denizens of the caverns likely come here frequently to drink.”

Tiros sighed, but nodded. Taking up his nearly empty goatskin flask, he dipped it into the water, letting the current fill it. The water moved swiftly, swirling white as it rushed around a series of boulders lying in the middle of the stream.

Boulders. At regular intervals. Shining faintly purple, in the torchlight.

The marshal jerked back to his feet, the waterskin dropped and forgotten. It floated away on the current as the other two men turned to Tiros in alarm.

“What’s the matter?” Dar asked, lifting his club to a ready position.

“RUN!” the marshal yelled, in the same instant that the purple worm reared up out of the streambed in a spray of water, its head, complete with a huge, gaping maw, turning toward them.

Chapter 30

SERIOUSLY SCREWED

For once, Tiros didn’t feel his old body protesting as he and Varo ran full-out across the cavern, retracing their steps back toward the narrow staircase to the second level of the dungeon. Brown toadstools went flying as they trod through patches of fungal growths, and the flames from their torches flickered wildly with the speed of their movement.

The ground rumbled all around them. It sounded like the end of the world.

Tiros saw the stairs ahead of them. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Dar, lagging behind. The fighter was fresher than he, but he was burdened by his arsenal, and by the pounds of gold and silver he had poured into his backpack from the ghoulish horde.

There was no sign of the worm, but by the shaking of the ground, it was still coming, somewhere beyond the light of the torches.

“Run, damn it!” he shouted. Just ahead, Varo hesitated, halfway between Tiros and the stairs. “Run, you bastard!”

The fighter lowered his head and put on a burst of speed. Driven by the marshal’s urging, or perhaps a more primal need to live, Dar rushed over the ground, his boots crunching heavily on the uneven surface.

There was still no sign of the worm.

Where in the hells it is... Tiros thought, just as the worm exploded out of the ground a scant fifteen paces behind the fighter.

Dar heard it, but he didn't look back, only continued running toward the shelter offered by the stairs. Varo had made it to the foot of the staircase, and Tiros knew that if he charged, he could join the cleric before the worm could get to them.

But as for Dar...

"Look out!" Tiros yelled, turning and running back, toward the fighter and the charging worm. The thing was... *huge* just didn't seem to fit. The creature was gigantic, its segmented body fifty, sixty, seventy feet long? More of it was still coming out of the ground as its head, along with the gaping maw, dove at Dar.

Tiros hit the fighter and knocked him aside just as the worm shot forward. Something hard clipped him on the shoulder, spinning him around, flinging him roughly to the ground. A noise like an earthquake filled the cavern. It took him at least a full second to recover enough to see what had happened.

The worm had overshot, its head driving into the archway that overhung the entrance to the staircase. With forty thousand pounds of mass driving behind it, the creature had pierced *through* that barrier, its head and about fifteen feet of body jammed deep into the narrow staircase. Its lower body flailed out behind it violently, and Tiros could see that its tail had finally emerged from its tunnel, the end tipped with a gleaming black stinger larger than a spearhead.

Dar was already attacking. The fighter slammed his club heavily into the creature's body, which reverberated from the force of the impact. The sheer... *gall* of the mercenary's action stirred something deep within the marshal, but before he could do anything else, he saw the worm's tail swing around, its deadly head clearly fixing upon its target.

"Look out!" he shouted.

Dar turned around, but he could not avoid the stabbing head that drove into the center of his breastplate like a ballista bolt. The fighter bounced off the worm's body and fell. Tiros could not tell if the stinger had penetrated, but at least the mercenary hadn't been impaled, as he'd feared.

Stone exploded outward as the worm's head tore free from the staircase entrance. Tiros's spirits fell as he saw a shower of collapsing rubble descend in the worm's wake, closing off the hope of escape with it.

Huge, long, twisting, shadowy forms appeared around the edges of the battlefield. Tiros's brain struggled to take it all in... ***More of them?*** But as the creatures entered the radius of the feeble light of his torch, he saw that the things were not more worms, but giant centipedes, three of them, each dozens of feet long, looming over the humans, but small in contrast to the gigantic worm. The centipedes had red and black shells, hundreds of stubby yellow legs, and mandibles like daggers that snapped at the air as

they surged forward. All three converged on the worm, attacking its body with those piercing jaws.

The worm counterattacked at once. Its head snapped down and seized a centipede, tearing its prying mandibles free and lifting it high into the air. Its sting impaled a second, but this one kept holding on, its body twisting as the worm's stinger continued to penetrate deeper into the wound.

Still overwhelmed by the sheer insanity of it, Tiros knew that the distraction offered by the appearance of the other vermin would not help them for long. He pulled himself up, and turned to flee. But then he saw something that changed his mind.

Dar was up again, and somehow, incredulously, he was attacking. The fighter had lost his club when he'd been knocked down by the worm's initial rush, but now he was hewing at it with the two-handed sword they'd found in the ogre lair. As the marshal watched, incredulous, the fighter tore a gash three feet long in the worm's body. He lifted the sword to strike again, but the worm's shifting body caused his strike to go awry. He staggered and fell to the ground, the sword flying from his grasp to fall clattering to the ground a good five paces away.

The worm's head came around, still carrying the struggling centipede in its jaws. That ring of jagged teeth snapped heavily shut, and the centipede was cut cleanly in two, the fifteen-foot segments flying out into the darkness to either side. The head shifted, focusing on the diminutive human even as its sting continued to worry deeper into the body of the second centipede. But instead of seeking to fly or hide from the inevitability of destruction, Dar merely reached around and drew out another weapon, the heavy warhammer they'd uncovered in the ghoulish lair.

Without realizing consciously what he was doing, Tiros was running forward, *Valor* leaping into his hand at his call. As the worm's upper body came around to face Dar, the creature came within his reach, and he leapt forward and swung with all his might.

Valor flared with blue light within his hand, and the marshal felt *something* surge within him, or within the sword; in the fury and chaos of battle, he could not be sure.

The tip of the sword cut through the worm's rubbery hide. The attack did not do as much damage as Dar had inflicted upon it earlier, but it must have hit something vital inside, for the worm immediately shifted its attack upon the marshal. The dark opening, almost a full five feet across, filled Tiros's view, accompanied by a terrible stench that rose from deep within the creature.

He tried to get away, to do anything to avoid that fate, but the worm was faster. Pain exploded within his torso as the worm seized him. He struggled, tried to bring his sword down to hack himself free, but he was pinned, and could not move. The worm's grip was like being held in a steel vise, and he could hear as well as feel the bones popping in his body.

“Tiros!” he heard Dar yell. He was vaguely aware of being lifted into the air. He glanced down, and saw a point of light on the far side of the creature. Varo. The cleric had not fled, after all. For an instant the cleric’s eyes met his, and the dark follower of Dagos nodded.

The worm’s jaws opened. Tiros took a final breath. He knew that this was the end.

And he fell, vanishing into the darkness as the worm swallowed him.

Chapter 31

BLOOD OF THE FALLEN

Dar could do nothing to intervene as the worm seized the marshal—taking the fate that it had intended for him, he knew—and lifted him into the air. The fighter did the only thing he could do, slamming the magical hammer hard into the worm’s body at the joint between two of its body segments. The dense hide cracked under the force of the impact, but that didn’t stop the worm from swallowing its captive a few seconds later.

Dar knew that he would be next. He could run, but he already knew that the worm could catch him. The thing was a demon from the darkest pit, and it seemed invulnerable, too huge to seriously hurt. But to Dar’s mind, the worm represented all of what Rappan Athuk had done to him, all of the vileness and horror and sheer evil of this place.

So he kept smashing at it. His wild blows glanced off its body as often as they connected, but its body was already deeply indented at two places where the fighter had focused his attacks. The worm was also showing other signs of heavy wear. The centipedes had done considerable damage, and the last one was still worrying its flank on the far side. And while Dar could not see it from his current vantage, Varo had done his share as well, pouring negative energy into its body from a pair of potent *inflict wounds* spells.

The fighter glanced over his shoulder, and saw the worm lift the limp form of the second centipede, shaking the destroyed vermin from its stinger. Dar already knew how much that deadly spear hurt; his breastplate was caved in from the first hit he’d taken, and his chest burned. It was likely that its poison was tearing through his bloodstream this very minute, slowly killing him.

“So be it,” he snarled, the words slurred. He’d cracked his jaw when the worm’s initial charge had knocked him roughly down. He could barely see the stinger, a black shaft in the surrounding darkness, but he tensed, knowing it was coming.

The stinger appeared out of nowhere, darting so fast that there was no chance for him to focus on it and respond. Instinct replaced thought, instinct and training that together brought the hammer around, backed by the fighter's considerable, if depleted, strength.

The head of the hammer struck the sting, and shot the entire hard shaft with the force of a catapult into the worm's body. The rigid tip became a projectile that tore through thirty feet of worm, shredding tissue, before it lodged deep inside its body. The force of its momentum was enough to knock Dar sprawling yet again. This turned out to be fortuitous for the fighter, for the worm started gyrating madly, its body slamming onto the ground hard where he'd been standing a moment before. The last centipede went flying, only to dissolve into wisps of nothing before it hit the ground. Dar staggered to his feet and somehow managed to get free of it before it crushed him with its violent movements. Retreating to the far side of the cavern, he saw Varo already there.

"The marshal?" Dar asked, knowing that the question was idiotic as soon as he asked it. He'd seen the creature swallow Tiros, and for all the marshal's determination, no mortal man could have survived that.

"Dead," Varo said, confirming what he already knew.

They watched the worm as its death throes began to weaken. It took the better part of two minutes for it to finally stop moving, and even then, its body continued to twitch as they approached it.

"The sounds of this confrontation will draw every creature within a league," Varo said, as Dar recovered his greatsword, and walked over to the body of the monster.

"This needs doing," Dar said, hacking a long opening in the creature's body. It took another minute; although it was easier to hit when it wasn't moving, the worm's hide was still incredibly thick. But the fighter kept at it until he'd severed the worm nearly in two.

It took longer for him to find what he was looking for. As Varo watched, he dragged a heavy, limp form from the worm's innards.

The cleric came over to take a look, even though it was obvious that there was nothing that he could do. Velan Tiros was barely even recognizable as human. Acid from the worm's stomach had eaten away much of the flesh covering his face, leaving a bloody mess.

"May your gods take you home, marshal," the cleric said softly, as he laid his blanket over the dead man's ruined face.

Dar hadn't lingered. Another minute passed, until finally he emerged, himself looking rather the worse for wear, his clothes slick with the worm's blood, and seared from the acids of its insides.

And holding *Valor* in his hand.

"What about his magic glove?" Dar asked.

Varo checked Tiros's right hand. "Destroyed. And I don't imagine we'll get much from his pack, either." The cleric did find that the marshal's magical throwing axe had survived his ordeal, so he handed that to the fighter. Dar took the weapon, wiped some of the gunk from the blade, and calmly tucked it into his belt.

Varo looked intently at the fighter. "Are you all right?"

Dar didn't respond for a long moment. "Let's get out of here. As you said, something else will probably come by and try to kill us any time now."

As if on cue, they heard noises coming from the direction of the main cavern. Looking in that direction, they saw what looked like a light source approaching from around the leading edge of the cavern wall to the left.

"Someone's coming," Varo said quietly.

"Well, let's go see what it is then," Dar said. Still holding Tiros's magical sword, he and the cleric walked to the end of the worm, and waited.

They didn't have to wait long. The light source resolved into a burning flame that came from the end of a quarterstaff. The staff was held by a man who was in the later years of middle age, by the look of him. He was accompanied by a party of travelers, six in all. Nearly all of them were clad in armor of black chain links, which tended to blend into the surrounding shadows, making it slightly uncomfortable to look at them directly. Four were men, including the staff-bearer. Two of the men were humans, heavily armed and carrying themselves with the air of trained warriors. The last was a dwarf, a squat but muscled figure wrapped in a dark cloak, and carrying an odd black metal weapon that had an axe blade on one end, and a spear-head on the other.

The men surrounded a pair of women, both human, but otherwise of little similarity. One was clad in black armor like the others, with short-cropped raven hair, and bearing a longspear among other weapons. The other was fair, with shoulder-length hair so pale as to be almost white. She too held a spear, a much shorter one, but unlike the other she did not carry a martial air about her. If anything, she seemed to bear a deep abiding sense of peace about her, tinged with a hint of melancholy.

The party of newcomers caught sight of the worm and halted. Varo remained silent, but Dar came forward, crossing his arms across his chest. He still held *Valor* at the ready.

The members of the other party saw him. The staff-bearer leaned over and whispered something to one of the men, a tall warrior with a longsword at his hip. The six came forward, the expressions on their faces anything but friendly.

“That’s far enough,” Dar said. “What do you want?”

The man that the staff-bearer had spoken to came forward. “We have come for Marshal Velan Tiros,” he said.

For a few seconds a silence stretched out between the two groups. Then, finally, Dar laughed, but it was a grim sound, thick with irony.

“Did I say something funny?” the warrior asked. He seemed as tense as a coiled spring, and the others behind him were equally prepared for what looked like a looming confrontation.

“The gods hate us!” the fighter exclaimed, turning and throwing up his hands. The newcomers shared a wary look, but Varo quickly came forward, and raised his hands in propitiation.

“We are not your enemies,” he said to them.

“Where is Tiros?” the warrior responded, his voice as sharp as a razor’s edge. “Your friend holds his sword, and I warn you...”

“He’s right over here,” Dar said. He walked over to Tiros’s body, and pointed down to the corpse. “Here you go. Just in the nick of time, he’s still warm, even. A little the worse for wear.”

The six newcomers stared down at the body in silence.

Chapter 32

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

The warrior—the apparent leader of the other group—fell to his knees, the strength apparently drained out of him by the sight of the dead marshal. He lowered his head, his body shaking with grief or frustration.

“Damn it... damn it all!”

The dark-haired woman came up behind him, and put her hand on his shoulder. "You did all you could, Talen. This isn't your fault."

The man with the staff came forward. "What happened?"

"What does it look like?" Dar spat. "Do you see this damned-huge purple worm that we just killed lying right here?"

"He gave his life in our joint struggle to survive," Varo added. "Without his leadership, we would not have made it as far as we did."

"So you're what, the rescue team?" Dar asked. "If you'd gotten here five minutes ago, maybe you would have been enough to save his life."

"We have had our own problems," the dark-haired woman shot back. "Five of our party have lost their lives in this place."

"Five, eh? Well, you got us beat," Dar said. "We only lost three... well, four, but I'd bet that slinking elf is still alive in some corner somewhere."

"This is not a joke, human," the dwarf growled.

"That's where you're wrong, dwarf. This," he said, waving his hands to indicate their surroundings in a broad gesture, "this is all a big joke. Only the joke's on us, and the gods are the ones laughing."

"How did you find us?" Varo asked, stepping into what was becoming an increasingly tense situation.

"Aelos used the power of the Shining Father to locate the marshal's sword," the dark-haired woman said.

"Ah, Aelos Sinaris," Varo said. "I thought that was you, although I admit this is the last place that I expected find such a distinguished servant of the Father."

"We must go where we are called," the cleric replied, although his mouth twisted as he looked at the priest of Dagos, and the golden icon he wore clearly visible on his chest.

Talen stood; his grief replaced with a hard look. "We will take the body. Allera, see what you can do for him. Krogan, can you fit him inside your *bag of holding*?"

As the light-haired woman knelt beside the corpse, the dwarf nodded, drawing out a large sack. "We'll have to clear out the extra supplies, but I think it can hold him."

“Argus, Shay, keep an eye out,” the warrior continued. Argus, the other fighter, nodded and took up a position a short distance away. Shay, the dark-haired woman, hesitated for a moment, glanced at Dar. “Are you sure, captain?”

Talen looked at her, and nodded. The woman took up her spear and headed toward the back of the worm, out toward the main part of the cavern. Within a few paces, she had blended into the shadows, and was gone from sight.

Talen turned back to Dar. “Give me that sword.”

“No.”

“It does not belong to you.”

“The marshal deeded it to me in his will. His last words were, ‘Dar, my friend, be sure to take good care of my sword.’”

“Do not mock his memory!” the warrior shouted. His hand tightened on the grip of his sword, and as an inch of steel slid out of its scabbard, a pale white glow shone from the blade. Dar did not move, but Varo, at least, knew that his companion was ready to attack at the slightest provocation.

Even as Varo stepped forward to forestall Dar, Aelos came over to Talen and put his hand on the warrior’s arm. The light atop the cleric’s staff cast the captain’s lined features into stark relief. “Let it go, Talen. The important thing is to get the marshal—and us—out of here.”

“Finally, someone speaks some sense,” Dar said. “The route back up the way we came was blocked by that worm. How did you get in here?”

“We came down the Well,” Krogan said, and at the word, it seemed as though a shudder when through each member of his party.

“Damn, even I know that wasn’t a good idea. ‘Don’t go down the Well!’ Man, you guys must have been desperate.”

“It was not as though we were given a choice. We all volunteered for this mission, and vowed that we would give our lives to bring back the marshal,” Allera said.

“Well, you might get your wish,” Dar replied.

“There is much more at stake here, mercenary, and the lives of thousands depend on what we do here.”

“Ah, so you’re part of Tiros’s revolutionary cabal, then. Not much left of it, looks like.”

“Perhaps we should focus on the immediate objective,” Varo interrupted. “You have a route out of the dungeon?”

“That is none of your concern,” Talen said. “We have what we came for. You two can go on your way; we will not hinder you, but do not expect our aid.”

“Hey now, wait a minute, ‘captain,’” Dar said. “In case you haven’t noticed, this place is a gods-damned deathtrap. We’ve learned a few tricks about Rappan Athuk... and a few lessons. The most obvious one, is that you need to stick together to survive.”

“We neither need nor want your help,” Talen said.

Dar pointed toward the purple worm. “You think you guys can handle one of those? You all look fancy in your black mail and matching outfits, but you’ll need someone who really knows a blade if you want to get out of here with the remains of your boss.”

“You are... criminals,” Allera said.

Dar pointed to Tiros’s body. “What do you think he was?”

Aelos, still standing at Talen’s side, said quietly, “We will need all the help we can get, if we are going back to the Well.”

For a moment, the captain regarded Dar and Varo with a cold, weighing stare. He also looked at the massive worm, still oozing foul fluid from the huge rents in its body. “You are both convicted murderers. How do we know we can trust you?” he finally said.

“When we first entered Rappan Athuk,” Varo said, “the marshal said something to us that stuck in my mind. He said, ‘If we don’t work together, we’re not going to be anything more than another mark on this place’s long tally of slain heroes and brave fools.’ He claimed not to want to lead, but he gave us a necessary unity of purpose, a direction, nevertheless. Without him, we never would have been able to come together as a group, and to get this far.”

“That does sound like him,” Aelos said.

Talen’s frown did not change, but finally, his hand dropped of the hilt of his sword. “Fine,” he said. “But I am in command of this mission. If you go with us, you follow my orders. And this is an alliance of convenience; once we are out of Rappan Athuk, then we are quit of you.”

“Agreed,” Varo said. “Since we are going to travel together, introductions are in order. I am Licinius Varo,” the cleric said. “My companion is Corath Dar.”

“Talen Karedes,” the captain replied. “Allera is our healer. You already know Aelos Sinaris, priest of the Shining Father. Krogan Deepshaft is a veteran sapper, and our expert on all things underground.”

The dwarf, working to get Tيروس’s body in his sack, grunted.

“The two on watch are Shaylara and Argus.” The introductions complete, Talen turned away.

“Welcome to the Doomed Bastards,” Dar muttered to himself.

The eight of them set out back in the direction that the relief party had come from, deeper into the underground cavern.

Chapter 33

THE RESCUERS’ STORY

They made their way back into the main cavern, and continued along the near bank of the stream, staying close to the curving, uneven wall.

“Where are we going, anyway?” Dar asked. Talen, at the front of the company with Krogan, did not acknowledge him or his question, but the fighter Argus turned to him. The man’s eyes continued to nervously scan the darkness as they walked and spoke.

“We made our way here by means of the stream, from another cavern complex a good distance away,” he said. “Aelos called upon the Shining Father to grant us the ability to walk upon the water, so we were able to follow the guidance of his spell to track the marshal’s sword.”

“Allera mentioned that you lost several members of your company,” Varo said.

The fighter, although not yet thirty, looked like a hard man who had seen his share of combat in his career. But the memories that appeared on his face made him look like a frightened child. “It was... grim,” he finally managed.

Aelos, walking further back in the marching order, heard the exchange. “A foul taint hung upon the entire area. It seeped into our bodies, threatening to steal our will. Even the simplest decision made one hesitate, paralyzed by doubt and fear. Only by working together, driving each other on, were we able to press forward at all.”

“The darkness,” Allera said, her voice coming up from behind Aelos. The healer clasped her arms against her body, as if cold. “It surrounded us, ever present, pressing

in. Our light sources were muted... even Aelos's flame barely allowed us to see a few feet."

"A powerful effect," Varo commented. "We have found evidence that the servants of Orcus still maintain a strong presence here."

Aelos nodded. "We did not encounter any clerics, but did meet up with plentiful numbers of undead. The seeping presence of doom made it difficult for us to fight them. The taint is not as strong here, but I do not look forward to our return to the vicinity of the Well."

"We slaughtered a pack of ghouls and ghastrs, and some black skeletons that were real bastards," Dar said.

"We fought some of those," Argus said. "With Aelos keeping them at bay with the power of the Shining Father, we were able to destroy them. But the wights... they got Gresham and K'varon, and later, Davros was claimed by the wraiths..." The man trailed off, his face noticeably pale under his helmet.

"How did you get past Lord Sobol's garrison?" Varo asked.

"We had a wizard with us," Aelos said. "The Guild has thrown its lot in with the Duke, but there are still individuals who are sympathetic to the cause of justice. Loren was one such... he cloaked us in a blanket of invisibility, allowing us to sneak past. We could not follow you into the mausoleum..."

"Yeah, some of the Duke's men found that out the hard way," Dar interjected.

"...but we had heard the rumors that the Well offered another route of access into the dungeon. It was Talen's decision to take the chance."

"What happened to the wizard?" Dar asked.

"In one of the caverns we entered, we were attacked by a flight of dozens of stirges," Allera said. "Six of them landed on Loren; he was dead within seconds."

"It sounds like we were not the only ones who experienced difficulties," Varo said.

"So Tيروس was like... what? The leader of the rebellion against the Duke?" Dar asked.

"I would not call it a rebellion, not yet," Aelos said. "But there are those that resist the tyranny of the Duke's rule. Tيروس, with his standing and reputation, served as a lightning rod around which those souls could rally. He is an inspiring leader."

"Was," Dar pointed out.

“He will be again,” Allera said. “Once we get back—”

“What?”

“Their reticence is understandable,” Varo said. “You have only just met us, and it is clear that your movement relies upon secrecy to survive.”

“The Duke’s secret police is very thorough,” Aelos admitted.

“So the government is against you, and the army, and the Guild,” Dar said. “What about the church? There was a cleric of the Shining Father with Sobol, when we were brought here. If the Duke’s such a bad guy, why are your people helping him?”

“It is not as simple as choosing sides,” Aelos began. “There are complicated—” He was interrupted by a soft whistle from Talen, who gestured for them to come forward.

The captain, Krogan, and Shay were standing ahead, at a point where the stream turned and entered an opening in the cavern wall. A rocky overhang protruded out over the opening, but as they got closer, they could see that beyond that obstacle, there was a clearance of a couple of feet or more over the fast-moving water.

“What did you do, crawl over that?” Dar asked.

“The clearance varies, but it is higher for most of the length of the stream,” Talen said. “Aelos, can you enchant us again, or do you need to pray for more spells?”

“I will need to rest before I can cast the spell once more,” the cleric said. “And I will not be able to affect everyone, not with our new members to consider.”

“I will take care of Dar and myself,” Varo said.

“Then we need to find a secure place to rest,” Talen said. “I’d prefer not to remain out here in the cavern, if there is an alternative; if there are any more of those giant worms about, we’d be in big trouble.”

“We had a fairly secure room on the upper level, but the worm collapsed the stairs up quite thoroughly,” Varo said.

“When I was initially scouting about, I thought I saw some openings in the cavern wall on the far side of the stream,” Shaylara said. “One of them might be a corridor exit.”

“All right, let’s check it out,” Talen said. “But everyone, keep your eyes open.”

Shaylara took off her pack and removed a light silk rope. Sliding the pack back on, she retreated from the stream, clearly marking off a running start.

“That’s a pretty good leap,” Dar said. Even at its narrowest, the stream was nearly ten feet across, and the woman was carrying both weapons and gear in addition to her armor.

“Shay’s a pretty good jumper,” Allera said. As they watched, she shot forward, leaping over the water... and landing at least another ten feet beyond it on the far side.

Seeing Dar’s mouth dangling open, she added, “And a bit of a show-off,” with a slight smile.

The scout fixed an end of the rope to a nearby stone column, and tossed the rest back over to the others. Krogan caught the rope, and attached his end to a stalagmite. With the rope securely anchored on both ends, they were all able to cross the stream with little risk other than a moderate dousing. Shaylara leapt over and back to recover the rope, and within a few minutes they were continuing in their exploration of the cavern.

The first cleft that they encountered rapidly narrowed into a dead-end, but the second widened into a navigable passageway. The rough corridor twisted for about fifty feet before culminating in one of the familiar iron-shod wooden doors.

“Be ready for anything,” Dar said. “We’ve learned that doors are trouble, in this place.”

Talen nodded. The passageway was crowded, but Argos and Shaylara unlimbered compact bows and readied arrows, while the captain took up a position beside the door. When the others nodded that they were ready, he thrust the door open and drew back to give the archers a clear line of fire. Behind them, Aelos held his staff up to provide light.

A long, empty hall lay beyond the door. Deep alcoves extended to either side down the length of the hall, and they could see at least two doors from their current vantage. A faint squeaking greeted their entry, but no rats were visible as they warily made their way forward. Some stone fragments and a couple of broken, scattered bones were the only notable additions to the room.

“There’s another door at the far end,” Krogan reported.

“Footprints,” Shay added, bending to examine the floor. “Booted humanoids... not very old.”

“Which way?” Talen asked.

The scout pointed to the nearest of the doors. “They went that way. Came from down the hall.”

“How many?” Dar asked.

Shaylara studied the tracks for a few more seconds. "Five or six," she said, finally.

Dar looked at Talen. "Well, what do you say, general? Want to crack some heads?"

The captain scowled. He turned to the dwarf. "What do you think, Krogan?"

"Four doors... not a good tactical position. Intruder could come from any direction."

Talen nodded. "Shay?"

"If we go another way, this party could come up behind us. Might be a good idea to see who they are, anyway."

Talen nodded. "All right. But I do not want to get too far from the cavern and the stream; remember that our objective is to get out of here. If we run into something we can't handle, we fall back to the cavern."

"Run screaming like little girls. Got it, captain," Dar said. Talen didn't rise to the bait, instead directing Argus and Shaylara to take up their ready positions in front of the first door.

As the others readied at the door, Allera whispered to Varo, "Is he always such a jerk?"

"On the contrary, I think he's on good behavior around you women," the cleric replied. "But he is a terror in a fight."

The door opened to reveal another corridor, which continued straight ahead for about thirty feet before ending in a small, irregular room. Shaylara and Krogan went ahead to search, gesturing that the way was clear after just a few seconds. The companions followed to find another door set in the wall to their right just inside the small room. Shaylara indicated that the footprints led directly to that door, using a few simple hand gestures.

Talen nodded, and with his own gestures he set them up again before the door. Dar, hanging back a bit, whispered to Varo, "Several of these guys are military, or former military. Talen, definitely, and most of the others as well. Well, not the girl," he added, watching Allera standing out of the line of fire, her hands wrapped tightly around the shaft of her shortspear.

"I am not surprised," Varo said. "Likely they developed their attachment to the marshal during their service together."

Talen opened the door quietly, revealing a narrow, slightly curving corridor that vanished out of sight to the left. Almost at once, they could hear soft voices from somewhere beyond.

Talen made a few quick gestures. Krogan came forward, creeping silently, while Aelos dropped a small bag over the top of his staff, dousing the light. Varo thrust his torch into a nearby mound of dirt, extinguishing it. A complete darkness enveloped them, and even though they could no longer see the walls, they could feel them pressing in close around them. The room was silent save for the sound of their breathing, and the occasional soft creak of leather.

They waited what seemed like an eternity. When the dwarf's gravelly voice whispered softly, Dar couldn't restrain a surprised jump.

"Quiet!" Talen hissed. "Report."

The others had to strain to hear the dwarf's soft voice. "Four of them," he said. "Orcs, clerics by the look of them. Wore robes, but I'd wager there was armor underneath. They're camping out up in a big room around the bend of the passage, two doors on the far wall. I couldn't hear what they were talking about, but they seemed nervous about something."

"Clerics, eh?" Dar whispered. "I have a few words to say to the goons of the Big Bad Nasty." He came forward, colliding with Argus.

"Hold your ground," Talen's voice came from the dark. "We're not here to kill clerics."

"If they should learn of our presence here, and escape to share word with their superiors, then we will have a serious problem to contend with," Aelos said.

Dar was thinking of a gravestone in the valley above, but he said nothing.

"If we can capture one of them, we might be able to learn more about this place," Shaylara said.

There was a pause. "Well, we doing this, or not?" Dar asked.

"All right," Talen replied. "Shay, you and Krogan will open with your bows; Dar, Argus, and I will then move in and take them out. The rest of you, follow and give us support. Try to take one alive, if you can. Aelos?"

"I can *hold* one of them," the cleric said.

"Right. If you see one stop moving, he's the prisoner... knock him out and tie him up."

"What about light?" Shay asked. "Krogan can see fine in the dark, but if Aelos shows his staff, they'll see us coming from far off."

“I can cast a *light* spell on a small object, like a coin,” Varo said. “You can keep it hidden until you are ready to attack, Shaylara, and then toss it into the room. That should surprise them for a moment or two, giving us an added advantage.”

The scout nodded. Talen said, “All right, everyone clear on the plan? Let’s get moving, then. Slow and quiet.”

After Varo cast his spell and gave the glowing silver coin to Shaylara, they moved into the curving passage. Krogan, able to see with his darkvision, helped guide the others, lining them up so that they touched the wall adjacent to the open door. There was a soft click as the dwarf loaded a quarrel into place in his crossbow, then he moved into the corridor, Shaylara right behind him, touching the dwarf’s shoulder. The passage was smooth and narrow. Shaylara and Krogan crept forward, their bows at the ready, the warriors only a few paces behind them.

The corridor straightened out; Krogan could see the room up ahead. But as they moved into position, and Shaylara reached into her pouch for the enchanted coin, they heard sounds of movement.

“We’ve lingered long enough. Let us get this over with,” came a rough voice from ahead, a moment before its owner stepped into view.

Even clad in a flowing black robe, it was obvious that he was lean to the point of being emaciated. His tusks jutted out wide from his elongated jaw; one was broken off a few inches short. His attention was focused away from the corridor, as he talked to his followers.

Krogan touched Shaylara’s hand. The scout closed her hand around the coin, keeping it in the pouch to shield the light from view.

Unfortunately, at that moment, a loud scrape of metal on stone sounded from down the corridor. The cleric’s head came around at the noise, and with his darkvision, could clearly see the two scouts not more than twenty feet away.

“Intruders!” the orc shrieked, clutching at a morningstar hanging under his robes.

Chapter 34

THE BEST LAID PLANS

The coin went skittering into the room, filling the place with a warm glow of magical *light*.

Krogan and Shay fired their bows in rapid succession, their missiles knifing into the evil cleric. One penetrated his robes but hit something hard underneath, glancing away. The second caught the man in the shoulder, sending him staggering back a step, a look of fury on his face.

“Slay them! Slay them!” he shouted.

The warriors came surging forward, and Shay and Krogan stepped forward and to the side, flanking the entrance, letting them in. Talen was in the lead, but as he charged into the room, the cleric leader presented his holy symbol, a small metal object shaped like a ram’s head. The captain froze in mid step, falling forward to clatter heavily to the ground.

“Talen!” Shay yelled, dropping her bow. She’d left her spear behind, to avoid getting it snagged in the narrow corridor, but she drew her shortsword and moved forward to shield the captain from the two clerics that were rushing forward to finish him off. The last one was casting a spell, moving his ugly green hands in a complicated series of gestures

But before either side could reach him, Dar exploded out of the passage with the force of a boulder from a trebuchet. As he emerged, his war club came up and around, intersecting with the face of one of the clerics with the full force of his momentum and strength behind it. The cleric was knocked back, his head crumpled into a ruined mess. The second cleric lifted his morningstar, but Dar continued his swing, and as he spun around, he slammed the club into the man’s hip. The orc screamed and went down, clutching at his side as shards of shattered bone shredded his organs from within.

The last cleric finished his spell, invoking the dread power of his evil patron. Argus burst from the passage and ran toward him, his longsword held out before him like a spear. The acolyte completed his magic, protecting himself from good, but it didn’t help him much as the fighter thrust half of the length of his sword into the man’s gut, driving him back against the wall. The cleric, critically hurt, reached out and touched Argus on the side of his face. The fighter yelled in pain as bloody red wounds appeared where the cleric’s fingers brushed his cheek. He staggered back, leaving the orc clutching his bloody stomach, smiling through lips flecked with his own blood. The creature was clearly dying, but he staggered forward to deliver another deadly touch attack upon the fighter, not caring whether he died, as long as he took a foe with him.

That plan came to an abrupt end as Krogan’s adamantine urgosh came flying end-over-end at him. The axe-head of the weapon struck the cleric solidly in the center of his forehead, and he crumpled backward, his head split near in two.

The leader of the clerics regarded Dar with a hateful look as the fighter stepped over the bodies of his acolytes. “The Great Master will claim your souls,” he hissed.

“Maybe, but he’ll get yours first, asshole,” Dar said. He lifted his club and came at the evil priest, wary of a desperate counterattack. The cleric did not lift his morningstar, however, instead reaching out suddenly with his other hand. Dar, having seen Varo unleash numerous touch attacks, expected something like that, but even though he drew back he could not avoid the orc’s hand as it brushed his arm, that brief touch enough to let it pour a surge of negative energy into him.

Dar grimaced and weathered the rush of agony that tore through the limb. “You’ll have to do better than that,” he grunted, smashing the head of the club into the cleric’s gut. The servant of Orcus was knocked back a step, bending over as the air was blasted from his lungs by the force of the impact. The evil priest snarled and lifted a hand to strike again, but before he could act, Dar brought the club around again, smashing the cleric just above his left ear. The orc went down like a sack of bricks, and he didn’t get up.

Dar lowered the club, and rubbed at his arm. “Damned clerics.” He turned to see Talen, who was being helped up by Shaylara, and who didn’t look happy.

“I thought we agreed we were going to take one alive,” he said.

Dar looked down at the string of bodies between him and the passage mouth. He pointed to the one he’d side-swiped. “I didn’t hit that one that hard... he should have lived.”

Allera came from where she’d been helping Argus, and knelt beside the dead cleric. She examined his injuries, and ran her hands above his face and chest.

“This creature took his own life,” she said, looking up at Talen.

“It would seem that whatever secrets he possessed, he did not want to share them with us,” Varo commented.

Krogan had recovered his urgosh, and had moved to check the two doors from the room. “All quiet,” he said.

Dar checked the body of the cleric leader he had killed. The orc’s equipment was of superior manufacture, including two weapons, a morningstar and a light mace, that both were of obvious masterwork quality. Probably magical as well; he’d have to have Varo confirm that later. He took both weapons, sticking them through the straps of his backpack.

When he stood back up, he saw Allera watching him.

“What? Don’t tell me you guys don’t loot bodies.”

“You are injured,” the woman said. “That orc cleric hit you with an *inflict wounds* spell.”

“I didn’t know the name of it, but yeah, it hurt like somebody had stuck a knife in my arm.”

She came up to him. “Give me your hand.”

With a grin that was not quite a leer, he held it out to her. Ignoring him, she grasped the arm at the wrist and elbow.

Dar shuddered as a cold rush swept through him, as though he’d been doused in ice water. That was replaced almost immediately by a soft warmth that flowed out from his arm, suffusing him with a sense of well-being. It was nothing like what Varo’s spells and wands had felt like, and he found himself filled with regret as the sensations faded.

“Um... wow.”

She looked at him with a cocked eyebrow. “You’re welcome.” Releasing him, she walked over where Talen, Shaylara, and Krogan had gathered by one of the doors.

“I don’t make out any signs that anybody came this way recently,” Shaylara was saying.

“I still don’t like the idea of us resting here, until we’ve cleared the area,” Talen said. “We’ll take a quick look, but don’t go starting a fight if one can be avoided.” He was looking at Dar as he said the last sentence.

“This guy’s worse than the marshal,” Dar said in an aside to Varo, as the cleric walked past him.

“Just remember, we share a common enemy,” the cleric replied.

The door they chose led into a small triangular room with one other exit. They quickly found that the rooms they’d entered were part of a small complex of interlocking rooms, alternating between small triangular rooms and larger six-sided chambers. Most of the rooms were empty save for dirt, refuse, and occasional debris that might have once been furnishings. One of the room had a wall that was dotted with small tunnel openings; almost as soon as they’d entered, a dozen giant rats had come surging out to attack. The companions slew five of the creatures in as many seconds, and the rest fled, chittering loudly as they vanished into the dark holes.

“I vote we don’t camp in this room,” Dar said.

Pressing on, they finally came to a last hexagonal chamber. This one was thick with debris around the perimeter, but the center of the room had been cleared to leave space for a large pentagram that had been etched into the floor. Floating in the middle of the pentagram, hovering a few feet off the floor, was a faintly glowing skull.

“What in name of the Father...” Talen breathed.

“I would presume that this is the reason for the clerics’ visit,” Varo said. “I would strongly caution against you breaking the circle.”

“Noted,” Shaylara said, keeping her distance from the edge of the inscribed pattern.

“What is it?” Argus asked. Aelos opened his mouth to speak, but before he could respond, the glow around the skull flickered, and they each heard a voice speak in their minds.

I am the Oracle, possessor of all knowledge. You may ask one question of me. Ask what you wish, and if you can meet the price, you shall learn the answer you seek.

“Well now,” Dar said.

Chapter 35

THE ORACLE

Talen gestured for them to return to the room they’d just left, indicating that Shaylara should remain at the door to keep an eye on the skull.

“This could be an excellent opportunity for us,” Varo said.

“If you trust that thing, you deserve whatever you’ll get,” Krogan said.

“Agreed,” Aelos said. “It is an undead thing, and in league with the forces of Darkness.”

“Perhaps,” Varo replied. “Do you think it can do what it claims?”

“I could sense that it possesses incredible power,” the other cleric replied. “But it is bound by the circle, and may just be seeking some fool to release it from its bondage.”

“I do not agree,” Varo said. “If it was some evil undead, why wouldn’t the priests of Orcus have freed it earlier? I would wager that the priests come to it for information... information that we could use to our benefit as well as they.”

“It spoke of a price,” Allera said. “I don’t imagine it’s talking about a sack of gold coins.”

“And even if it was, it wouldn’t get them,” Dar said. “I’m not giving up my treasure to some creepy talking skull.”

“It is a risk we do not need to take,” Talen said. “We passed several rooms here that would suffice for an encampment. Let’s go and set up our defenses.”

“Captain,” Varo said. “I intend to address the skull, and see what its offer entails.”

The soldier frowned. “The decision has been made, cleric. You agreed to follow my orders.”

Varo nodded in deference. “With all due respect, this matter lies outside of the scope of our current agreement. I will go alone; whatever risk I undertake will be mine alone. I give you my word that I will not undertake any actions that jeopardize your team or your mission, and I will not take any actions that might free the creature, if in fact it is bound, as Aelos suggests.”

“The word of a priest of the Dark Creeper!” Aelos exclaimed. For the first time since the two groups had met, the priest of the Shining Father looked agitated.

“Whatever your assurance, it is too great a risk,” Talen said.

“Nevertheless, my intent remains unchanged. I would urge you not to stand in my way; I bear neither you nor your people any ill will, but this is something I feel compelled to do.”

The others looked to their captain. Talen, in turn, fixed Varo with a hard stare, which the cleric returned calmly.

“Go then, and traffic with your dark powers, priest,” Talen finally said. “Were we in different circumstances, I would sooner see you in irons, but as long as we are in Rappan Athuk, I will not risk the lives of my people to hinder you. Go, but if you return, do not expect a warm welcome.”

Varo nodded, and started toward the door. Dar stopped him, putting a hand on his arm.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” he said quietly.

“No, I am not,” Varo replied. “But it must be done.”

Dar looked at the others, who were regarding them with expressions ranging from ambivalence to hostility. “You want me to go with you?”

“No. Go with the others. I will be back shortly.”

Dar nodded, and let him go.

The seven companions were quiet as they retraced their steps to one of the larger empty room. They set up camp in one corner. The six that had come for marshal Tiros

moved quickly and efficiently; they worked well together and seemed to have defined roles to play. Shaylara set up simple snares designed to catch anyone rushing through either of the two doors that exited the room, while Krogan drove several iron spikes into one, leaving the second unsecured. Talen and Argos started cleaning and sharpening weapons. Allera took out a satchel of supplies and began preparing a meal; Aelos took out a basin and magically filled it with cold, pure water, catching the overflow in two leather bottles that he stoppered and put aside for later.

Dar occupied himself mostly by staying out of their way.

The tension of the earlier discussion hung over the group, and there was little conversation as they took their meal. Talen asked Dar about what they had encountered in Rappan Athuk thus far. Dar told his tale, interrupted by occasional questions that focused on marshal Tiros.

"It sounds like you were close to getting out of here on a few occasions," Shaylara said, as the fighter finished his tale.

"We came damned close to getting wiped out on a few occasions too. Damn, this food tastes good compared to that crap that Sobol issued us." He pointed to Allera, who had only eaten half of her serving. The healer, distracted, handed the food to him.

"I had thought that we had faced the worst of what Rappan Athuk had to offer," Argus said. The fighter looked younger without his armor and weapons about his person, but he kept the latter always within easy reach. "But this 'dung monster'... it sounds like a true horror."

"Damned thing's invincible, as far as we could tell," he said. "Would have killed all of us, but for the quick thinking of your marshal."

Talen finished the last of his food and brushed his hands. "Better get some sleep. Shay, you and Argus on first watch. Keep an eye out for that cleric. Wake me and Krogan in four hours."

"Don't trust me enough to join your watch?" Dar asked.

"Would you?" Talen asked.

Dar shrugged. "I could use a good night's sleep," he said. He folded his tunic up and laid it over his leather vest to serve as a pillow, and wrapped himself up in his tattered blanket.

That's when Varo returned.

The cleric looked haggard, and Shaylara had to help him into the room and around her snares.

“What in the hells happened to you?” Dar asked.

Varo straightened, and shambled over to the edge of the camp. “Do not fear, captain, the monster is yet contained, and your circumstances have not changed.”

“What did it tell you?” Allera asked.

“I am not sure I know myself,” the cleric said. He shrugged out of his pack and breastplate, and lay down on the ground, not even bothering with his blanket.

“What about the price?” Talen asked.

The cleric looked up at the captain. “The price was high.”

“Was it worth it?”

“I suppose only time will tell, captain.”

The cleric closed his eyes. Within a few moments, he was asleep.

Chapter 36

RETURN TO ZELKOR’S LAIR

Dar woke feeling miserable, his guts clenching, bringing back memories of a bout with dysentery when he was in the army. Refusing to show weakness in front of the others, he forced himself up and through a series of warm-up exercises. Throughout the brief exertion he felt as though his stomach was about to explode. The would-be rescue party might have been fooled, but Varo saw through his charade and noted his distress.

“It is the advance of the crystal death,” he said.

“You don’t seem to be all that affected.”

“The progress of the illness varies with each victim,” the priest explained. “And in any case, there is no need to prolong our suffering. The healer should be able to purge our bodies of the substance.”

Dar nodded, although for some reason he felt oddly reluctant at the thought of subjecting himself to the healer’s touch again. But Varo took the initiative, and Allera agreed to work the magic on their behalf. After all of the worry about a slow, lingering death, the cure was remarkably anticlimactic; once she had prepared her spells for the

day, it took only a few seconds of mental focus, and a momentary surge of tingling power, before she pronounced both of them fully healed.

They did not linger long in their camp. Talen and Argus efficiently broke camp while Varo and Aelos prayed to their respective gods, separated by the full breadth of the room. The captain warned that they might encounter additional servants of Orcus searching for the missing party of clerics, but the bodies were still where they had stashed them in one of the smaller side rooms, and they encountered no other threats as they made their way back into the large cavern of the purple worms. They clung to the wall and retraced their steps to the stream without incident.

“What exactly can we expect to find ahead?” Varo asked.

“The stream goes on for a long distance... not quite a mile, but it’ll feel like it,” Talen said. “Your magic, if it is the same as Aelos’s spell, will keep you above the water, so the current should not affect you, but there are places where the roof juts low and it will take some time to slip past.”

“If the current is going our way, why not just float down with it?” Dar asked.

“It’s a rough ride,” Shaylara said. “At places, the tunnel bends, twists through tight spots, and the water is churned into a nasty froth. No matter how good a swimmer you may be, I wouldn’t recommend it, let alone with a pack and full gear.”

“What about beyond?”

“The stream opens out onto a large cavern with a high ceiling,” Talen said. “The stream pours into a large recessed pool in the middle of the room. There’s a raised stone bier in the middle; we fought a pair of wraiths there when we came through.”

Varo nodded. “And the well?”

“Accessed through a series of tight tunnels that pass through several additional rooms. It wasn’t difficult to navigate, but the dark power of the place will steal your resolve. Try to focus on the objective, getting out. We got through by helping each other, last time. Don’t leave anyone behind.”

“There’s a lot of sudden ups and downs,” Krogan said. “Watch where you put your hands and feet. And keep an eye out for things lurking around the bends.”

“The well itself is located over a deep pool,” Shaylara added. “We left a rope attached just below the opening. If it’s still there, it will be a tough climb, but I think all of us can manage it.”

“And if it’s not there?” Dar asked.

“Then we find out if Shay’s as good a climber as she claims,” Talen said. The scout smiled at him.

“Are you ready, Aelos?” Talen asked. At the cleric’s nod, the companions gathered beside the overhang where the fast-moving stream vanished into the cavern wall. Dar came over to Varo, who was readying his own spell.

“Are you sure this will work?” the fighter asked.

“Have faith, mercenary,” the priest replied, invoking the power of Dagos, and touching his golden focus to the fighter’s forehead briefly.

“I don’t feel any different.”

“Look.” The cleric pointed at Talen, who was already edging under the overhang, his boots hovering a finger’s breadth over the rushing water.

The eight of them made their way through the narrow space, and followed the stream down the low passage beyond. As Talen had noted, the fit was tight at places, forcing them to bend low or even crawl over the surface of the water. But for the most part, the tunnel roof was about five feet above the stream, allowing them to make decent progress ahead.

After a time, a dark passage opened to the right, where a branch of the stream split off and headed off into another direction. “What’s that way?” Dar asked.

“We don’t know,” Argus said. “We weren’t exploring when we came this way; the divine miracle only lasts about an hour, according to Aelos.”

Varo paused briefly to look down the side tunnel, but then proceeded after the others.

As they made their way deeper down the stream, each of them began to feel a cold chill settle upon them. They’d all been splashed with the bracingly cold water numerous times, until their clothes were soaked through, but this was something deeper, a cold that seeped through their skins to cool the very bone. The light coming from Aelos’s staff dimmed slightly, drawing out the shadows that stretched along the tunnel walls.

“Focus on the goal,” Talen said. “We are getting out of here.”

Finally, after another few tight places that slowed their passage, they could see the stream tunnel opening into a wider space ahead. Wary, readying weapons, they moved forward.

“The entrance to the passage is to the left,” Talen said quietly. “Do not linger.”

Argus leaned against the side of the tunnel, but Allera was there immediately, drawing him back into line. Dar felt the same oppressive sense of ennui, an emptiness that whispered into his mind, urging him to surrender everything in the face of the inevitability of their doom. He too wanted to give up, to sit down or to throw himself into the water, letting the current carry him away. His jaw tightened until he felt pain in his teeth from the pressure, but he kept going.

“There is a powerful evil infusing this place,” Varo said.

“I’m no priest, but even I could have told you that,” Krogan said. The dwarf’s teeth were chattering.

“Come on,” Talen’s voice came from up ahead, a sharp command that drew them forward.

The light from Aelos’s staff—truly feeble now—spilled out into a cavern that was truly majestic in scope. The roar of the stream as it spilled out into the broad T-shaped pool was deafening, echoing off the distant walls all around them. For a moment, the companions stood there and took it all in, struggling with the lethargy that continued to pound away at their consciousness. Then Talen’s voice drew them again, forced them back to the immediacy of the moment.

“Over here!”

They followed him away from the stream, making an easy transition from striding across the water to solid ground. But as the cleric’s light reached the north wall of the cavern, they froze.

“I take it this was the way out?” Dar asked.

They stared at a massive heap of rubble, stones piled into a mound almost fifteen feet high, spilling out into a trace that jutted into the cavern like a long tongue. Talen, a stricken look on his face, reached down and picked up a rock the size of his fist. For a moment he stared at it, and then he hurled it off into the darkness with an angry shout.

There was a clang.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Shaylara said, shifting her longspear in that direction.

The noise came again, this time louder and longer, a creaking noise of metal shifting. It was followed by a heavy clod upon stone, and then another.

“Something’s coming,” Argus said. The fighter was as pale as death; he reached for his sword, and then hesitated, his hand falling forgotten to his side.

Something resolved out of the darkness, a massive form that took form at the edges of Aelos's light. It was formed like a man, but no mere man stood twelve feet tall, or made the noises that continued to come from it, the sound of metal bending in a most unnatural way. The fragments of light that reached it glinted off of an emerald skin, alien and terrible.

"An iron golem!" Varo cried.

"You've got to be kidding me," Dar said, as the massive terror continued to lumber forward, bringing with it the promise of death.

Chapter 37

EMERALD DEATH

"We cannot stand before this foe," Varo said to Dar, who was already edging back from the approaching creature.

But Talen had already raised his sword, the magical steel shining against the encroaching darkness. "Defend yourselves!" he shouted, surging ahead. Shaylara and Argus went with him, meeting the creature's approach.

The golem's fist came sweeping around. Talen saw it coming and dodged aside, but it still clipped him hard on the shoulder, spinning him around. The veteran soldier narrowly kept his footing and countered with a powerful swing of his sword, but the weapon merely bounced off the golem's metal thigh, ringing loudly as it sent a painful jolt up Talen's arm.

Shaylara and Argus came at the golem from its flanks. Their attacks likewise struck the creature hard, but without any apparent effect. It swept its arms around in low arcs. Talen was hit again, his darkwood buckler shattering under the force of the blow. The shield saved his arm from being broken, but the fighter's face still twisted in agony as he staggered back, trying to recover. Argus was hit by its second attack, the younger fighter's shoulder hit so hard that it was dislocated by the force of the impact. The soldier screamed and dropped his sword, his arm hanging limply at his side.

Before the battered combatants could recover from the construct's powerful attacks, the golem bent forward. Its mouth opened wide, and it unleashed a gout of ugly brown gas onto Talen and Argus.

Allera started to rush forward, but Aelos grabbed her arm, forestalling her. "No, child!"

Dar and Varo were already back at the stream. The sounds of the golem's movements were echoing throughout the room, but as they reached the water's edge, they could hear a distinct noise, *not* an echo, from out in the darkness ahead.

"There's another one on the far side of the room!" Varo yelled back at the others. "Return to the stream... now!"

The first golem's toxic cloud dissipated to show the two soldiers in bad shape. Argus staggered and fell, while Talen, momentarily blinded, swung his sword in a wild arc that failed to connect with anything. Shaylara stabbed at its flank with her spear, trying to draw its attention, but it seemed focused on Talen as it lifted its arms, claspng its fists together into a deadly iron bludgeon.

"Talen, run!" Shaylara shouted. The golem stepped forward, poised to deliver a killing blow to the nearly defenseless soldier.

Another loud impact resounded from the golem's leg. The huge construct shifted to the side, momentarily off balance, its attack aborted. It turned to face Krogan, steam hissing from the crack in its knee that the dwarf's adamantite urgosh had wrought.

Talen saw the dwarf. He tried to say something, but could only cough the golem's poison from his lungs.

"Get Argus out!" the dwarf yelled, lifting his weapon to strike again. But before he could attack, the golem's fists came down, driving with finality into the dwarf's head.

"Krogan!" Talen yelled, his voice hoarse.

"Talen, get out!" Shaylara repeated, as the golem slowly turned toward him, blood dripping from its locked fists. There was nothing left of Krogan Deepshaft but a mangled heap of crushed flesh.

Talen grabbed Argus, dragging the nearly-helpless fighter to his feet. The golem lurched forward and smashed its fists down again, intending to crush them both, but at the last instant its damaged leg twisted, and the blow narrowly missed. It hit the floor with enough force to crack the stone, and the two fighters nearly went down as the ground shook under their boots.

Allera and Aelos were there to meet them, helping the wounded men as they tried to get away. The golem was only a step behind them, slow but inevitable, ready to kill them at the slightest stumble. Shaylara was still thrusting her spear at its back, and finally she seemed to draw its attention, as it stopped and started to turn toward her.

"Shay!" Talen yelled. "Get out of there!"

But the scout was already running, not toward them, but back toward the slain dwarf. The golem followed, steam hissing from the rent in its leg with every step it took.

Talen started after her, but Aelos forestalled him. "Captain! We've got to get out... there's another one moving to block the exit!"

"I won't leave her!"

"She can move faster alone!" the cleric insisted. "Captain... Argus isn't going to make it without help!" he said, as he and Allera dragged the semiconscious fighter between them. "If that second golem blocks the stream exit, we're all dead!"

The first golem was already fading at the edge of their light; there was no sign of Shaylara. "Shay, we're getting out!" he yelled, frustration clear in his voice.

Shaylara had reached the crushed body of Krogan. With the light of Aelos's staff and Talen's sword retreating fast, she had to search his body by touch, all too aware of the heavy footsteps of the fast-approaching golem.

She found what she was looking for just as the golem reached her, and she rolled away a split second before a huge iron fist came crashing down onto the ground where she'd been kneeling.

She could see the other golem now, silhouetted in the light of Aelos's staff. Her companions had reached the stream, and were making their way across the water to the exit. The golem apparently wasn't going to let a little water stop it; as she watched the big creature stepped into the fast-moving stream, the water splashing up in a white froth around it.

The first golem blocked her way back to the others, and while she could easily outrun it, she wasn't up to chancing a dash in total darkness across a floor that she knew was scattered with debris from the rockfall. Instead, she ran forward out onto the T-shaped pool, her boots treading lightly over the surface of the water. The low waterfall from where the stream entered the pool announced itself through noise and the spray of water across her face. Running into the spray, she sprang and leapt, easily clearing the low barrier, landing on the stream. The maneuver would have been impossible had Aelos's spell not allowed her to avoid the rushing current, but each step barely disturbed the surface of the water as she ran after the others.

Of course, there was the small matter of the golem blocking her way.

The creature seemed to sense her coming, even though her rush across the water made barely a whisper, certainly not audible over the rush of the waterfall behind her. She could see it clearly, highlighted in the light cast by the staff in the tunnel beyond it. She focused on that light, and as the golem's fist came around she dove, the *water walk* keeping her hovering an inch above the water, her momentum carrying her past the

golem. The creature tried to grab her with its other hand, but before it could react she was up and gone, charging after the departing light.

The golem did not follow.

Neither Shay nor any of her companions had spotted the shadowy figure that had hung in the air high above the cavern floor, silently watching during the encounter. As the last lingering remains of light faded, and the cavern returned to utter darkness, the insubstantial form drifted back to the ground. As it made its way to the south, the golems came lumbering after it.

It had been difficult for Zelkor to resist the urge to taste the life energy of those poor, pathetic, struggling mortals. The woman, in particular, had felt particularly... tasty. But Zelkor was bound to a greater power, and in this instance, at least, there were commands that must be obeyed.

Later, perhaps, an acolyte would serve as an appropriate compensation for its sacrifice.

Chapter 38

A WATERY GRAVE

“Dar... hold...”

The fighter paused at Varo’s voice, scowling as he waited for the cleric to catch up. The priest’s mace glowed with a *light* spell, allowing them to see as they made their way back up the path of the underground stream. “How much longer is your spell going to last?”

“Not much longer,” Varo admitted. “But we must wait for the others nevertheless.”

“Why? They seemed eager enough to get themselves killed; I didn’t tell them to attack that golem.”

Varo paused; he had to put this in terms that the fighter would accept. “Without them, and especially without the healer, we have little chance of surviving long enough to find another way out of the dungeon.”

Dar sighed. “Assuming that there is another way out.”

Varo looked at the fighter critically. They had left behind the lingering effects of the emotion-dampening aura that infused the vicinity of the Well, but if Dar’s spirit had been broken, then his own plans would be cast into significant jeopardy.

“Fuck it,” the fighter finally said, spitting loudly and drawing out his punching dagger. In the close confines of the tunnel, it was his most effective weapon. “Let’s go rescue those clueless fucks.”

But as the pair turned around, they could already see a glow approaching up the course of the stream. The light resolved into the flame atop Aelos’s staff, accompanied by all five of the survivors of Talen’s team. Argus still looked terrible, but he was moving under his own power, under the watchful eyes of Allera. Shaylara was bringing up the rear, casting frequent looks back behind them, alert for any signs of pursuit.

“Hey, glad you guys could make it,” Dar said.

“No thanks to you, coward!” Talen snapped.

“Hey, asshole, just because I’m not stupid enough to go charging a gods-damned *iron golem*...”

“Gentlemen!” Varo interjected. “We have only a few minutes before our *water walk* spells expire... I suggest we get moving.”

“We’ll never make it back to the far cavern,” Talen said.

“We’ll, we’re sure as hell not going to make it if we keep yammering here,” Dar said. “Let’s move it!”

The seven hurried back up the stream as fast as they could, helping each other past the inevitable low stretches and tight squeezes. They passed the fork in the tunnel, and here Varo bid them pause.

“We can’t stop here!” Dar exclaimed. Already, water was starting to froth around the soles of his boots; the spell was beginning to fade.

“As soon as the spell fails, we’re going to be shot down the river, right back into the waiting hands of those golems,” Shaylara said. “I’m a good swimmer, but there’s no way I can fight that current.”

“We have one other option,” Varo said. “As a contingency, I prepared a *water breathing* spell this morning. It won’t get us back to the worm cavern, but it may let us survive being washed down this fork.”

“But we don’t know what lies that way,” Shaylara said. “What if it pours off a thousand-foot cliff, onto rocks?”

"It can't be worse than the alternative," Dar said. He was holding onto a rock, now; the water was up to his ankles, and the current was beginning to tug at him. "Whatever we do, we have to do it now!"

Varo looked at Talen. "Do it, then," he said.

"Gather around me," Varo said. They did, with Aelos lingering the longest, expediency warring with preference in his expression.

The cleric cast his spell, touching each of them in turn.

"How long?" Talen asked.

"With all of you? A little less than an hour."

"If we're going to do this, we might as well get started," Dar said. He led them into the side tunnel. He barely got thirty steps before the current grabbed him, and he fell into the water, the others close behind.

* * * * *

Dar's head broke the water. His entire body felt battered and bruised, and he knew that had he not been able to breathe water, he would have certainly drowned. The river had been as fast and as nasty as they'd predicted, and it had not taken it easy on him.

He grabbed a rock and pulled himself half out of the water, gasping for air. It was dark, and the air felt cold. He looked around, but didn't see any sign of his companions. Not that he could have seen them in any case.

No, wait. There was a flicker of light, under the surface of the water nearby. Trying to ignore the protests of his body, he made his way over to it. The current was still pushing at him, but it wasn't as insistent as before; he must have ended up in a rivulet or pool of some sort.

"Varo? Allera? Anybody there?" he hissed.

"I am here," Varo's voice came from somewhere nearby. The cleric's voice sounded as beat up as he felt.

"The others?"

"I don't know," came the response.

"There's a light here," Dar said. He reached down, and pulled out Aelos's staff from where it had been jammed between two rocks.

Lifting the staff, he could finally see more of their surroundings. The magical flame revealed a large cavern, its ceiling beyond the range of the sphere of light. To his left, on the far side of the stream, a pair of massive stone formations rose up into the air. On the near side of the stream the cavern floor was relatively flat, rising slightly the further it got from the water. Lying on the strand there, the light shone on the prone forms of Shaylara and Talen.

“The captain and Shay are over here,” he said to Varo. He pulled himself out of the water, even that meager action taking a considerable effort. He wanted to lie down and pass out, but his battle-worn instincts were telling him that this place wasn’t safe. He saw that his pack had been ripped open, and his shortbow, stuffed through the loops for storage, had been snapped in two. A number of his weapons had been lost in the flood; the magical warhammer, the silver-edged greatsword, the orc cleric’s morningstar. But he still had his personal weapons, and one of the throngs holding the magical club had held, keeping the weapon bound to him. He shrugged off the waterlogged pack, and looked around.

“Help!” came a faint cry from the water. Dar turned and shone the light in that direction, revealing Allera, back near the mouth of the stream, only her head visible above the surface of the water. She was struggling with a heavy burden, which Dar identified after a moment as Aelos.

“Help the others, I’ll get them,” Dar said to Varo. Poking the staff into a gap in the rocks, so its light clearly illuminated the area, the fighter jumped back into the water, and pushing himself toward Allera and Aelos. The cleric was bleeding from a cut just above his left eye, and there were a few obvious bruises darkening in other places where the rocks had battered him. Dar took the man’s weight onto his, wrapping the unconscious cleric’s arm around his shoulder.

“Get him to shore, and I’ll heal him,” Allera said.

“I think we can all use some healing,” Dar said. “Where’s Argus?”

“I think I saw him over there,” Varo said, pointing. The cleric had pulled himself out of the water, and knelt beside Talen and Shaylara. The captain was stirring and groaning; he was alive, at least.

Dar looked at where Varo had indicated. There was a lump lying face-down in the stream, apparently caught on an obstruction just under the surface of the water. Argus.

And standing directly above him, leaning out over the water, was the largest troll he had ever seen.

PAY THE TROLL

The troll reached down, and grabbed Argus with a meaty claw. The creature lifted the two-hundred-pound fighter easily, drawing him up to stare into his face with its beady yellow eyes.

“Gurunga, tod nok,” it rumbled.

Argus, only semiconscious, muttered something incoherent.

Talen, restored to full awareness by a powerful healing spell from Varo, stood up and drew his sword. “Let him go!” he shouted at the troll. He moved to the edge of the stream, but the troll and Argus were on the far side, and there was no way for him to get to them.

The troll laughed and responded with another comment in the Giant tongue.

Dar turned to Allera. “Help him,” he said, pushing Aelos’s unconscious form up onto the shore. He considered swimming across to the troll’s side of the stream, but only for a moment. He pulled himself up on the near side. Reaching for the small pile of his belongings, he drew out his heavy club.

Talen had taken out his small shortbow, and was hastily fitting a new string to it to replace the waterlogged and ruined one left on from before. If the troll seemed threatened by his actions, it gave no sign of concern. In fact, it seemed almost casual as it shook its prisoner, and checked him for valuables. Finding little of interest, it glanced over its shoulder, and barked something else, “Zoolbing!”

Dar saw the second approaching form first. If the first troll was large for its kind, this one was truly monstrous. Standing well over ten feet tall, it carried a tower shield easily on one arm, and a large metal gauntlet covered its other clawed fist.

“Oh, we’re screwed,” the fighter muttered to himself.

The first troll tossed its captive back to the second troll as it lumbered forward. The creature caught Argus in its huge claw, locking its thick fingers around the helpless fighter’s waist. Argus was conscious now, and aware of the dire circumstances of his situation; he struggled to get free, but against the troll’s strength his efforts were feeble.

Talen drew an arrow from the quiver at his hip, and lifted it to his bow. But before he could act, the second troll smashed Argus hard against the nearer of the two stone spires. A loud crack echoed through the chamber, and the fighter fell limp in the troll’s grasp at once. Argus’s helmet had fallen from his head, and his hair, matted with blood and brains oozing from his shattered skull, left a greasy smudge on the stone as the troll

dragged him across the ground. Seeing that this prey was done, the troll tossed him over his shoulder.

“Damn it, you bastard!” Talen cried, drawing his bow and firing at the troll that had killed his comrade. The hasty shot hit the troll’s shield, glancing away harmlessly.

Shaylara was up now as well, and she shouted a warning as the first troll came forward. The companions saw with surprise that the troll merely stepped *onto* the surface of the stream, charging forward with surprising speed. Dar hurled his throwing axe at it, but even though the weapon opened a gash on its right arm, the attack did nothing to hinder its charge. Within a few long strides, it was on their side of the cavern, and coming fast.

The second troll came forward as well. It looked as though its intent was to merely hurdle the stream, and as strong as it had already proven itself to be, it looked as though the obstacle would prove no barrier to its rush. Had it smashed into the defenders at the same time as its brother, the adventures of the Doomed Bastards would have likely come to an end right then and there. But Argus’s death had bought them a few seconds, a delay that gave Varo time to call upon the intervention of Dagos once more.

A pair of huge monstrous centipedes came into view around the two stone spires, converging upon the onrushing troll between them. The troll arrested his rush as one of the summoned creatures stabbed its mandibles deep into its shoulder. The second came up behind it, but the troll’s sharp senses detected the second attacker an instant before it struck, and it brought its huge shield up under the centipede’s head, knocking it aside. With the other centipede locked on its shoulder it couldn’t bring its claw into play, but it brought the shield around like a club, smashing it into the giant vermin’s body, tearing it free. The wound it left behind was a vicious one, but the troll’s regenerative powers were already working to close it, the flow of blood and venom from the injury quickly easing.

Dar, Talen, and Shaylara met the other troll’s charge, spreading out to flank it. The troll’s considerable reach gave it the first attack, smashing Dar with a painful blow to the chest from its leathery fist. Dar grimaced and staggered back, but he was quick to recover with a potent two-handed strike that caught the troll in its arm. The creature’s tough hide absorbed much of the force of the attack, but by the way it snarled at him, it was clear that the blow had hurt it.

Talen, dropping his bow, drew his magical sword and rushed to join the attack. His first thrust was ineffective, glancing off its skin as it turned to respond to Dar. Shaylara, however, was able to exploit its distraction, coming up from behind, and stabbing her small sword deep into its flank. The troll reacted quickly, turning on the scout. She ducked under its first sweeping claw, but it abruptly grabbed her with the second, digging its talons painfully into her side. Shaylara cried out and tried to break free, but as she lifted her sword to stab it, the creature lunged and seized her wrist in its powerful jaws. She screamed as the troll bit down hard, breaking her arm, and as the other

fighters desperately pounded on it, trying to force it to free her, it spun its head around, sending her flying. She hit the ground hard, rolled, and came to a stop in a battered heap, unconscious and dying.

Allera and Aelos had not been idle during those first chaotic moments of battle. The healer had followed Dar's instructions, ignoring her own hurts as she channeled a powerful stream of healing energy into the battered priest. Aelos's eyes shot open, and he looked at Allera with surprise, as if surprised to see her there. The wound above his eye knitted shut, and the purpling bruises faded to a more normal color as the potent healing spell, augmented by the healer's natural talents, worked its course.

Allera, exhausted, sagged back into the water. Aelos grabbed onto her, and pulled her to the edge of the shore, placing her hands firmly on the rocks.

"Heal yourself, child," he said to her. "I must help the others against this dire foe."

Channeling his own divine magic, the cleric summoned a *spiritual weapon*, a shimmering field of force in the shape of a flaming torch. Seeing that the other troll was still distracted by Varo's summoned centipedes, and that his companions were being hard pressed by the other, he mentally directed the *weapon* to aid them in melee.

Neither he nor Allera saw the third troll that crept around the southern spire, near where the river entered the cavern. The troll, blending into the shadows, slipped silently into the water, and surged toward them.

Allera was just reaching up to pull herself up onto the shore when a pair of huge claws seized her from behind, and dragged her deep under the surface.

Chapter 40

TRIBULATION

Dar, Talen, and the troll continued to exchange blows in a violent storm of melee. The troll, having taken down Shaylara, found these two foes more tenacious, both men fighting with a furious determination. Dar slammed his club into the troll's leg, smashing the limb. An ugly white spike of bone stuck out of the wound, but as the troll fought on, the extruding bone sank back into its flesh, and its skin knit together around it. Talen did his share, opening vicious rents in its torso with his sword, but as tough as it was, he couldn't manage to score a critical hit that would dig deep enough into its body to cripple it. Aelos's *spiritual weapon* continued to harry it as well, but the pounding blows from the magical torch did not burn in reality, and once the troll had failed to affect it with a claw swipe, it ignored the divine weapon to focus on the foes that could bleed.

The troll on the far bank was likewise going quickly through Varo's centipedes. It brought down the edge of its shield once, twice, three times upon the one that had bitten it, severing its head from its body. As that creature dissolved, the troll turned on the second. The centipede managed to bite him on the back of its thigh, but the troll in turn got a grip on its long body with its claw, and started smashing it into the nearest stone column, even as the centipede continued to stab its fangs into its hand.

Varo, standing unengaged on the shore of the stream, knew that his companions were in dire straits. But he also knew that once the last centipede was destroyed, there would be nothing stopping this last—and apparently toughest—foe from joining the battle.

Summoning the power of Dagos, he hurled a potent enchantment across the cavern, calling upon the sinister might of his god to cloud the mind of the troll. The troll, though mighty, was not as strong of body as it was of mind, and it suddenly stopped its attack on the centipede, babbling incoherent scraps of phrases in Giant.

The centipede was quick to take advantage, breaking free and delivering another painful bite to the troll's leg.

Aelos looked down at the water where Allera had suddenly vanished. The only part of the troll that had seized her that he could see was the top of its head. It fixed him with its yellow eyes, which seemed to smile at him, as if promising a like fate to him.

"Burn, fiend!" the cleric cried, opening his palm to release a bolt of *searing light* into the face of the troll. The beam struck the troll squarely in the center of its forehead, blasting away a blackened streak of flesh. The troll responded by erupting out of the water, surging up onto the shore directly onto the wide-eyed cleric.

Dar was a tough fighter, but the troll was incredibly strong, and there was only so much abuse that he could take. As he slammed it in the chest with one last blow from his club, the troll stepped forward and seized his shoulders with its claws. Unable to break free, the fighter could only struggle helplessly as the troll opened its jaws wide and bit down on his head. Fortunately Dar was still wearing his half-helm, but as the troll tore it off his head, its teeth took a few good-sized chunks of flesh with it.

The troll's total focus on Dar gave Talen the opening that he needed. The veteran fighter came at the troll from behind, lifting his sword and driving it deep into the creature's back. The troll shrieked and tore away, releasing Dar, who staggered back and fell to the ground, his face a bloody mess. The troll was still regenerating, but it was now critically wounded, and its legs collapsed under it. It fell to the ground, thrashing wildly. It tried to get up, but failed as Talen stepped carefully within its reach, and slammed his sword up to the hilt in the monster's neck.

Aelos felt pain explode in his body as the troll tore into him. Its claws dug into his flesh, and it held him pinned as it loomed over him, close enough for him to feel the hot fetid

stink of its breath on his face. He knew, and the troll knew as well, that there was no way he could break free of its grapple. All he could do was lift one hand, streaked with blood, and touch it to the troll's chest.

"*Umbra predate!*" the cleric hissed, spitting blood at the troll. Darkness flashed between the priest's fingers, and the troll reared back as a dark *hole* opened in its chest. Black blood gushed out of the opening, covering the cleric's body.

In its fury, the troll tightened its grip, prepared to tear the cleric to pieces. But it heard a soft cough, and looked up into the face of Licinius Varo, who laid a gentle touch upon its brow.

The *inflict serious wounds* spell ravaged its terrible course through the creature's body. The troll, furious, nevertheless realized that two humans that could deliver such terrible hurts with mere touches were not something to be confronted lightly. It fell back, and leapt into the stream, vanishing from view.

Varo bent to examine the cleric, who was drenched in blood, some of it his own, but most belonging to the troll. "Where is Allera?" When the cleric, still somewhat confused, shook his head, Varo repeated, "The healer! If we don't find her, then this battle is still lost!" He glanced up to see that the troll on the far bank was smashing what was left of his second centipede. The spell had been about to expire, in any case. His other summoning had been replaced with his *water breathing* spell; there would be no more aid forthcoming from Dagos this day. Lacking any further magic that could delay or discomfit the creature, he could only hope that his *confusion* would keep it delayed for a few more critical seconds.

Looking over at the others, he could see that the first troll was down, but its body was still intact. Aelos's *spiritual weapon* was still smashing it, but as he watched, the spell's duration expired, and the glowing torch faded away. Talen—the fool!—had gone over to Shaylara, as if there was something that *he* could do for her. Dar was down too, barely clinging to consciousness by the look of him.

Varo knew that the troll he and Aelos had faced had only been temporarily stunned, and that it would be back as soon as it had regenerated the damage suffered at their hands.

Where was Allera?

There! The cleric spotted the pale strands of hair floating near the submerged bridge of stones that connected the two sides of the stream. Trying to ignore the troll that continued to pound the already-dissolving body of the centipede into the stone, as well as the one that was continuing to regenerate just a few paces away, he ran over to the bridge, and pulled the limp form of the healer from the water.

She lived, if barely. He cast one of his last remaining healing spells into her. As her eyes fluttered open, he fixed them with his own.

“Listen, do not speak. We stand on the brink of destruction, and have only seconds to act. Heal the others, starting with Dar. Do not hold anything back. Do not hesitate.”

She nodded, and got up, with his help. She could barely stand, but she didn't bother to heal herself, instead rushing over to Dar. The fighter groaned as she propped him up, but he gasped a moment later as she poured pure healing energy into him. The shock of it left him staggered, but she didn't stop, darting over to Shaylara.

Varo had started toward the downed troll, but a roar from behind drew his attention around. Whether because it had finally shaken off the *confusion*, or because its addled brain had finally registered upon them as a threat, the troll was coming.

It surged forward, ignoring the bridge, and leapt over the stream. It landed on the near bank with several feet to spare, ten feet and six hundred pounds of death waiting to be unleashed.

Chapter 41

BLIND LUCK AND DARK FATE

Talen, kneeling with Allera over Shaylara's broken form, looked up as the troll landed a few paces away. The fighter reached for his sword, but it was obvious from a single glance that he had no chance against it.

Dar yelled and rushed forward. The troll saw him coming, and smashed him across the chest with a truly titanic blow to the center of the fighter's breastplate. The fighter only gritted his teeth and surged forward, smashing his club up with both hands into the troll's chest. The blow didn't do much damage, but Dar thrust behind it with his full weight and momentum, trying to drive the troll back.

It was like trying to push back a stone wall. The troll was incredibly strong, possessed of a sheer degree of raw physical might that the fighter had never before faced. Dar knew that in another second, he'd lose the advantage of leverage, and the troll would lay into him with a full attack that he had little chance of surviving.

So he dug deep within himself, and made a last desperate thrust. Maybe it was luck, or fate, or some distant god's intervention, but the troll's right foot slid back a foot, just a single foot. The troll was only trying to gain better traction, but that foot landed on a slanted piece of rock on the water's edge, a rock that gave way when six hundred pounds of giant settled upon it. The troll, flailing its arms, went over backwards into the stream. Dar nearly went in after it, and only barely managed to gain control of his rush, windmilling his arms to maintain his balance at the water's edge.

It was immediately obvious, however, that the respite was only a momentary one. The troll still seemed somewhat *confused*, as it blundered first toward the underwater line of rocks, and then back toward the far side of the stream. But when it turned back to the companions' side of the cavern, it was obvious by the furious look that burned in its eyes that it had regained full use of its murderous capabilities.

Aelos, back on his feet, hurled a *command* at it to "Flee!", but whether it failed to understand it, or simply resisted the magic, the troll didn't stop coming on. It rushed forward, a wall of water surging ahead of it.

Dar was there to meet it, his club coming down in a powerful two-handed arc aimed at the troll's head. The troll lifted the arm holding its tower shield and shifted to the side, but the blow still came down solidly on its shoulder. The troll snarled and lashed out at the fighter, knocking him back a step.

The fighter immediately started to come at the troll again, but he heard a sizzling sound from his chest that caused him to look down. To his surprise, he saw a large hole in the center of his breastplate... which was growing, as the metal dissolved into reddish dust!

"What in the hells?" he asked.

The troll had managed to gain a foothold on the near shore, and as it rose to its full height, it looked utterly ferocious, poised to unleash destruction on the defenders. Once again, the companions rallied to meet it, with Dar joined by the just-healed Talen and Shaylara. The scout was still pale, her arm newly restored through Allera's potent arts, but she clutched onto her sword with grim determination.

With its back to the water, the troll lashed out with a violent fury. It pounded Talen hard with its gauntlet, smashing the fighter across the side of his head. Without his helmet, the blow would have crushed his skull like a melon, but even with the protection his head rang with the terrible force of the blow. It lunged forward to bite, but was intercepted as Shaylara leapt into its reach, darting under its shield and stabbing her sword into the crook under its arm as she passed. The troll shrieked and tried to knock her into the stream with a blow from its shield, but she ducked under the wild swing. The edge of the shield caught her on the back of the shoulder, knocking her down, but she rolled with the impact and out of the reach of the troll before it could follow up with a crippling blow.

Talen sliced a deep gash across the troll's thick gut with his sword. Dark blood welled out from the wound, soaking into a ragged leather belt that the creature wore. The troll struck Talen again, knocking him back. It started after him, but was distracted as Dar laid into it with a full attack from the flank. The fighter brought his club down hard into the troll's leg, and it let out another roar of pain. It turned on him, and with his armor all but ruined, he had almost no defense against its assault. The troll seized his arm with a claw, dragging the struggling fighter up into the troll's embrace before digging its foul

teeth into his shoulder. Dar screamed as blood erupted from the vicious wound, but he managed to grab a hold of his punching dagger, sliding it from its leather sheath.

Talen felt a soft touch on the back of his neck, followed by a rush of healing energy. Nodding in thanks to Allera, he leapt back into battle, charging at the troll. Without releasing its hold on Dar, the troll brought up its huge shield, deflecting the fighter's attack. But once again it left itself open to a surging rush from Shaylara, who thrust her small sword deep into the meaty flesh of the troll's thigh.

That pain returned redoubled as Varo touched the arm holding Dar, sending an *inflict moderate wounds* into the troll. The troll loosened its grip slightly, giving Dar a chance to lift his punching dagger, and stab the *keen* weapon into the troll's left eye.

The troll let out a terrible scream, and thrashed madly in a violent explosion of limbs that knocked all of the defenders back. Dar fell hard and nearly went into the stream, only Varo's quick helping hand dragging him back from the edge. The troll had lost all control over its movements, but it still clung tenaciously to life, its body continuing to regenerate the terrible damage it had taken. The companions could see that as well, and Talen and Dar, once they had recovered, came at it again, careful to avoid the mad gyrations of its limbs as they stabbed and smashed it. Within another several moments it was down, but even with huge gaping rents in its body, it continued to slowly heal.

"We must burn it!" Varo said.

"The *bag of holding*!" Talen exclaimed. "Shay, there's still a few oil flasks in there..."

But the scout never got a chance to follow up on the captain's suggestion. Aelos, a short distance away from the melee, saw the other troll, the one they'd put down in the first rush, leap up and rush forward. The companions turned as one at the cleric's shouted warning, lifting their weapons. Dar and Talen swung at as it ran past them, but the troll was moving with incredible speed, and both missed. Then it was past, with only Shaylara standing between it and the bridge of underwater stepping-stones. The scout held her ground, lifting her sword to strike.

The troll did not change its course, and as it reached the much smaller human, it merely seized her with its claws and leapt forward, ascending in a fifteen-foot arc that ended with it hitting the water on the far side of the bridge. The troll and its prisoner hit the water with a massive splash, and then they were gone.

For a heartbeat the companions only stared after them, stunned by the suddenness of what had happened. Talen ran forward, staring out into the darkness. "Shay! SHAY!"

The only thing that came back was silence.

Chapter 42

PYRE

The companions were wrenched quickly back into the moment as the body of the troll lying on the ground in front of them jerked, a gargling hiss issuing from its throat as it drew in a deep breath of air.

“Motherfucking thing’s coming back!” Dar yelled, looking around for his club, and ultimately settling on stabbing his punching dagger into its face and chest a half-dozen times. The troll started to struggle, lifting its arms to protect itself, but Dar’s furious assault soon had it unconscious again.

“We need fire,” Varo repeated.

“Shay had the oil flasks in the *bag of holding*,” Talen said. The loss of two more of his charges had obviously hit the captain hard; his sword was trembling in his hand, and his face was splattered with gobs of blood, both his own and that of the trolls he had battled. “She gone, along with the marshal’s body. We’ve failed doubly, now. All of them, dead, for nothing.”

“Talen!” Dar shouted. He looked even worse than the captain, with his entire upper body liberally coated with blood and gore. “We don’t have time for this bullshit... we need fire!” He looked up at Aelos, as the cleric came forward. “What about your staff, priest?”

“That flame is but an illusion,” Varo said. He’d unslung his own pack, but the only torch he had left was a sodden mess, unusable.

“What if we hack it into pieces?” Allera asked. The healer’s cloak was torn, and great rents were visible in the back of her leather armor where one of the trolls had rent her with its claws.

“No good... it’ll just keep regenerating,” Varo said.

“Damn it, there’s no way I’m fighting this bastard again,” Dar said. “Go through your bags... see if there’s anything that can be set on fire in any of them. No matter how small or soaked it is.” He stabbed the troll a few more times for good measure.

“Look around for anything that might be flammable,” Varo added. “Mushrooms, spiderwebs... whatever you find, bring it here. But don’t go far... there was another troll that we injured, but which may return at any moment.”

The five survivors quickly went to work. Talen crossed the underwater bridge over to where Argus’s body lay in a crushed heap. He returned bearing the dead fighter’s pack,

and kneeling beside the troll, started going through it mechanically. The others were putting together a small pile of flammable items, including a few damp sheets of paper from Aelos's scroll case, a coil of frayed hemp rope, some spare smallclothes, and a pair of broken arrows.

Talen lifted a small metal miner's lamp out of Argus's pack. A small amount of liquid sloshed inside. "Oil," he said.

Dar looked up from where he'd been monitoring the troll. "Get it over here," he said. "Pile everything on top of the troll's chest. If we can get it hot enough, the entire damned thing should burn."

Varo stood over the fighters as they prepared the small bonfire. Talen upended the lamp over the stack, careful not to waste a single drop. "You may want to take the creature's belt and gauntlet before you burn it," the cleric said to Dar. "There are potent magical auras about those items. The shield it carried as well," he added, indicating the large steel plate lying a few feet away.

Dar nodded and removed the items from the troll's body. "I also found a key on it," he said. Talen had taken out flint and steel, and looked at them.

"Burn it," Dar said.

The troll's body was soaked, but the lamp oil allowed the sparks covering the piled items to catch and bloom into wisps of orange flame. The five of them watched as the troll's body began to smoke. For a moment, as the hastily-gathered fuel they'd gathered was consumed, they worried that the fire would die out with most of the troll's body still intact, but then it suddenly flared up, the troll's flesh blackening as the flames started consuming its leathery hide. Dar watched until it was done, prodding every stray bit of troll onto the fire until it was completely consumed, leaving only blackened char. Then the fighter stood, and looked out toward the underground river.

"You see that, you bastards!" he shouted. "That's what's going to happen to all of you, if you come back here!"

The companions started gathering up their gear. None of them saw the dark lump that floated in the river on the far side of the cavern; the thing was too far away for them to detect the reflected firelight that shone in its big yellow eyes. Those eyes fixed upon the five humans with a stare infused with pure hatred.

Finally, the troll's head dipped under the water, leaving not even a trace behind it.

Chapter 43

A DIFFICULT DECISION

“We have to go after Shay,” Talen said. “She may still be alive.”

“I do not say this to hurt you,” Varo said, “but that is very unlikely. I do not know how carefully you looked at the dead troll’s hands and feet, but they were webbed. These creatures were scraggs.”

“What are they?” Allera asked, shivering slightly as she pressed her arms close against her body for warmth. The fire that had burned the troll had used up all of their consumables, and it hadn’t lasted long enough for them to dry out their waterlogged clothes. The air in the cavern wasn’t quite cold enough for them to see their breath, but it wasn’t much warmer than that, either.

“Scraggs are marine varieties of trolls,” Varo explained. “They can breathe underwater, and swim with great alacrity.”

“We don’t leave anyone behind,” Talen said.

Allera put her hand on the captain’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Talen,” she said. “But we need to focus on the living, right now.”

“She’s right,” Varo said. “We need to find a place to rest, and dry ourselves, or we won’t have to worry about trolls, or anything else.”

“Once we rest, I can implore the Shining Father for guidance,” Aelos said. With his damp clothes clinging to his body, he looked thinner and frailer than he had before. “He can give us an indication if we should follow after Shaylara, or seek another escape from this dungeon.”

Dar came back across the submerged bridge, carrying Argus’s bow and a pack that was obviously heavily laden. Despite the added weight, he leapt easily across the hidden stones to join them on the near bank.

“Damn, if I don’t feel as strong as two men, with this belt,” he said, indicating the troll’s belt, which was wrapped twice around his waist. “No wonder the damned thing hit so hard.”

“What’s in the pack?” Varo asked.

“The bastards had a fortune in gold ore stashed over there,” Dar said. “Hundreds of pounds of it. It’s too much to carry, but if each of us takes as much as they can manage...”

“We’re not here for gold,” Talen said sharply. “Our goal is to get out of here.”

Dar shrugged. "Might as well get rich in the process. But suit yourself."

"What about the key?" Varo asked.

"I didn't see anything, but there was a chain that was wrapped around one of the stone columns. End was broken off... could be the trolls took whatever was attached to it when they fled."

Talen still hadn't moved, staring out across the underground river, toward the narrow opening where it vanished back underground on the far side of the cavern. "Talen... we have to go," Allera said.

The captain didn't say anything for a long minute, while the others gathered. Then, finally, he turned and joined them.

The area where the trolls had laired had turned out to be an island, with the main branch of the stream wrapping around it to the south. There was more dry land on the far side, but their probings with Aelos's light hadn't revealed any exits in that direction. So they turned their attention to the only other apparent way out, a narrow passage deep within a cleft to the northeast. Without anything to build another pyre, they wrapped Argus in his cloak and left him under a shallow cairn of loose stones. Dar had suggested dumping his body in the river, but Talen had vetoed that idea, insisting that he would not have his loyal friend serve as food for the river trolls.

"They'll probably just come back and eat him when we're gone," Dar had muttered, but he didn't stop Talen from building the cairn, or Aelos from saying a blessing over the grave.

The companions moved single-file into the narrow corridor. Talen was in the lead, holding the dead troll's shield. For him it was a tower shield, and while it offered excellent protection, it was cumbersome and difficult to handle. Dar had taken Argus's chain shirt to replace his ruined armor, but it made sense to have the best-protected member of the group in the lead. Aelos came behind Dar, his staff held up to provide light, while Allera and Varo brought up the rear. Allera had lost her shortspear in the river, leaving her without a weapon, but Dar handed her the magical light mace he'd taken before from the dead orc cleric in the dungeons above.

"In this place, none of us can afford to be unarmed," he told her.

"Remember, we're looking for a quiet place to rest," Varo said softly. "Nothing too fancy, just a defensible place where we can recover spells."

The passage turned and quickly opened onto another large cavern, this one possibly even larger than the first. Huge rock formations occupied much of the floor space,

leaving only narrow paths to navigate around the perimeter of the room. Wisps of white hung in the air, like strands of lace.

“Spiderwebs,” Talen said. “Watch out for...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his warning, as a fine mesh of webbing settled over his upper body, quickly tightening and jerking him up off his feet.

Chapter 44

A STICKY SITUATION

Dar looked up and saw a quartet of giant spiders, each with a body roughly the size of a man’s, clinging to the wall over the entrance in a great spread of white spiderwebs. Two of the spiders had attached webs to Talen, and were struggling with the fighter’s weight as they slowly lifted him off his feet into the air.

“Oh, crap.”

Even as he spotted the threat, one of the spiders hurled a mass of webbing at him. He dodged aside, and the web caught on the rocks behind him—incidentally, partially blocking the passage entrance.

He moved forward into the room, and whipped his throwing axe out of his belt, hurling it into one of the spiders holding onto Talen. The weapon hit the creature on the head with a solid thunk, and it let out a high-pitched noise.

Talen, struggling to break free, managed to lift his shield up above his head, tangling the web lines on the edge of the steel. The spiders jerked him up another few feet, but as he slipped his arm out of the shield’s straps he sliced the strands wrapped around his shoulders with his dagger, cutting himself free. He fell away, dropping to land in a crouch five feet below, while the shield, divested of his weight, shot up into the air, narrowly missing one of the spiders before it got tangled up in the dense spiderwebs.

Dar was taking out his bow, while Aelos was moving gingerly into the cavern, trying to avoid the webs that were strung across the entrance. The spiders apparently decided to go for a more direct approach, as three of them launched themselves on strands of webbing, falling down toward the morsels below.

Seeing them coming down to him, Dar dropped the bow and whipped out his club. “Bug smashing time,” he said. Talen nodded, drawing his own sword.

The last spider hurled webs at Aelos, snaring the hapless cleric. He struggled, but only managed to entangle himself further, before the spider started drawing him up in short but steady jerks.

Dar wound up and waited for the first spider to get close. The creature spread its fangs, which dripped with venom, as it dropped fast toward its waiting prey. But it got much more than it bargained for as Dar smashed it with a blow that knocked it flying. It struck the far wall of the cavern, and stuck there for a moment before its weight caused it to drop back down. Still tethered on its web line, the creature began to swing back and forth like a pendulum.

Talen likewise scored a direct hit, but his spider remained intact enough to fight back. It landed on his shoulder, stabbing its fangs toward his neck. Fortunately the spider's attack hit the edge of his breastplate, narrowly failing to penetrate.

The third spider landed on the ground between the two fighters. With Talen obstructed by its comrade, the spider turned toward Dar, lunging at his lower legs.

Allera and Varo squeezed into the room, and leapt for Aelos's legs. Their combined weight dragged the cleric back down, drawing taut the line connecting him to the spider. The spider started to move down along the webs, all eight of its legs anchoring it.

Dar spat out a curse as the spider stabbed its fangs into his thigh. With a growl he smashed the club down into its head, crushing it. He immediately swept the club up in a follow-through that clipped the one on Talen in the abdomen, knocking it off the fighter. The spider fell to the ground, its legs twitching in uncontrolled spasms, which died abruptly as Talen thrust his sword deep into the center of its body.

The last spider was just too stubborn to release its victim, even as Allera and Varo continued to assist Aelos. The spider reached the edge of its web and held its ground, at least until Dar and Talen each fired an arrow into its bloated body. The spider, already wounded with Dar's throwing axe embedded in its body, collapsed and fell to the ground in a heap, narrowly missing the cleric.

"Watch yourself," Dar said, as he cut the cleric free.

"How are we going to get Talen's shield back?" Allera asked. They could see the heavy iron rectangle, stuck in the webs a good fifteen feet above them.

"Leave it," Talen said. "It's too damned unwieldy for these tight spaces."

"Varo said it was magical," Dar said. "It's probably worth a pretty heap of coin."

"If you want it, you can carry it," Talen said. "It's not going anywhere where it is. If we need it back, we'll know where to find it."

Dar looked up at the dense webs, and tested the weight of his pack and assorted burdens. "Fine," he said.

With that matter settled, they continued with their search. They found a few crevices in the back of the cavern that held spaces large enough to hold them all, but Varo reported feeling a vague uneasiness about the place. When pressed, he couldn't elaborate on it, but Dar told the others that he'd learned to trust the cleric's intuition, so they continued with their search.

Eventually they found another exit, a narrow passage, little more than a crawlspace, that exited the cavern to the north. Each of them regarded the tight tunnel dubiously, but when Varo commented that the trolls would have even more difficulty managing the passage, that gave them a good enough reason to proceed. Dar went first this time. He reported another cavern at the end of the passage, so they made their way through and gathered together at the far end to debate how to proceed.

"We keep getting deeper and deeper into this place," Talen said. "We don't know where we're going, or what we'll be up against ahead."

"Well, it's not like we have much of a choice," Dar said. "We can't retrace our steps; the stream we took here didn't have enough room above it to walk on the water, and even if Varo enspells us to breathe it again, we can't swim against the current."

"We can go with the stream, try to find Shay," Talen reminded them.

"Yeah, with those water trolls in the river waiting for us. You thought they were tough to kill on dry land? Real smart idea there, captain."

"Gentlemen, this bickering accomplishes nothing but to bring wandering monsters down upon us," Varo said. "Let's see if we can find a quiet side cavern here, and find a place to rest."

They spread out to search the new cavern. There were more spiderwebs in nooks and crannies along the walls and ceiling, but they spotted no more of the giant spiders. This cavern had a lot more open space in its middle, and they were able to expedite their search.

The webs were denser on the western half of the cavern. They found two passages there, another of the low crawlspaces, and a taller but even narrower passage a short distance away. Allera found footprints near the former, huge indentations in the hard ground that led toward the tunnel.

"Giants, looks like," Dar said, examining the faint markings that the healer indicated. He laid his own boot up against the print; it was more than twice the size of his foot.

"Okay, let's check out the rest of the cavern," Varo suggested.

To the south, they found something odd, a small pyramid of dark gray stone. They cautiously examined it, but found nothing that would indicate its purpose. There was space here to camp, but the area was wide-open to the rest of the cavern, and the mysterious presence of the pyramid made even Aelos uneasy.

They found two more tunnels leading out of the place. One, to the north, was large enough to manage single-file, but there were a lot of webs there, and in one of them, they found the desiccated hulk of what looked like the largest rat any of them had ever seen. The thing was easily seven feet long from its snout to the end of its tail, and none of them could identify precisely what species it had been when alive. The second tunnel was another low crawlspace, situated in the eastern wall over the cavern not far from the one that they had used to enter here.

"I'll take a quick look," Dar offered, borrowing Aelos's staff to light his way.

"Your friend, he has a... strong... personality," Allera said to Varo, as Dar crawled into the tunnel. Talen knelt by the tunnel mouth to watch his progress, and Aelos kept his distance from Varo as a matter of course, so the two were nearly alone.

"Dar is a more complicated individual than he appears to be," Varo said.

"And you, priest?" the healer asked, after a pause. "I heard about the charges against you. Human sacrifice. Blood rituals."

"I follow a proscribed religion," the cleric said. "Regarding the cult of Dagos, the public hears what the church of the Father wishes them to hear."

"So the charge against you is false?"

Varo looked at her directly, and she shrank a bit under his gaze. "I make no such claim," he told her. "I only suggest that like our mercenary friend, things are often more complex than they first appear to be."

The priestess opened her mouth, but could not think of a reply. A loud scuttling noise, followed by squeaks and a familiar battle cry, became audible from the tunnel entrance, drawing their attention that way. The sounds continued for several seconds, before they were replaced by a renewed quiet.

"Are you all right?" Talen shouted down the tunnel.

"Just some more of those giant fucking rats," came Dar's voice back to them. "There's a room here that looks good. Come on in."

They made their way through the tunnel, and found themselves in a large room that was obviously fashioned of worked stone. Debris cluttered the corners, and a pair of doors

were visible in the far wall. A few rat tunnels were visible around the perimeter of the place. The bodies of three dire rats lay hacked on the floor.

“We’d better check those doors first,” Talen said. The fighter took up a ready position by the nearest door, and nodded to Dar.

“Oh, just open it,” Dar said, walking over to the door and yanking it open. The door was stuck in its threshold, and it took a bit of work to get it free.

The room beyond stank terribly. Both of the doors turned out to access the same space, an L-shaped corridor that led onto a small room maybe eight feet by fifteen in size. The source of the smell turned out to be a dead beetle, maybe five feet long, covered in a carpet of smaller bugs that were happily feasting on its remains.

Allera held her nose. “Gods, this place is foul.”

Dar looked at Varo, and smiled grimly, nodding. “Perfect,” the cleric said.

Chapter 45

A MESSAGE FROM THE GODS

They cleaned out the small dead-end room as best they could, and hunkered down to rest. Dar and Talen took turns keeping watch while the spellcasters slept. The fighters could hear squeaks through the thin wooden doors, suggesting that the rats had returned to devour their slain fellows, but nothing came forward to threaten them. The “night” passed slowly for those on watch, swiftly for those asleep, and soon they were all awake, save for Dar who continued to snore in a back corner.

“Ugh,” Allera said, combing bugs out of her hair. “This entire place is a sty.”

“Our faith keeps us clean where it matters, child,” Aelos said.

“Are you ready to conduct your divination?” Talen asked.

The cleric nodded. “I will need a little time alone,” he said, with a pointed look at Varo.

“Fine,” Talen said. “But don’t leave the room; I heard those rats out there again earlier.” As the priest moved off a short distance, the captain ran a dirty hand over his face, rubbing at the dark circles under his eyes.

“You look like shit, captain,” Varo said.

The officer looked at the cleric in surprise, then finally laughed. “Yeah, I guess I can’t dispute that,” he said, settling back against the wall.

“We’ll get out of here,” Allera said.

They ate some trail rations, which thankfully had been wrapped tightly in oilskin wraps, and had thus survived their misadventure in the underground river. Even so, there were only a few scraps left when they’d finished, barely enough for a single additional meal.

“Save them for the mercenary,” Talen said.

“When we next rest, I—or your most sacred representative of the Shining Father over there—can pray for divine foodstuffs,” Varo said. “I would create them now, but I suspect that an additional *cure serious wounds* might come in exceptionally handy in the next twelve hours.”

Talen waved a hand idly, too tired to argue.

“I too can create food and water,” Allera said.

“Good for you, priestess,” Dar said, coming over and joining them. The fighter poked at the remaining food. “This all there is?”

“Eat up,” Talen said, looking over at Aelos. Dar did as he was bidden, quickly devouring what was left of their supplies.

“Gods, I wish I had some more of that brandy,” he said.

“This is not a time to get intoxicated,” Talen said.

“You sound a lot like the marshal,” Dar said, scraping some crumbs out of one of the food wrappers with a greasy finger, before stuffing it into his mouth. Allera looked at him in disgust, and turned away.

“I take that as high praise,” the captain said. “Marshal Tiros was willing to give his life to save the people of Camar. He was the heart and soul of our movement.”

“If your cause is truly just, another will rise up to take his place,” Varo said. Talen looked at the cleric in surprise.

“I don’t understand this revolution, anyway,” Dar said. “Sure, the Duke’s a bastard, but Camar’s had a good spell of peace, and most of the common people have food in their bellies.”

“The Duke’s reign is a corruption in the heart of a dying state,” Talen said. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand, mercenary.”

“You’d be surprised, captain; I know a fair bit about being a malcontent.”

Their conversation was interrupted as Aelos came back over to them. The cleric looked a bit haggard, but there was a strange glow in his eyes, as though he’d looked through a door into a place where no mortals were meant to tread.

“What did the Big Boss Daddy have to say?” Dar asked.

Aelos accepted Allera’s help to sit down between her and Talen. “The Shining Father revealed his will to me,” the cleric said. “But as with many *divinations*, the message is cryptic.”

“Such is the nature of the beast,” Varo said, but his tone wasn’t scathing, and after a moment Aelos continued.

“I received insight in the form of several verses that crept into my head,” the priest said. “I asked for guidance on how we should proceed from here. This is what I was told:”

*”Follow the path of the wayward giants,
Through the lair of benevolent squalor,
In the temple of the master of graves,
Shall you find the answers you seek.”*

“Cryptic,” Varo said.

“Well, we have a clue, at least,” Allera said. “We already found the trail left by the giants, the footsteps out in the cavern.”

“Nothing about Shay?” Talen asked.

“You’ll find the answers you seek in the temple,” Dar said, as he stood and walked over to gather his gear. “The only answer I want, is how in the hells do I get out of this damned place.” He kicked his pack. “I’ve got more money than I’ve ever had in my life, and all I need is someplace I can spend it. Maybe take ship to Drusia... I have heard that the wine is as sweet as the women, there.”

“Don’t you care about anything besides yourself?” Allera asked.

Dar’s grin was response enough. The healer clenched her fists, but didn’t say anything more as she gathered up her pack.

“We should be careful,” Varo said. “The rats are not a serious threat, but there may be more spiders out in the main cavern. Check the ceilings and any niches in the walls carefully for signs of movement.”

“Sending him up ahead worked well last time,” Dar said, with a nod to where Talen was strapping his swordbelt around his waist. The captain glanced at him, but said nothing, having apparently learned that it was better not to rise to the bait.

“Let’s get moving,” he said, once they were ready.

They unsecured the doors and went back into the outer room. The bodies of the rats were gone, leaving only some blood and scraps of fur as markers of their existence.

“Well, let’s—” Talen began, starting toward the low tunnel in the opposite wall. He never got a chance to finish, as a segment of stone wall on the side of the room to their left creaked open, and a goblin stepped through.

The creature seemed as surprised as they did, and for a single heartbeat the goblin and the companions shared a startled stare. But it recovered swiftly, falling into a crouch, and hissing something in a strange language.

Behind it, a small horde of goblins poured out into the chamber.

Chapter 46

THE GOBLINS OF RAPPAN ATHUK

Dar and Tiros lifted their weapons into ready positions, providing protection for the spellcasters behind them. The goblins moved with an odd sense of grace, sweeping out left and right from the door into a semicircle facing the companions. They were armed with a variety of weapons, small handaxes and javelins and bows, with tools and daggers stuck through their belts. Each was clad in studded leather armor that covered their torsos, with long leather flaps offering additional protection to their arms and legs. Beady eyes stared out at them under leather caps with long brims.

Within six seconds of the opening of the door, there were sixteen of the creatures facing them in a wary ring, weapons poised. After the initial warning, not a single one of the creatures had spoken.

“It would appear that we are surrounded,” Aelos said.

“Do either of you speak the goblin language?” Talen whispered. Varo shook his head. “Damn it, Shay and Krogan were the experts in this sort of thing,” the captain added.

“Bah, they’re goblins!” Dar exclaimed. “Booga booga!” he said, making a threatening step toward the nearest edge of the line, his club lifted up high in his hand. The goblins

tensed, but did not give any ground. "Let's just kick the little bastards' asses and be on our way."

"They aren't attacking us," Allera said. "Maybe we can avoid a fight, just this once?"

"Bah, they're cowards, but they'll attack us when our backs are turned, sure enough," the mercenary returned.

Varo, however, had been observing the creatures carefully. Standing just over three feet tall, and barely a third of an average human's weight, it was easy to be as dismissive of them as Dar had just been. The cleric was no stranger to goblinkind, having encountered numerous examples of the species in his time, but these were more coordinated and better disciplined than any he had ever seen. His eyes lingered on one that appeared to be clad in better-quality armor than the others. It was a fine distinction; all of their gear looked to be of exceptional make.

Allera came forward, stepping between Talen and Dar. "Do any of you speak the common tongue?" she asked.

A few goblins shifted their eyes, slightly, but it was subtle enough that she would have missed it had he not been looking for it. She saw what Varo had seen, that these goblins were... different. Trouble.

After a moment, the goblin that Varo had identified as the leader stepped forward. "You are new to the tunnels," it said. Its accent was thick, but its words were clearly understandable.

"We are not here by choice," Allera said.

"You are servants of the priests of the demon god?"

"No. They are our enemies."

The goblin nodded. "And your purpose here now?"

"None of your gods-damned business, gobbo," Dar said.

"Must you antagonize them?" Varo whispered.

"We are returning to the main cavern," Allera said, indicating the tunnel. "There are giant spiders that cling to the walls; be alert for them."

The goblin did not seem impressed. "We know of the spiders. Our business is with the river trolls."

"Ha! Hope you brought a shovel," Dar said.

The goblin's eyes narrowed. "What does this mean?"

Allera stifled a sigh. "We had an encounter with the trolls when we entered this area. The trolls challenged us, to their misfortune. We had to kill one of them."

The goblin nodded again, and said something in his own language. A stir went through the gathered goblins.

"Yeah, that's right," Dar said, interpreting their response as awed respect. None of the goblins changed position, however, or eased their weapons from their ready positions.

Varo looked at the tools in the goblin leader's belt. "You are miners?"

The goblin nodded.

Allera said, "We found some gold ore in the troll lair, but it was too much for us to carry. It should still be there, on the far side of the island. A conflict between us would be of no advantage to either side, and might prove to be... unpleasant. If that is what you came for, then let us go our separate ways in peace, and save our strength for the rats and spiders."

"I'm telling you, this is a mistake," Dar whispered—clearly loud enough for the goblins to hear him. "The little bastards will turn on us the moment our guard is down."

"Shut up," Talen said.

"Agreed," the goblin said. It made a small gesture to its troops, and the goblins just melted away, darting into the small exit tunnel. A few lingered behind, bows trained on the companions, and then they too were gone, leaving them alone.

"We haven't seen the last of them," Dar promised.

"Look, mercenary," Talen said, turning on the fighter until they stood eye-to-eye. "I don't give a shit what you think, or even if you are capable of that ability at all."

"Listen, you..."

"No, YOU listen! You were the one that suggested we stick together, as I recall. Strength in numbers and all that. There are five of us left, and in case you haven't noticed, that number keeps dropping. We cannot afford any battles that are not necessary. Maybe you're right; maybe we could have taken those goblins without breaking a sweat. But did you stop to think that those little creatures have stayed alive in this hellhole, that they *live* here? Maybe there's a thousand of the bastards in the next cavern over, or on the other side of that door. We don't know how big a threat they

were, we can only go by what we saw. Allera's an expert at negotiations, that's why I let her take the lead."

"They were soldiers," Varo said simply. Dar started to say something, but Talen overrode him again.

"Look. If you want to disagree with me—privately—insult me, or make your little jokes, fine. I find that ignoring you whenever you open your mouth is fairly easy. But let me make one thing abundantly clear. If you want to stay with this group, you won't ever question my authority when confronting an enemy, or even a potential enemy, again."

"We are five against hundreds, or thousands, who would see us dead," Aelos said, his tone conciliatory. "Please listen to wisdom, fighter."

Dar was still looking at Talen. Dar's eyes smoldered, and for a tense moment there was a promise of blood in the air between the two men. Talen did not give way, holding the other man's stare with his own.

"All right, this foolishness has gone on long enough," Allera said, forcing herself between them, pushing both men back a half step. "Will you look at yourselves? We're deep within the deadliest dungeon in the world, surrounded by foes, while you two... *men* are looking to beat each other up over who has the biggest... sword!"

Allera barely came up to their chins, and the healer looked almost fragile in comparison to the heavily armed and armored fighters. But it was the two men who looked sheepish, although they did not back down.

"Talen," she said, turning to the captain. "We need your leadership. Shay... she's gone, Talen. Along with Argus. Krogan. Gresham. K'varon. Davros. Loren. Brennan." The captain stood stone-faced as she recited the names, but he didn't turn away from her stare. She put her hand on his arm. "We need you, Talen. The living need you to stay strong."

She turned to Dar. The fighter smirked, and it looked like to took a mustering of will for Allera to keep her cool composure. "Dar. We need you, it's true. But you need us as well." He opened his mouth to say something, but she continued roughshod over him before he could speak. "No, don't offer a crack, or a comment, just shut the hells up for a moment. I know that your attitude is a cover for what we're all feeling. This place scares the crap out of me, and if it doesn't scare the crap out of you, then you're either an idiot or insane. I don't think you're insane, but you're going to end up that way if you don't ease up, and accept that we need to work together to survive this place."

Dar closed his mouth, and looked into the healer's eyes for a long second. He glanced at Varo; the priest's expression was as inscrutable as ever.

The fighter turned away without speaking.

“Let’s get out of here,” Talen said, turning and walking over to the tunnel. “You said they’d be waiting to ambush us, mercenary... so you can go first, just in case you were right.”

But there were no signs of the goblins in the large cavern; it was as if the creatures had vanished into thin air. Likewise, they saw none of the giant spiders, although the crannied ceiling above could have hidden dozens of the creatures beyond the range of their light. None of them felt much like lingering, so combining caution with speed they made their way to the small tunnel where the giant footprints they’d found yesterday terminated. The hole in the wall gave way to a twisting tunnel that was large enough to accomodate them, although it would mean crawling once again.

“Another tight squeeze,” Talen said. “I don’t see how a giant could have fit through here.”

“An ogre might have, if it really, really wanted to get to the other side,” Varo said.

“Trust in the words of the Father,” Aelos said. “We must have faith.”

“I trust in this,” Dar said, tapping his club. But the weapon was too large for the tight tunnel, so he slung it across his back, and drew out his punching dagger. “I’ll need light,” he said.

Varo touched the tip of the weapon, and cast a *light* orison upon it. The blade began to glow softly, until it shed as much light as a torch.

“All right, let’s get this over with,” Dar said, bending low and crawling into the tunnel.

“You might be more successful if you leave your pack,” Varo suggested.

“I can manage it,” Dar’s voice came back out to them, followed by a muffled curse.

Varo looked at Talen and shrugged, “Stubborn,” he said.

“As long as he only gets *himself* killed,” Talen growled, as he bent low and followed the fighter into the tunnel.

“Go ahead,” Varo said to Allera and Aelos. “I will bring up the rear, just in case Dar’s paranoia regarding our little goblin friends turns out to be justified.”

The healer and cleric nodded, and crawled after the two warriors. Varo hesitated a moment longer, looking around the cavern a last time as the shadows crept nearer with Aelos’s receding light. Then, as if satisfied with something, he nodded and followed the others into the tight confines of the tunnel.

The tunnel was navigable but tight, ranging from four to five feet high in most places, with the occasional tight squeeze. Varo saw several places where the space had been widened deliberately; that might be confirmation that large creatures had forced their way through recently. Or it might just be an accident of the tunnel; the cleric was not an expert in such things.

Up ahead he could see the others gathered in a slight widening of the tunnel. No, not a widening; the tunnel split, with branches heading off to the left and right.

“The right fork goes up, steep but navigable,” Talen was saying. “The other way, it looks like another fork a little ways on. So three choices.”

“Any indications as to which might be the giants’ path?” Aelos asked. “Or the ‘benevolent squalor’?”

“This whole place is squalor,” Dar said. “Let me check out these other forks, see if I can see where they end up.”

“We should stay together,” Allera said.

“I’m not going far, princess,” the fighter’s voice came back. They could see the fighter clearly in the circle of light cast by his glowing weapon as he shuffled over to the far fork, about fifteen feet away.

“Anything?” Talen asked.

“They both go on for quite a ways,” he said. “There’s a lot of webs... Damn it!”

“What is it?” Allera asked.

“Wererat!” the fighter hissed. He started to fall back, but his bulging pack got caught on the low roof, hanging him up. They could hear familiar sounds that were amplified in the confined space, the sounds of bowstrings twanging. The shots were coming from both sides of the fork, focusing on the fighter cramped into the space where the passages met. An arrow glanced off of one of Dar’s greaves, caroming off the tunnel wall behind him.

“Dar, get out of there!” Varo shouted.

“I’ll poke you sons of bitches!” the fighter snarled, but his violent struggles were not helping him extricate himself from his situation. Talen started after him, his own sword shining brightly in his hand. Dar turned and yanked his pack clear of the protruding stone that it was caught on, so he did not see the new threat coming toward him. But Talen could, spotting the onrushing creature beyond Dar’s shoulder.

“Spiders!” he yelled.

“We need to help him!” Allera said. But Varo paused, and turned back toward the tunnel mouth behind them.

“What is it?” Aelos said. He thrust his staff into the passage.

The light shone brightly on the eyes of the giant spider scurrying down the tunnel toward them, and flared on the green drops of venom that dripped from its fangs. The creature moved easily down the tunnel, almost filling it with its bulk, but they could still make out the shadowy forms of several other spiders immediately behind it, eager to join in the feast.

Chapter 47

TIGHT SPACES

There was no time to summon help, so Varo just held his ground and waited. The spider seemed to have no difficulties with the tight confines of the passage, and shot forward as if hurled by an onager. It was a frightening, overwhelming sight, but the cleric’s expression remained calm.

As the spider reached him, he lifted his mace in a warding position. The spider shifted and stabbed its fangs down heavily on the haft of the weapon. One fang gashed Varo’s hand, and he felt a burning pain as venom splashed over the wound.

But Varo was made of stern stuff. He touched the center of the spider’s head with his other hand, releasing the power of Dagos into the creature. The spider’s body spasmed as the energies of an *inflict wounds* spell ravaged it, and after a few seconds, it collapsed.

There were several more hot on the heels of the first, but they were slowed by the difficulty in getting past the dead body of their companion.

Dar turned back to meet the spider’s charge. The tunnel was far too crowded to use his primary weapons, but as the first lunged to bite he punched his dagger into its head. The spider was driven back by the force of the blow, and it crumpled in a bloody heap.

A second spider erupted out of the other fork with surprising speed, catching the fighter off guard. It barreled into him, driving him up against the side of the tunnel, seizing his shoulder in its jaws and stabbing its fangs deep through his armor into his flesh.

“Dar!” Talen yelled, moving as fast as he could manage to the fighter’s aid.

But even with a spider as large as he was holding onto him, the mercenary was far from finished. "Get off me, bitch!" he yelled, his blade shining as he yanked it free and stabbed it repeatedly into the second spider's body. The creature died messily, and Dar thrust it off him, spouting obscenities as blood oozed from the deep punctures in his shoulder.

Allera, caught in the middle between the two battling groups, yelled, "Talen... there's more behind us!" The captain turned, and spat a curse. "Fall back on the last tunnel!" he cried. "Dar... retreat!"

But the fighter was already engaged in killing a third spider that was trying to slide past the body of the first one. The tunnel was already crowded with bodies and slick with blood, and the stink of the dead creatures was nearly overpowering.

Dar glanced over his shoulder at Talen. "Go on... I'll be right behind you."

Talen nodded and retreated back toward the clerics. As he reached Allera, he said, "The mercenary's hurt... keep an eye out for him, but let out a yell if something gets past him."

The healer nodded, and squeezed past the captain, moving down the narrow tunnel.

Talen returned to find Varo and Aelos facing a spider that was having difficulty getting past the heaped corpses of two of its fellows. Aelos was trying to keep it at bay with his staff, but it was stronger than he, and its eight legs gave it a superior leverage. Varo nodded calmly to the captain as he rushed forward to join them, as if they were casual acquaintances meeting on the street.

Talen did not hesitate, thrusting his sword deep into the spider's head. The creature expired, sliding to the ground in a sticky mess.

"There are more behind," Varo said, pointing at the three dead spiders. "But they are having difficulty getting past the blockage."

"That won't hold them for long," Talen said.

"Dar?"

"He's holding his own at the other end. The spiders are working with wererats, it would seem."

The priest of Dagos nodded. "They were waiting for us, in ambush. It suggests a greater intelligence behind them."

"What about the last tunnel?" Aelos said, poking his staff toward the ascending shaft behind them.

“Well, at least nothing is trying to kill us from that direction,” Talen said. “We’ll wait for the mercenary.”

Another spider began to cram itself through the narrow space around the piled corpses, but Talen was able to kill it before it could get free enough to strike. The tightly packed bodies made an almost solid barrier, now, but he could hear more of the creatures skittering about in the space beyond.

Allera came back up the tunnel, followed by Dar. The fighter’s dagger was covered in blood, giving an evil red cast to the light that continued to shine from the blade, but the wounds in his shoulder had closed, and he looked hale enough under the blood and spider guts that covered his armor. “What word?” Talen asked.

“There’s still more of them, but they are blocked for now,” the fighter said. “I killed another two, which may give the others pause.”

“They are mindless vermin,” Allera said.

“Perhaps, but I suspect that there is a mind behind them,” Varo amended. “If we are going to go, we should get going.”

Talen nodded. “I will take the lead. Aelos, light the way for me, if you can manage it. Allera, help him. Then Varo, and Dar, in the rear.”

“Thinking they might follow us up?” the fighter asked.

“I wouldn’t wager against it... and if this tunnel doesn’t end up going anywhere, we’ll have to fight our way back down.”

“Lead on then, general.”

Talen sheathed his sword and crawled up into the tunnel.

The ascent was steep, but the narrowness of the walls and the roughness of the stone made the climb easier than it otherwise might have been. They quickly found more signs that large creatures had come this way, including several spaces where handholds had been hacked into the stone through brute force. Dar, bringing up the rear, his dagger tucked into his belt so it could continue to shed light, reported that he could hear the sounds of spiders below them, but that nothing seemed to be pursuing them up the shaft thus far. The news did not cause them to lower their guard, however.

The passage twisted and turned back on itself, continuously ascending. At no point was it so difficult as to require rope, but they still had to help each other over several spots, with the aged priest Aelos having the most difficulty.

Finally the tunnel leveled out into a gentle rise that opened onto what looked like another larger cavern ahead. Gesturing to the others to be alert, Talen crawled forward to take a look.

He had barely stuck his head out of the tunnel when a pair of massive hands locked around his neck, dragging him forward. The fighter tried to draw his sword, but his fingers had barely closed around the hilt when he was flung bodily into the center of the open space. Landing hard on the flat stone, a little stunned by the rough treatment, he nevertheless was able to quickly stagger to his feet and whip his magical weapon from its scabbard.

The bright glow of the sword revealed a half-dozen ogres standing in a ring around him, looking down at him with hungry expressions.

Chapter 48

PUNCHING BAG

“Oh, crap...” Talen said.

The nearest ogre reached for him. The fighter showed the creature the error of that strategy, as his blade *snicked* across his forearm, opening a deep bleeding gash. The ogre snarled and drew back, but its fellows took the opportunity to unleash a world of hurt upon the surrounded fighter.

Pain exploded in his back as a club smashed across his shoulder blades. He staggered forward and nearly fell, only to see another club coming straight for his face. He hurled himself aside, narrowly avoiding the powerful swing, only to be hit again by a third ogre that slammed its weapon into his left arm. Talen heard a loud snap, and the arm went limp. He was too overwhelmed to feel pain, but he knew that it was coming, bringing with it an avalanche of agony.

Assuming he lived long enough to feel it.

Aelos crawled bravely forward, and emerged from the tunnel in time to see the ogre standing beside the opening hurl Talen out into the room. There were ogres everywhere, but the cleric bravely fired a beam of *searing light* into the face of the first as it turned back toward him. The ogre roared in pain as the holy energies blasted it, but it had more than enough fight in it to reach down and seize the cleric, dragging him out into the room. It rolled him toward another ogre, which lifted its club to crush the hapless cleric's skull.

Allera emerged from the tunnel mouth to witness a scene of utter chaos and destruction, with her companions on the receiving end. Her breath froze in her throat as she saw an ogre slam the head of its club down toward Aelos's head. The cleric barely rolled out of the way, although the club crushed his right hand, the one holding his staff, and he screamed in agony as the bones in his hand were pulverized. Reaching out with his left hand, the cleric grabbed onto the ogre's ankle. Allera was surprised to see the ogre cry out and stagger backward, and even more surprised when it fell to the ground.

But there were more immediate concerns to deal with, including the ogre that loomed over her. As it turned to face her, she could see the burns on its face from Aelos's *searing light*. But even worse, behind it she saw Talen getting smothered by a ring of at least six other ogres. As she watched, unable to intervene, an ogre smashed him in the arm, spinning him around into the waiting blow of another. The fighter cried out, and collapsed in a mangled heap.

Allera had known fear many times since coming to Rappan Athuk, but overlying those surges of panic and terror lay a much deeper commitment. She was a healer, and those she cared about were suffering. Her power came at her call, filled her. Not even looking at the ogre standing above her, she started walking toward Talen.

The ogre lifted its club to crush the woman, but before it could strike, it hesitated. It looked at her as she passed, a bewildered look on its face.

It was still looking after her when Dar exploded from the tunnel, and stabbed his punching dagger deep into its back.

The main group of ogres, cruel and evil things, laughed at the bloodied mess of battered flesh and broken bones that lay on the ground between them. But they were also practical creatures as well, and several of them were quick to reach for the downed fighter, eager to get dibs both on loot, and choice bits of human flesh.

But as the first grabbed onto Talen's ankle, it felt a strange confusion fall over it. It looked up at another ogre that was picking up the downed man's glowing sword.

A rage filled it. The second ogre looked at its kin in surprise, which became confused alarm as the first lifted its club, and brought it down on the other's head in a powerful two-handed blow.

The ring of ogres exploded into confusion as the ogres started fighting amongst themselves, hurling powerful body-crushing blows back and forth. Even those that had not succumbed to Varo's *confusion* were drawn in to the melee, which quickly absorbed the full attention of all six of the ogres.

Varo had become visible with the casting of his spell, but the ogre guarding the tunnel entrance had its own problems. It bashed Dar with its club, but the blow seemed to only drive him to a greater intensity. Taking up his own club, the fighter smashed the ogre's

left knee, knocking it to the ground. The ogre screamed and tried to get up, only to take another hit to the side of its skull that put it down for good.

Dar looked up to see Allera walk calmly into the middle of the raging melee in the middle of the room.

“What in the hells is she doing!” he said to nobody in particular, rushing after her.

One of the ogres broke away from the melee in the center of the room, its face bloody where a blow had broken its nose. It ignored the slender woman walking by, focusing instead on the charging warrior carrying a club almost as big as its own. Varo’s spell clouded its mind with rage, and it rushed to meet its foe, lifting its club to strike.

Allera dodged between a pair of raging ogres that were raining down blows on each other. Another saw her and attacked, the *confusion* overwhelming the protective power of her *sanctuary* spell. She leapt forward, taking a glancing hit that nevertheless sent an explosion of pain through her side. *Two ribs broken*, she thought reflexively. She looked up and saw the ogre coming forward to finish the job, only to stagger back as another one brought its club down across its shoulders, knocking it to its knees.

Allera crawled forward to where Talen lay, forgotten in the chaos of the melee. A quick check revealed that the fighter still breathed, but was very close to death. She did not hold anything back, opening a torrent of healing power into him. The fighter stiffened, sucked in a breath, and opened his eyes wide. They focused on Allera, then shifted to the space over her shoulder.

“Allera... look out!”

The charging ogre smashed Dar in the chest with enough force that the fighter thought he could feel his insides being shuffled around to new positions. He staggered past the creature, his own counterattack ruined and feeble, barely enough to draw a grunt from the giant. The ogre lifted its club to finish off the battered human. Trying to draw a breath into his battered lungs, Dar brought the club up in what was an admittedly hopeless attempt to parry.

But the blow did not land. Looking up, the fighter saw a glowing torch smash into the ogre from behind. The ogre, more irritated than injured, turned around. It saw the real threat too late to respond.

“Embrace the oblivion of Dagos,” Varo said, touching the ogre’s side, releasing an *inflict serious wounds* into it.

As the ogre fell, Varo came to help Dar, who looked ready to charge into the melee, despite the fact that he seemed only a few steps from collapsing himself. There were still four ogres left standing, one of them waving around Talen’s magical sword. “Let the spell finish its work,” the cleric said, touching the gold icon at his throat as he cast a

healing spell to aid the battered fighter. “The ogres are *confused* right now, but will attack anything that provokes them.”

“But Allera went into there.”

“Yes, after the captain. She is tougher than she looks, and in any case you will do her no help by getting put down as soon as you enter the nearest ogre’s reach.”

“Damn it,” Dar said, breaking away from Varo, even as the cleric’s *cure serious wounds* took effect. Lifting his club, he rushed toward the nearest ogre.

As he ran, he felt a familiar soothing energy pulse through him. The healer was nowhere to be seen, but the feeling was unmistakable, easing his wounds, touching him in a way that Varo’s more bracing healing had not. He came up behind the ogre holding Talen’s sword. The creature was wrestling with another ogre for the weapon, so it did not see the fighter until it was too late. Putting all his strength behind the swing, he brought his club around in an arc that intersected with the base of the ogre’s spine. With a loud snap as its back was broken, the ogre screamed and toppled, dragging the other one down with it.

With the ogres out of the way, Dar could see Talen standing beyond it, his dagger stained bright red with ogre blood that covered his arm up to his elbow. The captain looked wild and battered, swaying back and forth. He stood astride Allera, who was conscious, despite the fact that the left side of her face was covered with blood.

“What took you so long?” the captain said, his words thick and slurred. Allera touched his leg, ignoring her own grievous wounds as she poured more positive energy into Talen’s battered frame. He’d taken a total of seven hits from the ogres, enough to kill him several times over, and only Allera’s presence had kept him standing.

That and the *confusion* that still muddled the minds of the surviving ogres. Even as Dar finished off the one that had been dragged down to the ground in the death-grip of its fellow, the last two remaining beasts seemed to realize that there was a greater threat present here than each other. They turned from attacking each other to attack Talen and Dar with their clubs. Dar felt all of the pain of his wounds explode back alive again as the ogre smashed him in almost the exact same spot as its comrade had a few seconds before. Talen, infused with new life by Allera’s touch, likewise was staggered as the other ogre’s club clipped his body, smashing ribs that had been healed and broken at least twice already. Somehow, defying the basic realities of the human body, he remained standing. But both men were in little shape to effectively counterattack.

Yet somehow, they did. Dar thrust his club up into the ogre’s groin, drawing a fearsome cry of rage and pain from it. Talen’s dagger was almost pitiful against the sheer size of the ogre, but when he buried it to the hilt in the ogre’s thigh, it certainly noticed.

All four of the combatants, the two remaining ogres and the human fighters, were all barely standing now, covered in bloody wounds and ugly bruises, and in even worse shape inside. Talen's foe lifted a meaty paw to grab the fighter's head, but before it could get a grip, Aelos's *spiritual weapon* smashed into its head. The divine weapon struck with the force of a real club, and the ogre fell back, collapsing with a ground-shaking impact as all six hundred pounds of it hit the floor.

Dar had no such assistance as he and the ogre came at each other for a final time. Dar struck just a heartbeat ahead of his foe, hitting its elbow with his club, and sending its club flying as the bones of its arm shattered. The ogre went down, but as it did its other forearm smacked hard into the fighter's face. Dar tried to keep his footing, but his body had taken just too much abuse. As the last ogre fell, he staggered a few steps away, looked up at Varo, and collapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 49

TO THE VICTOR...

Dar wasn't out for long, and his transition back to awareness was anything but pleasant.

"Damn it... ow! Gods, that hurts!"

"Keep yourself still. You have been grievously injured, and I must make adjustments to your body to maximize the effectiveness of my art. If you will wait for just a few moments, the healing will take its course, and the pain will ease."

Blinking, Dar looked up at Varo, who was kneeling beside him. The dead bodies of ogres were sprawled all around, forming a low rampart around them.

"Not who you hoped to see, perhaps?" Varo asked quietly. "She is helping Talen; the captain was in little better shape than you. But it looks like all of us will survive yet another of Rappan Athuk's little trials—this time."

"Aelos?" Dar said, trying to pull himself up into a sitting position, and regretting it almost at once. Varo's healing magic worked, but it lacked the sheer... *impact* of Allera's touch.

"Drink this," Varo said, offering him a potion—one of the ones they'd found in the ghoulish cache on the level above. Dar drained the liquid in a single gulp; it tasted terrible, but the familiar effects of magical healing followed almost at once. "The priest of the Father suffered a severely broken hand, but it's nothing that can't be fixed. The Most Exalted Lord has already attended to his servant's injuries, I believe. Aelos is currently keeping an eye out for any other attackers that might have been drawn to the noise of the fight."

“How many, altogether?” Dar said, letting the cleric help him up. He could see Talen and Allera about ten feet away, the healer offering similar assistance to the injured captain. As if feeling the weight of his stare, she glanced up at him briefly, then turned to continue helping the battered soldier.

“Eight. The dungeon is replete with the creatures, it would seem.”

“What did you do to them?”

“The spell is called *confusion*,” Varo said.

“Why didn’t you use it on the first batch of ogres we fought? Might have come in handy.”

“I lacked the ability to channel that much of Dagos’s power, when we entered Rappan Athuk,” the cleric explained. “Like you, my skills and abilities have grown since we have been in this place.”

“A proving ground, I think you called it,” Dar said, his tone suddenly wary. But he was distracted by the sound of someone approaching.

“Are you all right?” Allera said, coming over to them. She had healed her own injuries, but traces of hastily-wiped blood were still visible on her cheek and neck.

“A little the worse for wear, but I’ll live.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I wish to attend to something before we depart,” Varo said, turning and walking away from them.

“There is something disquieting about that man,” Allera said, watching him leave.

“He’s an odd one, no doubt, but he’s good in a fight,” Dar said. He slid off his pack, grimacing as the movement awakened new pains in his body. She started toward him as soon as he betrayed feeling pain, but he waved her off with a hand. “I’m fine,” he insisted. “Varo may not be as gentle as you are, but he gets the job done.”

She looked at him critically. “By the gods, you do seem to be able to take a beating.”

“I get plenty of practice,” Dar said, cracking his back. “How’s the captain?”

They looked over at where Talen was recovering his sword from where one of the ogres had dropped it. Allera had healed him, but he still looked like a mess, with his clothes torn and soiled, his shifting black armor dull with accumulated blood and dirt. He looked like a man who’d been crawling around through tunnels, battled giant spiders, and then been pounded several times to within an inch of his life by a mob of bloodthirsty giants.

“He will be fine... physically, at least,” Allera said, softly.

“What you did... it was crazy,” Dar said. “Walking into the melee like that.”

She turned back to him. “Talen was down. I did what I had to do,” she said. “I don’t suppose you would understand that.”

They shared a look that lasted for several seconds, then Dar bent down and recovered his pack. “No, I suppose not,” he finally said.

He walked over to where Varo had been checking the bodies of the ogres. Each of them had carried a bulging sack which he was in the process of searching as the fighter walked up. “Anything good?” Dar asked.

The cleric held up a wheel of cheese that the fighter could clearly smell from five feet away, even over the stench of dead ogres. “Depends on how you define ‘good’, for the most part,” the cleric said. “But I have detected several magical auras, and considerable mundane treasures that might interest you, assuming that you can find additional space to carry them.” He looked meaningfully at the fighter’s bulging pack, already laden with extra weapons and a considerable weight of gold ore.

“You let me worry about that, my friend,” the fighter said, grabbing the nearest sack.

“We should get moving,” Talen said, coming over to them. “Those spiders, or the wererats, may follow us up here at any moment.”

“There are several passages that look like they might lead elsewhere,” Aelos said, joining them from where he’d been investigating the far side of the cavern. “They are tight, but at least it looks like more crawling isn’t necessary for once.” The cleric looked pale, but his right hand seemed to be more or less intact.

“This won’t take long,” Dar said, admiring a small-sized silver helmet with a garnet set upon the brow. That ended up in his pack, which was already bulging with more material than it had been intended to carry.

“It is not a trivial exercise, captain,” Varo added. “We have already found numerous magical items that have greatly added to our capabilities. If these ogres had any items that may enhance our chances for survival, it would be foolish to leave them.”

“All right then, but quickly,” Talen said, recognizing the logic of the cleric’s statement.

In and among some disgusting miscellany—including the corpses of at least two adventurers—they found an assortment of valuable items. Varo’s *detect magic* allowed them to sort out the items that possessed magical auras. Those included a longsword, a half-dozen arrows in a leather quiver, three potions in crystal vials, a short, battered crowbar of lusterless gray metal, an arcane scroll in an ivory case, a spellbook that was

almost entirely ruined by fire, a set of boots with a bright green trim, and a clerical mantle that bore the sigil of Orcus.

“Wow, there’s a lot of stuff here,” Dar said, once it had all been gathered together. The fighter had helped himself to several other jeweled items and some gold pieces, but there was still a fairly large heap of less valuable items, including some masterwork weapons and armor, that they could not carry with them.

“Ill-gotten wealth,” Aelos said. But he accepted three small metal flasks from Varo.

“I believe that these contain blessed water,” Varo said. “It would seem to be most appropriate that you carry them.”

Aelos nodded and put the flasks in his pouch.

Dar drew the longsword and admired its flawless blade. “Elven make, if I don’t miss my guess,” he said. He tested the blade with a bit of leather thong, and found it to be razor-sharp. He started to fit the scabbard to his swordbelt, but hesitated. For a moment, he looked down at the sword already there, part of its blade visible through the battered and ancient scabbard. He’d lost the sword that had originally come with that scabbard, absorbed by the dung monster. The marshal’s sword, *Valor*, was ill-suited to him; Varo had told him that the weapon was aligned to Law, and each time he had used it, it had taken something from him, drawing a piece of his own essence into it.

Dar shook his head as if to clear it. It was just a sword. And in any case, he was finding that he preferred the big club he’d been using, and he had a few other weapons still in reserve.

Before he had to use *Valor* again.

“You need a secondary weapon, captain,” he said, coming over to Talen. “That dagger won’t do you well enough, if you lose your blade again. And there might be situations where you don’t need that beacon of a blade alerting every foe within a league that we’re coming.”

The captain’s expression betrayed suspicion for a moment, but then he nodded. “Thanks,” he said, taking the elven blade.

The group was rapidly preparing to depart. None of them could use the arcane items, so Varo took them for safekeeping. The cleric also took the other assorted items that radiated magic, at least until they had more time to probe their function later. Allera had found a ceramic pot containing antitoxin, which she’d added to her own healing kit. Also notable were some flasks that sloshed with lamp oil.

“Those will be useful if we encounter those trolls again,” Talen said, dividing the flasks out between them.

Dar took the quiver with the magical arrows, and found that the space inside the leather case was far roomier than what it looked able to hold from the outside, with slots that could hold hundreds of arrows.

“Magic,” he said, slinging the case over his shoulder without further reflection. His gaze lingered on the heap of discarded treasure, which contained armor and weapons that would have been worth a month’s pay, if not more. The others had already gathered by the mouth of one of the narrow passages on the far side of the room.

“You’re already carrying a small fortune, mercenary,” Talen said. “Let’s get going.”

They chose the larger of the two crevices, which split into two passages at its end. Talen led them into the left fork, which appeared to be slightly wider, but as they pressed onward it rapidly narrowed into a tight squeeze that forced them to move ahead in single file, their bodies turned sideways. Dar, bringing up the rear, had to take off his pack and drag it after him. The uneven ceiling was a good eight feet above them, so Aelos was able to hold his staff aloft, clearly illuminating the way ahead. Not that they could see that far; the rough passage twisted and turned, limiting how far ahead they could see. As they pressed onward, they could smell an ugly odor on the air that grew stronger as they continued, until it overpowered even the stench of death and blood that clung to each of them. It was the heady smell of rot and decay, a smell that Varo and Dar were familiar with from the ghoul chamber in the complex above.

Talen looked back at Aelos, who was just behind him. The cleric nodded and lifted his staff high, grasping his holy symbol with his other hand. The captain, holding his new elvish sword, turned and continued to probe forward.

“This is getting tight,” Dar huffed, as his armored torso snagged where the gap between the irregular stone walls of the passage narrowed to barely two feet. “If something jumps us in here, we’re screwed.”

Allera, just ahead, looked back at him, and lifted her finger to her lips.

“Talen says there’s another larger cavern up ahead,” Varo’s voice came back to them. “Be ready...”

As Talen entered the chamber, Aelos’s light revealed it to be another irregular cavern. The place was shaped like a giant “X”, with narrowing arms that included numerous tight crevices like the one they had just traveled. The cavern was more spacious at the center of the “X”, although the contents of the room made it seem smaller than it was.

The place was crowded with heaps of refuse. The identity of the contents of the noisome heaps were evident from the foul odors that dominated this place. Scattered among the heaps of rotting organic material, the light glinted off of half-buried metal, or

the dirty white of old bones. Small insects were everywhere, and Talen's boots crackled on the carapaces of tiny beetles as he left the passage.

"This place smells similar to a chamber we encountered above," Varo said, as he followed Aelos warily out of the passage. "The denizen of that place was an indestructible creature that we called the 'dung monster'. I would recommend that we..."

But before he could offer his suggestion, the nearest rubbish heap stirred. A long tendril emerged from the mass, twisting around Talen and lifting him off his feet before he or his companions could react.

Chapter 50

BENEVOLENT SQUALOR

Aelos's light revealed that the monster was a bulbous creature with a squat torso the size of a wagon, with an ugly mottled hide that was the color and consistency of a sewer pit. A huge maw littered with teeth split the summit of its torso, and several tentacles jutted from its body; two long tendrils that ended in wide flaps of leathery hide, and a shorter stalk that appeared to support several beady eyes that peered intently at the intruders that had come upon its sanctum.

Talen tried to lift his sword, but the creature's long tentacle had pinned his swordarm. The creature turned him upside down as it brought him close to the eye-stalk, shaking him slightly as it gave him a closer look.

"Let me through!" Dar said, all but shoving Allera into a trash heap as he burst from the passage, unlimbering his club as he came. But Varo leapt forward to block the fighter from charging the creature. "What in the hells are you doing?" he yelled.

"I don't think it means him any harm," Varo said.

"What? You've got to be kidding... look at it!"

"Talen! Are you hurt?" Varo asked.

"Um... no, I guess," the captain said, as the creature lowered him back down to the ground—right side up—although it did not release him.

The creature's huge mouth opened up, and a rumbling like an earthquake issued from somewhere deep within its body.

“Wachoowaneretwolegsmellfunny.”

“It speaks!” Aelos said.

“After a fashion,” Allera said, shooting a dirty look at Dar as she rose from the nearest mound, brushing filth of her cloak.

“I am Allera,” she said, holding up her empty hands to reassure it. “This is Dar, Varo, Aelos, and the man you are holding is named Talen. Could you release him, please?”

The creature looked at her—an eerie sensation, given its alien nature. Then it released Talen, dropping him a bit roughly to the ground. Its two long tentacles flailed at the air, and Dar likewise held himself ready for the situation to turn, his club gripped tightly in his hands. As it moved, the filth that caked its body dropped off in fat lumps.

“Did it say that we smell funny?” Dar asked.

“Dar, please, at least it is not attacking us,” Varo noted.

“What is your name?” Allera asked.

The creature made a noise the resembled a consumptive hacking up a lung.

“Uh... I think I’ll call it Max,” Dar said. “I knew a Max in the army, he kinda smelled and sounded like this guy.”

Allera shot him a look, then turned back to the otyugh. “We do not intent to hurt you,” she told it.

“Twolegstastyhungryhelps?”

“I think it’s asking if we want to be a meal,” Dar said, not taking his eyes off the creature.

“I think we’ll have to pass,” Talen said, rubbing his swordarm. He kept the weapon low, but ready to strike if the creature tried to grab him again.

“I’m afraid we aren’t very appetizing,” Allera said. “But I know where there’s a lot of good food... fresh, too. We could bring you some meat, in exchange for safe passage.”

“Um, what’s she doing?” Dar said in a whispered aside to Talen. “Is she saying what I *think* she’s saying?”

“She’s the diplomat,” Talen whispered back. “That thing had a tight grip. If you don’t want to be a meal for it, I’d suggest you follow her lead.”

The otyugh watched them all, but its eyestalks focused on Allera. “Twolegsmaketrade?”

While the healer continued to talk to the creature, Varo turned and looked at Aelos. “A benevolent creature amidst squalor?” he said to the cleric of the Father. Aelos, surprised, looked thoughtful and nodded.

It took only a few more brief exchanges for Allera to negotiate an arrangement with the creature. It seemed to know little about the dungeon beyond the cavern, not surprising, given that it was too big to navigate any of the exits. But it did show them one of the low rat tunnels that was mostly hidden behind a pile of refuse at the end of one of the branches of the cavern, a tunnel that it said led to, “Sumudderplace.”

Dar protested, but eventually agreed to help Varo drag several ogre limbs, hacked from the corpses back in the outer cavern, through the tight passageway. The otyugh accepted them eagerly, tearing into one of them while the companions watched with queasy stomachs. In exchange, the creature dug through one of its mounds with its tentacles, and pulled out a metal disk that it dropped onto the ground at their feet.

“Twolegshinymetaldangly,” it said.

Dar took a rag and wiped off some of the filth from the disk. “This is mithral!” he said. Turning it over, he could see the mounting brackets where leather straps could be fixed. “A shield.”

“Magical,” Varo said.

“It may have belonged to the elf whose body we found in one of those ogre sacks,” Talen said.

“Thank you for your generosity, um... creature,” Allera said. “If we come this way again, we’ll be sure to bring you more... food.”

As the otyugh turned to its meal, the companions retreated toward the passage that the creature had indicated. “Another tight squeeze,” Talen said, as they reached it.

“What just happened?” Dar asked, as Talen took the lighted staff from Aelos, and probed the entrance of the tunnel with it. “Did we just make friends with a ball of trash?”

“Any friend at all is better than none, in this place,” Varo said.

“It’s going to be crawling again,” Talen said, looking up at them. “But the tunnel appears to be unobstructed.” Handing the staff back to Aelos, he lowered his body until he was lying on the ground, and he started into the tunnel.

“These low tunnels... something bad is going to happen in them, I know it,” Allera said.

“Something bad is going to happen no matter what we do,” Varo said. “At least this way we are moving to confront our destinies, and not cowering in a corner waiting for it to come to us.”

“A cheerful thought,” Dar said. “You’re up, angel.”

Allera followed Aelos into the tunnel, followed by Varo. Once again, Dar brought up the rear.

This tunnel was longer than the others they had negotiated earlier. They crawled on for over a hundred feet, pausing occasionally to rest and to listen for any sounds of dangerous creatures ahead or behind. But other than the shuffling noises that they made as they moved, the cramped tunnel was as quiet as the grave.

“Gods, how far does this go on?” Allera

“Opening up ahead,” Talen whispered back. Aelos nodded, and passed the word down the line.

Wary of another attack, the fighter emerged from the tunnel into another cavern. This chamber was big, maybe sixty feet across, with irregular crevices situated at uneven intervals around the perimeter. The floor was covered with gravel and small stones, and there were a few uneven mounds of debris visible within the radius of their light. The familiar stink of Rappan Athuk hung over the place, but after the otyugh’s chamber, the stale air smelled almost pleasant.

Talen drew his glowing sword, driving back the darkness another dozen paces, but still leaving the far side of the chamber draped in shadow.

Aelos turned to help Allera out of the tunnel. The healer nodded in thanks, and took several deep breaths.

Neither of them noticed the shadowy form that crept along the wall toward them.

Talen continued to stare out into the darkness. He heard nothing except for the sounds of his companions behind him, but there was something, a deep instinct, that whispered of something wrong.

Then he saw the eyes, points of red that hovered in the air at the edges of the light.

“Danger!” he hissed in warning. He lifted his sword, but even as he saw the humanoid creature charge into the light, another materialized out of the shadows behind them, leaping onto his back, digging its claws into his neck.

The captain screamed as life energy was sucked out of his body.

“Talen!” Allera yelled. She and Aelos rushed to his aid, but a third wight surged forward out of the shadows to block them, its claws extended eagerly to tear into the healer’s chest.

Allera screamed.

Chapter 51

UNTO DEATH

Caught by surprise, Allera screamed as the wight charged at her. Aelos, likewise startled by the monster’s sudden appearance, could not react in time to intervene.

The creature slammed into her, raking with its claws. The healer’s magical armor withstood the attack, however, and the life-draining claws did not touch her flesh. The wight, furious, tried to grab a hold of her, and drag her down into a grapple.

Allera had been caught off guard, but she quickly recovered her wits. “Begone, abomination,” she said, placing her own hands upon its head. She grimaced as the deadly chill of its skin crept into her fingers, but she called upon her own magic to defeat it, unleashing a powerful surge of life-giving positive energy into the undead monster.

Now it was the wight that screamed, as its corrupt flesh was blasted from its bones. It fell back, smoke rising from its scorched skull.

Talen was having difficulties. He had yanked off the wight clinging to his back, but as he turned to stab it the second one had come at him from behind, charging into him and catching the captain in close between them. Thus far his armor had protected him from being energy-drained again, but with the wights in so close he was having a tough time bringing his sword into play.

Varo rushed forward, his divine focus held up in one hand. “I command you in the name of Dagos, back!” he shouted. But nothing happened; the wights were not affected, and the one that Allera had blasted was already recovering, even though only one eye still glowed within its ravaged skull.

“Aelos! Call upon the Father!” Varo urged.

The holy cleric was already acting, lifting the sigil of the silver torch, and presenting it to the creature. “Begone!” he said, echoing Allera’s earlier command. The cleric’s voice, thick with power, echoed through the room, and the wight in front of them cowered, drawing back until the cavern wall ended its retreat. One of the pair facing Talen likewise fell back and fled, running across the cavern until the darkness swallowed it up.

The last one held its ground, but the departure of one of his foes gave Talen a chance to sweep his sword across its body, opening a terrible gash in its torso.

“Aaarr!” Dar yelled, finally joining the fray, leaping up from the tunnel to charge to the captain’s aid. He’d drawn *Valor*, and as the wight turned toward him, claws outstretched, he swept the blade across its body in an all-out power attack that cut, and just kept on going.

The two halves of the wight’s body fell to the ground in a bloodless heap.

Varo was bludgeoning the injured one cowering against the nearby wall. “Find and destroy the last one,” he said to Dar. The warrior had sheathed *Valor*, and was looking from the sword to the body of the monster he’d destroyed. At Varo’s command he nodded, and headed across the chamber to where the last creature had fled. Aelos followed him, bringing his staff so that he could see.

Allera came over to Talen. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. I feel... cold.”

“The effect of the wight’s touch; it has drained some of your life essence. You may be able to fight it off, in time, but we don’t have that right now.” The healer reached into her satchel and drew out a small pouch. She took a pinch of fine dust from it, and sprinkled it over the soldier, whispering soft words of power as she did so. Talen shuddered as his stolen life was *restored* to him.

It didn’t take long for Dar to return. “Last one’s destroyed. I didn’t see any more, but it looks like there’s a lot of small tunnels leading off this chamber.”

“Let’s take a look,” Talen said. “Stay together, and keep an eye out; those things were damned good at remaining undetected.”

But they didn’t find any more wights lurking in the shadows. They did find a small tunnel that opened onto a passage of worked stone. All of the other crevices appeared to lead to dead ends, or to tunnels too small for them to navigate, so they headed in that direction.

The passage, formed of ancient stone blocks, was only five feet wide, but after the crawlspaces of earlier, it seemed relatively spacious. Talen took the lead, and after about sixty feet guided them into a large, roughly diamond-shaped room. This chamber was also deliberately crafted rather than naturally occurring, but like the last was almost empty, populated only by dirt and assorted debris. A small door in a recessed threshold was just visible on the far side of the room.

After a brief search, they ended up at the door. Talen listened at it briefly, and then gestured for the others to take up ready positions. For once, Dar did not make a

comment, instead standing beside the door, and lifting his club. He nodded at the captain when he was ready.

Talen yanked the door open. Beyond was a narrow, twisting passage. The illumination from Talen's sword and Aelos's staff revealed nothing ahead, but at the edges of the light shone on what looked like another room at the end of the corridor.

They moved on.

The room at the end of the corridor was a long rectangular chamber about forty feet wide and thirty deep. There was one immediate difference obvious about it; this place showed signs of intelligent residents.

"Looks like somebody called this place home," Talen said.

There were six beds, human-sized, arranged in two rows in the center of the place. Six plain wooden chests were arranged at the feet of the beds, facing the center of the room. Rolled up bedrolls along the edges of the room suggested that more people sometimes slept here, and brackets for torches set in the walls suggested that whoever they were, they utilized natural light.

There was another door in the wall to their left, set with a bronze casting of a leering humanoid face at eye level.

The companions moved into the room, wary.

"We are close," Aelos said. "There is a powerful evil aura near this place."

"Where's it coming from?" Talen asked. Aelos pointed to the door.

"I can feel it too," Varo said, taking up a position along the wall.

"We must be near the evil temple," Allera said.

"Well, if they gotta sleep, then they can be killed," Dar said simply. He'd gone over to take a look at the chests, and he flipped the latch of one with his boot, and kicked it open.

"No, don't..." Talen began.

He was cut off as a blast of electrical energy erupted from the chest, slamming into Dar's chest. The fighter staggered back as the bolt tore through him, draining away in sparks that leapt to the floor and to the other chest and bed across from him. He stood there, his chest blackened, smelling of burnt flesh and ozone.

"Ouch," he said.

Allera started toward him at once, but Varo stopped her. "Look!" he said, pointing at the chest that the *lightning bolt* had hit after passing through Dar. Dark green vapors were seeping from the chest where the bolt had scorched it, spreading out into the air in ominous tendrils.

"Back, everyone!" Talen commanded. They retreated into the corridor, where Allera summoned her power to treat Dar's injuries.

"That was stupid," she told him.

"Anybody ever tell you that you've got an awful bedside manner?" he replied.

Varo and Talen had kept a close eye on the room. The vapors had formed a small cloud in front of the chest, hovering in the air for a minute or two before dissipating.

"Burnt othur," Varo said. "Nasty stuff."

"Is it safe?"

"Give it another few minutes. And I would recommend not touching that chest further."

"Nobody touch anything," Talen said to all of them, his gaze lingering on Dar. "All of them might be trapped, for all we know."

They waited until the othur fumes had dissolved completely, but even so were careful to give the chests a wide berth as they made their way back into the room. "So now what?" Dar asked.

"The answers we seek are through there," Aelos said, indicating the door with his staff.

"Orcus cultists," Talen said, drawing his sword. Varo whispered something to Dar; the fighter nodded and walked around the room to the area the far door, although he made it clear that he wasn't going anywhere near it.

"We may be able to catch them off guard," Allera said.

"The Father will watch over us, and grant us victory," Aelos said.

"Maybe, but I don't think that's what *you* have in mind," Varo said.

Aelos looked at him in surprise. "What do you mean by that?" Talen asked.

"What I mean," Varo said, his words stabbing through the air like daggers, "Is that he's a traitor. Aelos Sinaris is a priest of Orcus."

Chapter 52

BETRAYAL

Varo's announcement was met with a moment of stunned silence, followed by an outburst of exclamations.

"What? Are you mad?" said Talen.

"No, you're wrong!" Allera said at the same moment. "I've known him for years... he presided over my initiation ceremony!"

"You had better have some strong evidence for your claim, servant of the Dark Creeper," Aelos said, his normally calm expression now tight with anger. "I have tolerated your presence for the good of the group, despite my contempt for your foul religion and its evil god. I was expecting something like this from you... you seek to drive a wedge between us, to weaken us before we confront the masters of this place!"

Dar said nothing, only watched the scene with his arms crossed before his chest, his club leaning against his body.

Allera started forward toward Varo, but Talen blocked her with a hand. "Explain yourself, priest," Talen said, his voice tight.

Ignoring Aelos's taunting words, Varo continued speaking in a calm voice. "I was suspicious at first, but I considered that perhaps I was responding to the overall ambiance of Rappan Athuk a bit too strongly. But there were a few parts of your story that just didn't fit."

With all eyes on him, the cleric walked slowly along the wall. "The first was how you tracked Marshal Tiros to us. After we made our way back toward the Well, I realized that the distance between the two parts of the dungeon were too great for a *locate object* spell to function."

"I cast that spell from a scroll, penned by one of the most powerful members of the Church, the Prelate Annochus," Aelos said. "I suppose he is a cultist of Orcus as well?"

Varo acknowledged the comment with a wave. "Perhaps. But it is only one item, among several. If I could make my entire case?" he said, with a nod to Talen. "It will only take a few moments, and then you can debunk my crazy theories with more efficiency."

Talen nodded. "Let him speak, Aelos."

The second thing of note—which I fully admit I did not see myself—was Argus’s description of how you “turned” the black skeletons near the Well. Admittedly the late soldier was not an initiate of the divine mysteries, but the effect resembled more what I do, which is to force the creatures to abase themselves before a greater power.”

“A power of evil,” Aelos said.

Varo ignored the interruption. “Those first few examples were not enough to convict you, naturally, but they did raise my suspicions. I watched you very closely after that, and noted each time you cast a spell. You know, I don’t believe I have ever seen you spontaneously cast a healing spell.”

“Now, wait,” Talen said. “He healed me, and the others, several times.”

“It is not the same thing,” Allera said softly, clearly troubled.

“No, it is not,” Varo continued. “In fact, against the trolls, he clearly used an *inflict wounds* spell. I did not say anything at the time, as in fact it is not specifically forbidden by the dogma of the Father’s church to use such magic in times of great need. But the priest who seeks to do so much pray for such magic in advance, petitioning the Father to grant such foul magic to His servant. One such as myself, the soldier of an “evil” faith, can of course call upon such power whenever needed, as long as energy remains within my reservoir of divine spells.”

Allera’s expression became a touch more stricken, as she remembered the battle against the ogres, and Aelos dropping one of the creatures with a mere touch.

“And there was the divination,” Varo said. “A nice touch to take yourself a bit away from the others, even using me as an excuse. But you were well within the range of a *detect magic* spell, which indicated that you cast no such spell at all. I imagine that you might have gone to your true patron, but what was the need? You *knew* where you wanted to take us, from the start.”

Talen looked at Aelos, who’s face had changed subtly, the muscles around his jaw tightening. “That is your proof, cleric of lies? Everything you have said is no evidence at all, just innuendo and circumstance played in a web to denounce me.”

“I agree, taken as a whole, it was not enough evidence to convict,” Varo said. “That was why I deliberately held back in the battle against the wights. I had to know for sure... and when you “turned” them, this time in my sight, I knew for sure.”

“At least you respected me enough not to bother with flashy, false effects; you knew I would see through whatever spell you normally used to simulate the holy power of the Father. But one thing I can tell, ‘priest’, is the difference between negative energy and positive energy.”

He turned to Talen. "Ask her," he said, indicating Allera. "She *knows*, as well."

Talen's face was cold as he looked at the healer. "Allera?"

She nodded.

"I have to admit," Varo said, "I have to respect someone who could clearly deceive..."

Aelos broke for the door. Dar, warned by Varo earlier, was instantly there to block him, his club ready to strike. The evil cleric swerved and touched the fighter, pouring an *inflict critical wounds* spell into him. Dar screamed as pure agony ripped through him, but he kept on the priest, swinging an off-balance swipe of his club that smashed the cleric in the arm. The hit was a glancing one at best, but backed by the fighter's augmented strength and the magic of the weapon, it still broke his arm.

Talen was charging after them, but Aelos was already running for the door again. He opened his mouth to shout, but nothing came out as Varo placed an aura of *silence* upon Dar.

Aelos reached the door and started to pull it open, but before he could get it open enough to get through, Dar slammed into him from behind. Their impact slammed the door shut, and Dar slammed the priest's face into the bronze fixture, breaking his nose and jarring loose a half-dozen teeth.

Aelos tried to break free, but managed only a feeble blow that Dar ignored as he pounded his fist into the priest's face, wreaking more havoc with his appearance.

When Talen got to him, his role was more pulling the fighter off the cleric than helping to subdue him.

Aelos was out cold, but Varo insisted using gestures that they gag him before he released the *silence* spell.

Dar pulled open the exterior door and glanced outside briefly. "Another hallway," he said. "Nothing coming that I could see."

"I can't believe it," Talen said. Tears ran down Allera's face, but she held herself steady, not looking away from the broken and bloody figure of the man she had respected, and even loved.

"Regardless of whether or not they heard us, some folks are going to be coming here sooner or later," Dar said.

"We don't know if Aelos had warned them we were coming or not," Varo said. "We need to fall back to someplace secure, consider our options, recover our strength."

“What about him?” Allera asked, indicating Aelos.

“Bring him along,” Varo said. “He may be able to help us further. Do not let him regain consciousness; he may be able to take his own life.”

“I can’t believe he fooled us all, for so long,” Talen said.

Varo looked at him. “It’s not hard to fool someone who wants to believe,” he said.

Dar looked at the black streaks and bloodstains on the floor, and the damaged chests. “They’ll know we were here,” he said.

“There’s nothing to be done for that now,” Talen said. “Varo’s right; we can’t stumble blindly ahead into what might be an ambush. We need to fall back and regroup.”

“What about what’s in those chests?”

“It’s not worth getting killed over. Leave it.”

“We have oil. I say we pile it all up, make a little bonfire. Leave a message for those demon-worshipping assholes.”

Talen appeared to consider the suggestion, but then shook his head. “I share your sentiment, but it’s too risky. There might be other traps like that poison gas, or the fire might end up filling the entire complex with smoke. No sense in making more trouble for us than we have to.”

Dar shook his head, but didn’t reply.

“Don’t worry,” Talen answered. “We’ll get those bastards.”

Dar nodded, and took up the bound and gagged body of the priest. With Varo leading, this time, the four remaining members of the Doomed Bastards retraced their steps, retreating back into the caverns and passages of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 53

ZEHN

The high priest of Orcus knelt upon the narrow platform at the apex of the four slender staircases. His position high above the floor of the chamber gave him a panoramic view of the temple, this place of pure corruption. The degree of taint present in this place

would have driven most men mad, but Zehn fed upon it, drank deep of the dark powers that were concentrated here. Fumes from the lava pit below the platform made his head swim, but in some twisted way he reveled in that too, ignoring the nausea that spasmed in his gut, and letting his consciousness better embrace the chaos of his patron.

He drifted in that state for some time, until those senses that clung yet to his mortal body alerted him to a disturbance. Annoyed, he drew himself back and turned to see one of the underpriests standing upon the steps, his head respectfully bowed low.

“What?” he croaked, his throat cracked and parched. In his trance, he often lost track of the needs of his body; of what importance were such pathetic worries in the face of communion with the True God?

“Great one, there has been an intrusion into the temple quarters. Several of the traps on the chests were triggered; whoever it was has withdrawn.”

Zehn collected himself while he considered the news. He’d been warned to expect a “delivery”, an influx of new energy for the Sphere of Souls that would have greatly enhanced his standing within the ruthless hierarchy of those who served the True God. He had been distracted by other concerns, but realized that he had let his outward interests draw his attention from the more mundane concerns of his temple.

“The warders on the third level?”

“We sent a party, they have seen nothing,” the underling replied at once.

Zehn thought for a moment. The fact that intruders had gotten past his guards wasn’t too troubling; Rappan Athuk was honeycombed with passages and tunnels, some known to the priests of Orcus, some not. Or the intrusion might have come from within; it could certainly be possible that one of the priests from the other temples was probing for weaknesses, in anticipation of a preemptive strike.

At the thought, the high priest let out a strangled chuckle. Let them come; the power of the True God was strong within him.

The underpriest ignored his superior’s self-indulgence, keeping his head carefully bowed. Zehn fixed his attention upon the man, whose power was growing, if not yet a true threat.

“Perhaps someone was looking for your book,” he said. The underpriest betrayed his surprise with a tiny shift, and Zehn continued, “Did you think you could hide it from me? *A book of vile darkness*, kept from my attention within my own sanctum?”

“No, great one,” the priest said.

“Bring the book to me,” he commanded. “You will lead the ritual cleansing at darknight this eve. And will thank the True God that you do not pay for your presumption with an eternity of service in unlife.”

The underpriest did not bother to hide his terror from his master. “As you command, great one,” he said, bowing until his forehead almost touched the edge of the landing.

“Set additional guards outside of the sleeping chamber, and order the guards on level three to resume patrols of the upper levels. Any incursions are to be reported to me directly. And direct the senior priests that they are prepare *glyphs* upon their next rest, after the darknight ritual. You may go.”

As the underling retreated back down the treacherous stairs, Zehn pondered. Action needed to be taken. His temple was already considerably under strength. The party of orcs he’d sent out to the Oracle had never returned with the answer to his latest question. They could have been slain—the path to the Oracle was not without hazard—or they might have gone over to another faction. That was one reason he had tasked the orcs with such errands; they were expendable.

Of more import was the delay of Severus in returning. He’d sent out the priest along with a hand-picked cadre of the more competent of the acolytes almost ten hours ago. Their task had been in part to track down the fate of the missing orcs, but Severus’s primary mission had been to initiate an embassy to Scramge. Zehn considered possibilities, none of which were favorable to his plans. Scramge had always held itself aloof from the schemes of the cult of the True God, but Zehn had to consider that perhaps the creature had finally put itself in play. Had it been responsible for the missing party? Had it now taken Severus and his team into its custody? Had another faction gotten to it first?

Of course, it was also possible that Severus himself had been confronted with an opportunity to betray his master, and had turned. That was how Zehn himself had risen to his current position of leadership, almost a decade past.

It was a complicated thing, serving within an organization dedicated to chaos and evil.

But Zehn was blessed of the True God, and he had resources beyond mere men and orcs.

The dark cleric cast out with his mind. A few seconds passed, and then a huge creature materialized before him, a vrock demon. The vulture-like creature hovered in the air on powerful beats of its wings, fixing the cleric with a potent stare that radiated a deep malevolence upon all living things. In the light from the lava below, the creature’s appearance was particularly hideous and alien.

Zehn was not afraid; he was favored, and the creature knew it.

“What is your desire?” it asked him.

“Travel to the second temple. Give my respects to Gudmund, and petition him for a flask of diamond powder, and for additional guards for my temple. Tell him that I have a valuable gift to offer... you know what it is.”

“The book?” the vrock said.

Zehn nodded; it was impossible to keep most secrets from the demons. He had served the True God for four decades, almost his entire life, but the monstrosities from the Abyss had been seeped in deceit and chaos for millennia. In most cases, he didn't even try to obfuscate; let the True God's servants believe that the humans could conceal nothing from them. The entity before him was powerful, but it could not channel the power of the True God as he could.

Soon enough, even the greatest of their wretched race would bow before *him*.

The vrock, perhaps sensing the thought, cackled and vanished. As it *teleported* away, Zehn turned his gaze to the side. The ceiling of the temple cavern seemed to press in close upon him, although it was in reality a good fifteen feet higher than the platform. The rough surface was a black forest of dark stone protrusions and deep shadows, where the light from below never fully ventured.

“Come,” Zehn whispered.

A shadow detached itself from the web of darkness and drifted forward. As it came nearer, it was revealed as a being of shadow, an incorporeal undead being that radiated a cold and malign power.

“Seek out these intruders, Nadroj,” he commanded. “If they are weak, destroy them... else bring word back to me of their numbers and location.”

The spectre did not respond, but after a moment, it drifted away, vanishing through the cavern ceiling.

Zehn stood, wavering for a moment as his body's weakness threatened to betray him. He summoned the power of the True God, and as the unholy energies of his patron filled him, he felt a surge of glorious ecstasy drive out the pathetic weakness of his body. He let it sweep through him, then turned to the nearest of the staircases.

Below, the acolytes were preparing the ground before the huge statue of the True God for the darknight ritual, under the watchful eyes of one of the underpriests. He didn't descend all of the way, stopping just a handful of steps down. The stairs were steep and treacherous, lacking a railing or any other safety mechanisms, and more than one careless priest had fallen to his death when traversing them in haste. But Zehn had

already transcended any mere mortal fears, and he leaned out dangerously over the lip of the stairs to regard the prisoner.

The captive hovered below the platform, bound with ropes around his wrists and ankles that were fastened to the adjacent stairs. His body sagged, his shoulders dislocated by the strain of his own weight against the joints. He was naked save for a few tattered rags, and his exposed flesh was a bright red, seared over long exposure to the rising heat of the lava pool below. He had been pushed beyond the bounds of most mortal creatures to endure suffering, but he did not die. And that was what fascinated Zehn; it was not his doing, or even *His* doing, that kept life within this fragile mortal shell.

When the prisoner had first fallen into his hands, he had been prepared to sacrifice him to the True God, to add its life to the Sphere of Souls. He'd sensed a potency within him, masked by the obvious madness that clouded the mind of the creature. Almost as soon as they'd brought him within the confines of the temple, he had begun to babble incoherently. Zehn had been ready to forego the ritual and just order him tossed into the lava alive when the prisoner had said something that had chilled him to the very core of his being.

Now, the prisoner said nothing, lost in a half-space between life and death where even Zehn could not find him. He did not dare to kill the wretch, not now, but he likewise knew that keeping him alive was dangerous.

"Speak," he whispered. But the captive did not stir.

"The True God has named you his," Zehn said. "So I leave you to his keeping."

Turning away, the high priest descended the stairs.

* * * * *

The spectre passed slowly through the strata of rock that supported the corrupt weight of Rappan Athuk, its incorporeal body passing freely through mere mundane obstacles like stone and earth. There were places it could not go, even here, but even with the ground it knew where it was, and where it was going.

It passed out into a dark cavern. It passed by its lair, confirming that the seals were intact. It saw the bodies left by those that had come this way, the gruesome remains of vermin hacked and mangled. Such beings had nothing to interest one such as it, but it lingered by the shield, to Nadroj's senses still faintly warm with the life energy of the one who had held it. It was sweet, that faint afterimage. Nadroj felt an urge to track down the source of that faint trace, but instead it seeped into the cavern wall.

It passed by the underground river. The trolls were not in appearance, but Nadroj could sense their presence. One of them was forever gone, a black slick upon the stone of the bank the only reminder that it had existed.

It traveled upward, passing through layers of stone that had been formed when the world was new. It quickly explored several chambers, occasionally finding traces of those that had come this way.

Finally, it drifted slowly out of a wall to find a cavern occupied by cold light, and warm bodies.

Nadroj was almost overcome with a surging hunger. The four mortals in the room... they seemed to *shine* with a bright glow of light, a beacon that drew at the undead creature like a candle's flame drew a moth. The spectre could sense their power as well, but Nadroj too was powerful, and these travelers were battered, beaten, unprepared. It would not take long for it to sweep in, shatter their defenses, and feed...

The spectre hovered there for a moment, caught by conflicting drives. But ultimately it retreated back into the stone. It drifted away, but not in the direction of the temple, which was scarcely a hundred yards distant, as it traveled.

Instead, Nadroj sank deeper into the earth, into the very bowels of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 54

AN UNPLEASANT DIALOGUE

"The Great Lord will feast upon your souls," Aelos said. Or rather, slurred, for it was difficult for the cleric to speak clearly with his jaw broken and blood spraying from his lips with every syllable. They were in the room where they'd battled the wights earlier, gathered on the far side of the cavern with their lights carefully shaded in an effort to reduce the chance of discovery.

"The Great Lord can kiss my hairy white ass," Dar said. "Tell us what you know, priest!"

Aelos managed to laugh, a grisly sight given his mangled appearance. "To the Abyss with you... you'll be there soon enough."

The fighter lifted a mailed fist, but Varo stopped him. "Enough. He is not going to talk."

"Maybe if I start taking fingers..."

“No... stop,” Allera said. She’d gone across the room, but could not stay away; the suffering of a living, sentient creature kept bringing her back. “We cannot do this... Talen, you have to stop them.”

The captain only stood there, his face a mask of stone.

Varo held up his hand. “No, she’s right,” he said. “Pain, or even the threat of death, will not avail you against one such as he. I could break him, given time and patience, but those are things that we do not have in quantities at the moment.”

“What do you suggest?” Dar asked.

“His crimes merit a sentence of death,” Varo said. He looked over his shoulder. “Am I within the law, captain?”

Talen nodded. Allera turned away.

“All right, now you’re talking,” Dar said, reaching for the priest. With his legs bound uncomfortably beneath him, and his arms stretched tight behind his back, there was nothing Aelos could do to resist.

“My master will welcome me with open arms,” the priest said.

“Yeah, well tell him I’m coming to kick his fat ass,” Dar said.

The priest spit a gob of bloody spittle into his face. Dar smashed him across the face, and he collapsed, unconscious again.

“He may as well be of some use to us, even in death,” Varo said.

“What are you saying?” Talen said, but it was clear in his eyes that he had a good idea what the cleric meant.

“Feed him to the otyugh,” Varo said. “It ensures that he will not be *raised*, and perhaps Max will have something else to offer us in exchange. In any case, I’d feel better with that creature between us and the temple. We can rest and plan our next move from the ogre chamber.”

Talen looked at Varo for a long minute. “You are a cold man, priest.”

“I do what needs to be done. You have been here long enough to know what is at stake, soldier of Camar.”

Talen, troubled, turned away and did not respond.

Varo nodded to Dar. "Take him up." He took the cleric's staff; they'd already looted his other possessions, including a ring that Varo said had likely masked his true aura from magical detection.

"You here that, you evil bastard?" Dar said, shaking the cleric. "You're going to be breakfast!" Aelos, still unconscious, did not respond.

Allera, her eyes wide, watched as the two men dragged their bound captive toward the rat tunnel that led back to the otyugh's cavern.

Talen started after them, but Allera stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Talen, what's happening to us?"

The captain sighed. "We are becoming what we are fighting against," he said. Then he turned away from her, and continued after the others.

Allera stood there for a moment as the darkness started to close around her. Then, wiping her face clean of tears, she followed after them.

Chapter 55

GUARDS AND WARDS

The two guards did not consider themselves friends; that was a sentiment that rarely existed within the ranks of the cult of Orcus. Brennith Goodwyn and Nunciato Callas were the names given to them by their respective parents, but those too the pair had left behind, replaced by new names given to them on the day that they swore allegiance to the Demon Prince. They were young, still in their mid-twenties, but no less corrupt for that. Each had participated in numerous atrocities, crimes against man and nature, but were yet mere acolytes within the ranks of the demon lord's servitors, their nascent talents just starting to awaken with the power of their dread patron. As such, they drew unpleasant duties, such as keeping guard in dank chambers.

For hours, the pair stood there in silence, flanking the door that led to the priest quarters. A pair of *everburning torches* set in sconces cast a wavering illumination over the chamber. The two guards, clad in robes the color of ink, were almost invisible shadows in the flickering light.

"Our relief is late," one of them said.

"Go complain," the other shot back. "If you're lucky, Zehn will just offer your testicles to the True God at the next darknight ritual."

The first glowered, but did not respond.

“Hsst,” the second said a moment later. “Did you hear that?”

“I heard nothing,” the first whispered back. But both men had taken heavy maces out from under their robes. They warily watched the passage mouth on the far side of the room. One of the torches had been placed to shine into that opening, but the corridor continued only a short distance back before it bent sharply to the left.

“There, movement!” one of them warned. Both acolytes peered forward...

... and saw a small brown rat creep into the light. It looked at the acolytes, and lifted its head to sniff the air.

“I’d say we’d better not report this particular intrusion,” the first acolyte said. The second chuckled, and lifted his weapon. “I’ll teach the little bugger to assail the temple of the True God,” he said, starting forward.

But he had barely covered two steps when an armored archer stepped around the corner, lifted his bow, and fired.

The arrow flew into the acolyte’s shoulder, staggering him. Strangely, both the impact and his movements after were utterly and completely silent.

The other acolyte opened his mouth to shout a warning, but again nothing came out. Recognizing the effects of a *silence* spell, he turned to the door behind him, yanking hard on the handle. It resisted him, sticking in the frame, but with a furious heave he ripped it open.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw another heavily armed warrior charging toward him with a big club lifted over his head.

The young servant of Orcus had witnessed horrible things since swearing his life to the service of Darkness, but he still felt his bowels turn to water as the sight of the onrushing fighter. Knowing that the radius of the enemy spell was limited, he darted into the narrow passage beyond the door. He could see the sleeping quarters ahead at the end of the passage, lit by a soft, warm light. There was a ward by the entry, but it would recognize him as one of its own, and let him pass. All he had to do was get out of the range of the *silence*, and then yell for help...

He suddenly heard his rough breathing again, would sounded startlingly loud in the close confines of the tunnel. He opened his mouth to shout...

The last thing he heard was the sound of his spine being snapped in two.

* * * * *

Talen ducked the cleric's swing. The man looked strong enough; he'd taken an arrow to the shoulder and still managed to fight. But he wasn't well trained, and the veteran soldier easily avoided the blow. Placing his feet, he drove half of the length of his sword into the enemy priest's body. The young man's eyes widened, and he slumped to the ground.

He saw that Dar had taken down the other guard. Within the aura of *silence*, he couldn't tell if an alarm had been sounded, but by the way that Dar knelt beside the body to check it, he guessed not. Reaching down, he grabbed the shaft of the arrow jutting from the dead man's shoulder, and snapped off its end.

Glancing back, he saw Allera and Varo entered the room behind him. Taking the enchanted arrow with him, he ran silently toward Dar. The fighter glanced back at him, and smiled.

Talen saw another man dressed in a cultist robe step into view. The man's eyes widened in surprise and alarm. Unable to warn Dar, he pointed.

The fighter shot forward, even as the cultist shouted a desperate warning. There wasn't much space between them, but as he charged forward an explosion of fire filled the narrow confines of the passageway. The flare lasted only a second, and even as it faded Dar burst through, his exposed skin blasted from the release of power from the *glyph of warding*. The acolyte tried to dodge back, but Dar drove his club hard into his gut, knocking him off his feet. The evil cleric fell to the ground, gasping for breath as he clutched his ruptured stomach.

Dar turned to the side and moved out of view, deeper into the room. Talen could only rush after the fighter. He emerged into a scene of chaos.

The room was occupied by over half-dozen clerics, some armed and ready, others just getting up from bedrolls along the walls. One of the beds in the center was occupied by a bearded priest who had the dusky gray skin of an Emorite; as he rose Talen could see that his torso was covered with a web of crawling, demonic tattoos. Recovering quickly, he saw Talen and reached for the morningstar laid against the head of the bed.

Talen beat him to it, slashing him across his bare chest with his sword. The Emoite grimaced and tried to cast a spell, recognizing too late that he was engulfed by a *silence* aura.

Dar was unleashing holy hell upon the other clerics. Two were already down, clutching broken bones and crushed ribs. Another three were attacking him all-out, while two others were casting spells in the back of the room, beyond the radius of the *silence* surrounding Talen.

Talen saw another man stagger to his feet from the last row of beds. As his blanket fell from his naked body, the captain saw that he was covered in oozing wounds, a bloody mess of cuts that covered almost every inch of him from head to toe. Talen could not see how he could even stand, but he did, and he made his way toward the exit door, leaving bloody smudges on the floor with each step.

Out of reflex, the captain started to shout to Dar, to alert him to the escapee, only to again belatedly remember the *silence*. He rushed after the man himself, but only got one step before the man he'd just wounded leapt at him in a flying tackle. Talen kept his footing only barely, but the man held onto him, his eyes burning with madness and fury.

Varo and Allera rushed into the room, weapons at the ready. Varo pointed to Talen, and Allera moved to help him. Varo started to move around the melee toward the door and the fleeing man, but the last two clerics charged to meet him in the center of the room, forcing him to turn aside.

The injured man reached the door and pulled it open, vanishing into the corridor beyond.

Dar took a hit across the shoulders, the cleric's heavy mace hurting him even through his armor. He grimaced and spun around, clipping the cleric heavily on the arm. The cleric dropped his weapon, but immediately leapt at Dar, trying to grapple him while his companions attacked him from behind. But Dar merely caught up the man by the front of his robe, and hurled him into one of his fellows. Both priests fell down hard in a tangle of limbs. Dar smiled and lifted his club, slapping it against his hand as he met the last priest's eyes in a silent stare.

You're next, he mouthed.

Allera swung her mace at the unarmored cleric. She only managed a grazing hit, but it distracted him enough for Talen to pull free and whip up his sword in a tight arc. The keen elvish blade sliced through the unholy cleric's arm, taking it off at the elbow. Blood poured from the terrible wound, but the priest, his eyes glazed over with madness, merely leapt at Talen again, trying to gouge out his eyes with his remaining hand.

The clerics fought with an insane fanaticism, but it was becoming increasingly clear that they were far outmatched. Dar took down his foe and spun to face the two he'd knocked down, sending one flying with a pulverizing blow that send him spinning wildly in mid-air. He swiveled to catch the second with his follow-through, but one of the dying acolytes on the floor grabbed him around his left knee, knocking off his balance. The cleric exploited that opportunity, leaping onto him, sending both falling over one of the beds.

Unfortunately for the cleric, the advantage proved only temporary. Even as he started to wrap his hands around Dar's throat, the fighter calmly drew his punching dagger, and

slammed it twice to the hilt into the man's body. The acolyte, his fingers still probing for a grip, slumped onto him, bleeding out his lifeblood onto his would-be victim.

Talen's foe had continued to attack, but with blood pouring down his bare torso, and missing an arm, it was only a matter of time before he went down for good. Varo held his position against his two foes, engaging in a rare stretch of armed melee, but really just holding his ground until the fighters could join the battle. The cleric took only one hit, a glancing blow that grazed his left bicep, but then Talen and Dar fell upon them from behind, and that was that.

The four gathered in the middle of the room, surrounded by bodies. Varo gestured to Talen, who took the enchanted arrow out of his pocket and tossed it across the room. As soon as it cleared the beds, they could speak and hear again. A few of the dying clerics moaned in pain as they messily gave up the last of their lives, but none were able to offer any further resistance.

"Round one to us," Dar said. He was bleeding from a few wounds, and his face was blackened where the *glyph* had burned him, but Allera healed him, and within a few seconds vitality had surged back into his body, bringing him back to full strength.

"One escaped," Talen said.

"We must continue to press them," Varo said, "While the initiative is still ours."

The door on the other side of the room was still open, revealing another corridor beyond. The passage was broad, almost twelve feet wide, with walls of utterly smooth black rock, and an arched ceiling ten feet above. As they moved warily forward, they saw that the corridor ended in a pair of huge doors of black stone. The doors were intricately carved with scenes of demons tormenting mortal souls. As they drew nearer, and their light sources played shadows across these carvings, making them seem almost alive.

"Foulness," Allera said, looking away from the doors.

Dar shrugged and started toward the nearer, but Varo stopped him with a raised hand.

"Hold," he said. "They are almost certainly warded against intrusion."

"Every second we delay gives them time to prepare a defense," Talen said.

"This will not take long. I am going to disguise my appearance," Varo said. "Then I will summon creatures that will challenge the door. Follow the creatures, but do not get in their way. Do not charge blindly in, and do not let yourselves get cut off from the exit. If seriously injured, fall back to the entry, if you can; Allera, you should be ready to use your skills if it is needed."

The healer nodded. "I am ready."

If the enemy is overwhelming, we will need to retreat and wait for another chance. That narrow passage beyond the bedchamber can be held easily by one man against many; we can fall back there if needed."

Talen nodded. "A good plan, priest." He looked at Dar. "Keep an eye on my back, mercenary."

"You just watch what's ahead of you, captain."

Varo took a step back and began casting. His form shimmered and became indistinct; a moment later it was replaced by the bloodied form of the underpriest he had killed, accurate down to the bloody gash across his bare chest. Without pause he moved into a second spell, reaching out through his divine connection across the planes of existence, summoning aid.

Wisps of ugly gray fog appeared before the cleric, materializing into the form of a pair of muscled, fiendish apes. They looked at Varo, who pointed to the doors, and grunted a command. The summoned creatures moved to his bidding, heaving at the heavy portals with their considerable mass and strength. The doors opened; something shimmered between them, a wave of energy that was there and gone in a flash. Whatever it was, the apes clearly survived it, moving ahead into the space beyond.

The companions had a chance to see a massive chamber, dominated by a tall platform in the middle.

Then chaos erupted.

Chapter 56

BATTLE FOR THE FIRST TEMPLE

The defenders of the temple had not spent their few moments of advanced warning idly. A row of a dozen clerics faced the doors in a broad half-circle. They were clearly prepared for battle, carrying steel shields and with chainmail visible under their robes. The majority of them lifted their maces and charged as soon as the doors opened, while five held their ground, casting spells.

The naked man with the terrible wounds was among the latter, working foul magic.

Behind the first line of defenders, the central platform rose up twenty feet above the cavern floor, supported by four steep staircases of carved stone. The platform was

supported above a pool of bubbling lava, which shed a ruddy glow over the entire chamber, the only source of light in the place. There was a man suspended below the platform, hanging over the lava pit from ropes lashed to his wrists and ankles. Another man stood atop the platform, his robe drawn back to reveal armor of black plate, and a shield shaped in the horned skull sigil of Orcus. Beyond the platform, through the gaps between the staircases, they could just see a massive statue set upon a low platform on the far side of the room, but any details were impossible to discern at this distance.

The summoned apes ambled forward to meet the onrushing wave of clerics. The powerful aura of *dispel good* that infused the entire temple did not help the acolytes against Varo's creatures, which were as deeply seeped in taint as the priests themselves. With their long arms, the apes struck before the clerics could bring their maces into play, unleashing powerful blows with their muscled fists. One grabbed a cleric by the throat and ripped off his arm with a powerful bite, dropping the screaming man to the ground with a roar of triumph. The other clerics attacked the apes with their maces, but the fiendish creatures were heavily resistant to mundane attacks, and took little damage.

Dar and Talen rushed in on the heels of the apes, spreading to either side to attack the ends of the semicircle of defenders. An acolyte smashed Dar on the shoulder with his mace, only to take a blow from the club that smashed in his shield, breaking the arm that held it. The cleric cried out in pain but somehow managed to keep fighting. Talen too exchanged blows with a priest, neither gaining a clear advantage in the initial flurry of strikes.

A potent explosion of dark energies engulfed the invaders. The *unholy blight* lasted only a second, and although Talen was somewhat discomfited by it, by and large the spell had much less effect upon the Doomed Bastards and their summoned allies than its caster had intended.

A loud screech filled the chamber, and drew the attention of everyone upward. The powerful vulpine figure of a vrock demon appeared, surrounded by a haze of shifting *mirror images*. It spread its wings to control its dive as it descended upon one of the apes. As the adjacent clerics hastily drew back, the ape lifted a claw to strike at the descending foe. The ape was a powerful foe, but the demon was both bigger and stronger, and it shrugged off the blow as it in turn tore into the ape with its claws and bite. At the same time, the demon released a cloud of toxic spores from its skin that seeped into the hapless ape's body, burrowing painfully into its flesh.

The situation grew more dire as the underpriests hurled their spells at the attackers. Talen resisted the icy chill of their magic, but Dar's will proved not as strong, and he froze, *held* by divine magic. His wounded foe, smiling evilly at the sudden turn of events, stepped forward and yanked Dar's helmet off his head with his good hand. As the fighter struggled to fight off the fell paralysis, the priest spat in his face, then lifted his mace to deliver a killing blow.

Allera emerged from the doorway and ran forward to help Dar. The cleric saw her coming, but focused on finishing the dangerous fighter before dealing with another foe. One of the senior clerics saw her as well and tried to *silence* her, but the strong-willed healer easily fought off the effects of the spell.

Allera saw that she would not get to the evil cleric in time to stop him, so she threw herself between them, lifting her arm to deflect the descending mace. The blow struck her hard, a critical hit that shattered the bone. She cried out and fell back, dragging Dar down with her.

“You filthy little bitch,” the cleric said, lifting his mace to strike again. “I’ll kill both of you!”

Ignoring both the cleric and the piercing agony of her own wound, the healer touched Dar’s face with her good hand, channeling healing energy into him, disrupting the underpriest’s paralysis.

The cleric’s mace came down, but Dar’s hand came up to meet it, snapping around the man’s wrist. The fighter squeezed his fist tight and twisted, and the priest’s bones popped as Dar broke his wrist. He cried out and tried to call upon his divine magic, but the words of the spell caught in his throat, overwhelmed by pain.

“Eat shit and die, asshole,” he said, smashing his punching dagger into the man’s gut, crunching through his armor as though it were sackcloth. As the man collapsed, he turned to Allera, lying on the ground beside him. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

“More... coming!” she hissed, holding her broken arm. Dar looked up to see that she was right; two more of the acolytes were coming his way, accompanied by one of the more senior priests. Dar could tell from one look at the man, and the faintly glowing morningstar he carried, that this guy was going to be trouble.

He reached down and picked up his club, and stepped forward to block Allera from the approaching foes.

The vrock had torn deep gouges into the body of the struggling ape, which continued to resist. Its own counterattacks were hindered by the *mirror images* that still warded the demon, although it was unlikely that its attacks could have hurt the demon in any case. With a roar, the demon reached down and grabbed the ape’s arms with its claws, wrenching down with a sick pop that tore both limbs from their sockets. The ape, punished beyond even its ability to absorb damage, collapsed and began to dissolve.

The second ape had been doing more damage than it had been taking, laying into the acolytes with abandon. A second Orcus-worshipper lay on the ground, struggling feebly as blood poured out of the gashes in his neck. The clerics, in turn, had only managed a few minor hits that didn’t seem to faze the fiendish animal in the least.

But then two of the underpriests stepped forward. One distracted the ape with a feint that glanced off its muscled arm, drawing a counterattack that glanced off his shield. That let the second one step within the ape's reach. His morningstar came crashing down into the ape's face, backed by the cleric's divinely-augmented strength. The critical hit was devastating, the spikes on the end of the weapon piercing the ape's skull, and transfixing its brain. The creature flopped back, almost crushing an acolyte that didn't get out of the way quickly enough, and quickly expired.

Talen had not been idly sparring during those few critical seconds of the battle. His defenses had been augmented with the shield that they'd won from the otyugh, repaired with some temporary leather straps torn from a ruined greave. He let his enemy come in with another attack, neatly sidestepping before countering with a sweeping cut that tore through the armor under the man's arm. The cleric screamed and spun to counterattack, but the captain had been waiting for that, and as he caught the foe's mace on his shield, Talen stabbed the end of his blade into the man's throat. The acolyte dropped his mace and clutched at the wound, which spurted a bright torrent of blood through his fingers as he fell.

Talen turned just in time to see the vrock take down the ape. The demon scanned the battlefield briefly before settling its attention on him.

"Oh, crap."

Chapter 57

BLOOD AND VIOLENCE

Talen paled as the demon spread its wings and leapt at him. He'd fought men and beasts, but this was beyond anything he had ever encountered. Still, he was a soldier and a man, and he lifted his sword, desperate to sell his life for a dear price.

A long, sinuous form erupted out of the corridor, darting between the open doors into the fray. Its head slammed into the demon, driving it back, piercing it with its mandibles. It was another huge centipede, and it distracted the demon for the few precious seconds that Talen need to get clear.

He looked up and saw an evil cleric standing in the doorway, and nearly rushed him before realizing it was Varo. *Damn it, what's wrong with me?* he thought. His thoughts had been in a crazy jumble since they'd come to this place, and his skin felt as though a slick of oil was clinging to it, a foulness that no soap could scrub free.

There was no time for contemplation; several clerics had seen him break away, and were charging toward him even as he turned back toward the battle. He met the first in

a high parry which he turned into a descending cut that tore a deep gash in the man's shoulder; the cleric screamed and fell back.

The second, however, was far more adept, and as his morningstar slammed into his armored torso he felt a cold surge of dread seep into his body.

"Yes, soldier of Light," the cleric said, taunting him. "You feel your doom."

Dar met his surge of enemies with a wild cry, swinging his club with abandon. The acolyte he struck first crumpled with a rib stuck through a lung, but the second caught his follow-through easily on his shield, suggesting a more experienced combatant. Dar in turn took a hit to his side that partially penetrated his armor, but lacking Talen's purity of purpose and depth of commitment, he did not suffer the same cold surge of power from the priest's *unholy* morningstar. But the mundane efficacy of the nasty weapon was bad enough, and as two more of the senior priests turned from the dissolving corpse of the second summoned ape to join in the battle against him, he knew that this was going to get really bloody, real fast.

"Stand fast," a soft voice said behind him. He felt a soft touch brush his neck, followed by a surge of positive energy that banished all doubts, along with the pain of his wounds and the lingering exhaustion of battle.

"Much better," he said, grinning as he faced the evil cleric. An acolyte tried to rush his flank, but he almost casually poked the head of his club into the young man's face, dropping him like a sack of grain. "Now let's get down to business."

"Take the cleric!" the enemy priest said, gesturing for his companions to spread out and come at their foes from the flanks. "The True God will claim your soul, warrior, but your flesh... that belongs to us."

"Well, I hope I at least you buy me dinner first," Dar said, seeing through a feint before meeting the cleric's true attack with a powerful swing of his club. The priest staggered back, clutching his side.

"Hurts, don't it?" Dar said. But he had to concentrate on the priest's pals, who were trying to get around him to Allera. He felt another cold chill, and knew that another priest was trying to do something nasty to him. "No... you... don't..." he said, his teeth chattering, but he managed to somehow marshal the will to resist the spiritual assault.

And just in time, as the flanking clerics charged in to attack.

Varo had remained near the doors, observing the battle for the best way to shape events. His gaze was drawn to the evil cleric atop the platform, who had not moved since the battle begun. He was almost certainly the source of the *blight* that had exploded in the room in the first seconds of the battle. His current idleness didn't mean

that he wasn't contributing to the battle; Varo knew that he was likely the most dangerous foe in the room. But at the moment, out of reach.

He didn't bother trying to *hold* any of the clerics; with their strong wills the spell was likely futile. A cleric saw him and ran forward, weapon raised, but he hesitated when he saw who it was.

"Help me, brother," Varo said, staggering forward.

The cleric—barely past his teens, Varo saw—ran forward to support him. As he grabbed onto Varo's apparently mangled body, their eyes met. Too late, he saw his mistake. Too late to do anything but scream as Varo unleashed an *inflict wounds* spell into him.

The acolyte stiffened, and collapsed.

Stepping over the body, Varo regarded the demon, which was going to be a real problem. Thus far the centipede had withstood its attacks, but it was clearly getting the worst of the exchange between them.

Dar delivered a powerful two-handed blow that drove one of the clerics several steps back, but he couldn't shift in time to stop the one behind him from touching him in the back, pouring an *inflict serious wounds* into him. He yelled in pain, swinging the club around to punish his attacker, but the cleric caught the blow on his shield.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" the first priest, now recovered and coming in again, taunted him.

Dar glanced back at Allera, but saw that the healer was busy. The last priest, the one that had been so terribly mutilated, had slipped all the way around the melee to the far wall, and had come up on Allera from behind. She tried to keep him at bay with her mace, but apparently the man had healed himself or been healed, for he no longer moved as though he was on death's door. He had no weapon, but Dar knew only too well that the priests of Orcus needed none.

But there was nothing he could do to help her, as all three of his foes came at him again. In fact, if he couldn't manage to stay alive for the next few seconds, her predicament was going to get a lot worse off very fast.

Talen faced his foe with a new respect for the cleric's deadly, evil weapon. The man was good with it, and Talen was forced to fight defensively, taking pounding impacts on his shield, barely able to adjust for each new assault, let alone get in an effective counter. The cleric's strength was amazing, the blows landing with almost as much force as those he'd taken from the ogres before. Within a few seconds his left arm was numb from the impacts to the mithral shield.

“Your death is inevitable, servant of Good,” the evil cleric hissed, lifting his weapon to strike again.

“For the honor of Camar!” Talen shouted back, launching a sudden counterattack. The cleric brought down his weapon, but Talen was already sliding past, his blade smashing into the cleric’s armored side. The chainmail under his robes held against the blow, but as Talen moved past him, he reversed the sword and thrust backward. The keen elvish steel drove deep into the cleric’s side, and he staggered back, favoring the critical wound.

Dar’s opponents, seeing that their *unholy* weapons were of limited effect against him, moved in to deliver *inflict wounds* spells by touch. Dar made them pay, lashing out with his club in powerful blows that crushed bones and mangled organs. But he took another devastating *inflict serious wounds*, and he was starting to feel that he was in bad trouble.

They could see it, too, and even though all three looked only a few shades short of death themselves, they seemed to grow only more confident the more wounded they became.

Dar felt a presence behind him, and tensed. It it was Allera, then well and good, but if it was the evil priest... The clerics did not give him a chance to shift his attention away for even an instant, coming at him in a semi-coordinated rush.

Then the healing was surging into him. He lashed out with his club, taking down the first cleric with a powerful smash the sundered his breastbone. Without hesitation he swept the club around with his backswing, impacting the second cleric on the side of the head an inch above his ear. A loud crack echoed through the chamber, and he too went down in a heap.

The last cleric let out a cry of rage, and extended his hands like claws toward Dar’s face. Dar calmly kicked him in the gut, knocking the air from his body in an explosive gasp, driving him to the ground. The club came down in a heartbeat, and snapped the evil priest’s neck.

A scream from behind him drew him around. He saw Allera crumple, blood pouring from her mouth, nostrils, and ears. She had paid a steep price for helping Dar. The naked cleric that had blasted her with an *inflict serious wounds* stood over her, blood covering his fingers. He looked at Dar and laughed maniacally, tangling his fingers in the fallen healer’s hair, and yanking her head up. She did not stir at the rough treatment.

“Get your filthy hands off her,” the fighter growled. He didn’t even bother to swing his club, merely *driving* it forward into the man like a battering ram. The cleric’s mad laughter continued even as the club crushed his arm and smashed into his torso,

sundering bones like a child snapping twigs. The cleric fell to the ground, still faintly wheezing with terrible mirth.

“Allera,” Dar said. “Allera!” He started to kneel beside her, but a loud roar drew his attention back up before he could see if she was still breathing. He looked up to see the demon holding Varo in its claws. Wounds covered the foul creature’s body; apparently Varo had gotten in a few licks. But the cleric’s arms had been shredded by the demon’s claws, and one side of his face was almost torn fully away by the vrock’s hooked beak. His left eye was a ruined, bloody mess in its socket, but his mouth continued to spit bloody syllables, and he managed to lift one savaged arm enough to touch the demon’s elbow, unleashing another *inflict wounds* spell into it. A few lingering *mirror images* hovered around it, giving the entire scene a blurred effect.

“Damn it, nothing’s ever easy,” Dar said, lifting his club and running toward the demon with a fierce yell.

The demon turned toward him. Almost casually tossing the crippled cleric away, it let out a piercing shriek that almost overloaded his senses. Somehow, through that terrible noise, Dar kept on running. For a moment his vision blurred, but the demon was impossible to miss, and he unleashed a powerful two-handed swing with everything he had left behind it.

The head of the club impacted the demon, but it passed right through its body and kept going. The *mirror image* vanished, revealing the true form of the demon a half-step away.

The demon roared and smashed a clawed fist into the fighter’s face. Dar staggered and fell to one knee, the club falling from his hand and rolling to a stop a few paces away.

Chapter 58

RAGE AND VALOR

The demon stood triumphant over its battered adversaries, seemingly unstoppable.

The last cleric still standing on the battlefield—save for the high priest still atop the pedestal in the center of the room—came at Talen even as Dar charged toward his doom. Talen had seen Allera and Varo go down, and knew that the demon would make short work of the mercenary. Not even trying to avoid the cleric’s attack, which caromed hard into his side, he ran past the man, slashing out low with his sword. The blow hit the cleric’s right knee with precision, all but tearing through the joint. The cleric screamed and fell, clutching at the limb, now held to his body by only a few strips of flesh and ligament. Talen was already charging at the demon, but the momentary delay

meant that he was too late to stop it from delivering the bone-jarring hit that sent the mercenary to his knees.

Talen yelled in defiance and stabbed at the demon's leathery back. His sword cut through empty air, sundering another *mirror image*. The captain's heart sank as the demon, belatedly noticing his presence, swiveled its monstrous head almost full around, fixing that horrible, malevolent stare upon him.

He was a dead man, he knew.

Dar slid *Valor* from its sheath. The cold tingle of life seeping from his body was almost too much for him, battered and broken as he was. But *something*, whether instinct, or some other mysterious agency, took over, and almost before he realized what he was doing, he was driving the axiomatic blade into the demon's gut.

The vrock screamed, the sound a thousand times worse than any sound any of them had heard before in their lives. The demon beat its wings furiously—almost knocking down Talen—and it *tore* itself off the blade, leaving its entrails behind it in a trail. The demon fixed a furious look upon the mercenary...

...and disappeared.

Valor fell to the ground, and as it did, Dar felt some clarity cut through the fog that had fallen over his senses. He felt like he'd been wrung out, and every muscle in his body seemed to have its own distinctive and particular tingle of pain. He felt most like falling down in a nice heap and sleeping for the next decade or so, but it was not to be, as Talen turned to the center of the room and pointed.

"The head cleric—he's coming!"

Zehn had watched the battle unfold with a dispassionate sense of separation; it was as if his consciousness was outside of him, watching his scene through the eyes of his soldiers. He had not been idle; if anything, his magic had unleashed powerful spell-surges through the melee that should have left their foes bewildered and weakened. But if anything, the foe seemed to grow stronger as the melee progressed, with the lesser clerics battered into unconsciousness or death. He felt a tingle on the third finger of his right hand, and knew that the Sphere of Souls was drinking deeply of the carnage being wrought here. The underpriests, aware perhaps that their sacrifice was aiding the cause of their dark Master, fought with desperate ferocity.

But they were losing, nevertheless. Even Gudmund's fresh levies, which had included the hulking bruiser-priest Acheros, had been as wheat to the farmer's scythe. The vrock should have been an end to it, but to Zehn's surprise, the warriors had driven it off.

So be it. He could still feel the power of the True God pounding in his skull like the beating of a great eternal drum. He was not a warrior, but death was his to use as a weapon, and he would bring these intruders low himself.

He started down the stairs, careful of where he put his feet. In his usual robes, ascending the steep staircases was tricky. In plate armor, it was dangerous. His earlier weakness had passed, and in fact he felt nothing from his body at all. It was as if his armored body was that of a golem, subject to the strength of his Will.

The warriors saw him, but instead of turning to face him, tried to help their fallen companions. It would be of no avail; from the look of them, the power of death granted by his patron would make short work of the fighters, and then the others would be his to offer to the glory of the True God.

He paused, however, as he passed the captive bound to the stairs. Something—he was not sure what—caused him to hesitate. He was not afraid of death, and despite his calm confidence, he knew that his foes might somehow overcome him. But the creature here could not be allowed to fall into the hands of those opposed to the True God.

The prisoner dangled from the ropes, seemingly insensate to his surroundings. But as Zehn lifted his mace, ready to finish the wretch, the tortured creature lifted his head, and fixed his eyes upon the dread cleric.

The cleric of Orcus had participated in rituals that would have driven most minds over the brink of insanity. He had calmly suffered violations of his body and soul, and risen out of them with more power. But in that stare, Zehn saw something that utterly unnerved him.

His reaction was not much, a mere step back before he recovered enough to know that he had been wrong before, that this prisoner *must* die, that he should have killed him the moment that the creature had fallen into his hands.

But as he shifted his weight, his boot slipped on the step.

Zehn tried to recover, but the weight of his armor kept him from regaining his balance. He did not cry out as he started to fall, invoking the power of his ring. That power, bound to the potency of the True God on this plane, was connected to the Sphere of Souls, and it had the ability to transport him magically to any of the other temples within Rappan Athuk.

Nothing happened.

Zehn spread his arms wide, whispering a prayer to Orcus even as he plummeted into the pit of burning lava.

“By the gods,” Talen whispered, watching as the enemy cleric fell to his doom. The captain looked down at the limp form of Licinius Varo. The cleric’s body had been mangled, and yet somehow clung tenaciously to life. Talen saw that hundreds of tiny, fibrous growths had sprouted from his arms, neck, and the good side of his face, flitting as his breath rattled from his cracked and bloody lips.

Talen had seen death numerous times, but somehow, this was... unnatural, terribly worse than the savagery wrought by sword and arrow by man upon man.

“He’s dying!” he yelled to Dar. “That demon... it did something to him... it’s killing him!”

Dar was crouched over the motionless form of Allera. He splashed some water over her face, wiping away the blood with a clean piece of her cloak. “Come on, princess... wake up!” he whispered harshly. “She needs healing!” he yelled in response to Talen.

“We all had healing potions, but used them all,” he said. “Look in her bag!”

Dar was already tearing through her satchel, dropping handfuls of bandages, herbal poultices, and tiny jars of powder here and there. Finally, at the bottom of the container, he found a vial half-full of blue liquid.

“What if it’s a poison or something?” Dar said.

“Then she wouldn’t have it... Your friend’s not going to last much longer, mercenary.”

Ripping off the cork of the vial with his teeth, he lifted Allera’s head gently, and poured the liquid directly down her throat. She didn’t cough, or even stir, and for a moment he felt a cold feeling press in his chest.

Then she opened her eyes.

“What... what happened...”

“No time,” Dar said. “Heal yourself.”

She looked left and right, but did not otherwise move. “Others?”

“Talen’s all right, but Varo’s not so good. Heal yourself first, and then you can help him.”

“No,” she said, each word clearly a significant effort on her part. “My powers are nearly depleted. Take me over to him.”

Her words brooked no argument, so he lifted her—gods, she was light—and took her over to Varo. The cleric was covered in what looked like a coat of ugly gray-green fur, growths from the vrock spores. The entire left side of his face looked like a gruesome

wasteland. Talen had cleared his nose and mouth, but even Dar could see that the man was fading fast.

“Put me down beside him,” Allera whispered. Her eyes were closed, but as she was placed down, she reached out and laid her hand upon his. “He is almost gone,” she said.

A blue glow started to form where their fingers touched, but at that moment a roar drew Dar and Talen’s eyes around.

The sound came from the cleric, as he lifted his body up out of the lava pit. His armor and helmet were a cherry red, fused to his blackened flesh. His screams were pure agony, and there could be no way that he could see, yet somehow he clung to life and continued to lift himself up out of the pit.

“Aaarrr!” Dar yelled, whipping up his throwing axe, and launching it in a powerful end-over-end arc that snapped across the room, burying half of the blade squarely into the brow of the cleric’s helmet. The magically keen steel cracked the superheated armor, and the blade bit deep into the man’s skull. Still screaming, the cleric fell back into the lava.

“Nice shot,” Talen said, turning back to Allera and Varo.

The blue glow had faded. The growths covering Varo had withered, turning white and crumbling into powder. The cleric still looked terrible, and there was nothing that could be done for his eye, but he was breathing easily, and as they watched, his good eye blinked and looked up at them with something approaching lucidity behind.

“We were victorious?” he wheezed.

“Yeah, something like that,” Dar said, looking around.

The place was a charnel house. Ravaged bodies lay everywhere, and the black stones of the floor were covered in slicks of blood that gathered in pools wherever the surface dipped lower than the surrounding stones.

“Help me up,” Varo said.

“You’d better take it easy,” Talen began, but the cleric waved his caution away with a hand.

“We may have overcome the defenses of this place, but more foes may be here at any moment,” the cleric said, his voice getting stronger with each word. “Help me up.”

“Can you heal Allera?” Dar said.

Varo shook his head. "My powers... are depleted," he said. With Dar's help, he knelt beside her briefly. "She is stable, for the moment. Did you find any potions, or wands, among her possessions?"

"Only one potion, which we used to bring her around to save you," Dar said.

"Maybe on the enemy clerics?" Talen asked.

"A good idea. Please check, if you would, captain," Varo said.

"Well, you won't find anything on the leader," Dar said. "He took a hot bath. A very hot bath."

Still unsteady, Varo made his way toward the platform in the center of the room. He stared up at the captive bound between the staircases. He was masked by wisps of smoke and the sheen of heat that rose off the lava, but Varo's intent stare looked as though it could have penetrated solid stone.

"The mad elf," he whispered.

Chapter 59

REUNION

Varo's muttered comment had been to himself, but Dar, coming up from behind, had heard it.

"What?" Dar said. "Him?" he squinted up at the prisoner, who hung limply from his tenuous perch.

"Cut him down!" Varo urged.

"I hate to break it to you, chief, but he's long dead. Looks like a side of slow-roasted beef."

"No," the cleric said. He started toward the stairs, barely able to put one foot in front of the other, but Dar quickly stopped him. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

"Cut him down," Varo coughed. "Please... at once."

Dar looked at the cleric, then over at Talen, who had moved Allera away from the scene of the battle, and had covered her with the remains of his cloak. "Talen! Give me a hand over here!"

Moving carefully on the stairs, the two fighters were able to cut the elf free and lower him to the ground. Varo was at their side at once, and he looked incredibly relieved to find a pulse beating faintly in the man's throat.

"I don't know how anyone could have survived that," Talen said with incredulity. "His arms are both out of their sockets... and his skin..." The entire front half of his body was a cherry red, blood oozing from where his skin had cracked and scabbed over, only to be reopened as he was moved.

"He's crazy," Dar said, looking down at both the cleric and his patient. But Varo did not look up, his hands moving fast as he did what he could for the elf's terrible wounds.

"We need to rest, and recover our strength," Talen said. "We should prepare a litter for Allera, maybe from one of the beds in the other room."

"She and the elf should not be moved," Varo said without looking up. "We cannot leave here, not yet."

"Ah, weren't you just saying a minute ago that we could expect enemy reinforcements at any minute?" Dar said.

"We cannot stay here," Talen added. "This place is utterly indefensible."

"I suggest we find a way," Varo said. He stopped his workings for a moment and looked up at them.

"Look at it this way," he said. "The caverns are clearly not safe. In addition to the ubiquitous rats, there are creatures like the wights, the spiders, and the wererats."

"Max was pretty helpful at covering us," Dar suggested.

"Allera won't survive being dragged through those little tunnels, and we're all likely to die from gangrenous infections if we linger in the otyugh's chamber in our current condition. I can treat disease with my magic, but I cannot restore limbs that have to be amputated due to putrefaction. To be honest, I'm surprised one of us hasn't come down with filth fever already."

Talen looked at Dar, who hadn't taken his eyes off Varo. The cleric met the other's gaze calmly with his one intact eye. Finally, the mercenary broke the stare, and looked around the chamber. "We'll need to get ready."

Talen helped Varo bring the elf over to the side of the room where Allera lay. Dar lingered behind a moment, looking over the scene of carnage. Looking the other way across the room, he could see a massive statue he'd missed before, an obscene form of a goat-headed humanoid carved in black stone. The ruddy light coming from the lava

pit seemed to glint off its eyes, making them seem to follow the fighter as he walked across the room. "It just gets better and better," he said, his expression as dark as the lusterless black walls of the chamber.

Chapter 60

THE EMISSARY RETURNS

Severus, priest of Orcus, was in a foul mood.

The acolytes that formed a string behind him knew better than to prompt him for any purpose not immediately essential. Any who served with Severus knew better than to test his temper. An odd choice for an emissary, it seemed, but Severus was also smart, and he had immediately discerned the true purpose of Zehn in sending him on this errand.

Somehow, he'd managed to become a threat in the eyes of his superior. Severus was not as powerful with the might of the True God, but nor was he weak enough to be casually crushed. This mission was elegant in its simplicity; send him to an overwhelmingly powerful being with a known hostility for the priests of Orcus; problem solved.

The embassy hadn't gotten off to a good start. He'd made a cursory search for the missing orc clerics, but hadn't found anything near the Oracle's chamber save for some old bloodstains that could have belonged to anything. That had only delayed the meeting with Scramge, whose lair was not far away from the resting place of the Oracle. The creature greeted them in surroundings that might have been considered welcoming; Severus recognized it as a mock-up of Thanatos, the Abyssal home of his patron. The acolytes had been suitably cowed, but Severus, familiar with Scramge's potent powers of illusion, had merely waited for the rakshasha to respond to his initial offer.

He wasn't surprised when the creature had demurred at Zehn's request for an alliance, but he was surprised to be offered a gift, a token for his master. The fist-sized green gem had shone with a faint inner light, and it radiated a powerful magic. There was something else, too, an odd aura that Severus hadn't quite been able to identify. He didn't spend much time mucking around with it; if it was a trap of some sort, which was likely given its source, then better for Zehn to trigger it.

Meeting with Scramge had taken longer than he'd expected, and they'd been delayed further when they'd all but collided into a party of goblin scouts as they were departing the rakshasha's realm. The two groups had never been on pleasant terms, and Severus's limited diplomatic talents hadn't been able to keep the situation from

devolving into violence. The priests of Orcus, augmented by the power of their patron, were victorious, but they left two of their own lying dead on the ground, along with three of the elusive goblins. Severus had killed two of the dirty little creatures, but their vicious and effective sneak attacks had left almost all of his party injured. He was tempted to leave the mewling brats behind and continue alone, but he was not that much of a fool. So he wasted more time treating their wounds, and recovering enough for the small company to continue.

The guards watching the entry to the fourth level of the dungeon regarded them with raised eyebrows at their battered condition, but they were also smart enough not to badger Severus with questions. Severus noted that the guards were the same that had warded the exit on his way down here, and wondered if they had done something to earn Zehn's ire. That might be useful, he thought, noting the pair's names in his mind.

The priest led his depleted force back through the secret ways to the temple, considering the different paths that his debriefing with Zehn might lead upon.

The familiar stench of blood and death alerted him well before they found the bodies.

The guards had been cleanly and efficiently slain. Creeping forward, he hooked the half-open door with his morningstar, and slowly drew it fully open.

The odor was ten times stronger. From his vantage, he could only see a pair of bodies ahead, but he could almost *taste* the destruction here, and knew that the sleeping quarters was full of them.

The acolytes were watching him, their weapons out and ready. A few had already called upon the power of the True God; foolish, given that they didn't know where their foes were, or how many there might be.

"Go back and fetch the guards," he told one. He considered retreating back to the third level to seek out the ghouls they'd passed on the way back up, but the creatures had already been altogether too eager in their manner as they'd watched the small column of priests pass with fresh wounds, smelling of blood, and he doubted his ability to control them. If they came upon this carnage, their lust for warm flesh might overcome the natural authority that his robe and his power granted him in the eyes of the undead.

A soft clatter announced the arrival of the reinforcements. That gave him five in all, under his command. None of them warriors, but all could at least channel the raw power of Death that was the domain of the True God. They were young and foolish, for the most part, but they were committed, ready to die at his command, and that was all he needed, right now.

He gestured for them to follow him with a nod. He went slowly, reluctant to betray their presence with the slightest sound. They could not be utterly quiet, not in their armor,

but the soft swishing of their mail coats was barely louder than the skittering of a dire rat as they entered the room.

Severus's initial senses had proven correct; the chamber contained the hacked and broken bodies of almost a half-score of his brethren. The ground shifted slightly; thousands of gold piece-sized beetles were swarming over the bodies, devouring them. Severus nodded; it was the way of Death. One of the acolytes heaved into a corner; the senior priest frowned and waited for the youth to recover his wits. He made a mental note that the acolyte would have to be disciplined later; one who followed the True God should not be discomfited so in the simple face of Death.

Once the abashed acolyte had recovered, the small party made its way into the entry corridor to the temple. The huge doors were partially opened, and Severus could sense that the entry wards had been triggered.

Severus halted long enough to call upon the protection of the True God. Behind him, he could hear the others doing the same, in muted voices.

The dark cleric unlimbered his unholy morningstar, and stepped forward.

The violence here exceeded even the carnage in the priests' quarters down the hall. Bodies in black robes were sprawled in a wide zone radiating out from the doors; it looked as though the defenders had met the invading force here. Limbs jutted out from bodies at unnatural angles; many of the dead looked to have had bones viciously broken. The slaughter looked to be complete; Severus counted the dead and came up with both the entirety of Zehn's garrison, and the reinforcements sent by Gudmund. But there was no sign of the High Priest.

Without speaking, he indicated to his acolytes to spread out and investigate. He didn't expect to find any of the temple's defenders still alive, but it was possible that one of them might be clinging to life, and able to give an accounting of what had happened.

He caught the flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, too late to warn his men of the archer who rose to a crouch up on the high platform, an arrow already drawn to his cheek.

An acolyte cried out as the arrow buried itself to the feathers in his shoulder. The archer was already reloading, but before he could get another shaft away, Severus reached out with his mind, drawing upon the power of the True God to *hold* the enemy. The warrior froze as the spell took hold. Severus looked around carefully to see if there were any other attackers, but the temple seemed deserted save for them.

"I want him alive," the priest said, gesturing for three acolytes to move up to take custody of the archer. Another tended to his injured companion, who grimaced as he held onto his bleeding shoulder.

“This will have to be cut away,” the acolyte said.

“Do it,” Severus said, his back to the acolytes as he scanned the room. There was something here, something not right. It tickled at the edge of his senses, indefinable. His gaze was drawn to the massive statue of Orcus on the far side of the room. There was a *presence* there...

With his attention focused there, he didn't see one of the robed bodies stir and rise quietly to his feet. The acolyte tending the wounded man heard something and turned around, only to take a two-handed strike from a heavy club to his face. The man fell to the ground, the front of his face now a concave bowl.

The wounded acolyte barely got his mouth open to yell before the attacker's backswing caught him on the bottom of his chin. The follow-up wasn't as strong as the initial attack, but it was more than enough as the impact sent shards of bone exploding through the acolyte's brain.

Severus spun to face the deadly killer, his morningstar raised to strike or defend. The foe was a muscled man with weathered skin and deadly eyes. He looked to be injured, but that had not stopped him from killing two of his men in as many seconds.

“Looks like it's just you and me, chuckles,” the man said.

“So be it,” Severus replied. The two came at each other. Severus went immediately for a death touch, taking a jarring blow to his side that crushed ribs even through armor. But he got inside the warrior's reach, and shot out his left hand, seizing the man's throat.

“The True God demands your death,” Severus hissed, his breath rattling a little from the effects of the hit he'd taken.

The warrior tensed as the dark power of the death touch stabbed deep through him. Severus could feel his very life quivering like a vibrating cord. His mouth twisted into a feral grin, but then it faded as the fighter snarled and tore free.

“Tell him to get in fucking line,” the man snarled. Severus lifted his morningstar, but the warrior was faster, swinging his club around in a low arc. It hit the cleric in his hip hard enough for both of them to hear the crack of bone. Severus went down, an agonizing pain exploding through his body.

The acolytes had just started up the steps, moving up two of the staircases, when the enemy had struck in their rear. Without spoken conclave, two turned to help their leader, while the last rushed up to finish off the incapacitated enemy atop the platform.

That last one made it halfway up before it caught sight of a dark figure emerging from behind the statue of Orcus on the far side of the room. It pointed at the acolyte, and spoke a single word of *command*.

“Fall,” he said.

The acolyte screamed as the word echoed in his consciousness, overcoming his strength of will. He could see his foot slipping, but could do nothing to stop it as he toppled over, and plummeted down into the lava pit below.

The fighter stood over the dying cleric as the two acolytes rushed back toward him. The two shared a look and spread out to flank the warrior, who calmly awaited them. He used the time to drop the head of his club onto the back of the fallen cleric’s neck, snapping his spine and ending his struggles at once. He took up the weapon again as the two priests came at him from both sides with their maces. He dodged the first wild swing, taking a glancing blow across the shoulders from the second. Grunting from the force of the impact, he unleashed his own assault, spinning the club first forward, then back along the same arc. Each time the club crunched into bodies, and when the assault was finished, no enemies were left standing.

Once again, quiet returned to the temple.

Chapter 61

RECOVERY

The next eight hours passed with interminable slowness. Dar and Talen, keeping watch for another attack, took alternating shifts patrolling the perimeter of the room and standing in vigil atop the lava platform. There were two doors into the place, the large stone double doors they’d arrived through, and a smaller door that opened onto a narrow staircase descending to another level. After the last attack, they fortified the place somewhat, shutting the stone doors and piling the bodies of the dead clerics to form a barricade in front of them. They likewise worked to seal the other door, using some iron climbing spikes from Talen’s pack, and a few of the spiked morningstars from the slain senior clerics. Talen would not touch the latter weapons, as he reported feeling a terrible feeling spread through his gut when he so much as brushed the hilt of one. But they were very durable, and Dar found that by hammering a few into the jam of the door using his club, they made very effective doorstops.

Those defensive measures didn’t make them feel all that much more secure. Both fighters had seen the demon vanish in front of them, and they knew that the thing could most likely reappear with equal suddenness. Furthermore, the temple was infused with

a palpable aura of evil that affected both of them, putting them on edge, and filling their idle moments with dark thoughts of death and destruction.

But no further foes threatened them, and by the end of the shift, they'd relaxed their guard enough for the two warriors to start resting in shifts. It was more a matter of necessity, as both men could barely stand upright, let alone maintain an alert vigilance. By the end of the eight hours, both looked almost as badly off as the dead bodies heaped before the main exit doors.

But their vigilance paid off. Allera stirred back to consciousness even before Varo regained his spells and could treat her. With both of them regaining their strength and their spells, they turned their magic to the battered fighters, healing their wounds, and easing their exhaustion through the use of restorative magic. Allera also created fresh food and water for them, which went a long way to making them feel human once more.

Even Allera's magic could do nothing for Varo's ruined eye. The cleric rigged a crude patch for it, more to spare the others having to stare at the empty socket, than for his own needs. The skin surrounding the grievous wound had grown back, but it was a new pink, and clearly distinguishable from the weathered hide covering the rest of his head. It was a clear marker of how close they had all come to destruction.

The mad elf remained an enigma. Allera treated his physical wounds, but he remained in a nearly catatonic state. He ate food and drank water when it was put into his mouth, but did not otherwise respond to their prodding. Varo had taken a strange interest in the creature, and remained by his side while the others debated what to do next.

"Can we get out of this damned place, now?" Dar asked.

"Where can we go?" Talen asked. "Those clerics came from somewhere, yet we didn't find any corridors that led off from the wight room. The only other apparent way open to us is down."

"We're already too far under the fucking ground," Dar said. The fighter was going through a small pile of loot he'd collected from the place. The prizes of the collection was a pair of huge fire opals, each the size of a clenched fist, he'd prised from eye sockets of the goat-being statue, and another gem, an only slightly smaller brilliant-cut green stone, he'd found on the body of one of the clerics. The green gem glowed with a soft inner light, so faint that you had to really look to see it. Dar hadn't needed Varo's spells to tell him it was magical, and obviously valuable. All three gems went into the mercenary's pack. The battered leather of the pack had taken quite a beating, and it seemed to be kept together by habit as much as anything else. While the others talked, he took an extra cultist robe, and fashioned a pair of sacks out of it, repackaging his considerable stash of loot before dropping it all back into the pack.

Both fighters had taken clothes and armor from the dead men, replacing their ragged and filthy garb with fresher gear. Dar had kept his black robe as well, buckling his

swordbelt and backpack tightly over it to keep the garment from snagging on his weapons. He'd recovered another of the garments for Talen, but the captain had taken one look at the blood-colored sigil on the fabric before refusing.

"I am surprised that we have not been attacked again," Talen said. "Have we broken the power of the cult of Orcus?"

"It would not be wise to assume such," Varo said, coming over toward them. "The taint of that unholy body runs deeper, much deeper, into this place. We have seen but a tiny portion of Rappan Athuk in our travels; far more terrible horrors lie beneath us."

"You seem to know a great deal about this place," Talen said.

"Yeah, but don't expect him to share any of it with ignorant grunts like ourselves," Dar said. "What aren't you telling us this time, priest?"

The cleric's cool exterior was not disturbed by the fighter's accusation. "I have no secrets to share with you. As I have told you before, I know only the legends of my order. Like you, I am learning as I go, and trying to survive. I only know that this shrine—and others like it—fuel the potency of the dread entity that controls this place."

"Others?" Allera asked. "How many others?"

"I do not know," Varo said. "But I can feel the malevolence of this place. It senses our intrusion here, and hates us for it. Can you not feel it, healer?"

Allera only shivered and turned away.

"All the more reason to get the hell out of here," Dar said.

"Agreed," Varo said. "But I ask you indulgence, for just a few more minutes. I cannot destroy the evil that dwells here... but perhaps I can weaken it." He turned and walked over to the grim statue that dominated the back of the room. He knelt before it, and took his divine focus off from where it dangled from his neck.

"Now what's he doing?" Dar asked. Curious, the three of them rose and walked over to him.

The cleric was chanting in an unfamiliar language, slowly lifting his arms, holding the golden sigil between them on its leather throng. His three companions could not understand his words, but one of them... *Dagos* they did recognize, two syllables that pounded into their consciousness like the beating of a drum.

Varo took up his sigil and lifted it high in one hand. With the other, he took out a flask—one of several from the ogre loot—and starting spraying its contents upon the statue.

The droplets of holy water sizzled like acid as they splashed on the smooth black stone, leaving a bright sheen upon its surface.

Without ceasing his chant, Varo reached into his pouch and drew out a fistful of something. He threw the material upon the statue and the surrounding ground as well; fine shavings of silver, painstakingly hacked from a larger object. Blood glistened from some of the tiny slivers, from where the sharp ends had pierced the cleric's flesh. Ignoring the blood covering his hand, Varo continued his chant, which began to accelerate into a rising crescendo.

"This... this is not right," Talen said. He hesitated, clearly wanting to withdraw, but torn between wanting to intervene to stop the cleric from what he was doing. Allera stood beside him, her eyes wide.

And then, abruptly, Varo stopped. He lowered his hands, and sagged forward.

"What did you do?" Dar asked.

"I invoked the power of Dagos to weaken the connection of Orcus to this place," the cleric explained. "It is not complete; this place will have to be *hallowed* by a holy priest to fully destroy it. But it will certainly not please the Lord of the Undead."

"As if we didn't have enough problems," Dar said.

"Let's get moving," Talen said.

"Where?" Dar asked.

"Other than Max, we've left nothing but enemies behind us," Talen said. "That leaves only one way to go; forward."

"Down the stairs, you mean," Dar said. "The last time we went deeper into the dungeon, Tiros paid for that mistake with his life."

Talen spun on Dar, his frustration betrayed on his face. "Do you have another alternative, mercenary? Perhaps we crawl back and take our chances with the spiders, and the wererats? Or maybe we can find another rat tunnel to crawl into, and hope we don't crawl into another ambush? Or perhaps you'd prefer to search until we find out where those clerics came from, and maybe find the rest of them?"

"What about the elf?" Allera said. "He is no longer in danger of dying, but his mind... it is far from here."

"Put him out of his..." Dar began, but Varo interjected, "No. He has to come with us."

Dar looked angrily at the cleric, then aside at Allera. He slashed down his hand. “Do whatever in the hells you want, then, but he’s your problem. I’m sure as shit not going to carry him.” Turning away, the fighter stalked across the room toward the far door, where he started wrenching out the wedges he’d bashed into the jam earlier.

“I’ll help you with him,” Allera said to Varo. “Maybe we can put together a litter.”

Talen lingered, looking up at the statue again. Without its gemstone eyes, it looked somehow even more malevolent, staring down at him from the cavernous black holes deep within its skull.

The captain felt lost, surrounded by a flow of events that he could neither control nor manage. Thus far, he’d stayed alive, but those around him had fallen, one by one. Of those he’d brought with him into this place, only Allera remained, and she had just come within a hair’s breadth of dying.

“Talen, are you all right?”

He turned to see the healer standing beside him. Behind her, Varo was wrapping a blanket around the shaft of Aelos’s staff and some pieces of wood they’d taken from the clerics’ barracks, securing them with strips of leather cut from the dead cultists’ armor. Allera’s eyes were full of empathy as she laid her hand on his arm.

He could take almost anything, but that simple gesture of understanding almost undid him. He felt a wall of unbridled emotion surge within him, and only barely managed to keep it under control.

“I’m fine,” he lied, and turned to follow Dar.

A minute later, the five of them—including the comatose elf—had gathered before the far door. Dar had removed the obstructions, and as he pulled the door open, their light shone upon a dark set of weathered stone steps. A smell of old graves drifted up from below.

They started down.

The staircase descended deep through the surrounding rock. In the narrow space, their footfalls sounded overly loud on the smooth stone. The light from the end of Aelos’s staff, now part of the stretcher that Allera and Varo were using to carry the unconscious elf, played over their faces from below, casting dark hollows around their eyes. Talen, behind Dar in the lead, had his magical sword out, its light shining ahead of them, stretching the mercenary’s shadow out ahead of them down the stairs.

After several minutes of trudging down stairs, their light indicated an open space below. They emerged into a large chamber of worked stone, with a high ceiling supported by squat stone buttresses some twenty feet above. They could see what looked like large

stone biers ahead of them to the left and right, forming orderly rows that appeared to extend across the room, at least as far as they could see.

“Tombs,” Talen said, shining the light of his sword to the left and to the right.

A noise broken the silence; a sound of stone scraping on stone.

“There!” Allera shouted, pointing. Talen brought the glowing sword around; they could see one of the stone lids sliding open; as they watched a pale claw reached out and grabbed the edge, shoving it hard out of the way. The sound was echoed all around the chamber, from the darkness beyond the edge of their lights.

“Gods, I hate it when I’m right,” Dar muttered, lifting his club.

Chapter 62

THE WIGHT CATACOMBS

“Keep them at bay,” Varo said, calmly lowering the elf to the ground at the foot of the stairs, then taking up his divine focus.

“Yeah, right,” Dar said, facing the darkness to their right. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the crypt on the left had disgorged a familiar pale-skinned monstrosity—another wight. It fixed its glowing red eyes upon them, and sprang out of the tomb, landing lightly on its feet.

Turning back, Dar saw several other sets of eyes moments before more of the creatures appeared out of the shadows. They were approaching in a collapsing half-circle—a half-dozen thus far. At least the scraping noises had stopped. The creatures were eerily silent, their tread making no noise upon the rough stone floor.

“Varo...” Dar began.

“Just another few seconds,” the priest said, focusing his will through the focus of his god.

“Let them come to us,” Talen said. Behind him, Allera stood ready, her hands surrounded by a faint blue glow as her healing power swelled with her.

The creatures made no communication, but they all leapt forward in the same instant, charging toward the defenders with claws outstretched. Dar met the first with an overhead strike that smashed the wight heavily in the chest, knocking it to the ground. The undead monster flailed its limbs wildly, but managed to turn over and squirrel

forward, clawing at Dar's legs. The fighter was already too busy with a second creature to deal with it, holding the surging monster off with his club as it tried to dig its claws into his arms.

Talen met the others on the far flank, blocking their route to Allera and Varo. He sliced off the first claw that came sweeping at him, taking off the creature's limb at the wrist with his sword. The wight barely paused, spinning and leaping for his throat with its other claw.

Distracted, Talen was left wide open to the fourth wight, which leapt eagerly at his exposed flank. Allera stepped forward to block it, and it eagerly turned upon her.

"Allera, no!" Talen yelled unable to help her without leaving him totally open to his opponent.

A wave of pulsing negative energy swept over them. Dar felt it as a faint tingle, while Allera and Talen felt a momentary twinge of nausea that twisted deep within their guts. But there was no time to reflect or recover; the wights were upon them.

The last two creatures surged in behind the one that was attacking Allera. The healer held her ground even as the lead creature drew its claws across her face, opening shallow gashes in her left cheek. She laid her hands upon it, sending a powerful surge of positive energy into it. The attack stunned the wight, but the other two were right on its heels, and things suddenly looked quite grim for the healer.

But then, to her surprise, the wights fell upon their injured companion, bearing it to the ground, and ripping its body open with their claws.

The sudden betrayal quickly changed the tide of the battle. Dar took down his second foe with a pair of solid blows that mangled its body, then followed through with a pounding smash that pulverized the head of the injured one hacking at his ankles. Talen, too, finished his foe, thrusting the length of his sword into its body, then kicking the fading creature off the blade.

Dar immediately turned to strike down the two creatures tearing their ally apart, but Varo restrained him with a raised hand. "Do not worry about those two," he said. "They are under my command."

Dar looked at him dubiously. "Say what?"

"This is the blackest necromancy," Talen said, regarding the two creatures with revulsion as they stood up and stood silently watching them. The undead swayed slightly, but otherwise did not respond to being observed.

"So they'll do whatever you want?" Dar asked. He walked up to the nearer of the two wights, and spat in its face. The wight did not respond.

“They will obey my commands, even unto their destruction,” Varo said.

“This is wrong, priest,” Talen said.

“Why? They are weapons, captain. Would you yield that tool to our enemy, and eschew its use on the basis of principle?”

Varo pointed to one of the creatures. “That thing does not live. It is a foul abomination. Yet it can absorb a sword thrust meant for you, or for Allera there. It can fight for us, and slay the enemies of our cause. It can stumble into a trap, and make the way ahead safer for us. You do not have to call it friend, captain. You do not have to enjoy its company. But it is utter foolishness to reject this gift that Dagos grants our cause.”

“Your words are slippery, priest,” Talen said. “You lead us down a path of shadow. I can see its end; at that point we become indistinguishable from the foes we fight.”

“The deed is done,” Varo said. “I will not undo it because you are squeamish.”

“Anything that is done can be undone,” Talen said. “What do you others think of this?”

“Hey, I’m all for having another body to take some hits, for a chance,” Dar said.

“I agree with Talen,” Allera said. “What if we encounter another cleric of Orcus, more powerful than you, Varo? Could he turn the undead against you?”

“Possibly,” Varo admitted. “Although we would have far greater problems, in such a circumstance.”

“It does not matter,” Talen said. “I am not going forward with such things in my company. Choose, priest. Go on with us, or with your new allies.”

“You are a fool,” Varo said. But he made a small gesture, and the two wights turned on each other, tearing with their claws.

The companions drew back at the ferocity of the attack. Within a few seconds, one of the creatures was down and unmoving, and the last could barely stand, deep gashes covering its body.

Dar finished the job, putting it down for good.

“Are you all right, Allera?” Talen asked.

The healer nodded, summoning a trickle of healing energy that closed the wounds as they spoke, leaving not even a scar behind. “I have been drained, slightly. If my spirit is

not strong enough to recover on its own, I can draw upon my powers to *restore* what was lost. I will be fine, do not worry about me.”

“I would recommend keeping them from touching you in future engagements, if at all possible,” Varo said. “That may be more difficult without my aid, but if that is your choice...”

“Keep them at bay if you can, cleric, but I will not fight with them as allies,” Talen said.

Varo nodded. “Ah, thank you for the clarification, captain. Perhaps we should move on?”

Dar had already started checking out the nearest of the stone tombs. Most of them were empty, apparently—or at least had not produced any undead monsters to assail them. “What are you doing?” Allera asked him.

“Checking for loot,” he replied. “We’ve already found some good stuff among the dead in this place.”

“Have you not accumulated enough gold?” she asked.

“Angel, you can never have enough.”

“I would avoid the sealed tombs,” Talen said. “There may be more of those creatures in them.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Dar shot back. But he’d been standing beside an unopened tomb when Talen had spoken, and he grumbled as he moved to one of the empty ones that had produced a wight earlier. Other than some assorted trash of no value, and a few shattered bones, the crypts were empty.

They found a corridor on the other side of the room, and after finishing their search, continued in that direction. The passage continued for about forty feet before opening onto another room. This one was even larger than the previous chamber, with several ranks of crypts neatly aligned in perpendicular rows that formed a big “E”. The majority of these tombs had been opened, with the heavy stone cover slabs lying ajar on top, or shattered on the floor beside them. The place was thick with the stench of ancient decay, but nothing stirred to greet them as they entered.

“Stay together,” Talen said softly, even his quiet words sounding unnaturally loud in these sepulchral surroundings.

They moved into the room, shining their light sources into the corners. The room was over a hundred and fifty feet wide, and sixty deep. Their boots made soft echoes against the bare stone walls, no matter how quietly they tried to walk. They found a deep alcove to the right along the far wall, a slightly raised area upon which three intact

tombs were situated. They gave that a wide berth, for now. They also found two doors, a set of ancient double doors bound in discolored bronze on the far side of the room to the left, and a single stone slab door in a corner to the right. They also probed a few deep crevices in the walls, but none of them appeared to go anywhere.

“Well, which way?” Dar asked, as they completed their circuit, and returned to the entry corridor.

Talen started to say something, but he was interrupted by the sound of grinding stone. The companions lifted their weapons at once and scanned the surrounding crypts, but they could see no motion from those that they could see.

“The door!” Varo hissed, pointing. They looked across the room to the south door, which had been pushed open. A soft glow of light came from behind the heavy portal.

The companions took cover behind the nearest crypts, shielding their lights. Peering over the stone tops of the crypts, they could see a huge humanoid figure stagger into the room.

The thing stood over eight feet tall. Its thick arms and torso bulged with muscle, but there was something... *wrong* with it as well; its skin was patched with different shades of color coming together in rude seams, and it moved as though it was partially paralyzed, its stride hitched and uneven. So unnerving it was that they almost didn't notice the woman standing beside it. She was human by the look of her, young and with plain features set off by sandy brown hair that had been crudely hacked short. She wore a plain gray robe, and carried a short rod that glowed with a pale magical light.

The woman and her companion started around the perimeter of the room toward them.

“Wait till they get here, then strike?” Dar whispered to Talen.

“Shhh,” the warrior mouthed.

Varo tugged on Allera's arm and pointed. They'd laid the elf down nearby; from his current position, his legs jutted out beyond the end of the crypt. If the pair passed by the corridor, they would almost certainly spot him.

The healer nodded, and the two crawled over to him. They grabbed onto the end of the litter, and started to pull him slowly over the floor.

The sound of the approaching pair grew louder. The tall creature's awkward strides sounded loud upon the stone; from the thumping impacts, it must have weighed hundreds of pounds, at least.

The two were barely twenty feet away, now. Talen and Dar, bent low, moved around the crypt that gave them shelter.

The elf groaned.

The footsteps stopped at once. "Who's there?" came the woman's voice. She sounded scared, but after their travels in Rappan Athuk, none of them were going to assume that she was anything but a deadly threat.

None of them stirred. They could hear the woman's voice again, chanting in the language of magic.

Suddenly Allera stood up, revealing herself. "We're not enemies," she began. Talen rose as well, but kept his empty hand up, away from his swordhilt. Allera continued, "We just want to..."

She was interrupted by the woman's startled shriek. Gesturing to the huge creature beside her, she shouted, "Kill them!" As the creature lumbered forward, the woman spoke a word of magic, and disappeared.

Chapter 63

THE POUNDING

"I hate it when I'm right," Dar said, coming around the crypt to flank the creature from behind. The monster headed straight toward Talen, who had moved forward to block its route to Allera and Varo.

Up close, they could see that it was a constructed being, a thing fashioned from the flesh of several creatures. Its eyes were dead orbs, but it seemed to have no difficulty sensing the presence of enemies before it.

The captain narrowly avoided a pulverizing overhead smash of the creature's fist. The blow smashed into the corner of the adjacent crypt, shattering the stone and sending bits of debris flying. Talen looked down at the broken stone with surprise. The creature lifted its other fist to strike, but the fighter quickly recovered, slashing his sword across its torso.

The sword bit into its hide, but barely managed to gash it. There was no blood.

"Its skin is like leather!" he warned.

"I'll take it down," Dar said. He put his full weight and strength into the blow, smashing the club into the small of its back. The attack was the same that had taken down cultist after cultist in the temple above, and its force was utterly devastating.

The club hit the creature with a loud twack. Instead of toppling to the ground, it simply turned and fixed its empty stare on the fighter.

“Oh, cr—”

He never got a chance to finish, as the golem smashed its fist solidly into the fighter’s jaw. The critical hit sent Dar flying, spinning out of control into the nearby crypt. Spitting blood, he couldn’t do anything but take the punishment as it smashed him with its other fist, punching him in the back. Dar groaned as his internal organs were rearranged somewhat; gobs of blood exploded from his lips to splatter on the top of the crypt.

“It’s killing him!” Allera exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, he’s got a bit more fight in him, I suspect,” Varo said calmly. The cleric was focusing his concentration on something else; he muttered words of power under his breath, and began scanning the area. He nodded to himself as he faced the corridor, and started moving slowly in that direction.

“What, where are you going?” Allera asked. The cleric didn’t respond, and the healer began to move around the crypts, hurrying to get around the battle to aid the battered fighter.

Talen laid into the golem from behind, but while his blows were scoring its back, they weren’t inflicting much in the way of damage. The creature’s thick hide seemed to be considerably resistant to injury, and it clearly did not experience pain. Ignoring the captain, it lifted its huge fists to finish off the more dangerous foe.

Dar heaved away from the crypt just as another blow slammed into it, smashing the entire wall of the tomb into dust. Electing for a less wild attack this time, he smashed his club into its arm with precision, there was a crack of bone, and the creature staggered slightly.

“Tho moo cad be hoot,” the fighter snarled, his broken jaw slurring his words beyond comprehension. The golem turned to track him, and he followed up his initial strike with another swing at its right leg. The creature’s knee joint was knocked inward, twisting its leg at an angle that would have been excruciating for a living creature. Instead, it just swiveled awkwardly and punched Dar in the shoulder.

“Ah moo mutter fakkir!” Dar exclaimed, clutching his battered arm in agony. He looked up to see Allera coming around the edge of the melee, toward him. “No!” he yelled, holding up his good arm in an effort to forestall her.

Too late. The healer was trying to keep her distance from the golem, but she underestimated its long reach. The golem swept out a long arm, clipping her on the

side of her head with its fist. The blow was just a glancing one, but Allera was knocked to the ground, stunned.

“Go woe!” Dar yelled to Talen, lifting his club again. The captain must have guessed what the fighter was getting at, for he swung his sword low, aiming for the golem’s injured knee. The sword bit into its flesh, and as the golem started to wind up for another attack the battered limb gave way. The golem fell to one knee, already struggling to get up.

The fall put its head right on a level with Dar’s. The fighter roared a bloody challenge as he brought his club around in a broad arc, smashing it into the side of the golem’s head. There was a loud crack, and its head bent over to the side, its ear almost touching its shoulder. The golem twitched, its hands still reaching for Dar. Then it toppled forward, smashing into the floor in an inert heap.

“Ahr woo awrite?” Dar asked, as Talen helped Allera to her feet. A bruise was already starting to form on her temple where the golem had hit her.

“You stupid, stubborn fool,” she said, clucking as she took his head in her hands. He gasped as powerful healing energy flooded into him, knitting his broken head and body back together.

“Wow,” he said, when she was done.

“What happened to Varo?” Talen asked.

“He was looking around, and then went to the passage,” Allera said, pointing.

“Fat lot of help he was against that thing,” Dar said.

“I was keeping an eye on the wizard,” the cleric said, reappearing in the passage mouth. “Or have you forgotten already how dangerous spellcasters can be?”

“So what happened to her?” Talen asked.

“She made herself *invisible*,” Varo said. “I wasn’t able to pinpoint her exact location, but I did note that she went down the corridor behind us.”

“Back toward the temple?” Allera asked.

“No,” Varo said. “As I went into the corridor, I saw a secret door we’d missed being shut. I believe that we’ll find her somewhere beyond it.”

“The smart thing would seem to be to count our blessings that we met a foe ready to run instead of fight, and keep going,” Dar said.

The four companions looked at each other for a long moment.

Chapter 64

INTO BANTH'S LAIR

The secret door, in actuality a slab of iron cleverly disguised to look like the surrounding stone, pivoted on a central axis. It had been locked, secured by some unseen mechanism, but Dar was able to wrench it open, revealing a plain straight corridor beyond.

Talen had his bow out; they agreed that if they encountered the wizard again, Varo would *silence* an arrow and the captain would try to put it either into or near her, to block her spellcasting. Dar had handed over a fistful of his magical arrows to Talen, to better his chances. While the mercenary still had Argus's shortbow among his cache of weapons, he was far more effective in melee. Allera and Varo were still carrying the elf. Dar had suggested leaving "the baggage" in one of the crypts, but Varo had refused. For some reason that the fighter couldn't fathom, the cleric seemed almost fanatically dedicated to the well-being of their former companion.

The passage extended as far as they could see, into darkness. They cautiously made their way forward. There was no way to mask their approach; they needed the light of Talen's sword and Varo's staff to see.

"Shh... do you hear that?" Talen said, lifting a hand for silence.

"I don't hear anything," Dar said after a few seconds.

"Sounded like... buzzing," the captain said.

"Remain alert for traps," Varo said from the rear of the column.

They continued on, and saw that the passage bent slightly to the right before opening onto a room up ahead. The chamber was much wider than it was deep, and extended as far as they could see to their right and left. Stone statues placed at regular intervals formed two rows across the room, facing the center, forming a hallway thirty feet across between them.

The room was occupied. A disorderly knot of humanoids were gathered in the middle of the room to the right, and as soon as the companions entered they turned and started shuffling in their direction. The creatures were clad in battered suits of archaic plate mail armor, and carried halberds.

“Zombies,” Varo said. He and Allera put the elf down in the shelter of the passage, and joined Dar and Talen. The captain lifted his bow and put an arrow square into the chest of one of the creatures. The missile pierced its armor, but the shot did not appear to have any effect.

“Save your ammunition,” Varo said. “These must be hacked to pieces.”

“Not a problem,” Dar said, drawing out *Valor*. He swallowed as the power of the sword settled over him, but he held onto the hilt of the weapon tightly as the undead monsters closed to attack.

The fighters met the surging undead with a violent assault. The zombies, too slow to react, took devastating hits that ripped them apart, their ancient suits of armor offering little protection against the powerful attacks. Dar slammed *Valor* through a zombie’s torso, from its left shoulder to its right hip. As the monster fell apart, he swung his sword around in an arc that took a second creature’s head from its shoulders. Talen was only slightly less effective, delivering a pair of cuts that sent a zombie tumbling to the ground. Allera stood at the ready, knowing that her involvement in the melee would only add to their risk, while Varo held back with a deep frown on his face, scanning the surrounding darkness. Finally he lifted his divine focus, and called upon the power of Dagos. Four of the zombies tottered back and withdrew from the melee, swayed by the call of the cleric’s god.

Talen and Dar continued to tear apart the zombies, suffering only minor injuries in turn from the undead monsters’ crude blows with their awkward weapons. The zombies weren’t putting up much of a fight, and none got past the two defending warriors.

“We are being delayed,” Varo said.

“It’ll just be a few seconds more,” Dar said, pushing a zombie off him, and sweeping his sword through its lower body, almost severing it in two. The zombie toppled over backwards, flailed about a bit, and fell still.

“I don’t think we have a few seconds,” the priest said, as a light appeared on the far side of the room to their right. The light was coming from a door that opened in the center of the wall; it looked like a roaring bonfire had been placed directly behind it.

That appearance was just an illusion, however. As the companions watched, the roaring fire moved *through* the doorway, expanding as it came into the room until it brushed the vaulted ceiling twenty feet above. As it fully entered the room, the flames took on a semi-humanoid form, with huge “arms” of fire materializing out of its core. It was fully fifteen feet from one side to the other, and the way that the flames splayed out over the ceiling, it looked as though the peaks of the fire could have extended far higher than they did. Trailing lines of black char on the stones, it started moving toward them.

Chapter 65

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN

As the elemental moved across the room toward them, the companions felt a sudden lethargy settle upon them. Varo and Allera were able to resist the effect, but both fighters felt their movements *slowed* as they finished off the remaining zombies.

“What’s happening?” Dar shouted over his shoulder.

“An arcane spell,” Varo replied. “The enemy wizard is here somewhere, likely behind the elemental, and likely invisible to boot.”

“Well, do something about her!” the fighter shot back, but Varo had already stepped back into the relative shelter of the corridor, and begun spellcasting. The four zombies he’d controlled shuffled off to engage the elemental. They looked almost pathetic in comparison to the incredible, monstrous pillar of raging fire, as as they drew within its reach, it swatted one with a burning paw, turning it into a pyre. The zombie staggered around as a sick stench of roasting flesh filled the room, then it collapsed in a heap as the flames continued to consume it. The other zombies closed to attack, but their slams only succeeded in setting themselves on fire. Still, they mindlessly pressed their assault, smashing at the elemental’s semi-substantial core.

“What are we supposed to do against that thing?” Dar asked, as Talen fired one of his magical arrows at the creature. The captain’s shaft vanished into its body, but whether it had an effect was impossible to discern.

“They can be killed!” Talen replied, drawing out another arrow. Dar looked between the captain and the elemental dubiously, but it was clear that the zombies weren’t going to last much longer. Grimacing, the fighter started forward to engage the creature.

Dar moved barely quicker than the shuffling zombies, and the monster saw him coming. As he entered its reach it swept around one of its long arms of flame around to meet him, splashing his body with eager tongues of fire. Grimacing as the hot flames seared his skin and burned away his facial hair, he kept pushing forward into the inferno.

“Even he won’t stand up long against that,” Talen said. Allera had come to the same conclusion, and the healer started toward him, an unarmed human against a monster made out of living fire. This time, Talen did not call out for her to stop; somewhere deep inside him, he knew that this battle might take everything that all of them had.

And maybe, even that wouldn’t be enough.

Talen looked around for the enemy wizard, but true to Varo's warning, the gray-robed woman was hidden from his view. He dropped his bow and unslung his shield, cursing the lingering effects of the *slow* spell as he slid his sword out of its scabbard. The maneuver which should have taken a second took several, and by the time that he started toward the elemental, Allera was already almost to the edge of its reach.

From Dar's perspective, the world around him was all fire and smoke. Within the elemental's reach, everything was dominated by the roaring pillar of flame that sent waves of crushing heat over him. He knew he couldn't stand up long against it, but still swiped at its body with his sword. *Valor* bit into something substantial, but Dar could immediately tell that this thing, whatever it was, could absorb a lot of damage.

So be it. Sliding the sword into its scabbard with his right hand, he unslung his club with his left. The maneuver left him open to another attack, and he staggered backwards as twin surges of fire battered him, almost blinding him. He could smell his own burning flesh, and thought that he was finished.

Then, so familiar now that it was like being doused in cool water, the healing touch of Allera cleansed him, clearing away the pain and weariness of his wounds. Blackened char flaked off his dead skin, revealing healthy pink flesh beneath it. He saw the healer there beside him, the left side of her own face scored by the elemental's flames. As usual, she had ignored her own injuries to tend to him.

"Fight the good fight," she told him, as he looked down at her calm face in amazement.

He turned back to the elemental, which had been momentarily distracted by the appearance of a pair of huge centipedes that had joined the melee. The fiendish creatures summoned by Varo had an innate resistance to fire, which at least kept them from being transformed to blackened char in a few seconds, like the zombies. The elemental in turn was immune to their toxins, but the sheer force of their slam attacks forced it to pay attention to them.

Talen, following Allera into the melee, had not rushed directly in to engage the elemental. Instead, the captain slipped around the perimeter of the battle, hoping to flank the creature. It took him longer than he'd hoped, and once again he cursed the magic that had *slowed* him. Varo's centipedes joined the battle in mid-maneuver, and he had to stagger out of the way to avoid being overrun by one rushing to engage the elemental. But he eventually got around behind the left line of statues, and turned inward, willing his legs to move faster.

He was caught completely by surprise as a sudden wracking sensation twisted through his guts. He looked down at his hands, which had started to shimmer, as if he was watching them through a heat haze.

No! his mind yelled, as he fought the spell that was trying to do something bad—that much he could guess—to him.

The feeling faded in a second or two, and his perceptions returned to normal.

Looking up, he saw another shimmer, this one in the air about twenty feet ahead of him.

The enemy wizard.

Dar smashed at the elemental's body from below, while the centipedes continued to tear at the huge monster from above. The elemental swept its arms around and seized one of the giant vermin, the hot flames of its grasp burning through its fiendish resistance and leaving its segmented body scorched black. The centipede twisted and stabbed its mandibles into the spongy substance of its body, and in response the elemental drove it down to the ground, fire exploding out from the point of impact. The centipede, battered beyond its ability to absorb damage, stopped moving and began to dissolve, returning to whatever dark pit from whence it had come.

The elemental shifted its attention from the second centipede, which hadn't managed to significantly damage it as of yet, to the tiny human that was battering its lower body. But as it turned to Dar, it detected another foe entering the melee. Its reflexes were such that a fiery probe was crashing toward the newcomer even as it drew close enough to be struck, but like the others it had struck, this enemy simply absorbed the attack, even as flames spread eagerly over its upper body.

But Licinius Varo had a surprise in store, and as the substance of the elemental impacted him, he unleashed his *inflict critical wounds* spell into it.

The elemental drew back as negative energy ravaged it. The limb it had formed to strike the cleric dissolved, and great black striations could be seen traveling through its fiery body as the spell wrought its destructive course. The elemental's distress left an opening for Dar, who grasped tightly onto his club, and swung it in an all-out power attack upon what looked like the core of the elemental's body.

Or at least the part he could reach.

Talen did not hesitate, *slowed* or not. Lifting his sword, he rushed toward the invisible spellcaster. She'd already tried to cast one spell on him, and he steeled himself for another destructive assault, or maybe another attempt to flee. But the telltale shimmer in the air did not move.

Suddenly it felt like he'd hit a brick wall. The slight distortion was still there, just about ten feet away from him, but he couldn't move any closer to it, no matter how much he mentally urged his body forward. It was as if he'd struck an invisible barrier that held him back.

He heard a laugh, a man's laugh. And then the worst thing he'd ever seen in his life materialized in front of him.

Later, he wouldn't be able to describe what it had been, just that it had been more frightening than anything he'd ever experienced. *It* came at him, a monstrosity that grew larger with each foot that it drew nearer, until he thought that he would be engulfed by it.

Screaming, Talen fell to his knees, clutching his skull as the *phantasmal killer* wrought terror upon his mind.

The elemental seemed to falter, the flames that made up its body flaring out in random directions. And then, so suddenly that it seemed almost accidental, the creature just came apart, dissolving into wisps of bright flame that themselves were gone within a second.

From within the fire, Corath Dar staggered forward, followed by Allera and Varo. The healer touched Dar again, continuing to counteract the terrible effects of his injuries. His helmet and greaves looked as though they had been laquered black, so thoroughly had they been blasted by the fire. His new robe, and most of his other clothes, clung to his body in charred strips. Some of it was still on fire.

Talen looked up, saw them coming. Blood trailed from his lips; he clenched his jaws tight enough to split the flesh. "He's there..." he managed to say. "The wizard! He's there!"

"You are stronger than you look," came a strong male voice from somewhere ahead of them. "You walked through the fire... but can you survive the cold?"

The question was apparently rhetorical, as the still unidentified spellcaster summoned his magic again, and hit them all with a *cone of cold*.

Chapter 66

ENTROPY

The spell was devastating. The terrible heat of the elemental was instantly forgotten, replaced by a cold that penetrated each of them to the bone. Talen and Dar were hit by the full force of the blast, which covered both men with a rime of white frost. Talen slumped over and fell to the ground, unconscious, and Dar looked only slightly better off, only Allera's recent healing giving him enough stamina to remain on his feet. The healer had been sheltered by the fighter's body, or she might have been killed outright. As it was, her pale skin was almost blue, and she shook uncontrollably. Varo, too, was hit hard, and he fell back, his teeth chattering as he rubbed his arms in an effort to create warmth.

The mage's laughter sounded through the room.

"I'll g-g-get you, bitch," Dar said, starting forward again, shaking off a cascade of ice crystals.

"Wait," Allera said, rushing after him. As he was still *slowed*, she caught him easily, pouring yet another powerful healing spell into his body. Without hesitating, she rushed over to Talen, ignoring the deadly threat of the mage in order to preserve the lives of her companions.

The wizard launched another attack, hitting them with a wave of *crushing despair* that seeped into their consciousness, sapping their will to fight. Dar staggered forward, lifting his club, punctuating each step closer with a word that he spat from clenched jaws.

"I... will... kill... you... bastard..." But like Talen, when he got within ten feet of the wizard, he just stopped, unable to progress any further. He smashed his club down into empty air, roaring in frustration.

"It is unfortunate that your will is not as strong as your stubbornness, servant of Orcus," he said. "I was wondering when your toady little masters would decide to contest their pathetic powers against mine... and I have been ready for this day!"

A dark shadow swept down from above... a fiendish dire bat, summoned by Varo. The creature's echolocation allowed it to fix directly on the wizard's position, but as it dove, it too hit the wizard's *repulsion* field, and it was turned away, screeching as it pumped its wings to gain more altitude for another pass.

"Nice try, priest!" the wizard shouted. He no longer seemed to care about betraying his position with his speech; in fact, as they watched, a number of items appeared in mid-air from his location, flying across the room to land on the floor behind Dar. The fighter glanced back in alarm, wondering at what new threat this portended.

They were... little white mice.

"You've got a sick sense of humor, wizard," Dar cursed. But Varo saw what was coming, and he shouted a warning even as the air rippled with a *dispel magic* spell from the evil spellcaster.

The "mice" shimmered and vanished, replaced by a confused-looking old man in a gray breechclout, and a trio of odd creatures that looked like a cross between a chicken and a snake.

Varo's eyes widened in dawning horror as he recognized what they were.

“Cockatrices!”

Chapter 67

OF STONE AND FLESH

Dar heard Varo’s warning clearly, but he had no idea what it meant.

“What?” he yelled.

“Kill the chickens!” the mage shouted. “Now!”

Dar was a bit confused—after all, the creatures looked weird, but there was a fucking invisible *wizard* right behind them—but they had survived a number of fights through Varo’s instincts and knowledge thus far, and in any case, he couldn’t get to the spellcaster right now anyway.

The chicken-things seemed pretty disoriented too. One of them snapped at the old man, who to Dar’s surprise suddenly sprang to his feet with considerable agility, leaping back at least six feet almost as soon as his feet had touched the ground. The chicken-thing squawked at him, but seemed to lose interest, wandering off toward the exit.

Another saw Dar coming, and turned toward him. It snapped at his ankles, but the fighter easily avoided its nipping bite—not that its little beak could have done much damage. He brought his club down in a solid two-handed blow, and like that the monster was little more than a smear on the stone.

“What’s the freaking big deal?” he asked nobody in particular. The second creature turned toward him, and he lifted his club to give it more of the same.

Varo let out a high-pitched whistle and pointed. The dire bat dove down to attack the third creature, the one that had missed the nimble old man. The huge bat swooped down and seize the cockatrice in its jaws, lifting back up into the air on a single powerful sweep of its wings.

It didn’t get very far. Within a few seconds, the bat stiffened and fell. It landed in a hard clatter, its petrified body shattering into a thousand pieces on the floor. The cockatrice, crushed by several hundred pounds of stone, did not survive.

Dar stared at the bat, and then at the thing trying to nip at his ankles.

“Holy fucking shit...”

Allera knelt beside Talen, pouring life into his body. Her healing power came at her call, but was almost interrupted as the wizard hit her with a powerful transmutation spell. But the healer was possessed of a considerable fortitude, and she resisted the *baleful polymorph*.

“A healer, serving the wretched children of Orcus?”

“I serve the Light!” Allera yelled back at their unseen adversary. She gently shook Talen, adding her will to the power of her magic. The fighter groaned, and stirred as she wiped frost from his face.

“Talen... Talen, we need your strength...”

A ragged, almost feral cry drew her attention up, and her eyes widened in surprise.

Dar dodged back as the last cockatrice snapped at him. He had suddenly gotten really, *really* interested in not getting hit, having seen what the things had done to Varo’s bat. The creature was fast, but Dar’s club was just as quick, and finally the two met, leaving the cockatrice shuddering out the last of its life from its broken body.

Relieved, Dar heard the same scream that had alerted Allera, and he turned around.

The old man seemed to have recovered quickly as well, and as he saw Varo approaching him, he settled into a ready fighting stance. “I am not your enemy,” the cleric said, pointing at the approximate location of the wizard. “The wizard that did this to you is over there,” he said, careful not to provoke the man with any sudden movements.

Both men turned in time to see the mad elf, shrieking a cry of animalian rage, charging at the wizard. The elf had no weapon, but he ignored the *repulsion* field, surging forward to leapt out into thin air. Somehow, he either sensed or guessed the transmuter’s position, for he settled upon *something*, hovering in mid-air, crawling over it, tearing, scratching, and biting.

The wizard shouted in surprise and alarm, although he didn’t seem to be injured, not yet. As the companions watched, the wizard became visible, likely as his *greater invisibility* spell finally expired. He was a slight man, clad in a gray robe similar to that worn by the woman they’d encountered earlier. But his was cowled, and a swatch of fabric covered his face, although now it was twisted as the elf continued to tear frantically at him. A bevy of *mirror images* surrounded him, but it was easy in this case to distinguish the true wizard, for only one had a crazy elf trying to bite his head off. Thus far the elf’s attacks had had little effect; the wizard was also protected by *stoneskin*.

The wizard held a wand in his hand, and he managed to point it at the elf clinging to his upper body. “Mutatio!” he yelled.

The elf shrieked again, lifted his arms into the air, and fell to the ground. By the time he hit the stone, he was a two-inch long white mouse.

The wizard did not have much time to savor his victory. Talen fired another magical arrow into his torso. The mage's *stoneskin* absorbed the shot, but the way he clutched at his side indicated that he had certainly felt it.

"Now, you burn," the wizard said calmly.

But before he could summon his *fireball*, he had to content with a new threat, as the old man and Varo rushed at him from the side. Both overcame the potency of the *repulsion* field, and launched attacks at the spot where the wizard had been standing when the elf had attacked. The wizard cleverly drew a short distance back, allowing his *mirror images* to shuffle around him, masking his true location once more. The old man responded by closing his eyes, and using his other senses to try and divine the foe's location. His first lunging strike, however, hit only empty air. Varo followed behind him, casting a *cure serious wounds* spell upon himself as he came.

Talen fired his bow again, hitting an *image* and causing it to vanish. "Dar!" he yelled. "Help them... shoot the images!"

The fighter nodded, unlimbering the shortbow he'd taken from Argus's body. But the bow had just taken too much abuse in their travels through the dungeon. He strung it without difficulty, but as soon as he drew back an arrow, the ragged string snapped.

"Damn it!" he cursed.

Allera continued to bolster them, healing them all with a *mass cure light wounds* spell.

Thus far, the wizard's layered wards had protected him from serious harm, but he seemed to realize that the initiative had begun to shift against him. He blasted the old man with a volley of *magic missiles*, causing him to stagger and fall back. But the old man was surprisingly durable, and he remained standing. As Talen hit another *image*, he turned and headed for the door.

Before he could get to it, he found himself confronted by Licinius Varo.

"*Mutatio!*" he yelled, lifted his wand and pointing it at the cleric. But nothing happened.

"Dagos protects me," the cleric said. "And destroys those who offend Him." He stepped forward and grabbed the hand holding the wand, unleashing an *inflict critical wounds* upon the mage. The wizard's *stoneskin* and other protections were of no avail against the divine energies of the spell, although his will was such that he was able to withstand the worst of the effects.

The wizard tore himself free from the cleric's grasp. He reached into a pocket of his robe, but before he could do anything further, the old man caromed into him from behind, taking his knees out and knocking both to the ground. "Your foul workings shall come to an end, Banth!" he cried out, in thickly accented Common.

The old man tried to get onto the wizard's back, but Banth was surprisingly fast, and he rolled out of his grasp. Varo tried to help, but before he could grab the mage's hand, the wizard took what he'd gotten from his pocket—a glass vial—uncorked it, and swallowed its contents.

"You wish to wrestle?" he said, cackling as he shouted words of power, "Then let us dance!"

Varo thrust his hands under the wizard's cowl, pouring the energy of the strongest spell left to him into another *inflict wounds*. But even as his power ravaged Banth again, the cleric could feel the man *changing*. His lithe body under his robes began to swell, and his skin, already bolstered by his *stoneskin* ward, grew rough and dense. The wizard's head came up, and as he stared into Varo's eyes, the cleric saw no intelligence there, only a furious battle rage that caught him aback.

The wizard sprang up, throwing the monk off him almost as an afterthought. He seized Varo around the throat, crushing his windpipe with hands that had suddenly become as strong as the grips of a vice.

"Dagos... rejects..." the cleric began. He tried to call upon his power again, but he could not get enough air into his lungs to speak the words.

Laughing deeply, Banth drew out a small dagger, and slammed it to the hilt into the cleric's chest. Varo's body spasmed, and the mage hurled him against the nearby wall. Varo hit the stone with a heavy smack, and fell limp to the ground.

The old man's fist, held as rigid as a dagger's blade, came crashing down onto the back of Banth's neck. The blow should have snapped his spine, but instead Banth merely turned, and smiled down at the old man. Somehow, he'd gotten *taller* as well.

The old man held his ground, but could not withstand a punishing blow as Banth punched him with the fist still holding the dagger. The hilt shattered the man's jaw, and he collapsed like a marionette that had had its strings abruptly cut.

"Over here, wizard!" came a yell. Banth turned in time to get smashed hard in the chest by Dar's club, hurled by the fighter. The missile staggered the wizard, but augmented by the *transformation* spell, he recovered quickly. He lowered his head and charged the fighter, holding his dagger as though it were a sword.

Dar, unable to close due to the lingering effects of the *repulsion* field, drew his punching dagger and waited for him.

The two collided hard into each other, and somehow it was Dar who gave way. Banth shrieked and stabbed his small knife deep into the fighter's side, drawing it back covered in bright red blood. Dar grimaced and countered with a thrust of his own dagger into the wizard's body, but the force of the blow was blunted by the wizard's *stoneskin*, augmented by the toughening of his hide from the *transformation* spell. Gleefully, he swept the dagger up, going for the fighter's jugular, but catching the bottom of his jaw instead. A bright spray of red erupted from the wound as the wizard opened his enemy's flesh to the bone.

Talen tried to come to Dar's aid, but was still held at bay by Banth's *repulsion*. Until the wizard closed with him deliberately, there was nothing he could do to reach him. He fitted his last magical arrow to the string, but with the two foes in such close quarters, he couldn't release his shot without risking hitting Dar instead.

Gnashing his teeth in frustration, the captain watched and waited for a shot.

Allera had rushed over to where Varo had fallen. The cleric lived, but he was barely conscious, trying and failing to push himself up on his arms. Blood continued to fountain from the deep puncture wound in his chest, spreading in a widening puddle on the ground.

"Hold," she said, kneeling beside him.

"We... must... defeat..."

"I know," she said. "But you won't be of any help if you can't move." She'd already gone through all of her higher-powered spells, but she cast a *cure moderate wounds* spell on the injured cleric, which closed the oozing wound and wrought a great improvement in his appearance.

"Help the old man," he directed her, as he fought back to his feet.

Dar and Banth continued to trade blows, stabbing their weapons into each other's body with violent abandon. But the wizard's *stoneskin* continued to absorb most of the force of Dar's hits, while the fighter, lacking such protection, was taking a beating.

Finally, the wizard thrust his knife into his foe's side a second time, and Dar went down, dragging Banth with him. The fighter's punching dagger went flying out of his grasp. Blood spurted from Dar's wounds as the wizard lifted his dagger and thrust down for a killing blow. Dar caught the wizard by the wrists and arrested the dagger with its point mere inches above his throat. Even with the augmentation of his magic, Dar was stronger, but the wizard wasn't bleeding out from several penetrating knife wounds.

The blade quivered in the air, then descended another inch, the point dripping blood that fell in splotches on the fighter's exposed throat. Then another inch, until the steel touched his flesh.

"Time to die, warrior," the wizard hissed, his voice scratching.

But suddenly, Banth reared up, his face twisting in agony. Varo stood behind him, his hands wrapped around the wizard's throat, unleashing yet more destructive energy into his body. Banth snapped back his elbow, smashing it into Varo's face. The cleric fell back, but in that instant Dar ripped the knife from the wizard's grasp, and buried it to the hilt in his body.

Banth looked down at him. "Well played," he said. Blood poured from his lips as he looked down at the hilt extending from between two ribs.

And then he toppled over, dead.

Chapter 68

THE MADNESS OF BANTH

They had been victorious over the master transmuter of Rappan Athuk, but the cost had been incredible. All of them had been burned, frozen, and beaten to within an inch of their lives. Dar couldn't even rise until Allera healed him, and he likely would have bled to death if she'd lingered just a few more seconds.

"Gods and demons," Dar said, once Talen had helped him to his feet. "Who was that guy?"

"His name was Banth," the old man said, coming to stand before them. "He was mad, driven by his quest for power and his desires to create 'perfect' beings. You will not understand fully until you see what lies beyond yonder door."

"And who are you?" Talen asked.

The old man bowed. "My name is Setarcos," he said. "I am Drusian, as was Banth. I am a member of the Order of the Vigilant Fists, a monastic association dedicated to the protection and preservation of the natural order of the world. When Banth first came to our attention years ago, he had already earned a reputation as a monster. Three members of my order were sent to deal with him."

"I take it you were unsuccessful," Varo said.

The old man nodded. "We underestimated his power. Banth had uncovered a cache of ancient magic in one of the tombs of the Old Fathers, including items of eldritch power and lore that greatly enhanced his own considerable talents. Otaalp and Eltotsira, my brothers, were tortured and slain by the transmuter, but I was transformed into the form of a harmless white mouse. That was his favorite way of dealing with his enemies; at one time he had a cage full of them."

"So it would seem," Varo said. He opened up his hand, revealing a furry little white mouse. The creature tried to jump out of his palm, but the cleric quickly grabbed it with his other hand.

"The elf?" Talen asked. Varo nodded.

"Well, he's easier to carry now, at least," Dar said.

"Will you be able to *dispel* the enchantment?" Allera asked.

"With some effort, perhaps," the cleric replied. "But I think that our fighter may have a point. It may be wiser to keep him in this form, given his mental state... at least until we win free of the dungeon."

"I hope you kept that cheese from the ogre lair," Dar said.

"I am curious why the mage threw you at us," Talen said. "The cockatrices, I can understand, but why release you?"

"I think he may have even forgotten that I was still alive. He kept his mice in a large brass cage, jumbled together. Some of them retained awareness of what they were, while others were mice in mind as well as in body. I think he enjoyed watching us suffer the complications inherent in our new condition. When you arrived, myself and the three transformed cockatrices were all that were left. He tossed us into the sack... you know the rest."

"A costly error, on his part," Varo said. "Your aid was instrumental in our victory."

The monk nodded modestly. "Where is this place?" he asked. "You are not Drusian, and I do not recognize the architectural style here."

"You're a long way from Drusia," Dar said, as Talen said, "This place is in a southern Camar, a dungeon known as Rappan Athuk."

The monk nodded. "The Dungeon of Graves. Yes, its reputation is known even in distant Drusia. Appropriate, it would seem, for one such as Banth to end up here. A suitably grim locale for his foul arts. It would seem that I have you to thank for completing my mission, and rescuing me from the clutches of the wizard, although my current situation does not appear to be less dire for it."

“We’re not too happy about it either,” Dar said. “We’re not here by choice... most of us, anyway. I don’t suppose you know the way out of here?”

The monk shook his head. “While I retained some flickering remnant of my consciousness while in my altered form, my memories of that state are... cluttered. Before I was cast into that sack, I spent most of my time in the transmuter’s laboratory, although sometimes he brought the cage into the chamber where he held his experimental stock captive.”

“Experimental stock?” Allera asked.

The monk nodded. “It is not pleasant,” he said.

“What about the woman?” Dar asked. “The one who sicced the golem on us.”

“Woman?”

“She was in her twenties, plain looking, rude-cropped hair,” Varo said.

“It sounds like Banth’s apprentice,” Setarcos said. “Kupra. I do not know where she came from, only that she appeared here about... six or seven months ago? He abused her terribly. She treated me and other creatures kindly; I do not believe that she is tainted with the same evil that pervaded Banth.”

“She might be able to help us,” Allera said.

“Um, are you forgetting the golem?” Dar said. “She tried to kill us!”

“Almost everything in this place has,” Talen said. “If she attacks us again, we may have to kill her, but Setaros is right, she might be willing to change sides.”

“First, we have to find her,” Varo said. He indicated the door. “I believe we’ll find the wizard’s quarters through there.”

Talen turned to the monk. “This place is extremely dangerous. You are welcome to accompany us, but I ask that you defer to my leadership. We have clashed with the cult of Orcus and the undead creatures that dwell in this place, but our primary objective is to find a way out.”

Setarcos bowed. “A goal I wholeheartedly share,” he said.

After checking the wizard’s body for loot, the companions, now numbering five, turned to the far door. Allera and Varo had worked their remaining healing upon them, but were unable to fully restore their bodies from the abuse Banth and his deadly allies had inflicted upon them. Dar, in particular, looked wretched, his recently-acquired garments

once again cut, burned, and soaked with blood both from himself and his enemies. But the fighter took up his club and his position at the front of the line without complaint. Well, without much complaint.

“Wretched or not, if that bitch casts a spell on me, I’m going to put her head through the wall,” he said. “The same goes for anything beyond that door!” he growled loudly, as they drew close.

“Your companion does not appear to value the advantage of tactical surprise,” Setarcos said.

“Yeah, well, you get used to it,” Allera said dryly.

The door opened onto a passage that quickly deposited them in a long room, brightly illuminated by permanent magical lights set in sconces high along the walls. The place had a distinctive aroma of beasts, mingled with a heady scent of fear. As they moved into the room, they could see that it was dominated by large iron cages, some arranged along the walls, others set into recesses in the floor. The cages were all occupied, and as they drew closer, each of them could see what Setarcos had been getting at before.

The prisoners were wretched beings, animals that had been horribly mutilated. The first contained several monkeys that each possessed five arms. The creatures barely stirred as they entered, looking up at them with expressions of pure suffering. The other cages contained mergings of different creatures, beings with features of rats, wolves, spiders, or even humanoids. None of them did more than recoil against the back of their cages as they approached.

“This is... terrible,” Allera said, her expression stricken.

“Banth was a monster,” Setarcos said simply, his own eyes filled with grief.

“We should put these things out of their misery,” Dar said.

“No!” Allera said. “They are innocent!”

But Talen put his hand on her shoulder. “I know, Allera,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “But what can we do for them? We cannot bring them with us... and if we set them free, into Rappan Athuk, we may as well be sentencing them to death, an end far more grim than what we could offer.”

“I... I don’t know,” Allera said, turning away from him.

“There is a door over here,” Varo said, pointing at the far wall as he completed his circuit of the room.

“Maybe you could take her out of here,” Dar said to him. “Just for a few minutes.”

“No,” Allera said, turning back to them. “No, if this must be done, then I should do it. I can... I can minimize their suffering.”

“This creature has not been mutilated,” Setarcos said, drawing their attention to a row of bars covering a long pit in the middle of the floor. The companions gathered over the pit, where they could see a massive tiger lying in filth below. The creature was almost twelve feet long. It looked up at them as they stared down, but did not make any other movements.

“A dire tiger,” Varo said. “It does not look as though Banth had gotten to it, yet.”

“What’s that?” Dar said, noting movement within the pen. Varo pointed the light of his staff through the bars.

“Oh gods,” Allera said. “Cubs...”

The little cubs were each over three feet long, but it was still obvious that they had not been long outside of their mother. Allera fell to her knees beside the cage, tears falling down her face. “No, I cannot,” she said.

Dar looked at Talen. “You should leave, Allera...” the mercenary began.

“No,” she said, looking up at him with a ferocious expression. “No,” she repeated. “I will help you with the others; they have suffered long enough, and I accept that nothing can be done for them but to ease their torment. But these, these neither you nor I shall harm.”

“We cannot just let them go,” Talen said. “The mother, at least, is dangerous. She may look quiet now, but she must weigh thousands of pounds. Defending her cubs, she would tear us to pieces.”

“Leave them to me,” Allera said. “I give you my word that I will not threaten the safety of the group, Talen.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, but none of them seemed willing to challenge the healer’s commitment on that issue.

“So that is decided,” Varo finally said. “But before we take any action, I would recommend that we finish our search, and resolve the matter of the wizard’s apprentice.”

They all agreed to the cleric’s suggestion, and gathered near the door. When Dar indicated that he was ready, Talen tried to pull it open, without success.

“It’s jammed,” he said.

A few seconds later, the door exploded inward. Dar strode through the remains of it, his club in his hand. The space beyond the door was little more than a large closet, maybe fifteen feet on a side. It was crowded with a small, sagging bed, a crude desk formed out of old crates topped with uneven lengths of board, and a chair that looked as though it would collapse at the slightest disturbance. Otherwise, the room was empty.

“Nobody in here,” Dar said. Talen and Varo had followed him in, standing in the threshold of the ruined door. Varo stepped in, and took a quick look around, careful not to disturb anything that might be trapped.

Finally, he stepped back, and pointed toward the bed.

Dar strode forward, and heaved the bed over with a single massive yank. It flipped over, revealing the gray-robed woman huddling beneath it. She shrieked and tried to rush past, but Dar seized her and hurled her against the wall. Her breath was knocked out of her, and before she could get enough of it back to yell again, Dar was there, one hand around her throat, the other holding his club.

“One word of magic, and your brains will be splattered all over this wall,” he growled.

The young woman stared at him with eyes wide, paralyzed with terror.

Chapter 69

KUPRA

“By all the gods,” Allera said, shoving past Talen into the already crowded room. “Dar, let her go!”

“Like hell,” he said. “I’ll handle this, healer.”

“Like hell,” she shot back, stepping up until she was literally a few inches from his arm. “If you want to get healed the next time you get carved up into a bloody mash, you’ll let her go, right this instant.”

“She’s danger—”

“You can stand in the doorway. Look, she isn’t going anywhere, all right? Do you think she’d have hidden under the bed, if there was anywhere else she could have gone? Now, let her go. Now.”

Dar held the healer's stare for a long second, then turned and in disgust released his prisoner. The woman sagged to the ground, gasping for air. She tried to retreat when Allera reached for her, nearly tripping over the overturned bed.

"I'm not going to hurt you," the healer said, her voice calm and level. "I'm Allera. You're Kupra, right?"

"How do you know my name?" the woman managed to wheeze.

"Not from Banth. He's dead, Kupra."

The young woman looked up at her. "No," she said, shaking her head.

"Yes, Kupra. We killed him, but only because we had to. He was mad, Kupra, and evil. But I don't think you're like him."

"Dead..."

"Yeah, poked full of more holes than a pincushion," Dar said, from the doorway. "I can drag the corpse in here, if you want."

Allera shot him a look that held daggers, then turned back to Kupra. "It's true. He's dead."

The woman started crying, and fell into Allera's embrace, her whole body shaking as the sobs overcame her. "It's all right," Allera said, stroking the woman's uneven hair. "It's all right."

Talen took Dar's arm. "Leave her alone for a few minutes," he said.

"You're entirely too willing to trust, captain," Dar said quietly, as they drew back out of the doorway into the larger room outside.

"And you're too willing to condemn. Let Allera have a chance; we need allies far more than we need enemies."

"You'd trust her as an ally?"

"I'd see what information she could give us, and weigh it according to the context of the situation. And keep my eyes open for betrayal. I'm not paranoid, but I'm not a fool, mercenary."

"I guess we'll have to see if that's true," Dar said, walking away.

Allera remained inside with their prisoner for a good ten minutes, with Varo keeping a close eye on the interview from just outside the doorway. Finally, the healer brought the

apprentice mage out. She looked awful, with red eyes and a blotch where a bruise had grown around her right eye. They could also see red marks around her throat where Dar had grabbed her. She stood against Allera as if the healer was a supporting wall.

“Kupra will help us, if we bring her with us when we depart,” Allera said. “She just wants to leave this place.”

“Yeah, fat chance of that,” Dar said. “That’s been our plan as well, and how well has it worked out for us?”

“She knows a way out,” Allera said.

That got everyone’s attention immediately.

* * * * *

Kupra was able to share a great deal of information about her former master.

She showed them where to find the secret door that led to Banth’s laboratory. Scattered about on shelves, tables, and wooden racks was a very thorough collection of alchemical ingredients, tools, and leather-bound tomes. They also found numerous body parts and other pieces of “failed” experiments. Kupra described some of those to the companions in a cold, lifeless tone of voice, as if she were relating things that someone else had seen, rather than she.

A door off the laboratory led to a spartan bedchamber that had clearly belonged to the dead wizard. Bookshelves lined the walls, and in addition to a bed and desk, there was a large brazier of ancient bronze on an iron stand in the center of the room. Oil lamps, most currently unlit, dangled from iron chains around the perimeter of the chamber.

Varo examined the brazier, and the contents of an empty jar he found lying beside it. “This device is magical,” he said finally. “I believe that the wizard used this to summon the elemental we battled. Do you know the command words?” he asked Kupra.

The apprentice nodded faintly.

“There is a good deal of power and wealth here,” Varo said. “We should search it carefully before we depart.”

“Yeah, whatever, I want to hear about the way out,” Dar said. He turned to Kupra, but the woman drew back in terror as he looked at her. Exasperated, he turned to Allera. “Get her to tell us about the exit.”

With some prodding, Allera got the woman to reveal what she knew. There was an exit beyond a secret door in the exit to the wight catacombs, she told them. It was warded by a hive of giant bees, but beyond that was a shaft that led straight to the surface.

“That buzzing I heard, in the passage,” Talen said.

“If only you’d found the door, we might have avoided that bastard mage altogether,” Dar said.

“Now that we know the way out, we should leave this place,” Setarcos said.

“Not yet,” Varo and Allera said almost as one. The cleric nodded to the healer. “We should rest first,” Allera said. “And then I will use my magic to speak to the tiger, and see if I can help her and her cubs.”

“This place does seem to be rather secure,” Varo added. “And I would like some more time to go through the wizard’s effects.”

“Bah, magic mumbo-jumbo,” Dar said. “The man was cracked, that much is easy to see. What do you expect to learn from his crap?”

“We will see,” Varo said enigmatically.

They attended to a few things before turning to rest. True to her word, Allera helped Dar and Talen kill the tormented mutations in Banth’s “storage room”. Afterwards, she went off alone, and refused to let any of the others come with her, even to watch over her. She returned an hour later, and fed the dire tiger.

Varo spent the time reviewing Banth’s library and collection of alchemical materials. He kept Kupra with him, to provide direction and explanation of his finds. She was able to direct the cleric to the transmuter’s spellbooks, which he packed into two large travel bags. He kept the apprentice’s smaller book separate, but did not return it to her for now.

Talen and Setarcos made a thorough search of the complex, to verify that there weren’t any other ways in and out other than the main corridor. They did find a pit in the outer hall that nearly captured Setarcos, but the old monk was able to leap free before gravity drew him in. They marked its location carefully and continued their search.

Once they were reasonable sure that the complex was secure, they let Allera and Varo rest in Banth’s quarters. Kupra was given a few blankets as well, but the men agreed that she should be bound. Talen tied her wrists behind her back, and attached them to one of the larger bookshelves. The apprentice accepted the treatment mutely, offering no resistance.

Dar and Talen took shifts watching and resting. Although they didn’t say anything, neither was quite ready to put full trust in Setarcos either, for all the old man’s apparently benign nature. The monk did not complain, sitting on the floor of Banth’s bedchamber in a meditative pose.

Time passed without incident. Allera and Varo recovered their spells; the group enjoyed a meal from Banth's undistinguished larder. After treating what injuries remained from the previous day, Allera said that she was ready to deal with the dire tiger.

"What do you want us to do?" Talen asked.

"Open the secret door to the outer complex. Then come back to the laboratory, and stay there until I return."

"What?" Dar asked. "You mean you're going to open the cage, with you in there alone? What if it attacks you?"

"If it intends to attack me, I won't open the cage," Allera explained patiently, as if to a child.

"How in the fuck are you going to know whether it intends to attack you?" Dar returned.

"I can use my magic to communicate with it."

"Yeah, what if it lies? Maybe it says, 'Oh, sure, I'd love to get out of this cage, I won't hurt you,' and then when you open it, it yells, 'SUCKER', and then eats you?"

"Animals are less duplicitous than humans," Allera said. "In any case, it is a risk that I intend to take."

"We should at least be in the room. If it decides to make a snack of you, at least we can—"

"No. As I promised Talen, I will not risk the group. I will cast my *sanctuary* spell, just in case the creature becomes a threat. I also have the ability to *calm emotions*... but if you are all there, it may agitate the creature beyond my powers to control it."

"We will wait in the adjacent hall, with the door open," Talen said. "If something should go wrong, we will come to your aid."

"Very well."

They made their way out to the cage room. Talen and Dar headed out to open the exits, then returned to the hall beyond the secret door to the lab. They lingered there as Allera knelt beside the cage in the floor, and looked down at the huge tiger.

The creature was magnificent, even in its current state. She could see its ribs through the tattered hide loosely covering its body. Its cubs prowled through the muck, mewling.

Sensing her, the tiger lifted its head—clearly taking an effort—and growled. The sound rumbled in its body like an earthquake.

Allera opened her mind to her magic, and reached out to the creature.

Chapter 70

BZZZZ...

“I hope that what you did doesn’t come back to haunt us later,” Dar said, as the companions prepared to set out once more. After Allera had released the dire tiger, they’d retreated back to Banth’s chamber, and were packing up their gear, old and new.

The fighter had replaced another set of ruined clothes with replacements from Banth’s wardrobe. The only problem was, the fighter was about a foot and a half taller than the wizard had been. The robe he had put on under his armor terminated right around his knees, giving him a somewhat comic appearance.

Dar was beyond caring about such mundane concerns. But as he took up his pack, Varo came over to him. “I need you to take the brazier as well.”

“What? You’ve got to be kidding. That thing has to weigh two hundred pounds!”

“It is extremely valuable. You are the only one of us strong enough to carry it.”

“No way, cleric. Forget it. Were you even listening to that bitch apprentice earlier? We’re going to be climbing up another of those damned shafts. You want it, carry it yourself.”

Varo took the fighter aside, and spoke to him quietly for a few minutes. Dar’s expression did not change, but when they packed up the last of their gear, the fighter lifted the heavy bronze bowl, and lashed it to the back of his pack using ropes they’d found in the transmuter’s laboratory.

Talen came back in, carrying his own heavy pack. He raised an eyebrow when he saw Dar’s added burden, but didn’t say anything.

“Ready?” he asked them.

“Just one more thing, on our way out,” Varo said.

In the laboratory, they found that the cleric had gone through all of the wizard’s books, heaping all those that didn’t warrant keeping into a large heap in one corner. The

wizard took a large clay jug he'd left on the edge of a nearby table, and started pouring the contents onto the pile.

"What are you doing?" Talen asked.

"There is material in these books that should have never been written," the cleric said. "I am going to burn them."

"But there are no vents for the smoke," Allera said. "You may choke us out."

"I have considered that," Varo said. "Do you know any beekeepers?"

"What?" Dar asked, but Talen nodded. "Clever, priest. The smoke may make the bees more pliable."

Varo nodded. "Still, I would suggest that you be already on your way when I ignite the stack." His companions left, leaving Varo alone as he finished dousing the books with oil. The cleric adjusted his pack—heavy with the added weight of several volumes of Banth's library ensconced inside—and recovered one of the lamps from the other room.

The books went up in an eager pyre, and Varo turned and left without looking back.

Following Kupra's directions, they made their way to the corridor leading out to the wight catacombs. She showed them how to open the secret door that accessed a deep vault. The buzzing noise was much stronger here, and they remained alert as they investigated the place. There was a huge opening in the floor that led to a dark shaft.

"Where does that lead?" Talen asked.

Kupra shook her head. "I do not know."

"Let us consider that a question best left unanswered," Varo said. They moved cautiously around the edge of the shaft, and made their way to the far side of the room.

"Shine the light over here, please," Setarcos said. He indicated a stretch of wall that looked different, even to casual observation. As their light hit it, it seemed to shine *through* the wall. The buzzing was much stronger here as well.

Talen probed the wall with his dagger; the blade cut through it with only slight resistance.

"Looks like this is the way," he said.

Allera coughed; the air was starting to get a bit hazy. "I suggest we cut away as much of the top part as we can reach, and let the smoke through," Varo said.

Dar and Talen worked together to put the cleric's suggestion into action. They could all smell a sweetness in the air that contrasted notably with the usual smells of Rappan Athuk. They could also hear a loud buzzing, which continued to grow louder until it filled their heads and made even brief conversation difficult. The air continued to thicken, until their eyes were watering.

"If we wait much longer, the bees aren't going to be the only ones suffering," Dar said, after a few minutes.

"All right, let's press on, but stay together," Talen said.

They cut a larger opening in the fibrous wall, revealing a passage beyond. The corridor was narrow enough to force them go single file, so Dar took the lead, followed by Talen. Setarcos and Kupra remained close to Allera, while Varo brought up the rear.

They didn't go very far, maybe twenty feet or so, before the passage opened onto a large cavern.

"Damn," Dar said, impressed despite himself.

The cavern was dominated by a massive honeycomb that stretched across the walls and ceiling of much of the place. Bees, each easily five feet in length, were crawling sluggishly across the hive; there were over a dozen that they could see. The place smelled sweet, overlaid with a waxy smell like a chandler's shop.

The bees didn't seem to notice the adventurers, or didn't consider them a threat. None of them were willing to bet that this would remain unchanged, however.

"There's an opening," Talen said, pointing to a low spot beneath the hive. As they watched, a bee crawled through it, disappearing from view.

"The shaft out is on the far side?" Kupra said.

"Will the bees attack us if we try to leave?" Setarcos asked.

"I don't know," Kupra said.

"Those stingers will hurt if they do," Dar said. "I suggest we shoot them full of arrows; if they swarm, we can fall back to the other room and stab them as they come through the passage."

"That may not be necessary," Allera said. "I can *calm* them, long enough for us to get past."

"What if there's more in the shaft?" Dar asked.

“They’ll still be there if we kill the ones in here,” Talen said. “And they’ll be pissed to boot. Let’s try Allera’s plan.”

The healer cast her spell, speaking in a soft singsong as they moved into the room. The noise of the bees, already muted from the effects of the smoke, softened still further. The creatures still moved about, but their actions were lethargic, slowed. Careful not to prod any of them, the six adventurers made their way to the gap in the hive, and passed through. Allera maintained her chant, soothing the bees as they passed.

“In his journals, Banth noted that the honey produced by these bees has a curative effect,” Varo said.

“Good for them,” Talen said. “Don’t mess with it; we don’t want to press our luck.”

But Varo, curious, lingered momentarily as they passed through the hive. Taking up his mace, he poked a small hole in the walls of one of the cells of the comb. A rich slick of honey oozed out of the opening. Careful not to get any of the substance on his skin or clothes, the cleric scraped a portion of the material into a fold of oilcloth.

Turning around, he found himself face to face with a giant bee.

Chapter 71

ESCAPE

The bee crawled forward. Varo, recovering quickly, stepped smoothly aside, letting it pass to the far side of the hive.

The cleric rejoined the others, who had watched the encounter at the mouth of a shaft on the far side of the cavern. “You have more luck than sense, cleric,” Talen said.

“Knowledge is a weapon as strong as any sword, captain. This may be useful.”

“Are we getting out of here or not?” Dar asked.

With a final telling look at the cleric, Talen removed his pack, and began taking off his armor. Allera accepted the burden, rolling up the fine blacksteel suit, tucking it into the straps of his pack. Setarcos handed him a coil of rope, one of two they’d found in Banth’s very well-stocked laboratory. None of them wanted to think about the uses that the wizard had put the silk cord to, but if they could use it to escape, it was well worth taking.

"I'll signal down when it's safe to come up," he told them. "Keep an eye and a hand on the rope; two tugs means its safe to come up." He mimed tapping the hilt of his dagger against the adjacent wall. "I'll tap if I encounter anything. One tap means it's okay, keep coming. Anything more than that, trouble."

"What should we do if you run into something up there?" Allera asked.

"Throw lots for his armor," Dar said. The others looked at him; nobody laughed.

"I'll be fine," Talen said. "Remember, one at a time, and help each other where you can."

The captain took off his swordbelt, and drew his glowing magical sword. Taking a sharp knife from Setarcos, he cut away at the leather scabbard, until he had torn away a foot-long strip. Sliding the sword back into the scabbard, he slung the belt across his chest, so that the glowing blade shone softly ahead of him.

"Careful that doesn't foul you," Dar said.

Talen smiled. "Worried about me after all, mercenary?"

"I just want to get out of here. If you fall, then that means / gotta make the climb."

"Just listen for the signal."

"I don't think I can do this," Kupra said, looking up the shaft.

"Yes, you can," Allera said. "I'll be right behind you, don't worry."

"It's not so bad," Setarcos said, looking up the shaft. "The slope isn't quite vertical, and the shaft is rough, with lots of handholds."

"All right," Talen said, checking his gear one last time. "I'm ready."

"Good luck," Allera said.

The captain nodded and entered the shaft. The rope trailed up after him, uncoiling steadily. Setarcos remained in the shaft, watching after him, although the twists in the tunnel made him impossible to see after about fifteen minutes.

The first rope approached the end of its length; Dar fastened the second to the end of the first. He tied Talen's pack to the end of the second rope, along with the heavy bronze bowl.

"We don't want to lose that," Varo said.

“I know, I know,” the fighter said, without looking up.

The second rope had only gone through about half its length when Setarcos indicated that he'd felt a tug. The monk started up, and Kupra moved into position, prodded by Allera.

They made their way up. After Kupra, Allera got the tug, and went up. Dar and Varo shared a look. “After you, warrior,” the cleric said.

“No, I'll be last. What? I'm a better climber than you, and stronger. And if the bees decide they want to fuck with us after all, I'm better equipped to handle them.”

Varo looked at him. “Very well. Good luck, Dar.”

“Just get up there. We're leaving.”

“Of course.”

Varo got the signal and climbed up, leaving Dar alone. Varo had taken Aelos's staff, slinging it through loops across his back. The fighter remained at the base of the shaft, holding onto the rope, listening to the buzzing of the bees.

Finally, the rope tugged on his grasp.

The mercenary made his way up.

The climb was difficult, especially with the darkness, and since Dar hadn't taken off his own armor, or left his heavily laden pack. But Setarcos had been right about the handholds, and the fighter made his way up to where the first segment of rope met the second without difficulty. There were occasional ledges, and he paused to pull up the end of the rope, leaving Talen's pack and Varo's damned bowl there before pressing up further.

A few minutes after that, he heard a faint tap from above. He waited. A minute passed, and then he could hear something crawling down the shaft. He couldn't see it, but he could smell it coming closer.

“Damned bees,” he muttered, wrapping the rope around his bracer, and pushing himself into a niche in the side of the shaft. He drew his punching dagger.

The bee drew closer, until its smell was overwhelming. Dar felt something soft brush his arm, and he tensed... but then it was past, the sounds of its passage receding. Dar let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

A short distance further, and the shaft straightened, heading upward at about a seventy-five degree angle. He hardly needed to use the rope now, and paused to drag up the

end of the rope and its burdens. The bowl made a loud clanking noise on the rock with each tug; he'd wrapped a blanket around it, but apparently it had come loose.

"If the rope breaks, there's no way I'm going down after it," he muttered to himself. "Damned priests and their magic..."

But the bowl made it up without mishap, and he laid it in a secure niche before pressing on. He could see a light up ahead, and soon Varo's face, illuminated in the glow of the *continual flame*. It took him only a few minutes to reach him; the shaft leveled out there, and opened onto what looked like a cave just beyond.

"The bowl?" the cleric asked.

"Yeah, good to see you to," Dar said. He gave the rope a tug. "You can pull it up the rest of the way." He made his way past the cleric, into the cave.

A cool breeze met his nostrils, and for a moment he just stood there, breathing deeply. "Hey, where is everybody?" he asked.

"Up here," came Allera's voice from ahead.

He moved around a bend in the cave, and then he saw the most welcome sight he could remember seeing in his life.

Stars.

He crawled forward—the end of the cave had a low ceiling—and emerged on a rocky slope blanketed in dense brush. Talen, Setarcos, and Kupra were there with Allera, standing in the darkness together in shared silence.

They'd made it.

They'd escaped Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 72

A LATE NIGHT FRACAS

"Where's Varo?" Talen asked.

"He's getting your pack," Dar said.

The captain went back into the cave to help the cleric. Dar looked over at Allera.

“Well, princess? Did you think we’d make it out of there?”

But before the healer could respond, the old monk raised a hand. “Do you hear that?” Setarcos asked.

They listened, and made out a faint sound on the afternoon breeze. It was barely audible, but Dar recognized it.

“It sounds like a battle.”

Dar stepped out onto the hillside, ignoring the brambles that tugged at his legs. The hill rose up to the south behind them, but Dar headed toward forward, to the northeast, where their current hill abutted the shoulder of another that ascended in a gentle rise to the north.

“Dar... wait for Talen!” Allera cried softly after him, but he was done waiting around for people, or taking orders. He was surprised to hear the others hurrying after him; Setarcos, Allera, even Kupra.

It took them only about ten minutes to reach the crest of the far hill. The sounds they’d heard earlier were slightly louder, now, and Dar thought he could make out distinct sounds within the mélange of noise that battles produced; the clash of weapons, the screams of dying men.

The dark horizon of the crest was marked by clusters of squat boulders. Dar moved toward the nearest, wary now, his club in his hand. His boots crunched on the dry brush, but otherwise he was a shadow in the night.

Finally, he reached the top of the hill, giving him a decent view of the surrounding terrain. And of the source of the noises they’d heard.

“Oh, this is too much,” Dar said, with a chuckle.

Ahead, about a mile distant, he could see the depression that marked the site of Rappan Athuk. From his current vantage, he couldn’t clearly see into the graveyard; even the mausoleums were just deeper shadows within the bowl.

A fort had been constructed on a low rise on the far side of the ruin. Sobol must have had his soldiers chop down every tree within ten miles; the fighter didn’t remember seeing much in the way of forests on their way to the dungeon. The place didn’t look like much, the rude stockade enfolding an area maybe forty feet square, barely enough to hold all of Sobol’s forces, let alone their mounts and supplies. Squat towers had been erected at two opposite corners of the fort, and torches had been set all around the perimeter, blazing back the night.

The place was under attack by a considerable army. Humanoids of some sort, it looked like; Dar couldn't quite make them out at this distance, except to see that they were about man-sized. Orcs, maybe, or hobgoblins. There were a few larger creatures in the mix that looked like ogres, or maybe trolls. The attackers used no lights of their own, and when they entered the radius of the light from the fort, they were moving fast, charging toward the stockade walls.

Thus far, it looked like the defenders were holding, but it was clear that they were completely surrounded. Dar could make out the wreckage of what looked like several camps around the perimeter of the dell, and scattered lumps that were probably bodies. Dar was surprised that the soldiers of Camar had stayed as long as they had, and he wondered if Sobol was still there, inside the fort.

A surging pillar of flame roared down from the heavens, blasting a knot of large creatures making for the front wall of the fort. Well. It looked as though the soldiers still had their cleric with them, in any case.

"Who are those people?" Setarcos asked.

"Soldiers of Camar," Dar said.

"Are you going to help them?" the monk asked.

Dar looked at him in surprise. "Fuck, no!"

"They serve the Duke, but the individual soldiers are just common men," Allera said. "They cannot all be held to blame for the actions of their commanders."

"Listen, priestess," Dar said. "Those pricks are the ones that threw me and the others—including your marshal, in case you've forgotten—into that gods-damned pit. If I go over there at all, it's to shove three feet of steel into the guts of that bastard Sobol."

A sound from behind them drew their attention around. It was Talen and Varo. They didn't have the brazier with them, but Dar knew that the cleric wouldn't let them leave without it. "What's going on?" the captain asked.

"See for yourself," Dar said. "Looks like the Duke's men are having a bit of trouble."

Talen looked out over the battlefield. "It is not our concern," he said.

"But Talen," Allera began.

"No, Allera," he interrupted. "Our mission here may have failed, but we have a more important one, remember?"

She lowered her head, but nodded.

The captain looked up at the others. "As far as I am concerned, our time together has come to an end. Mercenary, our pact is concluded; I am happy to be quit of you."

"The feeling's mutual, captain."

"Where will you go?" Allera asked.

"Anywhere but here," he responded.

"Priest, we are done with you as well, and I cannot say that it has been pleasant knowing you."

"Fair enough," Varo said.

Talen looked at Kupra and Setarcos. "Mage, I do not feel equipped to be your judge for anything that you have done while serving that madman. Go, and I strongly suggest that you keep going until you are far from here."

"Talen, we can't just leave her here," Allera said.

"Indeed, I would appreciate it if we could accompany you to Camar, if is your intention to return there," Setarcos said. "From there, I can arrange for a ship back to Drusia, and perhaps can help Kupra... readjust to a new life."

"Staying with us will not be a boon to you," Talen said. "We are marked for death in Camar, all of us. We are rebels against the authority of the Duke."

"Ah. And yet you will return?"

Talen nodded.

"Well then, it still seems like we would be better off journeying in your company. From what I can see from here, the road north is a dangerous one, and I expect that you will be especially vigilant when it comes to avoiding... trouble... on the way. When we reach Camar, we will depart your company and burden you no more."

Talen looked down at Allera. "Very well," he said. "But just the two of you. I have had quite enough of the rest of the 'Doomed Bastards'."

"Don't worry, you won't cross my path, captain," Dar said. He shrugged his pack up over his shoulders, and turned away. But Allera stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"What?"

"Good luck to you," she said.

“I make my own luck,” he shot back. But then his expression softened slightly. “Don’t throw your life away for your cause.”

“Some causes are worth it,” she said, not meeting his eyes.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t know.” Turning away again, he walked down the hill, until the night had swallowed him up.

“What of you, cleric?” Talen asked.

But Varo was already gone.

The four remaining survivors of Rappan Athuk adjusted their packs, and retraced their steps back down the hill. Talen led them well to the east before starting north, giving the Dungeon of Graves, and the embattled soldiers of Camar, a wide berth.

Within minutes, the hillside was quiet again, save for the distant sounds of battle that filtered down across the crest to the north.

THE END OF BOOK 1

The “Doomed Bastards” in the Dungeon of Graves Book 2

Chapter 73

THE SCARLET JEWEL

The city of Camar was known as “The Scarlet Jewel,” from the way that the morning sun rising over the Great Eastern Sea shone upon the city’s red tile roofs in a blaze of glory. Travelers said that the sight of a sunrise over Camar was an experience that changed you forever. Residents of the city tended to scoff at such tales, but they happily took the gold that the travelers brought to their city.

Camar sat adjacent to the mouth of the River Nalos, around a wide bay sheltered from the storms that frequently blew in off the sea five months out of twelve. The city was arranged like a spiral staircase, rising up from the low ground near the bay, up onto a hill that rose up in a gentle slope to the northwest. The top step of the stair was the High District, looking down over the city, home to the estates of Camar’s noble families, and the palace of the Grand Duke.

The Gold Quarter was populated by those who made their business through the trading of wealth. Gold didn’t literally pave the streets here, but by anyone’s reckoning there was more of the stuff—along with generous helpings of platinum, silver, jewels, and anything else of value to men—in the quarter’s vaults and counting houses than anywhere in the world. The quarter also housed the Great Square, with the Cathedral of the Shining Father at one end, and the notorious Wall of Regret on the other. The bodies hanging from the Wall were a constant presence, now, replaced by fresh corpses at a regular interval. It was a sad counter to the majestic aura of the grand church, but the thousands who conducted business in the square learned to ignore the grim sight.

The Trades Quarter bustled with almost as much activity as the Gold. It was one of the oldest parts of the city, and in some places, the buildings were built in layers that had been added slowly over four or even five different centuries. It was said that the craftsmen of Trades could manufacture any item known to man. The city’s renown University was also located here, with five thousand students crowded into a campus tucked neatly into a niche along the city’s outer wall.

The Docks Quarter was as big as the rest of the city combined, sprawling out around the crescent shaped bay. Ships from all over the world came into that bay during all but the very worst months of winter, disgorging people and goods from every nation known to the mapmakers of Camar, and occasionally from one that was not. Four times in the city’s history the outer walls of the city had been extended outward, and four times a new flood of people had surged in to fill the space. The Docks were a chaotic, crowded,

dangerous, and lively place, and one hundred thousand people lived their entire lives here, sometimes never leaving the place from the moment they first drew breath, to the moment they took their last. “Why leave?” diehard Dockers would ask. Everything in the world that one could think of wanting could be found there.

Licinius Varo, disguised as a swarthy Eremite sailor, might have been thinking the same thing as he made his way down Minter’s Alley, one of a thousand dingy, crowded back streets that twisted throughout the Docks. A mule, loaded with covered wicker panniers, followed obediently behind him. Off the main boulevards, where the Duke’s heavily-armed soldiers kept order, the city seemed like a different place entire, exotic and menacing. A half-dozen back-alley merchants and toughs had challenged Varo since his entry. The former lost interest when they saw the cut of his clothes and the lean lines of his face, while the latter took one look at the man’s eyes before deciding to look elsewhere for prey.

He’d almost reached the end of the alley before he turned into a side passage so narrow and crowded with junk that a casual passerby would have probably missed it. The mule followed along, its panniers scraping against the close walls.

The side-alley opened onto a tiny plaza. Tired old buildings surrounded it, sagging inward so much that the sky above was just a tiny square above. Sounds echoed here; a shouted argument in a foreign language, the bawling of a child, the barking of a dog.

Varo saw what he was looking for. The boy, barely in his teens by the look of him, was sitting in a recessed doorway, regarding him with a look that combined boredom with shrewd evaluation.

“Armides?”

“Who’s askin’?” the boy said.

Varo leaned in, and whispered a name, so softly that no one but the boy could have heard. His demeanor changed at once, and he sprang up, bringing both man and mule into the building so quickly that the place seemed to swallow them up.

Varo found himself in a dingy inside room lit only by a struggling tallow candle. The boy efficiently started unloading the mule, laying the panniers out in a row on the dusty floor.

“What happened to Davos?” Varo asked.

“Taken,” the boy said, without interrupting his work.

Varo nodded. It had been the same everywhere he’d checked since his arrived in Camar. Bravik, Jathen, a dozen more names, all swept up in the Duke’s net. Even Patrides, it seemed. The first three safeholds he’d visited since arriving in Camar had been traps, exposed by the Duke and left to snare one such as him. It seemed as

though his own arrest and trial had only whetted the Duke's appetite for squashing the cult of Dagos in his city.

Worship of Dagos had always been frowned upon in Camar, where the tall spires of the Cathedral of the Shining Father dominated the city skyline. But since the ascendancy of the current Grand Duke, those who served the entity commonly known as the Dark Creeper had been persecuted with more vigor, and more success than Varo would have liked to admit. Those like him were expert at hiding in the shadows, but the Duke, it seemed had grown adept at seeing into the places where the Creepers liked to hide.

It occurred to Varo that he was almost certainly the most powerful cleric of Dagos left alive within a thousand miles.

The boy started to unlash the fastenings on one of the panniers, but Varo stopped him. "Take the mule, do with it as you wish," he said. "Leave me alone here."

The boy nodded obediently and departed with the creature, closing the door behind him.

It took Varo about a minute to find and open the secret door; the building had settled some, it seemed, straining the mechanism. When he finally got it open, it revealed a staircase that dropped precipitously into darkness below.

Leaving the candle, Varo took out the stub of wood that still bore Aelos's *continual flame* upon its end. He tucked the stick into his belt, leaving his hands free. It took him several trips and a *bull's strength* spell to get the panniers into the lower chamber, but he managed it.

The underground chamber showed no signs of intrusion, but Varo had no intention of remaining here. If the Duke had penetrated the cult to the extent of seizing Patrides, then none of their secrets were safe. There was an entrance here to the sewers that ran under the city, but while that might make him harder to find, it was hardly security. The Dark Guild ruled the undercity, and while they shared a hatred of the Duke with the Creepers, they welcomed no one into their realm.

He piled his cargo in the middle of the room, and opened one of the cases. The preparation for the ritual took about twenty minutes, and ended with Varo sketching a series of designs upon the floor with a slab of chalk. That was followed by a more careful application of powdered silver from a tiny bag he carried. When it was done, there were two circles upon the floor, one containing Varo and his gear, and the other empty.

This course, while necessary, was not without risks of its own. If Patrides had somehow been coopted—difficult, but possible given the resources apparently commanded by the Duke—then the final safehold might have already been compromised. But if that was the case, then he was finished anyway. He could have fled the city; the length of the Duke's reach was limited, and there were those who looked to Dagos in other lands.

But there was no time. He'd felt the sands falling through the hourglass in his thoughts since leaving Rappan Athuk, and he often wondered if he was already too late.

Making an effort, he calmed his thoughts. The last time he had been in a place like this, he had not had sufficient power to complete the ritual. Patrides had shown him, though, had given him the knowledge that he would need later. Had he known, what would befall him and his kin?

Varo squelched that thought as well, locking it in a box within his mind. He needed his full concentration to focus upon the ritual. What he was doing was easier due to the preparation of those who had come before him, but it was not simple by any definition of the word.

The words had been etched into his memory, and came at his call. He had to sacrifice a good part of his spell power, and a small bit of his own personal power as well, to fuel the ritual. It took less time than Varo had expected, the power surging in answer to his summons.

Looking up, he saw that he had been successful.

"I seek entry into the Farthest Hold, by the terms of our compact," he said.

You are the last, the slaad said, its deep croaks overlaid with meaning as the creature's words echoed in his mind. *Your kin have fallen, one by one. Your time grows short upon this world, mortal.*

Varo met the creature's alien gaze calmly. "That is true of all men," he said. "I may be the last, but you are still bound to obey. I will command you if necessary, but you need only comply. Open the way, and I will presume upon your time no further."

Your master compels me, the slaad's voice sounded in his head. *I will comply...*

And then everything swirled around Varo, and he was enfolded in a chaotic surge of power that blacked out everything, including his awareness.

A heartbeat later, the hidden chamber was empty once more.

Chapter 74

THE BUCKER'S HOIST

Even in Camar's Docks district, already a dodgy part of the city, there were slums. Like any city, the bulk of Camar's population was poor, and they crammed together in

unhealthy quantities in dirty, ramshackle buildings situated in close rows upon the already narrow streets. Even under the strict order maintained by the Duke, violence was common in this part of the city, as people with few options took out their frustrations upon each other.

And then there were the *slums*, areas where even honest thieves feared to tread, let alone the soldiers in gold and red. This was where where the detritus of the city washed up, to live out their wretched lives in squalor, preying upon one another. In these parts of the city, the trade in narcotics, flesh, and sex were among the tamer businesses. The Duke's men kept a close eye on these districts, but mainly to make sure that their residents' perfidy remained restricted within.

One of the more notorious of these neighborhoods was the Pike, so called because it was situated on a long stretch of reclaimed land between two filthy canals. This strip of territory was barely a hundred feet across, and yet there were hundreds of rickety buildings crowded onto that spit of land, separated by narrow alleys where the sun's light almost never reached the street. Once the area had been a bustling mercantile district, but a former ruler of the city had ordered its three main bridges destroyed, to allow ships to pass further up the canals without obstruction. Since then, the place had fallen far.

Sometimes well-heeled folk from the other quarters would make their way to these places, seeking adventure, or access to illicit vices not available elsewhere. Sometimes those people would vanish into the mess of the slums, and never came back. To some, that danger only enhanced the lure.

The short, slender figure that made it way down a dark street colorfully known as the Way of Daggers might have been one of these. Covered in a dark, cowled cloak that completely concealed its form, something about it nevertheless seemed to convey the impression that it did not belong here. Maybe it was just the fact that the cloak was clean, instead of being covered in mud and shit, like everything else in the Pike.

The cloaked figure reached its destination, a dark building that hovered over one of the canals, leaning slightly out over the water as if considering diving in. The place had a sign, but it was so weathered and caked with soot that it was impossible to tell what it had once said.

The stranger opened the door, and for a second the street was transformed. Light, smoke, raucus laughter, and even some noise that might have been music poured out into the alley. Then the cloaked person entered the place, and as the door slammed shut behind it the darkness returned as before.

Inside, the place was a scene of almost uncontrolled chaos. The Bucker's Hoist was a dive bar that seemed to go out of its way to emphasize the "dive". About sixty people were crowded into a common room that seemed built for half that many. Smoke hung in the air like a dense fog, and faces drifted in and out of it like apparitions. The "music"

came from a performer huddled in a corner, squeezing out notes from an old flute that had clearly missed its prime.

The stranger passed through the narrow corridor that extended between the long bar and the overcrowded tables. Nobody molested the newcomer; within the depths of that cowl, anything could have been lurking. People in the Pike were not averse to taking advantage of the unwary, but they knew enough not to take things at face value.

The cloaked figure reached a door at the end of the room. It was guarded by a hulking brute that looked to have more than a little orc blood in his veins. A few words were exchanged; money changed hands and the door opened.

The inner room was less crowded than the one outside, but no less noisy. There was another bar in here, and women as well, most clad in a manner that left no doubt as to their profession. The patrons were scattered at tables around the perimeter of the place, leaving the center of the room mostly open. Bloodstains covered the floor in that area, suggesting that it was used for other sorts of sport from time to time.

The cloaked stranger looked around for a minute. One of the doxies showed some interest, but it was clear that the figure was not interested. Instead, it started across the room. A lean man in black standing on a narrow staircase along one wall spotted it and moved to intercept.

The stranger did not appear to notice. It moved to the far side of the room, where a deep alcove jutted off the main part of the floor. There were only a few booths in the shadowy recesses of the back, with black curtains that could be drawn forward for privacy.

The cloaked figure headed directly for one of these. Its occupant was a tall, muscled man with a day's growth of beard covering rugged features. His black hair fell down loosely around his head, but couldn't fully conceal the fact that one of his ears had been cut down to a mere nub, or that a pair of scars ran along his left cheek. He was clad in a loose tunic of black silk that had been unlaced enough to reveal his hairy chest, and while he bore no obvious weapons, one look was enough to tell that he was a warrior.

He was accompanied in the booth by a pair of women, one blonde, the other red-haired, both buxom and clothed only if one allowed a loose interpretation of the term.

The stranger stood in front of the booth. The man from the staircase took up a position behind the cowed figure, looming a head over him, his hand on the hilt of a short sword.

"Dar?" the stranger asked, in a quiet, dangerous voice.

The warrior looked up. Something dangerous flashed in his eyes. "Yeah. What do you want?"

The cloaked figure stood there, his identity hidden in the shadows of his cowl. The guard started to draw his weapon, but Dar forestalled him with a wave of his hand. “No, I’m here,” he said, smacking the table. He seemed a bit drunk. “I knew you bastards would send somebody; well, I’m here. Go ahead. What do you want?”

The figure reached up and drew back its hood.

“Hey, it’s a girl!” one of the wenches said.

“Hello, Dar,” Allera said.

Chapter 75

A TALK BETWEEN OLD FRIENDS

“I can’t believe you’re hiding out in a place like this,” Allera said. She and Dar were alone in the booth; the fighter had banished both the women and the guard as soon as he’d recovered from his surprise at seeing the healer.

“What’s wrong with the Hoist?” Dar asked.

She looked around. “It’s a dump, Dar. You had all that money, I thought you were going to get out of Camar...”

“Hey!” he said, his words slurring slightly. “I *own* this dump!”

She leaned across the table, and lowered her voice earnestly. “If I was able to find you here, then the Duke’s men surely will as well. I mean, you’re using your real name, by the gods! I’m surprised that one of these... people... haven’t turned you in already.”

“Let them come,” the fighter said. He lifted his drink—there was a bottle at the table—and drained a deep swallow.

“Why did you come back here? You didn’t survive Rappan Athuk just to throw your life away, did you?”

“I had no idea you cared, my dear lady.”

She looked at his face critically. “Have you been fighting?”

“Why? Want to put down a wager? I warn you, nobody’s been able to take me down yet, though there was this bastard of a half-orc...”

Allera glanced back at the bloody floor, and blanched. "You mean, you've been... Oh, Dar, what is *wrong* with you! People are dying, and you..."

"Everybody dies, princess," he said harshly, cutting her off. "And you know what? Nobody gives a shit."

"Some people do care."

"Yeah, and where does it get them? Caring didn't save your marshal's life, and it didn't save Shaylara, or any of the others."

"I didn't come here to argue with you, Dar."

"Why *did* you come here? I seem to recall our last meeting, it didn't end with us promising to look each other up to salute old times." He took the bottle in his fist, but he didn't drink.

"We need you, Dar."

"Oh. So you're still on about that revolution of yours, eh? In case you haven't noticed, princess, the rebellion is dead. The Duke's got Camar wrapped up in an iron fist. Tiros is dead, along with those who felt like him."

"Not all, Dar. There are those of us who are still fighting for what is right."

"Right? You *can't* be that naïve. Not after what we saw, together."

"It is exactly because of what we saw in Rappan Athuk that I *can* see," Allera insisted. "You're right, things are terrible, and people are suffering. The Duke's power is stronger than it has ever been."

"But to just lay down our arms, give up! *That* is the coward's course. We have to take responsibility for the world that we make for ourselves, Corath. I know you're not afraid of the Duke, or his men... I saw what you did in Rappan Athuk, you don't have to prove anything to me, or to anyone else. But you can make a difference. We *need* your sword."

Dar leaned back. "Did Talen send you to me?"

"Talen doesn't know I'm here. If he knew that I'd come..."

Dar chuckled. "Yeah, I guess I can imagine what he'd say."

"Think about it, please. You know that the Duke's men will come for you, eventually. You thought that I was one of his enforcers, at first. If you didn't want a confrontation, you wouldn't *be* here."

“Maybe I’m just a fool. Maybe I’ve got a death wish.”

“No. No, you are a man that wants to survive. You wouldn’t have lived through what you did, if you weren’t driven to live. And it’s not just about the money, no matter what you said before. If it was, you’d be in Drusia, or somewhere else about a thousand leagues away.”

“Maybe I just don’t care anymore.”

“Then maybe you need something to care about.”

He looked at her for a long stretch, maybe ten seconds. Then he laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Talen was right. You are a diplomat,” he said. “I swear, you almost had me going with all that self-sacrifice crap.”

“Is it so hard to believe that someone might believe it?”

“Look around you. There aren’t many people here who put much stock in belief.”

“Tiros believed in something.”

“Yeah, and look what it got him.”

“Varo told me about how he died. He and Varo had made it to the stairs; he didn’t have to turn around to face that worm. But he did.”

“Then he was a fool. If our positions had been reversed, / would not have stopped.”

“In Rappan Athuk, you put your life on the line for all of us, several times.”

Dar laughed. “That’s what you saw? I was trying to stay alive, lady. If it came down to an exit and throwing my life away to save the lot of you, I know which way I would have gone.

She met his eyes for several long, silent seconds. “I believe you,” she said. “And that is more sad for you.”

His expression turned sour. “Look, princess, let’s cut through the bullshit and get right down to it. What’s in it for me?”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“You mean, you want money?”

“Well, you heard Talen, he called me ‘mercenary’ all the time. I don’t think he ever used my damned name, the prick. But no, I’ve got lots of money. No, if I’m going to jump on this wagon, I want to know where it’s going.”

“What does that mean?”

“Don’t be coy, healer. I know a bit of history—the violent bits, at least. When the smoke clears from this sort of ‘popular revolt’, there’s usually a lot of reshuffling at the top. Titles, lands, wealth...”

“You want... a barony?”

“Lord Dar... has a nice sort of ring, don’t you think?” He grinned at her.

“We’re not setting ourselves up to be the new rulers of Camar,” Allera said. “We don’t want to just replace the current, corrupt system with a mirror of itself. I don’t know what the new government will look like, but the people will have a chance to have their voices heard...”

“Oh, that’s nice. ‘The people’ are too damned stupid to wipe their asses, let alone rule a kingdom. Tiros, Talen, and their followers... they may be idealists, but they aren’t stupid. Not *that* kind of stupid, anyway. No, I trust that Talen will remember his friends... or perhaps more accurately, that *you* will ensure that he doesn’t forget me.”

She took a deep breath. “I cannot promise anything to you at this point. But say that I can get the... ‘consideration’ that you are seeking. You will help us, then?”

“Well, I’m talking about it, which shows that I’m probably as crazy as you said. But what you’re asking me to do is akin to walking back into Rappan Athuk. I’m not going to just do that on your words of a ‘better Camar’ and all that, or even on a flimsier hope of land and title.”

“Look, if you want something else, just come out and say it.”

“All right, princess. I want you.”

There was a pause. “What?”

“Oh, I think you heard me again. And don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m getting at.”

“You...” She stood suddenly, her chair sliding back noisily. “You pig!”

“Maybe, but I’m not the one who is willing to sacrifice *anything* for the cause.”

She slapped him, hard, but he only laughed. She turned away, but he grabbed onto her arm, and dragged her back down into the booth.

“Now look whose turn it is to have her values thrown in her face,” he said.

“Let me go.”

“Or what? You’ll heal me to death?”

Her eyes narrowed. “My art is committed to preserving life. But my knowledge of the human body is not limited to just how to fix it.”

He glanced down, and saw a dagger in her hand, its blade pressed between them, close against his tunic. He couldn’t quite see its blade clearly, but there was *something* smeared on the blade.

“Poison? Doesn’t that violate like thirty or forty lines in the Healer Code?”

“Release me.”

He chuckled and let her go. She jerked away, and stood.

“You know, I think I want you more now than ever,” he said.

“The Duke’s men can flay your skin of your bones, for all I care,” she hissed at him.

“Ah, but then who will help you win your little revolution?”

“Go to the Abyss.”

“I may yet,” he said. She started to turn, but he cut her off with another harsh statement. “Consider carefully, healer. The offer ends the moment you step out of this room. I’ll fight for your cause; hell, I’ll cut off the Duke’s fucking head myself. But only if you give me what I want.”

She stopped. She didn’t turn around, but she didn’t leave, either.

“How many men does Talen have left, again?”

She didn’t respond. He chuckled again.

“Heck, you might even like it.”

“You are a bastard.”

“I am that. But don’t worry, sweets, I’ll be gentle. Unless you like it rough.”

She turned, her eyes narrowed to cold slits. They glanced down at Dar’s side. Since their brief altercation, she could now see what had been invisible under the table before.

“You still have his sword.”

Dar glanced down and patted the hilt of *Valor*. “The sword seems to agree with me better now. Maybe it just needed a little time to get used to my unique style.”

“Talen said you were the finest swordsman he’d ever seen.”

“Did he now? Well, that touches my heart, coming from him, especially.”

She looked at him. “Fine,” she said.

“Fine what?”

“I will give you what you want, in exchange for your service.”

He smiled at her. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. But after. First the service, then the reward. You swear to our cause, and then I will swear to... to give you what you ask for, once the Duke has been overthrown.”

“Just like a little dog, eh? Well, fine, princess, I will do your my tricks for my treat. If you swear on it, I’ll take you at your word.”

She looked at him with a stare of cold fury, so different from her usual calm demeanor. For a moment, Dar thought she might lose control, but then she took a deep breath, and visibly mastered herself.

“You have my word.”

She walked around the edge of the table, then turned back to face him briefly.

“Be at the Market Square fountain at highsun in two days.”

“I’ll be there.”

Once more, she started to turn around, but again his voice stopped her.

“Wear something nice.”

She yanked up her hood and stormed out, and this time even the hardest of the Hoist's patrons saw her coming and gave her space to pass.

Dar lingered in the booth, looking at the bottle. The girls and his enforcer came by to see him, but he waved them all away. He remained there for a long time, a quiet island in the noisy din of the dive tavern.

Chapter 76

VARO'S CHOICE

Licinius Varo sat in a padded armchair, clad in a simple robe that clung to his lean form. He'd been a comfortable-looking man at once time, approaching portly, but his experience in Rappan Athuk seemed to have scoured him, leaving only bones and skin and a hard edge like that of a sword's blade. He'd replaced the patch covering the eye he'd lost in the Dungeon of Graves, instead using a glass imitation that more or less matched his good eye. The former tended to focus on different things than the latter, however, which added a certain eeriness to his appearance.

The cleric was writing in a large, leather-bound tome, his pen darting across the parchment, pausing only to draw more ink from the reservoir balanced precariously on one of the chair's arms. There was another, rougher sheet spread over the adjacent page, covered in a shorthand scrawl that was also his. He was in a small study, with wood-paneled walls and shelves that were bare save for a few thick books and some more writing materials. In addition to the armchair, there was a compact desk that was cluttered with papers. There was one exit, a narrow arch leading to a carpeted hallway. A diffuse light filled the place, originating from nowhere in particular.

Finally, he stopped writing, and leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment. Without looking, he moved the inkwell to the adjacent end table, recovering the lid and settling it in place. He put the quill atop the container, and let out a deep breath.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the writing. He would have to go through it again, to verify that his memory and notes had recorded everything correctly. Every single word. Review of the meaning could come later.

He got up and put the book down on the table, after inserting a piece of blotting material between the pages he'd been working on. Then he stood and walked across the room, rubbing his eyes with ink-stained fingers.

The book was named the *Codex Thanara*, and in some ways, it had been his life's work. He'd first uncovered it twenty years ago, a time when he'd been a very different man than he was today.

For one thing, he'd still been a servant of the Shining Father, in those days.

The book as he'd first encountered it had been a fragmentary collection of loose passages and fragments from a larger work, which its original compiler, a monk named Gravius Thelad, had presumed lost. Thelad had died before Varo's grandfather had been born, and much of the book was his commentaries upon the material therein, and musings on what might have comprised the missing portions.

The book was in many ways excruciating to read. Some of the references were but a few words long, with pages and pages of missing text. In other cases, the book contained several pages of intact material dealing with esoteric subjects, only to abruptly and suddenly end right when something important had been raised.

The book also had a very strong personal significance for Varo, as it had led to his Fall.

The cleric sighed and stopped his pacing. Not coincidentally, he'd ended up right where he'd started, with the book.

He had to make a decision, he knew. He couldn't stay here any longer; in fact he'd likely taken too much of a risk staying as long as he had.

He stepped over to the desk and looked at the note again. There was no signature, but the hand of Patrises was as familiar to him as his own.

The message was dated fifteen days ago. The same day he'd entered Rappan Athuk.

My friend Licinius:

If you find this message, then you must already know that you are the last. I take no solace in knowing that I was right, and that the danger posed by the Duke overshadowed any threat that might lurk within Rappan Athuk. As I write this, the Duke's enforcers have already taken Bravik and Jathen, and others are no doubt being swept up in his nets. I do not blame you for drawing additional attention to our activities; I suspect that these actions would have taken place regardless of your arrest. Quite simply, we refused to accommodate ourselves to the new order, unlike our brothers of the Father, and thus we could not be tolerated.

I have already stayed here longer than is safe. Upon finishing this missive, I will summon the Guardian and return to Camar, to do my best to undo what has been done. I wish you the best of fortune, and hope that the Eyes of the Watcher will be upon you as you follow your own destiny.

Varo put down the letter, and looked again at the other scroll that Patrises had left behind. He hadn't decided what to do with *that*, but it was clear that his former mentor had intended for him to finish his mission. The significance of what was written on that

second piece of parchment had complicated things greatly. The fact that it was here had suggested that Patrides had known that he would most likely fail. And the fact that he had failed meant that Varo was confronted with a very difficult choice.

Varo took up the book, and went to another chamber. He passed a bedroom, his armor and weapons scattered on one of the beds. Continuing down the hallway, the wood-paneled walls of the study gave way to bare stone, and he ended up in a small workroom. As he entered the place, his gaze lingered on the doorway in the far wall. Beyond lay the fourth and final room of this sanctuary, and the source of his current indecision. Without conscious intent he found himself going there, and facing his...

What? Prisoner? Guest? Salvation? Curse? The first term might have been chosen by a casual observer. The elf was bound to a wooden rack anchored to the stone wall by black iron fixtures. He hung limply in his bindings, unconscious or insensate, deep within whatever madness still gripped him.

Varo sat down in the small chair in the corner, and watched him.

He could not stay here. If he did, he would eventually end up as mad as the poor creature that fate—or something else—had put within his power. The walls of this shelter were warded, which allowed it to persist in a stable state at all. The sanctuary was located on the plane of Pandemonium, and even in a shielded locale such as this, the eddies of raw power that filled this place had unleashed chaos in his dreams. Eventually, he knew, dream and reality would become intertwined, and he would be driven insane.

This place, so far beyond the reach of their enemies on the Prime, was no sanctuary, he thought. Patrides had known that. In a way, it was a prison.

When he'd first arrived here—how many days had it been?—he hadn't been sure of what he would find. He'd broken Bant's *baleful polymorph* enchantment, restoring the elf to his natural form. For his own safety—and, he suspected, that of his captive—he had secured the elf to the rack. He'd given the elf food and water, had cleaned up after its biological functions, but the creature did not respond to his questions. For all intents and purposes, it was lost in the same deep coma that it had been in when they'd found it in the dark temple under Rappan Athuk. For two days, he'd tried a variety of spells and prompts, but had gotten no answers from it. He'd even briefly resorted, reluctantly, to physical coercion, but pain stirred the elf no more than anything else.

Then, he'd gotten an unexpected response. He'd brought the *Codex* into the room, skimming the passages to see if there was a clue to his current dilemma somewhere in its pages. He must have read something aloud at some point. He almost didn't realize that the elf had spoken, but when he looked up, and saw the elf staring at him, he felt something cold clench in his chest.

He'd stood and walked over to his captive. The elf was still staring at him, but his eyes were empty, and did not follow his movements. He repeated the fragment he'd read from the book. The passage he'd read was only a few words here and there, bits from a larger document referenced at the "Epitath of the Final Sacrament."

"Where for the glory... not in the skin, that tattered rag... let the worms feast upon it."

The elf responded,

Where for the glory of the horned one does the true essence lie?

Not in the skin, that tattered rag that clothes us; strip it away.

Not in the flesh, mere meat to rot to nothing; let the worms feast upon it.

There had been more. At almost every prompting, the elf had responded, filling in sections of the *Codex*, filling Varo's head with knowledge that had exploded years of assumptions. He had recorded everything furiously, spending days with the elf, forgetting to take food and water, eschewing rest, until his body nearly collapsed under him.

Now, he stood facing his enigma. There were no more passages to recite; he had wrung everything from the elf that it had to give.

He spoke. The elf did not stir; this passage was not from the *Codex*. No, this had been told to him by another, by a floating skull within the dungeons of Rappan Athuk.

His question had been, "What is the key to defeating the aspirations of Orcus upon this Prime Material?" The answer he'd gotten was what he said now.

"The Lord of Darkness will ascend to rule
Lest the apostate, the general, and the elflord
Have their heart, soul, and mind returned to them
The three anchors of power are broken
And the mortal triad in their full awareness
Confront the Master in his den."

Varo had not gotten a good night's sleep since the Oracle had spoken to him. It was possible, likely even, that the creature was just another lie, a test like everything else in Rappan Athuk. But he could not shake its words.

He had not shared the words with anyone else, until this moment.

He thought he understood part of it. He was the apostate, and while the 'elflord' may have been any of the thousands of elves that lived within or near the borders of Camar, it stretched the bounds of coincidence too far for him to be any other than the poor wretch before him. The general... Tiros? If so, then it was possible that he'd already failed, and the fate outlined in the *Codex* in graphically vivid language was doomed to occur.

No. He could not accept that. Even if he was doomed, even if they were all doomed, he could only continue to fight against that fate, the knowledge of which had transformed his life when he had first opened the dusty old tome twenty years ago.

"I am sorry," he said to the elf.

And then he turned and walked with purpose back to the workroom.

Chapter 77

ANATOMY OF A COUP

"Nice headquarters you guys have here," Dar said.

Talen regarded him with a cold expression. "We make do with what we have, mercenary."

The two men stood facing each other within the open hold of the merchantman *Fortune's Folly*. A gentle rain pattered on the deck above, but did little to mute the noises of Camar's bustling harbor that trickled in through the open hatches.

"I'm surprised that the Duke's wizards have not sussed out your hiding place yet," Dar said easily. "Or have had one of your own turn you in for a cart full of silver."

The young men that had escorted Dar into the ship's hold bristled, but Talen restrained them with a wave of his hand. "The mages of the Guild of Sorcery are not omnipotent, and there are means to defeat magical viewing," the captain said. "Just being on open water has a way of fouling some forms of magic."

"I had no idea you were so broadly versed in the arts of conspiracy, Talen," the fighter said with a grin.

"It was Marshal Tiros who did most of the organizing," Talen said. "He had a number of contingencies in place... even for his death."

“Looks like his planning ahead paid off.”

“Allera said you had agreed to help us.”

“Indeed. I found that I missed your company just *too* much.”

“She spoke of your desire for a reward.”

“Oh? That is a surprise.”

“We will speak of prizes if and when the Duke has been overthrown,” the captain said. “But rest assured that a liberated Camar will have need of leaders to help move it forward back toward liberty and stability.”

“Ah. Well, my dear captain, the people have stability now, and from all accounts, most consider liberty highly overrated.”

“They are not so placid as you might assume. The Duke has at best a reluctant allegiance from the mercantile guilds, and from what I am told, there are those in the Guild of Sorcery and the Church of the Shining Father who would be quite happy to see a replacement come forward.”

“Being willing to countenance an alternative and being willing to support insurrection are two different things.”

“I know that. We all do. But we are prepared to do our best to bring about the necessary change.”

Dar leaned against a nearby strut. “So, what’s the plan?”

Talen smiled, but it was cold. “Now you must really take me for a fool. You will be briefed when we are ready to carry out the operation.”

“Not too long, I hope. I have a business to run, and important things to consider. My neck, for one.”

“Don’t worry yourself unduly. We have a plan, and we have resources to draw upon. It will succeed.”

“Your optimism is notable,” Dar said. “Say, where’s Allera?”

“She is out in the city gathering supplies. Don’t worry, we’ll do our best to entertain you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come now. You don’t imagine that we could let you go back into the city, now that you’ve seen this place?”

“You going to stop me?” Dar asked. He pushed slightly away from the spar, bringing the hilt of his sword within easy reach.

There was a sudden and dramatic shift in the atmosphere in the hold. In addition to the two men behind him, there were several others within view nearby, all of whom carried weapons openly. And there had been at least half a dozen others on the upper deck of the ship, within an easy shout.

There was a loud crack, and several people jumped as a hatch in the floor sprang open. A wiry old man’s head popped up, and looked around.

“Eh? What’s with all the racket up here?”

“Master Alucinor,” Talen said. “I apologize if we disturbed your work.”

“If you want those bombs ready by Founder’s Day, then you’d best not disturb my concentration,” the old man said, pointing a finger at the captain. “It’s bad enough with all this... rocking. Very inconvenient! And that ‘assistant’ you sent down, Jaros? It’s impossible to think with him always humming!”

“I’ll see if we can’t find someone else to help you, Master Alucinor,” Talen said. The old man snorted and disappeared back down the hatch, slamming the hatch after him.

“Bombs, eh?” Dar asked.

“We’ve got hammocks set up in the forward hold,” Talen said. “Grab one; I’ll have food, drink, cards, and dice sent up.”

Dar held the captain’s stare for a moment longer. “Fine,” he said. “But this had better be building up to something good.”

Chapter 78

MOVING IN HIGH CIRCLES

The man known as the Patriarch, High Priest of the Shining Father in the city of Camar, entered his private office. The place, situated directly above the Holy Nave in the architectural marvel that was the Great Cathedral, was traditionally a place of reflection and virtue for the most powerful cleric of Camar’s dominant religion. The High Priest

had a staff of twenty working in the public office below, but here, through three windows that offered magnificent views of the city and the bay beyond, the nominal leader of the city's faithful could stand in silent and solitary contemplation of the greatness of the gods' creation.

The Patriarch had crossed the floor halfway to his desk when he paused, and frowned. There was a large object on his desk, covered in a square of black silk.

Grasping his holy symbol, the Patriarch summoned the power of the Father, sensing for the presence of evil. Whatever the thing under the cover was, it was not malevolent. Curious, the cleric was about to detect for magic when a voice brought his attention around.

"Hello, Gaius."

The cleric started and spun around, his hand still clutched tight upon his holy symbol. His eyes widened as a figure stepped out of the air, and then his face twisted into a snarl as he recognized the intruder.

"Varo! You dare to come here?"

"Calm yourself. I only wish to talk with you for a moment."

"Heretic! I have no interest in hearing your words!" Summoning the power of his patron, he surrounded himself with a *Shield of Law*.

"Impressive. But I have no intention of attacking you, Gaius."

"Then you shall feel the vengeance that your victims have cried out for," the cleric hissed, reaching out for his magic once more.

"Kylan Toledra."

The cleric flinched as though he'd been struck a physical blow. "What?"

"You know the name, Patriarch. If I do not leave this chamber, it and four other names: Lale Tonneth, Palden Sur, Allen Jangar, and Edwin Karedes, will be spoken the length and breadth of Camar."

"How... how *could* you know..."

"The Church of the Father is no stranger to scandal, of course. But to have in the passing of a single year, in one province, five boys, three priests in three different villages..."

"You are delusional if you think you can stain me with those names! I was blameless..."

“I am sorry, I did not mean to imply that you were the perpetrator of such vile acts, Patriarch. But as it happens, you *were* the bishop of the diocese of Yelen when those cases occurred. Strange, how the cases never came before the Ecclesiastic Council, isn't it? And while all three priests retired soon thereafter, there was no formal punishment, was there?”

The Patriarch fixed Varo with a stare that was equal parts hatred and dread. “What do you want, heathen?”

Varo nodded in the direction of the covered object upon the Patriarch's desk.

Wary, the high priest walked over to his desk. He shot a glance back at Varo, as if suspecting that the other cleric would creep up behind him to strike. But Varo merely stood where he had been, watching.

“What foul artifact is this?” the Patriarch asked.

“See for yourself.”

The Patriarch grabbed onto the silk cloth and drew it back. Below, shining brightly in the diffuse late afternoon light coming through the room's tall windows, was the bronze bowl that Varo had taken from Banth's quarters in Rappan Athuk. Recently polished, it gleamed brilliantly, the deeply etched runes around the perimeter of the bowl catching the light.

“It is a *brazier of commanding fire elementals*,” Varo said. “Sulphur, added to the flame, greatly augments the potency of the conjured creature. To that I can personally attest.”

The Patriarch looked at him, suspicion obvious in his eyes.

“Oh, it is genuine, Gaius,” Varo said. “Feel free to use your diviniatory powers to confirm it; I will wait.”

“The summoning words?”

Varo drew out a small, tightly-wound parchment scroll. “I will hand them to you when we have reached an amiable exchange. I imagine, that with all the symbolism of the ‘burning torch’ and the ‘warding flame’ that the holy church uses, this item will be quite... *useful*, for you to possess. If nothing else, it might liven up the Midsummer Flame ritual somewhat.”

The Patriarch had run his fingers along the edge of the bowl as Varo had spoken, but now he turned around. “I will not lend the power of the Most Holy Church to the aid of the cult of the Dark Creeper.”

“Nor would I ask you to. No, you know as well as I that my ‘cult’, as you call it, is riven. The church of Dagos is in ruins; my former associates have been imprisoned and tortured to death by the Duke and his enforcers. No, what I have in mind, it is... more *personal*.”

“By all rights, I should call upon the power of the Father and finish the job, right now.”

Varo tsked. “You could, although I should warn you, my own power has been augmented considerably since you had me sent to my doom. But you are forgetting something. The names, Gaius. The names.”

The high priest considered. Varo looked calm, but he had to make an effort not to reach up and grasp his own divine focus, the same one that he had crafted for himself in Rappan Athuk.

“What do you want, then?” the Patriarch finally asked.

“Three things; a bargain given the value of that bowl. A fully-charged *wand of cure serious wounds*. A scroll with the *greater restoration* spell scribed upon it. And finally, a *periapt of wisdom*, the most powerful of the three varieties.”

“The church does not have one of the last in its inventory,” the Patriarch responded.

“Oh, the one that you wear will suffice,” Varo said. “It is a bargain, Gaius, considering the added value of silence that you earn as a free bonus. Even if you do not elect to keep the bowl, you could certainly sell it to the Guild of Sorcery for enough gold to build another cathedral to the glory of the Father.”

“I will need to go down to the Vaults to...”

“No. You will call Baden Nosk, your private secretary. You will tell him to bring the wand and the scroll from the repository in the Lesser Nave. If you do anything else, or embellish beyond my instructions, then our deal is null and void.”

“I sometimes forget that you were once one of us, Varo.”

“Sometimes I do as well, Gaius. Please decide now. I have other appointments to attend to this day.”

The high priest did as he was bidden, calling his secretary via the pull cord set into the wall behind his desk. Varo stepped into the shadows on the far side of the room where he’d first appeared, out of direct sight of the door. The young Nosk, clad in a crisp robe of new wool, appeared within a minute. He listed to the Patriarch’s orders without comment, and descended immediately to fulfill them.

While they waited, Varo asked, “How fares Valus?”

“Valus?”

“Yes. Last I saw, he and Lord Sobol were fighting off a veritable army of humanoids that did not seem at all pleased at their presence in the region.”

“I was surprised to see one of the Duke’s creatures in the company of one of the higher priests of the Conclave,” Varo said. “From what I have heard, relations between the lord of Camar and the church have been strained of late.”

“The church does not take sides in temporal disputes,” the Patriarch said. “The Duke is the lawful ruler of Camar.”

“Still, some of his policies must be galling. His ban on the casting of spells in his presence is unprecedented, I believe. And from what I have heard, the entire Palace is warded to reveal the use of any magic upon its premises.”

“Such measures are directed against the Guild, not against the church. The Duke is a pious man.”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

“And there are still rebels who refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Duke. But as your foul cult was destroyed, so too shall all other threats to order and the stability of the state be dealt with. Then, the security measures will be less necessary.”

“The justification of exigency is one of the oldest tales in the book.”

“I will not argue political theory with one of the fallen.”

“Theology then, perhaps?”

The Patriarch fell silent, and the two waited for several minutes in uneasy quiet. Finally, Nosk returned, bearing a small white satchel. “Excuse me, Patriarch... I thought I heard voices on the stairs.”

“It is of no concern, Nosk.”

“As you say, Patriarch.” The secretary waited for a moment, but when it became clear that there were no further orders, he turned and departed, closing the door behind him.

The high priest opened up the satchel, and examined its contents. He took an amulet from a slender silver chain around his neck, and added it to the package. “Here, take it,” he said, offering it to Varo.

Varo came across the room and took the satchel. He examined the contents briefly, then with a flick of his wrist tossed the tiny scroll into the bowl. "Our business is concluded."

With a last glance at Varo, the Patriarch took up the scroll and unrolled it. The words written upon it were in an unfamiliar language, but the cleric could feel the echo of power within them. Varo hadn't tricked him; the command words were legitimate.

"Varo, I had best not..." he said, turning.

The cleric was gone.

"Nosk."

The door opened, and the Patriarch's secretary walked back into the room. "You heard?"

The man nodded.

The Patriarch's fist tightened on the scroll in his hand. "Prepare a message for me," he said. "To Lord Sobol, at the Ducal Palace. Begins: My good friend, I have news to share..."

Chapter 79

PREPARATION

Fortune's Folly sat low in the water just off a long, sagging quay on the far northern end of Camar's docks. The squall that had hovered over the city over the last two days had blown away with the coming of the morning, leaving the harbor becalmed, and the entire city unnaturally quiet. It was Seventhday, which was typically a day of rest for most of the city's residents, but it was also the day before a big holiday in the city, the annual commemoration of the city's founding some thousand-odd years before.

In the hold of the merchant ship, some thirty men and women were crowded together. All of the portholes and hatches had been sealed and covered, and the air was thick and warm. The only light shone from the sword of Talen Karedes, who spoke from the center of a ring of attentive bodies.

"The day has come at last. Tonight, we put into fruition the dream of Marshal Velan Tiros, and other greats like him, who dared to stand up to tyranny. The marshal is with us no longer, but his spirit still guides us as we move forward to free Camar from the iron grasp of its corrupt masters."

“You have all sacrificed to make this day possible. Unfortunately, we have had to keep most of you in the dark as to our plans; this was for your safety, but also for the absolute need to keep the security of the operation intact. You all know how talented the Duke’s questioners are at their craft.”

“Now, the time for obfuscation is at an end. From this point out, we go forward together, as brothers and sisters, to live or die as we succeed or fail at our mission.”

“About time,” Dar muttered.

“The palace, as you know, is heavily guarded. In addition to the Duke’s personal cadre of elite guardsmen, the entire place is warded against magic. The Duke has an almost pathological fear of spellcasters, and has forbidden by degree any spellcasting in his presence.”

“You’re saying there’s an anti-magic shell over the entire palace?” Allera asked.

“No. That would be beyond the power of even the Archmages of the Guild of Sorcery to construct. But the wards have been set so that the Duke will instantly be alerted if *any* magic items or active spells are brought within the palace walls. We have tested this, and have confirmed that it works.”

“I bet it sucked to be the testers,” Dar commented to the man beside him.

“But the Duke’s paranoia may work to our advantage,” Talen said. “It is extremely unlikely that he will have magi or clerics as part of his defenses.”

“That just leaves five hundred elite troops,” Dar said.

“You are right, Dar,” Talen replied. “But the majority of them are barracked in the outer wards. There are less than a hundred men assigned to the inner palace itself. But just to be safe, we’ve organized a little distraction. Allera?”

“We’ve organized a protest that will develop out of the festivities in the Great Square, in front of the cathedral,” Allera said. “Jaros has gathered a small army of young people who will help spread the word; we have a thousand pamphlets prepared, and a banner.”

“I have composed a chant that is both catchy and incredibly unflattering of our Exalted Leader,” the bard said. “The crowd will eat it up, I assure you.”

“You’re going to throw children up against the Duke’s soldiers? I’m impressed, Talen, I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“We are not sending these people in to fight,” Allera said, her voice tightly controlled.

“No, you’re just going to stir up the crowd, and bolt when things get ugly,” Dar said. “Either way, innocent people are going to die.”

“Many innocent people have let out their last breath in that square, hanging on the Wall of Regret,” one of the warriors said, a grizzled mountain scout named Baraka Suhn. “We aren’t dicing for coppers here, mercenary.”

Talen lifted his open hands to calm them. “We aren’t looking for a bloodbath, but we cannot have a chance of success unless the Duke’s soldiers have their attentions elsewhere.”

“Now, once night falls, the strike team will make its way into the palace. We’ve arranged for fourteen men to pose as teamsters, bringing in an extra-large load of foodstuffs for the Founder’s Day festivities. Alucinator’s bombs of alchemical sleep gas should take care of the kitchen staff and the guards.”

“You will have to be careful,” the alchemist said. “The poison works quickly, but you have to get a good whiff of it for it to take effect. If you hold your breath, you can run through a cloud of the stuff, although it will settle quickly once the bomb bursts... ten seconds at most.”

“Alucinator has also prepared a coating for our blades and arrows that should incapacitate any foes that the bombs miss. Be careful with it; one careless scratch, and you’ll end up knocking yourself out. Once we’re in the palace, we’ll switch into guard uniforms,” Talen said. “Then we’ll make our way directly to the Duke’s chambers.”

“What if he’s not there?” Dar asked. “Say he takes a walk, or decides to go grab a whore or something. I mean, it’s Founder’s Eve and all. That’s what I’d be doing, if I wasn’t overthrowing the government.”

A few of the young men laughed. “He is meeting with his inner circle of noble lords that night,” Talen said. “He will be there.”

“What about the magic ward, captain?” a tall woman archer named Pella Dorin asked. “How do we get our weapons past it?” She tapped a quiver dangling from her hip, which bristled with arrows with different colored fletching.

“You don’t,” Talen said. “We’ll be using mundane gear only for this mission. You can store your magical weapons here until the mission is complete. Don’t worry, Pella, I’ve asked Alucinator to prepare you some ‘special’ arrows that won’t radiate magic at all, but which will pack a little extra punch regardless.”

“I call them ‘boomshots’,” the aged alchemist said, chortling.

“Woah, woah, woah,” Dar said. “I’m not leaving my sword here. Don’t you think that our weapons might come in handy in there?”

“There is nothing to be done for it. If we try to smuggle in so much as a healing potion, then we’ll never get past the outer wall.”

“Oh, this just gets better and better,” Dar said.

“Are there any more questions? All right, people. Check your gear, then check it again. Talk to Anders about what you’re bringing. We’ve got hiding places built into the wagons we’ll be using, but we don’t have any space for extra stuff. Alucinator will brief you on the gas bombs and his other surprises. Other than that, grab a quiet spot and try to get some rest. We set out at sunset.”

As the revolutionaries went about their preparations, Dar sought out Allera. “So,” he said. “This is it, I suppose.”

“I have to get going,” Allera said. “Jaros and I have a lot of preparation of our own to do before nightfall.”

“Wait. I wanted to give you this. It’s magic, I guess, so I won’t get to bring it with me, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to leave it here for some sailor to steal.” He took a large gemstone, several inches across, out of his pocket and handed it to her. It was the glowing green stone he’d found in the temple of Orcus in Rappan Athuk, taken off a slain cult priest.

“What is it?” she said.

“I have no idea. But it matches your eyes.”

She looked up at him, uncertain for a moment. “You are the most exasperating man I have ever met. First you basically make me a whore, and now you’re offering me jewelry?”

“You’re not a whore, Allera,” Dar said.

“Well, if this is your idea of ‘dating’, then you’ve got something fundamentally wrong inside your brain.”

“I don’t suppose I can argue with that.”

She shook her head. “Try not to get killed,” she said finally.

“Oh, I fully intend to collect my payment,” he said with a grin. She flushed, and with an angry expression started to turn away. “Be careful,” he said after her.

She looked at him again, nodded, and joined the bard, darting up the forward hatch and out before he could say anything else.

Chapter 80

PURSUIT

Varo realized that he was being followed.

Getting in and out of the Patriarch's private office above the nave of the Cathedral of the Father without being detected had not been as easy as he'd made it seem. He'd already burned a good number of his daily allocation of spells, and only the newest higher-order divine spells granted by Dagos had made the operation possible. That and the cache of potions that he'd taken from Banth's laboratory.

The potion of *gaseous form* that he'd used to leave the Cathedral had not lasted long enough for him to cross Camar and return to his hideaway in the Docks Quarter. He'd barely managed to get to an alley branching off the Great Square before he'd rematerialized. He had already used his power to *disguise self* earlier, so he adopted a more mundane camouflage, taking out a ratty old cloak from a sealed oilskin wrap and tugging it down over his body. The garment stank, and augmented with some filth from the alley, the disguise was quite convincing. Ordinarily, a beggar moving about near the core of Camar's busiest mercantile district would have drawn attention from the Watch, but with the city bound up in the excitement of the pending Founder's Day holiday, things were rather more chaotic than usual. Tomorrow, at least, nobody in the city would go hungry.

Walking with an affected limping gait, the cleric made his way quickly back to the Docks. It wasn't until he'd passed through the huge iron archway of the Ravager's Gate—named for one of the less praiseworthy of Camar's rulers—that he began to feel the familiar twitch between his shoulder blades. The feeling wasn't quite supernatural, but Licinius Varo had long since learned to trust in his instincts.

He started a few minor maneuvers designed to shake whoever it was that was following him. He wasn't really expecting those to work; if whoever was tracking him was any good, they likely wouldn't have any effect. And if it the source was magical in nature...

Varo had made heavy use of warding spells since returning to Camar... *nondetection*, *obscure object*, *undetected alignment*, and *false vision*. But he knew that such magic was rarely foolproof, and that if the Duke, or the Guild, had learned of his return, then he would be marked as a threat to be eliminated at once.

His visit to the Patriarch had almost ensured that this was the case. But it was a risk he'd had to take. He still wasn't sure what was going to happen when he returned to the planar sanctuary, but he suspected that events were going to take a sudden and

dramatic turn, one way or another. It was the same feeling he'd had when he'd first looked upon the valley of Rappan Athuk.

He cut through a crowded shop, shedding his disguise as he did so, and emerging in a rare form—his natural appearance. But that lasted only long enough for him to duck behind an open stable door. Once there, he quaffed a potion of *invisibility*—another of Banth's presents—and scanned for any magical auras that would suggest magical scrying. He detected none, but that didn't necessarily mean that he'd lost his pursuers.

It took him the better part of an hour to travel the two hundred yards separating him from the tiny courtyard where Armides lived. The cleric put into use every trick and deception he'd learned from a cult that lived and breathed such. Even so, he was not confident as he headed down the alley and ducked into the narrow side passage. This would be the last time he used this access point, however. He'd already come here more times than was safe, but with most of the hiding places of the Creepers already coopted, he had little choice.

The little plaza was empty. Armides had already sold the mule, and the sounds of the city were muted, the thousand different noises of the Docks blended into a single background buzz.

Varo entered the building. The dismal hallway inside swallowed him up. The small side rooms near the entry were empty. Almost reflexively he checked the trap on the door in the far back; everything was as he had left it. Neutralizing the trap, he moved inside.

The room was dark; the small candle he'd left burning had gone out. Closing the door behind him, he summoned *light*.

The first thing he saw was Armides, dangling from the rafters, gagged and bound, an ugly purple bruise swelling over his left eye.

The second thing he saw, as he spun to his right, was that he was not alone.

His good eye widened in surprise, as he saw something he had not at all expected, and which completely shattered his carefully laid plans.

Chapter 81

REVOLUTION

Camar was ablaze in lights, as the city enjoyed the festivities of Founder's Eve. In public squares, raucous taverns, and in small private gatherings, the people of the city celebrated the holiday in a loud and vigorous fashion.

The noise radiated particularly powerfully from the Great Square, in the city's Gold Quarter. The lights were especially bright there as well, and on a closer examination some of the illumination would have been seen to come from bonfires, and from an assessor's house that was on fire. The light from those fires glinted on the angry faces of shouting people, and on the gleaming breastplates of soldiers from the Duke's Guard, sent to quell the disturbance and restore order. At more than a few places, blood already stained the cobbles of the square, and it was almost certainly likely that more of it would flow before the night was out.

Within the Ducal Palace, an almost preternatural quiet filled the place, a jarring contrast to the revelry outside. The marble halls of the palace were almost unnaturally pristine, the white monotony of the stone walls occasionally broken by a fine tapestry or an expensive, rare vase on a small pedestal. The place was a museum, and at night, the halls felt haunted by the spirits of those leaders that had come before, for good and for ill.

A sound of metal clattering on the marble floor echoed unnaturally loud through the silent palace. The noise was followed by a cry of pain that was abruptly cut short. The source of the sounds was an alcove where huge double doors of polished mahogany were flanked by life-sized statues of armored knights, staring down in mute judgment. At the moment, they were looking down at two unconscious men, and a third who was bleeding out a copious amount of blood from the arrow that pierced his chest.

"Bind them, quickly," Talen said. His men leapt into action, securing the unconscious guards with short lengths of silk cord. The burly northman Baraka Suhn bent to check the wounded man, and shook his head.

"It had to be done," Talen said to Pella, the archer. The woman nodded, as the gruff ranger finished the injured man. "We will all have blood on our hands ere this night is through, captain," she said.

Thus far, their plan had worked far better than they could have hoped. Alucinor's gas had taken out both the kitchen staff and the guards. One man had gotten away, but Suhn and the two scouts he'd brought with him had run him down before he could get to the thick door that led out into the palace proper. Only two of their men had been hurt, suffering just minor wounds.

After securing the captives, the strike teams had moved quickly forward. A guard station was neutralized with efficiency, allowing them to toss four bombs into the adjacent barracks. All twelve guards were taken out without the attackers suffering a single wound. Suhn detected a wandering patrol before they got close, allowing them to jump the four guards, and again take them down without problem.

And now they were standing at the doors to the Duke's private chambers. "This is going far too well," Talen said quietly.

“Yeah, it sucks when a plan actually works,” Dar said. “Well, there could be a hundred crossbowmen behind that door, or twenty wizards, or a dragon, or nothing. There’s only one way to find out.”

Talen gestured to his scouts, who took up flanking positions. Then he himself walked up to the doors, and with a heave pushed them open.

There wasn’t a legion of waiting guards beyond the doors, only a broad, empty chamber. Unlike the bare outer corridors, this one was richly carpeted, and decorative hangings covered every wall. A cool evening breeze wafted in from a narrow slit window, its shutter left slightly open. The room was unlit, but starlight drifted in through a large round window that dominated the wall to the right, comprised of thirty heavy panes of clear glass set in thick bars of iron, like a spider’s web. The window offered a dramatic view of Camar below, with pinpoints of light visible all over the city.

Talen pointed toward the double doors on the far side of the room. The strike team darted into the room, moving silently into position. Dar shadowed Talen, as the captain moved up to the door. He looked at his troops, meeting the eyes of each in turn. Once he was sure that they were all ready, he turned back to the doors.

“For Camar, for Tiros, and for justice,” Talen said, thrusting his shoulder into the near door. Opposite him, Dar did the same on the other portal.

The fourteen assassins burst into the room. The place was a spacious hall, set up as a conference chamber. The décor had a military theme, with tapestries showing scenes of notable battles from Camar’s history, suits of armor arranged on stands, and various weapons hanging from mounts high along the walls. A huge oval conference table, fashioned from a slab of pure white marble, dominated the center of the room. Gathered around the table were the thirteen noble lords of the Duke’s inner circle, men of power, influence, and prestige. Lord Sobol was among them, sitting at the place of honor on the Duke’s right.

And next to him, standing with his palms upon the surface of the table, was the Grand Duke of Camar, Nicolidas di’Tenerassa. The Duke was a man of high middle age, and he bore a mantle of authority that hung about him like the folds of the long blue cloak that he wore. His eyes were a dark, deep blue, and as cold as a mountain lake.

“What have we here?” he said, his voice deep and powerful. “Uninvited guests.” His nobles had turned to look at the armed intruders, but none of them had stirred as of yet. The nobles carried weapons as well, mostly long, slender swords that hung in their scabbards from the backs of their high-peaked chairs.

“We have come to put an end to your tyrannical rule!” Talen yelled. “Too long have you bled the people of Camar for your own gain!” Behind him, his soldiers had readied bombs and arrows, but like the Duke’s men they held their attacks, as if the tension

between their leader and their enemy had frozen everything in the room except the two of them.

“I think not,” the Duke said. “Camar... and it’s people... are *mine*.”

Talen made a gesture. An arrow from Pella’s bow shot across the room, striking the Duke in the chest. Under his tunic, he had to be wearing armor, for while the arrow drove him a step back, it failed to penetrate. A second arrow, from one of the scouts, narrowly missed, shattering on the wall behind him.

A pair of alchemical bombs hit the table and exploded in a swirl of white smoke. The cloud obscured the table for a moment. There was a slight scraping noise, of chairs being drawn back, but there were no shouts, no desperate coughing, no sound of bodies hitting the floor.

The cloud persisted for only a few seconds before it started to dissolve. When it revealed the Duke’s high council to them again, their appearance had changed dramatically.

Twelve of the noble lords, while still clad in their finery, now sported large bat-like wings that spread from their backs. Their expressions had also changed, their human countenances replaced with fiendish visages complete with horns, deep red skin, and protruding jaws filled with pointed teeth. They were half-fiends, creatures of diabolical origin.

Sobol had changed as well. His clothes, covered by some sort of glamour, had morphed into a suit of dusk-gray spiked mail. He’d drawn a sword of black steel flecked with spots of red that radiated an ugly pale light. His appearance, too, had shifted, his already sinister look further warped into the gaunt features of a narzugon.

Only the Duke had remained outwardly the same. But as he looked upon the would-be assassins, they could see that the cold blue pools of his eyes had been replaced by flickering red flames.

“Only now, in the hour of your death, do you understand,” the Duke said, lifting his hand. Flames exploded around his fist, coalescing into an angry ball of fire.

Chapter 82

A DIABOLICAL PREDICAMENT

“Take cover!” Talen yelled, an instant before the Duke drew back his arm, and hurled a *fireball* into the midst of the attackers.

The blast scorched the entry to the room, ravaging the heavy doors, and transforming several tapestries into blazing pyres. It also killed three of Talen's soldiers outright, and inflicted terrible wounds on nearly all of the others. Only a few that had either leapt forward or managed to dart back behind the threshold of the chamber entry were able to escape the full force of the blast.

Baraka Suhn was one of those who had darted ahead, and he came up into a roll as the Duke's half-fiend lords rushed to engage the intruders. He had drawn out a pair of heavy sickles, one of adamantine, the other of alchemical silver, and as two of the false nobles charged him, swords lifted to strike, he raked both weapons across the torso of the first. The half-fiend snarled, but absorbed cuts that would have disembowled a mortal fighter without further reaction. As Suhn darted back to avoid the immediate counterattack, he saw that his foe wore a suit of fine mail links under his expensive clothes.

"They're armored!" he yelled in warning to his companions.

The clash of metal on metal sounded loudly through the chamber as the two sides met in a violent melee in its center. Talen's soldiers fought well, but most of them were young, and already bore serious wounds from the *fireball*. And it quickly became clear that the half-fiends were more than just good fighters, as they darted into flanking positions, opening up devastating sneak attacks that tore through the humans' defenses. One soldier went down as a fiend sliced through his hamstring, while a second turned an initial attack only to take a thrust through his back that pierced his heart, killing him almost instantly.

Only Talen kept the line from buckling at once, holding his ground at the center of the melee. He exhorted his men and women to hold, deflecting one attack with his shield, and turning to stab a second attacker in the chest before it could follow-up to its advantage. The half-fiend staggered back, but wasn't seriously hurt; the fiendish durability possessed by the monstrous half-breeds turned serious injuries into minor scrapes. They were also completely immune to the toxins that Alucinor had given them. Without magical weapons, there was little that the soldiers could do to hurt them, short of a lucky critical hit.

Still, they fought on, and bled.

Dar hit the right edge of the line hard and kept going. A half-fiend swung at him with its sword; he took the hit and countered with a power attack that cut under its arms, ripping through its armor and biting deep into its torso. The diabolic warrior staggered back and lifted its sword for a counterattack, but Dar was already surging past it, driving his sword around into a backswing that clipped it hard on the back of its neck. The fiend fell forward, collapsing in a bloody heap.

Dar met the Duke's gaze for an instant. The mercenary lifted his sword in challenge, but was forced to suddenly defend himself as two of the half-fiend warriors surged forward to intercept him.

On the opposite flank, Suhn had taken a glancing hit to his shoulder that had torn open an old wound. But he'd kept his injured opponent at bay, and even managed a lucky hit that had snagged deep into the foe's hip, laying his pelvis open to the bone. The other half-fiend whipped around the ranger, coming at him from behind, but an arrow thudded into his chest, piercing his mail and the thick hide beneath. Despite its immunity to the poison covering the arrowhead, it was clear that Pella's shot had hurt it nevertheless.

Suhn shifted to try and keep both enemies ahead of him, but as he lifted his sickles to strike again, he felt a cold chill fall over him. He turned to see Lord Sobol—the narzugon—looking at him with a cold smile. The veteran ranger tried to fight off the cloying power of Sobol's spell, but he could not resist as the *hold person* froze his limbs.

Helpless, he could do nothing to stop the two half-fiends as they drove their swords deep into his body.

One of his scouts had moved to his aid, but now found herself fighting for her life as Suhn's killers turned their attentions to her.

"Pella, the Duke!" Talen yelled, dodging a thrust that still managed to draw a red line across his right bicep. Thus far, he'd been able to avoid being flanked, but the soldiers to either side were being hard pressed, and neither had inflicted much damage on the enemies facing them. A scout fell to the ground, clutching his throat as blood exploded from between his fingers. A few seconds later, a young soldier fell to the ground as a sword pierced his left thigh. His opponent lunged forward, snapping its jaws around the man's neck. Blood splashed out from their evil embrace, and the soldier abruptly fell limp.

The odds, roughly even to begin with, were turning steadily against the attackers.

Pella drew and fired, sending another arrow at the Duke. This time, the shot actually stuck in his arm, but as the overlord of Camar looked down at the wound, he seemed more annoyed than hurt. Plucking the arrow out, he extended his arm toward the archer. A *lightning bolt* shot from his hand, streaking across the room. It hit one of his own nobles in the back, tore through the soldier facing it, and then continued, blasting into Pella's chest. The archer was knocked back into the outer room, landing hard on the ground. She didn't get up. The soldier likewise went down, while the half-fiend, naturally resistant to the electrical energies of the blast, was just moderately singed.

"Aarrgh!" Talen yelled as he took another hit. The soldier behind him was fighting off a half-fiend with courageous desperation, but as the man to his right was taken down by the Duke's *lightning bolt*, the captain could no longer protect his flanks. A half-fiend he'd already hit twice surged forward to finish him, but Talen proved he was still

dangerous, spinning around, clipping the tip of his sword through the fiend's skull. The precise strike took out its left eye, and blood exploded into the air from the vicious wound. The infernal creature screamed and fell to the ground, clawing at the bloody socket.

Dar, meanwhile, had been pushed back, forced to defend himself against two skilled foes. They were wary of his sword, having seen what it had done to their comrade, but they also knew that their fiendish hides were resistant to his non-magical weapons. They spread out, keeping their distance as the three exchanged a series of non-damaging blows, giving him no way to escape, save through them. They were moving to flank him, and without an ally or a barrier to block them, there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Dar snarled, drawing his lips back to bare his teeth.

They were... *pointed*.

The mercenary's body had already begun to change. He lowered his body into a crouch, as his back bent, his bones shifting to accommodate a new form. His fingers grew longer, and claws emerged from their tips. His face experienced the most jarring transformation, elongating and exploding with coarse hair that quickly covered his entire features.

Within just a few seconds, a wererat faced the two half-fiends.

Chapter 83

THE FURY OF THE DUKE

Dar had shifted form into that of a rat-human hybrid, the culmination of the change wrought upon him by the wererat that had bitten him in Rappan Athuk.

The infernal warriors were nonplussed by the change, and continued to press their attack. Now it was their foe that resisted their attacks, their swords of infernal iron of little use against the unnatural resistance granted by the lycanthropic curse.

Dar had lost none of his own fighting skills in the transformation, and had gained a blazing increase in speed and agility. His enemies had flanked him, but he did not give them time to exploit that advantage, overwhelming the foe in front of him with a violent surge of attacks before the one behind him could drive its weapon home. It cost him; he took two hits from the one at his back, which hurt him some even through his newly augmented hide. When he finally drove the first infernal warrior to its knees with a blow that crushed its breastbone, the other one leapt at his back with its sword raised to finish

him. There was no time for Dar to spin to face it, but in a blur of motion he reversed his stroke, driving his sword up through the body of his second adversary. The half-fiend clutched at the wound, then its sword fell from its hand to clatter on the ground, followed a moment later by its body as Dar yanked his weapon free.

Snarling, Dar leapt over a fallen chair, and rushed around the conference table toward the Duke. The Duke had taken down a weapon off the wall behind him, an ancient greatsword with a slightly curved blade. The infernal lord turned toward the onrushing half-man fighter and watched him come, his burning eyes shining in the deep caverns of his face.

Besides Dar, there were only four of the invading force left standing, and their situation had become truly grim. Talen and the last two soldiers from his line had been driven inexorably back, forced into a defensive triangle as the half-fiend warriors formed a ring around them. One could barely stand, his left leg covered in blood where his hamstring had been sliced open. The other soldier was barely past his teens, and while the skin of his face and neck was blackened with burns, he had otherwise been able to thus far escape additional injury.

But they still faced five of the hellish warriors, none of which had been seriously hurt. And as Talen lifted his sword into a defensive stance, he saw another foe move forward to join the battle.

“Ah, the loyal captain,” Sobol said. “Taking up the cause after the death of your beloved marshal. A shame that Velan Tiros did not live long enough to see the final end of his little cabal.”

“Face me, and we’ll see...” Talen began, but as he spoke he met the narzugon’s gaze, and everything else seemed to fade away, and the devil swelled, until it dominated his view. He could hear the creature’s laughter, and felt his own heartbeat pounding in his ears as blackness crept upon him.

The last scout had been driven back into a corner by the two warriors that had killed Suhn. She favored her side where one of them had gotten to her through her light armor. She’d tried to remain mobile, to keep her foes at bay with rapid strikes and retreats, but while one of the pair was at least as hurt as she was, the other had suffered only a minor scratch just above its left eye that barely bled.

“No place left to run,” it said to her, as the pair closed in, careful to leave her no avenue of escape.

Dar crouched and leapt at the Duke, who brought his sword around in a smooth blocking strike. The wererat shifted and immediately came in again. The two exchanged a violent fury of blows, and when they broke again it was the Duke who bore a fresh wound, a cut on his right arm that oozed bright red blood. But as the two

combatants shifted position for another exchange, the flow of blood ceased, and the wound knit shut.

“You cannot defeat me,” the Duke said.

“If you can bleed, you can die,” Dar hissed at him, and leapt to attack once more.

This time, neither combatant held back. Dar took a hit that bit into his flesh, the Duke’s sword tearing a gash six inches long in his side. But the warrior in turn unleashed a devastating combination of power attacks, one of which connected hard, piercing the Duke’s chest, his sword driving deep into the man’s body. The Duke staggered back and almost fell, blood pouring down his body from the vicious wound.

Dar leapt onto the edge of the table, and lifted his sword to finish his adversary.

A huge crash sounded, and the chamber almost seemed to shake. Before Dar could strike, the Duke reared back up. He clutched a necklace at his neck, shattering one of three black iron globes dangling from the golden links with a crushing squeeze of his fist. At once the Duke began to grow in size, his arms lengthening and thickening, his torso broadening, his tanned skin replaced by a dense gray hide. His skull shifted as well, sprouting a pair of massive horns. A long tail and wings sprouted from his back. The new form of the Duke was over nine feet tall, and he loomed over the wererat fighter crouched upon the table.

Dar screamed and threw himself upon the creature, but before he could strike, the cornugon seized Dar in its claws.

“Wretched mortal,” it said, its voice causing the room to shake—or maybe it was just the creature’s grasp. Dar squirmed and tried to break free, but the monster’s claws held him like iron bands. “Now you see the folly of your pathetic efforts.”

Dar struggled, and the devil squeezed its hands together, digging its claws into his body. It leaned forward, until its jaws were inches from his face.

“Where is the marshal’s sword? I know that you have taken custody of the blade. Yield *Valor* to me, mortal, and I shall let you keep your wretched life.”

“Go fuck yourself,” Dar said. With a sudden motion he yanked his right arm free of the devil’s grasp, and brought his sword up to strike. The attack came down on the Duke’s head, but as it hit it glanced off one of the curved horns. The sword shattered, the blade snapping off halfway down its length.

“So mote it be,” the devil hissed. It slammed Dar down on the table with enough force to crack the ancient stone. Dazed, the wererat fighter could do nothing to alter fate as the cornugon lunged forward, its spiked tail darting over its shoulder, down into its prey,

driving through his chest and through his heart, finally erupting out of his back, digging deep into the mass of the table.

The corugon snapped its tail up, launching Dar across the room. He landed hard on the ground, blood splattering over the marble tiles. His body shimmered, and he returned to his human form. A hole penetrated his chest where the devil had impaled him.

His lips moved for a moment, but no sound came out. And then he died.

Chapter 84

THE HAND OF FATE

As he fell into the power of the narzugon's gaze, Talen could feel his life force ebbing away. He tried to fight it, but it was as if he was punching against shadows; every counter he tried was absorbed into the spreading black.

And then he heard a voice cut through the darkness.

"Fight it, my son. Fight it... the fate of worlds will rest upon your strength. Fight it, and bring the strength of the Dragon's line back to Camar."

Somehow, the voice was like a lifeline, and Talen found the darkness drawing back. Reality came rushing back like a surge.

He found himself looking up at a sword that was rushing down toward his head.

Instinct preceded thought, and somehow he brought his sword up to block. He blocked the cut, then another, dimly aware of a gurgling scream behind him as the injured soldier at his side went down. He could not manage an attack; everything he had was in keeping himself alive.

Sobol was not attacking, but he smiled as his warriors did the dirty work for him.

"Your will is strong, but it will not matter," he said.

The he heard the loud crash, echoing behind him. He could not turn; the enemy did not relent. But then a greater drama took hold as the Duke resumed his true form, and took up the struggling form of... what the heck was *that*? The melee came to a temporary halt as both sides watched the cornugon deliver its death blow. Talen belatedly realized what had happened, recognizing the wererat as his former companion. But it was too late. He started forward, swinging his sword at a half-fiend to drive it back, but the creature easily deflected the strike with its own blade. Its fellow smashed its own sword

across Talen's chest, knocking him back, pain exploding through his body as a rib gave way.

That was it. He was done. He could not even lift his sword to defend himself; he could only wait for the foe to finish him. He looked at Dar's body, as it shifted back to its natural form.

Sorry, chum, he thought.

He realized that the half-fiends were not attacking. The enemy warriors were standing there, weapons raised, but they were not coming forward. Rather, they were waiting... for what?

And then something *big* leapt over him, and fell upon the half-fiend warriors, tearing and clawing and biting. Feathered wings flashed through the air; a deep *thump* sounded just an instant before an infernal warrior staggered back, half its face torn away.

And then Talen's entire understanding of reality shifted, as an oh-so-familiar voice sounded behind him.

"Take them down!"

He turned, not believing that he would see what his mind had told him was there. He couldn't believe it even as he saw Marshal Velan Tiros charging forward. Could not believe it when he saw Shaylara a step behind him, a longsword in her hands. And others... the mad elf from Rappan Athuk, looking haggard but otherwise fully sane and lucid, clad in a soft green robe that covered his emaciated body. And finally, the familiar face of Licinius Varo, who pointed behind Talen and shouted a warning.

"Captain, look out!"

Talen spun to take a downward strike on his sword. The half-fiend warrior lunged forward, seizing the captain's elbow in its jaws. Talen tore free before the thing could get a firm grip on him, but he could feel blood running down his forearm from the wound. The infernal warrior lifted its blade to attack again, but Shaylara leapt into its reach, driving her sword to the hilt into its body. The enemy screamed and collapsed, blood gushing from its pierced lung.

"Shay... what's happening?"

She turned to him, a wry grin on her face, but suddenly looked alarmed. "Look out!" she said, pushing him roughly back.

Talen felt his battered ribs scream out as he hit the ground, but the alternative would have been far worse as another *lightning bolt* ripped through the air where he'd been standing. The blast incinerated the celestial griffon that had been tearing through the

half-fiend warriors, continuing through the doorway, passing through Varo before discharging harmlessly out into the outer chamber. The cleric staggered against the doorframe, but Talen knew he was tough—he'd live.

That was more than he could say for the rest of them. Shay had rushed to Tiros's aid; the marshal was fighting Sobol. The narzugon seemed quite skilled with its unholy sword, and its first struck almost took off the marshal's left arm, cutting *through* the steel shield that Tiros wore.

One of the half-fiends, knocked down by the griffon, rose and picked up its sword. It came at Tiros from behind. Talen started to shout a warning, but then the creature just *withered*, shrinking down into the form of a tiny white mouse.

The captain looked over his shoulder, and saw the elf holding a familiar-looking wand.

Sobol hissed as Shay impacted it from the side. Her sword seemed to have no difficulty piercing its infernal hide, finding a gap in its armor and biting deep. Tiros came at it from the opposite side, but the narzugon called an *unholy blight* upon itself, staggering both its foes, sickening them. Talen, on the edges of that blast, felt his stomach twist, but he kept his footing.

When the *blight* cleared, however, he saw the Duke coming forward to destroy them.

The cornugon still carried the greatsword, which seemed like little more than a long dirk in its massive fist. It vaulted the table with a powerful beat of its wings, lowering its head to clear the ceiling fifteen feet above. It looked like Death itself, and Talen felt the sudden stirring of hope bred of the unexpected appearance of Shay and the marshal wither and die. He'd seen the thing slay Dar, almost effortlessly... how could they hope to stop it?

All he knew was that if Tiros and Shay were going to die here, he would join them at their sides.

"False Duke, creature of the Hells!" came a shout from behind them. It was Varo, holding a scroll in one hand, and a collection of several objects in the other: a glass flask, a silver dagger, and a burning torch. The captain could see that the priest wore the tattered mantle bearing the sigil of Orcus, one of the prizes taken from the ogre horde in Rappan Athuk, the symbol faint but clearly visible across his chest. His own divine symbol blazed with a violet light upon his chest.

"Your fading god has no sway here!" the cornugon roared, its voice deafening.

"I deny you!" the cleric replied. "With silver and blessed water, and the symbols of the gods that hate you, I bend my will and the will of Dagos upon you! By the Light, and the Shadow, and the Darkness, I BANISH you back to the pit from whence you came!"

The scroll in Varo's hand burst into white flame. The devil shrieked, and its body shimmered as ripples of released energy swept through the center of the room. The spell, augmented by the items of anathema that Varo carried, penetrated its infernal resistances and its own considerable will, and with a final shriek of defiance, the fiend was cast back across the border of planes to its own realm.

One of the half-fiends still standing was sucked into the vortex with it, but Sobol, whether because of the limits of the spell or because of some lingering resistance of its own, was left standing alone. The narzugon, which had turned to witness the departure of its master, screamed and spun around, no doubt readying some dread power either to attack its foes or seek escape. But it only got as far as Tiros's sword, which crushed into the side of its face. The devil spun around, taking hits to its body from both Talen and Shaylara, and collapsed.

The last half-fiend warrior tried to break for the door, but it too was *polymorphed* into a harmless mouse by the elf. As the room fell silent, the last enemy defeated, Talen turned to Shaylara and crushed her in his arms.

"I thought I'd lost you," he said.

"I know," she said, holding him tightly in return.

Tiros looked around the bloody chamber. In addition to the bodies of the slain half-fiends, and the dead narzugon, the hacked figures of almost a dozen men and women, all of whom he had known personally, lay scattered about the chamber. Varo was already tending to those who looked as though they might still be alive, but Tiros could see at a glance that most of those down on the floor would not be getting up ever again.

"Can you restore them to life, cleric? As you did me?"

"The cost is great," Varo said.

"No cost is too great for such as these," the marshal said. He turned, and saw Dar's body lying half-hidden behind a fallen chair. He walked over to it.

"A long path, to find you here," Tiros said, softly, looking down at the mangled corpse of the mercenary fighter.

"Marshal."

The voice drew him around; it was Varo. Talen and Shay were watching too. The elf was a mysterious shadow behind them.

"There will be time for grief and recovery later. Right now, Camar lacks a leader. There will be those who will seek your death for what was done here tonight, even if the truth of the Duke's nature is revealed. You have witnesses, and evidence, of a sort." The

cleric glanced at the bodies of the half-fiends, and at the hacked form of Sobol. "In the absence of the cornugon, I would suggest that the narzugon stand in as the 'Duke'."

"At least let us clean up," Talen said. His clothes were seared with fire, and soiled with his own blood and that of the monstrosities he had slain. Shay and Tiros were somewhat better off, but none of them were anything approaching presentable.

"No," Varo said. "No, you should remain as you are. Let the people see what has been sacrificed on their behalf."

Tiros nodded. "And what of you, cleric?"

"I think you are better off without being seen in my company. Preserve the bodies of the slain, especially that of Corath Dar. I will be in touch." He nodded to the elf, and the two departed back through the foyer.

"That man gives me a cold feeling in my gut," Shay said, once he had departed.

"Nevertheless, we owe him our lives," Tiros said.

"Your sword is in safekeeping," Talen said. "Dar kept it, but now that you have returned to us..."

Tiros nodded. He suddenly looked his age, but as he turned to them, his eyes blazed with intensity.

"Come, we have much to do ere this night is done," he said.

Chapter 85

BACK FROM BEYOND

It was like being born.

Awareness was stabbed into him like the thick blade of a spear. He was torn from the darkness, screaming, and cast into a light so blinding that he thought it would burn his senses from his skull. He tried to run, tried to protect himself, but it was as if his body wasn't even there; he could feel nothing but the pulsing agony that suffused his consciousness.

"Hold him," a voice came from everywhere.

If he thought that the first moments were pain, they were nothing to what he now felt. It was as if a part of him was being hacked away, like raw skin being flayed from his living hide. He screamed again, and this time the sound was real, his own voice echoing around him.

“By the gods, what are you doing to him?” Another voice, familiar.

He could hear the first voice now, but muted, a low chant coming from nearby. It was the source of his suffering, he knew. He tried to strike out, to stop it, but while he was starting to gain an awareness of his body, he was unable to move, helpless against the continuing attack. All he could do was howl, but that gave him no relief.

And then, after an eternity, it stopped.

He laid there for a time before full consciousness returned. A voice drew him back. “Drink.” Something cool touched his lips, and then a soft trickle as wonderful as the finest draught poured down his throat. He coughed, but was able to keep most of it down.

He tried to open his eyes, but a sharp brilliance stabbed painfully into them. “The light,” he whispered, his voice as frail as a reed.

“Shade the lamp,” Varo said.

The intensity of the light faded somewhat, and he blinked. It was so dark that he almost couldn’t see, but his eyes still watered. Varo was there, and Talen, and Shaylara. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

“You’re dead,” he said to the scout.

“Came close, but not quite as close as you,” she said.

He tried to get up, and failed utterly. “How long?” he rasped, as Shay gave him another drink from the waterskin.

“A little more than a full day,” Varo said. “It nears midnight.”

“The demons?”

“Devils, actually. And they were defeated. Through a bit of foresight from one member of my order, I was able to banish the cornugon, and the others were able to handle the narzugon, and those half-fiends that you didn’t hack to pieces.”

“Help me up.”

“You need to rest. Your body has been through a great trauma... two, actually.”

Dar looked at Varo suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

"I cured you of your lycanthropy. Ordinarily, it might have been a helpful condition to possess, given the enhanced durability and speed it grants, but I doubt you had enough control to avoid a forced change during the full moon, and all we need is for you to turn into a rat in the midst of... when we need you."

Dar frowned. There had been something in the cleric's voice that had rung a tiny alarm bell in the back of his thoughts. Dar glanced over at Talen, who looked distracted. "Where's Allera?"

The captain looked, of all things, uncertain.

"Tell him," Varo said.

"Tell me what?" Dar asked.

Talen cleared his throat. "We only made it through the night by a narrow margin. By displaying the bodies of the fiends, Marshal Tيروس was able to persuade a contingent of the palace guards that they'd been deceived. We spent most of the night and following day meeting with members of the nobility, the mercantile associations, the church, and the Guild of Sorcery. Even now, the marshal is engaged in a delicate balancing act, trying to keep the situation from devolving into chaos."

"Get to the point," Dar said sharply.

The captain looked utterly exhausted, but he nodded and continued. "It wasn't until midday the next day that they found him, at one of the rendezvous locations. Jaros, the bard... he'd been crucified. They drove spikes through his hands and feet, right into the wall..."

Shay put a hand on Talen's shoulder. "They left a message," she said to Dar. "Written in blood."

"Who?" Dar said, but his eyes showed that he already knew the answer.

"The cult of Orcus," Varo said. "They have taken her. They have taken Allera with them, presumably back to Rappan Athuk."

Chapter 86

THE RETURN

A cold wind rose up, swirling around the knobby hills and sending plumes of dead leaves spinning through the air.

Corath Dar stood at the edge of a familiar valley, almost in the same exact spot he'd been when he and his erstwhile companions had been doomed to a harsh fate in the dungeons of Rappan Athuk.

It was a gloomy day, the sky above an unbroken slate of dark gray. Winter had come in earnest, but the weather had in fact seemed to conspire to speed them here; the first early storms had blown past them, and the road they'd taken from Camar had been dry throughout their hurried journey. Talen had expressed hope that they might catch Allera's captors on the road, but Varo had not been optimistic. The cleric had taken on an air of fatalism that had grated on Dar. Things were dark enough without such a mood.

He stared down into the valley. The lowest part of the valley seemed to be immune to the wind; wisps of persistent fog continued to clog the space between the mausoleums, the long fingers of mist creeping up through the gravestones, finally fading about fifty yards from where he stood. The stench of death was fresh, mixed with the smell of char. The bodies scattered around the western edge of the valley had been picked clean by predators, and there were bones everywhere one walked. The burned wreckage of the Camarian fort jutted into the air like a monument to the place.

Grim, Dar thought.

He turned to regard his companions.

The mood on the journey here had been darkened by more than the gravitas of their mission, and the well-deserved reputation of their destination. Even Dar, not much for subtlety, could sense the lines of tension between the members of this company. Their camps each night had been quiet, with little idle conversation and a good share of dark stares. In some ways, this group was more at odds with itself than the original Doomed Bastards. There, they had at least shared a common foe, and a hatred of the authority that had compelled them to enter the dungeon.

Talen and Shay stood together, yet turned slightly away from each other. Dar felt that they were being stupid. Now that their relationship was more or less out in the open, that should have taken care of that. Her escape from Rappan Athuk had been unbelievable enough; she'd shared a tale of flight through a great underground cavern, of mushroom men and goblin miners and fearsome umber hulks. What little he'd heard of it had forced him to reevaluate his impression of the dark-haired scout. She was someone to be reckoned with.

But Dar got the feeling that Talen wasn't happy to see Shay return to Rappan Athuk, while Shay clearly bristled at the unwelcome protectiveness from her former captain.

Talen was distracted, and it probably was for the best that he wasn't in clear command of this mission. Not that some of their number would have obeyed his commands, in any case. The fool probably felt guilty for abandoning his lord as well. Dar didn't waste any time on such thoughts; Tiros would either handle things in Camar, or he wouldn't. In any case, it was a waste of time to dwell on anything other than their current objective... and staying alive.

Varo was... well, Varo was Varo. Dar knew that the cleric concealed layers of hidden motivations under his inscrutable façade. Dar wasn't stupid enough to turn his back on him. Varo had saved his life numerous times, and Dar did not doubt his hatred of the cult of Orcus. But Dar had been thinking a lot lately of their earlier visit in Rappan Athuk, and questions kept coming to mind, especially when he thought back to the things that Varo had done and said in the Dungeon of Graves.

The elf was even more of a mystery. He'd been completely transformed when Varo had released him from the insanity that had gripped him their last time here. His features, then warped by madness, now bore the quiet and alien somberness that seemed a birthright of all of the sylvans. He'd been healed, but his body still bore the marks of the incredible physical strains to which he'd been subjected. He still moved with the smooth grace characteristic of his people, but Dar could see that he was neither as fast nor as strong as he'd witnessed before. Normally composed, Dar had noticed that the elf tended to flinch at loud or sudden noises, and he often looked into the shadows with a faraway, haunted expression in his eyes. While now at least nominally sane, his memories had been gutted, and he did not even remember his name, or who he had been prior to his appearance in Camar. He now called himself "Malerase," which Shay had explained meant "forgotten one" in the language of his race. Varo had said that he was a magic-user, and while he hadn't done anything that had impressed Dar thus far, the cleric had said that his abilities would develop quickly as he recovered from his ordeal. He spoke little, and Dar had made no effort to draw him out.

His gaze shifted to the two newest members of their company. They were a good part of the reason for the tension within the group. The two men returned the fighter's scrutiny with cold gazes of their own.

The newcomers were the result of Valen Tiros's negotiations with two of the stronger power groups in Camar. Although clearly torn by the capture of Allera, it had been obvious that the marshal would not be joining them on the mission to rescue her. Tiros had his hands full keeping Camar from tumbling over the edge into outright civil war. Sending a platoon of soldiers to help them was out of the question, and in Dar's mind, probably for the best. Where they had to go, they would probably only leave bodies behind them.

In all justice to the marshal, Tiros had done his best. He'd provided them with mounts and spares, and new equipment. Dar wore a new breastplate, an exceptional suit in a slightly archaic style. It was probably older than he was, but it had been kept up, and

infused with magic to boot. The breastplate had been etched with the rose of Camar in faint relief, but a plain black surcoat had taken care of that.

The two men, their new allies, had been the response to Tiros's plea for aid to the Guild of Sorcery and the Church of the Shining Father. Both organizations had been complicit in the corrupt rule of the Duke, at least in Dar's mind. But Tiros would need their support if he was going to have any chance of establishing a new ruling coalition. So quiet negotiations had been undertaken, 'arrangements' had been made, and now a representative of each organization stood with them at Rappan Athuk.

Theodorus Vitus Zosimos was a lean, almost wiry man in his early forties. His features were drawn, his face covered with a meticulously trimmed beard of black as yet untinged with gray. His expression took on a particular intensity when he was thinking about something, which was almost always. They'd already seen his magic, when they'd encountered a quartet of trolls on the road two days ago. The evoker had blasted the creatures with a *fireball* from a hundred yards out that had been impressive indeed, and when they'd put the injured creatures down after a brief and violent melee, Zosimos had finished them off with a spray of fire from his fingertips. He was competent, cool, and supremely arrogant; in other words, the perfect embodiment of the Guild.

And then there was the cleric. If the Church had wanted to drive an explosive wedge into their midst, they could not have done better than to send Marcus Cornelius Valus as their representative. Varo had greeted the news calmly, but Dar had known him well enough to know that the cleric had been furious. But the help of a high priest could not be refused, and Dar knew well enough to know that they'd probably need the man's talents on this trip. He and Varo had spent the entire trip avoiding each other, which was fine with Dar. Even leaving aside the man's role in sending them into Rappan Athuk the first time, Valus was a prick. He'd obeyed his orders, and had helped to heal them in the aftermath of the brief battle against the trolls, but he made no attempt to conceal his contempt for those he was sent to aid.

There were four others riding with them, scouts from Tiros's old command. Their role was to watch their horses and keep a secure camp, hidden in the adjacent hills. From what he knew of the area around the dungeon entrance, Dar knew that they weren't going to have easy duty by any means.

"All right, let's get this over with," the fighter said. He checked his weapons for the fifth time since their arrival. In addition to his magical club and punching dagger, and a new longbow, the sword *Valor* hung at his side. Tiros had not contested his claim to the blade, perhaps knowing that Dar would have far more need of its power, where he was going.

The fighter started down into the valley. Bones crunched under his feet, and behind him he could hear the others, forming a broad line as they made their way back to Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 87

DANGERS NEW AND OLD

The persistent mists, thinned but never fully dissipated by the breeze, swallowed the company from Camar up as they made their way deeper into the dell. The oblong shapes of gravestones rose up out of the uneven earth all around them. More than one grave looked as though it had been disturbed, recently.

“I say again, that this peripheral assault is foolish,” Valus said. “You reported that you had a back way into the dungeon, via the bee tunnels. We should strike deep at the heart of the enemy, and deliver a crushing blow against their full strength.”

“We stick with the plan,” Dar said, without turning back.

The ‘plan’ was largely Varo’s, and while Dar professed his support, he inwardly had misgivings. In private discussion with him, Talen, Shay, and Tiros, the cleric had revealed new information about the Dungeon of Graves, and the likely place within where the cult of Orcus had taken Allera. As always, Varo was more than a little vague about the source of his information, but on prompting from Tiros, acknowledged two sources: a mysterious book known as the *Codex Thanara*, and a direct *commune* with Dagos that he’d completed only shortly after he’d raised Dar from the dead. Varo told them that there were two other temples to Orcus in the Dungeon of Graves, in addition to the one they’d pillaged, and that they would find Allera in the second, under the control of another high priest of the demon god.

“She will almost certainly be sacrificed to Orcus,” Varo had explained. “I am not certain how much time we have, but I do know that we cannot waste any of it, if we hope to have a chance of stopping them.”

“What are we doing talking, then,” Dar had growled. The fighter had still been barely able to walk back then, but he’d propped himself up with his club, and had demanded horses, ready to ride out before the day was out.

Ultimately, they had delayed through that night, but were on the road from Camar by the time that the sun rose the next morning. Riding hard, with ample remounts, they had eaten up the miles. Dar had set pace at the head of the column, driving both himself and his horses. At the end of the first day, he’d fallen from the saddle, unable to stand. Only Varo’s intervention had given him the strength to rise the next morning, but once on the road his pace did not slacken. Each day, as they’d drawn ever closer to Rappan Athuk, he’d gotten stronger, and when they had finally encountered the wandering band

of trolls, *Valor* had put two of them down, the second after it had clawed out the throat of his horse, bearing them to the ground.

A structure rose up ahead of them out of the mists. It was the mausoleum, warding the entrance to the Dungeon of Graves.

“Watch for the guardians,” Varo said. Talen and Shaylara had already strung their bows, and Zosimos had readied his wand of *fireballs*.

“I thought you destroyed the green gargoyles the last time you were here?” Valus asked.

“We did,” Dar said, not taking his eyes from the mausoleum as they slowly approached. “But the black gems, their eyes, were gone from my bag, when I checked later. They may have fallen out, or....” He paused for a moment, letting the import of his words sink in. “Assume nothing, about this place.”

“There!” the elf warned, lifting his longbow. He drew, aimed, and released in a single smooth motion. Varo had enchanted a quantity of arrows with a *greater magic weapon* spell earlier that day, the enhanced missiles divided among the party’s archers. The shaft knifed through the fog, flying over the mausoleum’s mantle before hitting something hard.

“What is it? I do not see anything,” Valus said, clutching his holy symbol.

“You’ll see them soon enough,” Dar said, holding *Valor* close by his side.

The sound of flapping wings announced the arrival of the guardians an instant before the green-skinned creatures materialized through the fog. Again there were eight of them, the deadly green gargoyles that had so mauled the first cohort of the Doomed Bastards on their entry to the dungeon. Their black eyes glittered in the poor light as they spread their wings and dove toward the companions.

A *fireball* exploded in mid-air, enveloping most of the gargoyles. The blast did not destroy any of them outright, but a moment later an arrow hit one in the throat, exploding through its body and out the back. It fell to the ground, exploding in a shower of debris as it hit. Talen and Shay kept up their barrage as several of the gargoyles swerved toward them, their claws extended as they dove. Another pair swung around in a wide arc that would bring them upon the small column from the rear, to attack the spellcasters.

Two gargoyles swept low and came at Dar, who held his ground and waited. The first one slashed at him with a claw, gashing his arm just below the shoulder. As the gargoyle landed, its foreclaws already extending toward his face, the second dove at his back.

Dar roared and brought his sword up and down in a powerful two-handed strike. The blade hit the gargoyle on the side of the head and kept going, cleaving through its skull. One of the black gem-eyes went flying across the blasted landscape, the other falling into the crumbling mass of its body.

Continuing his momentum, Dar spun around and tore into the second creature. He clipped its left wing, shearing it off entirely. The gargoyle shrieked and flopped to the ground. It tried to claw at the warrior's legs, but failed to tear through his greaves. Snarling, Dar drove his sword down into its chest, finishing the creature off.

His companions were doing almost as well. One of the gargoyles swooping down toward Zosimos was blasted by five *magic missiles* and veered off course, finally coming down in front Marcus Valus. The cleric was ready with his mace, and before the gargoyle could get into position to launch an effective attack, Valus crushed it with a powerful blow to the back of its skull.

Zosimos came under attack from a second gargoyle, but the creature's claws scratched harmlessly upon his *stoneskin*. A few feet away, the elf had come under heavy attack from another of the creatures, but Malerase avoided the first swipes of its claws and fell back, continuing to fire arrows as he gave ground.

On the far flank, Talen dropped his bow and drew his magical sword as a pair of gargoyles dove at him and Shay. One smashed the side of his head with a claw, but his helmet absorbed most of the force of the blow. His sword was much more effective, cutting deep into its body with several strokes. It tried to take off again, only to take an arrow square in the center of its chest, destroying it.

The second gargoyle elected to go for the lightly armored archer rather than the fighter, but it found Shay to be an elusive target. The scout easily kept her distance from the hopping creature, which finally found itself set upon by Talen from the side. It spun on the captain, only to learn its mistake when Shay leapt back and drove her sword into its side. Within seconds, this creature had joined the first in oblivion.

And just like that, the battle was over. Valus came to Zosimos's aid, and the two put down the evoker's foe even as Dar sundered the one fighting the elf. The battle had lasted less than twenty seconds, and the companions had suffered only minor injuries in the brief exchange.

"All right," Dar said, sliding *Valor* back into its sheath. This time, he didn't even bother to collect the gargoyles' gemstone eyes, turning instead to the mausoleum doors.

"Last time, the key was hidden in the base of that dwarf statue over there," Varo said, pointing to the nearby landmark.

"The key... I... remember..." the elf said, his hands shaking slightly as he held them slightly apart, mimicking the feel of the magical key.

“They’re open,” Dar said, prodding at one of the doors warily with a gauntleted hand. The heavy portal swung slightly open with a faint creak.

“Be wary,” Varo said. “The entire mausoleum is a giant and deadly trap.”

“Knowing that, we are to just walk into it?” Valus asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Dar said, working on the door in more earnest, and yanking the heavy metal portals open. The metal hinges protested, but in a few seconds the way was open enough for them to make their way inside. “Don’t worry, cleric, you’ll get used to the way we do things soon enough.”

The mausoleum was empty, save for bones and scattered debris. Some of the detritus was new, the remains of a party of soldiers sent by the late Lord Sobol to follow them into the dungeon. Faded bloodstains could be seen on the floor, walls, and even the ceiling above. The stone crypt in the middle of the room stood intact, the heavy lid lying in its usual place.

“They replaced the stone plug,” Varo said, indicating the spot on the floor where the hidden shaft to the dungeons was located.

Talen and Shay were working to wedge the doors open, but suddenly there was a loud grinding noise, and the entire mausoleum shook. The huge doors, connected to some powerful mechanism deep within the surrounding stone, began to swing shut.

“I can’t stop them!” Talen said. Shay could have leapt through narrowing opening before the doors slammed shut, but she took one look at Talen and held her ground.

The floor began to vibrate.

And if that wasn’t bad enough, the lid on the crypt toppled forward, revealing a quartet of black skeletons that rose up from within, their eyes blazing with an ugly red malevolence as they leapt out from cover and attacked.

Chapter 88

A RATHER ABRUPT RETURN

The mausoleum was filled now with a terrible grinding noise, which echoed off the walls. The floor shook, and the huge slabs of stone began to inexorably rise, driven by some incredible mechanism concealed below.

Zosimos turned back to the doors, ready to blast his way out. The wizard seemed nonplussed by the dire situation, but then again he was the only member of the group who could *dimension door* outside of the deadly chamber at any time.

“Hold them off,” Varo said to Dar and Valus, as he calmly walked over to the location of the stone plug. It too was rising, along with the rest of the floor.

Valus held up his holy symbol, calling upon the power of the Shining Father. A brilliant white radiance erupted from the sigil of the burning torch. Two of the skeletons fell back before that sacred light, but the other two charged toward the priest in a violent frenzy. Dar was quick to meet them, delivering a two-handed strike from his club that knocked one of the skeletons violently back. The undead monsters did not hesitate, hollow shrieks sounding from the depths of their skulls as they counterattacked. Both Dar and Valus took gashes from the faintly glowing swords wielded by the skeletons, but both resisted the fell power of those blades that tried to steal the strength from their bodies.

Talen and Shay rushed forward to join the melee, sweeping into the skeletons from the flanks. Their cutting and thrusting weapons had little effect upon the monsters, but they did distract them, giving Valus and Dar the opportunity to press their attacks to better effect. The priest *turned* the skeletons a second time. This time he only affected the one facing him, but it became a moot point a moment later as Dar smashed the other again, causing it to explode in a shower of bone splinters.

The fighter started after the three *turned* skeletons, which had retreated to the far corner of the mausoleum, but Varo’s voice drew him about. “This way, now!” the cleric said. Varo had used a *stone shape* spell on the slab covering the shaft, and was already slipping down to the ladder below. The stone floor of the mausoleum had already risen a foot, and was continuing to ascent at a slow but steady pace.

“Do not linger... remember the bars that come out to block the shaft,” Varo said, starting down the ladder. The elf was only a pace behind him, dropping into the shaft, nimbly catching the top run that was now three feet below the lip of the opening. The other companions hastened over to the opening. Dar and Talen helped Shay and Valus down to the top of the ladder, and they started down after Varo. Zosimos, seeing that his arts were not needed against the door or the skeletons, came over to them, but as the warriors started to help him into the shaft, they could see the fat steel bars begin to emerge from the surrounding stone; within seconds the way out would be blocked.

“There’s no time!” Talen yelled.

The Guild mage looked up at them. “Jump,” he ordered them.

Dar and Talen shared a look, and obeyed.

The three fell into the shaft. Valus looked up and let out a surprised yell to see over six hundred pounds of rapidly-descending mass plummeting down toward him. But a split

second before a bone-crushing impact, the mage uttered a word of magic, and their violent descent slowed rapidly as a *feather fall* took effect.

There was still no place for Valus to go to avoid being struck, and as the four collided, the cleric lost his grip on the ladder. Talen lunged and seized Valus by the edge of his cloak, while Dar latched on to the nearest rung of the ladder, arresting his fall. Valus, clinging to Talen with his free hand, thrashed his legs through the shaft, unsuccessfully trying to find the rungs again. The heavily armored cleric dragged Talen down rapidly despite the mitigating effects of the wizard's spell, and the two landed hard at the base of the shaft in a tangled jumble of limbs. Shay, who had shot down the ladder at the first hint of trouble, stepped aside just in time to avoid being crushed.

Zosimos, drifting gently down behind Talen and Valus, reached out and snagged a low-hanging rung, and used it to smoothly avoid the fallen pair, jumping to the side to land lightly beside Varo.

"Dar?" Varo asked.

"He's on his way down," the wizard replied. "I believe he is a bit... suspicious... of the magic."

Shay helped Talen and Valus to his feet. The cleric limped slightly, but both that and the wound he'd taken from the skeletons faded as he channeled a *cure wounds* spell into himself. "Quite the plan," he said.

Talen drew his glowing sword and moved into the passage that led into the dungeon. Behind him, Dar reached the end of the ladder, and hopped down to join them.

"Not much of an ambush," he said.

"Still, a very impressive trap," Zosimos said. "I could see how it would discourage casual visitors to this place."

"Yeah, a bunch of the Duke's soldiers found that out the hard way, last time we were here," Dar said.

"I wonder how the mechanisms are arranged?" the wizard continued, peering up the shaft. "Just the counterbalances alone would have to be *huge*..."

"We're here for a mission, not to sightsee," Shay said.

"Understanding how this trap works may help us to avoid others," Zosimos said, speaking in a tone as if addressing a small child.

"We are inside, and again the way is blocked behind us," Varo pointed out. "Let us focus on the objective. We are committed; we cannot relax our guard for an instant."

They started down the passage after Talen. Light was not a problem for them this time; in addition to Talen's sword, both Valus and Zosimos carried items that had been enchanted with a *continual flame*. The cleric bore the spell on his shield, which bore the burning brand of the Shining Father etched into the steel.

"By the Father's light, this place is foul," Valus said, as the stench of the passage rolled over them.

"It's going to get a lot worse," Dar said. The fighter glanced back at Varo, who nodded in understanding.

Talen led them without incident to the end of the passage, and the pit at its end. Dar and Varo had briefed them on what to expect, so they secured ropes and lowered themselves down to the secret door below. The portal was jammed, but Talen was able to force it with a bit of effort.

They made their way into the dungeon level. The stink was overpowering, stronger even than the original group had remembered. Zosimos lifted a cloth to his face, and Valus's face twisted with revulsion with every step he took.

"Nice, huh?" Dar said to Valus. "Just remember, you sent us down here, last time. Payback's a real bitch, isn't it?" Before the cleric could reply, the fighter turned away and walked ahead.

Shay moved to the lead, replacing Talen at point. They continued steadily but cautiously ahead, the scout scanning every inch of the floor, walls, and ceiling as they crept forward. They veered right at the first fork, and made their way into the first room. "Don't touch anything," Varo said. "Last time we were here, there was some green slime... and other things that weren't as they seemed. Dar and I will point out anything that wasn't exactly as it was on our last visit."

"Let's just get to the river, and get out of here," Talen said.

They crossed the room to the far exit. The way forward was open, with all of the doors they'd encountered before shattered from their hinges. The place had been scoured clean, and none of them had any question as to the reason.

The next room was likewise barren; the smashed coffin that had been here last time was gone, and there were only a few scattered bits of debris around the edges of the room. On the far side of the room, their light indicated the stairs down that had caused Dar considerable grief on their last visit.

"Watch for the traps we remember, but note that the priests may have set new ones as well," Varo said.

“We are all of us veterans,” Valus said. “These constant reminders are not necessary.”

“They cannot hurt,” Talen said. “Varo and Dar have been here before... and Malerase, of course,” he added, with a nod to the elf. Thus far, the elf had seemed to fade into the background, blending into the shadows without any apparent effort.

Valus opened his mouth to respond, but was cut off as Shay hissed a warning from over by the stairs. “Hsst! Something’s coming!”

They drew back into a wary semicircle around the top of the stairs. “What is it?” Talen asked.

“Listen.”

They stood there in silence for several loud seconds. They passed in slow accompaniment to the pounding of seven hearts.

A sound reached them... a sickly slurping noise, instantly familiar to Dar and Varo.

“The dung monster,” Varo announced.

“I hate it when I’m right,” Dar said, grimacing.

Chapter 89

A MESSY REUNION

“There is not enough space in here,” Zosimos said.

“There is a larger room not far from here,” Varo said. “We lured the creature there once before, and got around it there.”

“Can we not just rush around it here?” Talen asked.

“It’s slow, but it’s big... and sticky, too,” Dar said. “If it gets a touch on you, you’re probably dead meat.”

“Whatever we’re doing, better do it now,” Shay said, falling back from the stairs, her hands wrapped tightly around the shaft of her spear.

The company from Camar fell back, retracing their steps through the dungeon. When they reached the initial fork that led back to the mausoleum, they turned right, Varo directing them forward, holding his staff up to light the way.

They passed a few narrow clefts in the rock and ended up in the large chamber where they had battled the dung monster, not so long ago. The only exit, save for a few cracks around the perimeter of the room that were obviously too narrow for egress, was the collapsed corridor on the far side of the room to the right.

“This plan had best work, or we shall be trapped in here,” Valus said. The cleric, burdened with heavier armor than the rest of them, seemed a bit winded. But despite his age, the priest was hale, and he carried his mace with the experienced ease of one who had seen many combats.

“Is it coming?” Talen asked Shay, who had brought up the rear during their retreat. Urging them to silence, the scout listened in the chamber entry, and after a few seconds, nodded.

“Take up positions,” Varo said. “Everyone save Zosimos, over there by the rubble pile.” The companions hurried across the room, except for the wizard, who took up position near the far wall to the left, opposite the collapsed passage.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t remember last time,” Dar said.

“It must possess a rudimentary intellect,” Varo said, “thus its ability to duplicate objects like the one that snared Ukas. But I suspect that the creature’s actions are determined by more primal instincts. In any case, we must trust to the evoker’s talents. I discussed what we learned of the monster with him at some length, and he understands what it can do.”

“What we *know* it can do,” Dar muttered under his breath.

“Well, we have our contingency plan,” the priest replied. He glanced at Talen, who stood with Shay, holding a large sack between them. The captain met his gaze and nodded.

“If it comes to that, we are well and truly fucked,” Dar said.

Any further conversation was cut off by a sudden noise of ooze squelching upon the stone floor, out in the corridor just outside the room. The stench assailed them as it came rolling into the chamber, moments before the actual creature became visible at the edges of their light.

Dar and Varo had seen the dung monster before, but even so, its appearance was shocking. Vile, amorphous, it almost filled the entry, spreading out across the floor as it exited the passage and poured into the room. It moved slowly but inexorably, drawn to the spoor of fresh food. Fear hung in the room like the sour odor from the creature, but the companions held their ground, their faces tight with grim anticipation.

Two long pseudopods began to form out of its central mass, extending toward the larger concentration of prey. But its attention was drawn to its left as Zosimos fired a series of *scorching rays* into its mass. The flames poured over its body, but they left no apparent effect upon it.

“Fascinating,” the evoker said, retreating along the wall.

After a moment’s hesitation, the monster moved after him, away from the others in the far corner. Zosimos let it follow him into the opposite corner, the thing leaving a slick trail of foul goop behind it.

“He’s cutting it awful close,” Talen said.

Finally, while the creature was still a good ten feet away, the evoker lifted his hands, and called upon his magic. A glowing field of transparent energy, a *wall of force*, sprang into being, separating the corner holding both the wizard and the monster from the rest of the chamber. The curving plane was flawless, extending even into the cracks and crevices in the walls and floor, forming an impenetrable barrier.

Zosimos at once leapt to the side, intending to give himself a bit more distance from the creature. But he’d underestimated its reach, as one of the long tendrils slashed out, and slapped hard against his back. Its strength exceeded his by an order of magnitude, and it yanked him roughly off his feet, toward the bulk of its mass.

“Zosimos!” Talen yelled, although it was not clear what, if anything, they could do to help him from the far side of the *wall*. All they could do was watch as the wizard was dragged back toward the creature’s body, unable to break free of its adhesive grasp.

Chapter 90

FLIGHT TO THE RIVER

Zosimos did not scream or cry out. As the dung monster pulled him in, he crossed his hands over his chest, and closed his eyes. He smacked into its body, its acidic secretions already sizzling against his clothes as it began to envelop him. As the others watched in horror, the wizard maintained a perfect concentration, and uttered words of magic that they could not hear through the *wall*.

The evoker’s body shimmered, and vanished from the dung monster’s grasp, to reappear on their side of the *wall of force*. He materialized in the same pose he’d been in, nearly flat on his back, and he fell to the ground hard, grimacing. Talen and Shay were there in a moment to help him up. His magical robe had resisted being burned

away by the creature's acid, but it was threadbare in a few places, and his flesh was red where it had touched him.

"That was... uncomfortable," he said, as Valus cast a healing spell on him.

"We must hasten," Varo said.

"He speaks truly; the spell will not keep it long, less than a minute," Zosimos said. The dung monster had already moved to the barrier, and spread out along it, looking for a way through.

"Shay, take us out," Talen said. With more than one look back over their shoulders, the companions left the dung monster behind, temporarily trapped.

"Too bad you couldn't make one of those permanent," Dar said.

"It is possible, but it is not a trivial undertaking," Zosimos replied.

"I imagine we're not the first to consider how to defeat the monster in a lasting fashion," Varo said. "I suspect that the creature is almost immortal; certainly nothing I have seen has suggested that it can be 'killed' as we understand the term."

"The perfect guardian," Zosimos said.

"Just remember that we'll need to face it again on our way back," Valus reminded them, putting an edge on their victory—and the wizard's narrow escape.

The scout led them quickly back the way they had come, until they once again reached the stairs leading down. She checked carefully for traps, but found nothing new. The board over the false step had not been replaced, or perhaps it had, but the dung monster's secretions had absorbed it. The cover on the pit on the far side of the room below was in place, but with Varo's prompting, Shay easily marked its edges, allowing them to continue past without incident.

All too aware that the dung monster was now free again behind them, they continued down the south passage at a steady pace. Shay slowed and lifted a hand as they reached the large cavern at the corridor's end. Varo and Dar had warned the others about the wererats that had battled them last time, so they were prepared for another ambush.

But this time, the tunnels high along the cavern wall remained dark and silent. The seven companions made their way across the chamber to the underground river. This way, according to Varo, was where they would find the second temple... and, if his information was correct, the missing healer.

"It looks passable," Talen said, probing the swift-moving river with his blade. "The clearance even seems somewhat higher than the connecting tunnel between the Well and the worm cavern."

"Less crawling this time, I hope," Dar said. "It's no good walking on water, if you have to get down into it to get under an overhang."

"The current is moving in our favor, at least," Shay said. "If we do have to get wet, it will push us along in the direction we have to go."

"Only on the way in," Valus pointed out.

"You've got a real way of pointing out the down side to everything, priest," Dar said. "Look at it this way... you get to smite some bad guys at the end. That'll make your god happy, right?"

The cleric's eyes narrowed, but he didn't reply.

Dar turned to Talen and Varo. "So, are we going to sit around here and wait for the ol' shit-crawler to catch up to us, or are we going to do this?"

"My spell will enable us to walk upon the surface for about an hour and a half," Varo said, as he took up his divine focus. "It will be enough time, but we should not dally."

"More information from your unholy master?" Valus said.

"Even you cannot afford to turn away his help," Varo said, turning to him with his sigil in hand.

"I will not suffer the aid of the Creeper," the priest responded. "Keep your spell; I will call upon the blessings of the Father."

"Suit yourself," Varo said. Zosimos joined Valus as the priest cast his own spell, but the others let Varo touch them one by one, infusing them with the potency of his *water walk* spell. At once, Talen stepped out over the water, the soles of his boots hovering a scant inch above the surface of the water.

"What can we expect to find at the other end?" Talen asked Varo.

"Traps. Monsters. Cultists of the Demon Prince. Beyond that, I do not know."

Talen nodded. "Let's get going," he said. Shay started after him, but paused as the elf suddenly took her arm.

"This may help you," Malerose said, swirling a hand before her eyes. Shay blinked, surprised.

“What did you do?” Talen asked.

“I have empowered her to see in the dark,” the elf replied. “It was a spell from one of the transmuter’s books. It may take a slight adjustment, as you cannot see colors with the *darkvision*.”

“That will be helpful. Thank you,” Shay said. With a final nod to Talen, she turned and ducked under the entry to the river passage, treading lightly atop the swiftly moving current.

The others followed, vanishing into the low passage until their lights faded, leaving the darkened and empty cavern behind them.

Chapter 91

ALLERA’S FATE

Allera lay on cold stone. She shivered, but the cold was nothing in comparison to the pain that wracked her slender frame. She was covered in blood and filth, and the tattered remains of her shift. Everything else had been taken from her.

Her reservoir of power had been nearly depleted, but she still retained a small trickle of divine energy. But she refrained from healing herself. Her hesitation was a signal of how far they had already broken her, she knew, in that compartment of her mind that was still thinking with some form of clarity. During the sessions of torture, they had not made any efforts to restrain her from using her healing abilities. If anything, they had seemed to welcome it; once restored, her body could be abused further. They had allowed her time to rest, to regain her powers; such was the contempt with which they held her. After all, what could a healer do to them? The thought made her recall Dar, who had also once mocked her talents. The fighter had treated her with scorn, had cheapened her with his lustful demands. But she couldn’t think ill of him, not now. Not after what they’d gone through together in this place, not after he’d agreed to help Talen and the others. Had he given his life in that cause? The cultists had not answered any of her questions about the outcome of the attempted coup against the Duke; either they didn’t know, or they weren’t interested in sharing information with her.

They had been careful to keep her alive, however. She had considered taking her own life, but the idea was still anaethma to her. They knew that, no doubt. They were probably watching her even now.

She had no idea to what purpose they were keeping her alive. They had asked some questions, early on, but her interrogators had seemed barely interested with the

answers. Most of those who hurt her had been young people, men and women both, and not entirely adept with the devices that they used.

She rolled over, letting out a small sigh of pain as the movement stirred new agonies in her battered body. As she shifted, though, she felt something hard press against her side. It took a small effort of will to reach up and see what it was; they'd flayed several inches of skin from each of her arms, and every movement of the limbs brought terrible stabbing pains that lanced through her like cold needles. Her remaining skin had been marked with brands, unholy sigils that covered her face and torso, seared deep into the flesh. They had even branded her scalp, after hacking away her beautiful, pale hair with rough knives. Even her healing powers could not fully remove those dread markings, and when she had tried, they had just branded her again during the next session, relishing her agonized screams.

A soft green light spilled over her as she found the thing that had poked her, and drew it out from an inner pocket of her ragged garment. Her eyes widened in surprise. It was the gemstone that Dar had given her.

She'd had the stone on her when the cultists had captured her. She and Jaros had been taken easily, caught by surprise by a small group of men who had laid in wait for them at the rendezvous. Held in a field of magical *silence*, bound by tight, barbed cords that had bitten into her flesh, she had been forced to watch what they had done to the bard. Then one of them had pressed a cloth to her face, soaked in something that had made her head swim almost at once. She'd lost consciousness.

She didn't remember much of the journey from Camar, although she'd had a good idea of their destination almost at once. She'd been kept bound and gagged, her head wrapped in a burlap sack that smelled of horses. She had no idea of how much time passed since her abduction; everything of that time had blended together into a confused medley of fleeting sensations. She'd been kept drugged, she was fairly certain. The first clear memory she had was of being dragged up and secured to a rack of metal and wood, the sack yanked free to reveal the faces of her captors.

She looked down at the gemstone. Its inner light seemed to flicker slightly at her scrutiny. Obviously valuable, it radiated a faint magic, but had no other properties that she'd been able to discern. Gudmund, the wholly evil leader of this corrupt cell of cultists, had been quite interested in it. He'd asked her a number of questions about it, and her inability to answer them had seemed to pique his curiosity further. He'd taken it with him... hadn't he? How had it gotten back into her possession?

She heard a familiar sound of footsteps on stone. She tucked the gem back into concealment a second before a loud grinding sound announced the return of her captors. She squinted against the light of their brands as the door creaked reluctantly open.

It was Gudmund, a cold look in his eyes as he looked down at her.

“It is time, my dear,” he hissed at her. “Now, you will join with the True God, and the end of your life will hasten his coming.”

His acolytes came forward, arms extended. Allera screamed, but it didn’t do any good.

Chapter 92

THE RIVER TREK

The sound of the water rushing beneath their feet echoed loudly through the close confines of the tunnel, as the companions from Camar made their way deeper into Rappan Athuk. Their light sources glistened off of the slick, moist lichens that covered the upper half of the tunnel. Thus far, true to Talen’s estimate, the going had been much easier than in the last such river passage they’d negotiated, but there had still be a number of places where they’d had to get wet to make it past low overhangs in the uneven ceiling above.

Shay had moved up ahead, checking back periodically to warn them of another tight fit coming up. She was like a ghost, materializing out of the shadows without warning. Talen would betray his tension each time she left again, his jaw tight as he led them forward.

“Hey, I meant to ask you,” Dar said, as they pressed onward, “What ever happened to that old man, and the wizard girl, that we found before? Sorcatos, or whatever his name was.”

“Setarcos,” Talen said. “And Kupra.”

“Yeah, right.”

“They departed Camar shortly after our return,” Talen said. “I believe that they had agreed to return together to the monk’s homeland.”

“Really?” Dar scratched his beard. “Huh. Girl was a bit too pudgy for my tastes; I don’t go in for the porkers. But good for the old man, I guess. They’ll probably be the only ones to have survived Rappan Athuk, and live to tell about it.”

The captain glanced over his shoulder at the fighter. “You do not expect us to survive?”

“Do you?”

Talen turned back and continued on without responding.

Dar looked to his left, and saw the elf crouched there, looking intently at him. "What?" the fighter asked.

"There is a large insect on your shoulder," Malerose said.

"Fuck!" the fighter exclaimed, knocking the foot-long centipede off his armor before it could bite him in the neck. The creature fell into the stream with a soft plop, and was quickly carried off by the current.

Dar looked at the elf, who merely met his gaze with a silent stare. Behind him, he could see Varo, and then Zosimos, with Valus bringing up the rear about fifteen paces back. The cleric was again having difficulty, his heavy armor making him less mobile in the close confines of the underground river channel.

Dar kept going, bent over low, his helmet protecting him from the frequent collisions with the irregular protrusions that jutted from the ceiling.

After a time, he turned back, and saw the elf still there, hovering directly behind him. "You want to go on ahead?"

"I am content to follow," he replied.

Dar looked at him for a long moment. The last two exchanges had been more words he'd had with the elf than in the entire trip from Camar.

The elf was more of a mystery now than he'd been when he was a raving madman. Dar's knowledge of elves, or the *aelfinn*, as they called themselves, was mostly limited to camp rumor and dirty jokes. Despite having served on the western frontier during his stint in the army, he'd never met an elf prior to the day that this one had been dragged forward as a fellow prisoner on the edge of Rappan Athuk. Elves were not common in Camar, although they apparently dwelled in great numbers in the deep forest that extended as much as a thousand miles beyond Greathold. No one in the Duchy was really sure how many of them there were, exactly. At one time, they had contested with the men of the city-state in a series of violent wars. The last of those had been well over a century past, but it was said that the aelfinn had long memories.

"So now you're some kind of wizard, eh?" he finally said. "How'd that happen?"

"After Licinius Varo restored my wits, I chanced to examine some tomes that he had left lying out upon a workbench. I found that I could understand some of the script within; the language of arcane magic."

"Lucky break, that," he said, glancing back to where the cleric was drawing quickly nearer.

“Most of the spells in the books are beyond me,” the elf continued, his gaze drifting, as if he’d forgotten that Dar was there. “But it feels as if the knowledge is there, waiting...”

“Why are you here, elf?”

Malerase turned back to meet his stare. For a moment, Dar thought he wasn’t going to respond. But finally, in a low voice, he said, “This place... it draws me...”

“Anything the matter?” Varo asked, as he finally joined them.

“Just waiting for word from Shay,” Dar said, turning back. Talen had gotten a good distance ahead, he saw; the captain’s glowing sword was visible a good fifty feet down the tunnel, although a clear view of the soldier was blocked by the low, jutting rock ceiling.

“We shouldn’t linger,” the cleric said. They moved forward to rejoin the captain, and found him with Shay at the edge of a wide bend in the course of the river. The two were talking in low voices, and Shay urged them to silence as they approached.

“The river enters a cavern up ahead,” she told them. “It’s occupied, I think. I didn’t see anything, but I heard growls, and I could sense *something* moving about.”

“It’ll be hard to get close without whatever it is seeing our light,” Dar said. “Or hearing us; Valus clanks like a smithy with all that metal he’s wearing.”

“You are all making a great deal of noise,” Shay said, tapping him lightly on the front of his battered helmet, dented by his frequent collisions with the low ceiling. “I can try and get closer, scout out the situation more clearly.”

Talen shook his head. “It’s too much of a risk to get separated. No, I don’t say this too often, but for once, I think this is a situation where we blast first, and ask questions later.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Dar said with a grin. “And here comes the blaster now.”

They looked up to see Zosimos approach, the wizard moving with silence and grace in comparison to the heavily armored and armed cleric just behind him. The Guild mage met their expectant gazes with a raised eyebrow.

“You’re up, wizard,” Dar said.

Chapter 93

A TREACHEROUS WELCOME

The creatures that lurked in the dark chamber needed no light to see; their sharp senses revealed all of the secrets of the darkness. That included the smell that one of them detected, an odor that drew its attention at once, and attracted it to the bank of the underground river. The meaning in that smell was clear, and with a bark it alerted its companions.

Prey...

The creatures spotted a light, a pinprick of glow that grew rapidly larger, approaching fast. It shot past the first of the monsters in a fiery streak, continuing for only a few more feet before it exploded with a roar of liquid flames. The flames scorched several of the creatures, but others leapt back, avoiding the worst of the *fireball* through nimble agility. Several of them seemed to shimmer as the fire surged around them, shifting about through a trick of the light.

The one that had initially detected the invaders remained near the river, its lips tucked back into a snarl. The fading light of the *fireball* revealed it to be a large, emaciated six-legged beast, not quite canine, not quite feline, but some uniquely monstrous creation with features of both. A pair of long tentacles sprouted from its shoulders, edged with ugly ridges that looked capable of truly terrible wounds.

An arrow came blasting down the river tunnel toward the momentarily silhouetted creature, but while it seemed to be dead-on for the center of its skull, when the missile hit it passed harmlessly through its body. The air around it shimmered, and the monstrous thing suddenly appeared two feet to the right.

The displacer beast, unable to get to its prey, wisely drew back, out of the line of sight of the river tunnel. The cavern was filled with angry barks and hissed, some tinged with pain.

A light appeared from the tunnel mouth, accompanied by a furious battle cry. The displacer beasts crept forward, but remained out of the view of the tunnel, waiting patiently for the enemy to arrive.

They were surprised a moment later as a second *fireball* streaked into view, exploding directly before three of the creatures. This time they had a harder time of it avoiding the flames, and those in front took the full brunt of the blast.

Even as they shook their scorched heads and blinked the smoke from their eyes, the first of their enemies exploded out of the river tunnel and into the room.

The tall human bore a club almost as big as he was, and he smashed it into the head of the nearest beast before they could fully recover. The blow should have crushed its

skull, but once again it passed through empty air, as the creature shimmered a few feet away, safely out of his reach.

“What the fuck—” began the warrior, but he was cut off as the displacer beasts tore into him.

The man was armored, but the serrated tentacles of the beasts seemed to find every weakness in his defenses, tearing vicious gashes in his arms, legs, and torso. Within a few seconds the attacker was staggering back, in bad shape. The displacer beasts, used to hunting as a pack, surged around him in an effort to flank him, cut off his retreat, and finish him off.

But the human was not alone. More of them emerged from the tunnel, quickly leaping to the attack. An already injured beast yelped as a lightly armored human woman thrust a spear into its flank, cannily detecting its true location despite the magical shifting aura that concealed it. The monster was no stranger to violent battle, but self-preservation overrode its fury, and it quickly withdrew from the battle.

Another male warrior joined the first, although his own initial attack was just as ineffective. But more enemies had appeared in the tunnel mouth, floating upon the water like their allies. One, a slender figure draped in a cloak of shadow, pointed a device at one of the beasts, unleashing a potent magic upon it. The displacer beast snarled and turned as it sensed the spell taking hold, but could not counter before it shrunk down into the form of a harmless white mouse.

Another man came forward, ignoring a swipe from a tentacle that smashed hard into his side. He carried a metal bludgeon, but instead of attacking he came to the aid of the battered first warrior, using his own magic to heal some of his wounds.

Driven to a wild frenzy, the displacer beasts pressed their attack. Surrounding the four intruders in the center of their ring, they extended their tentacles to their full length, ripping and tearing at these foes that had dared to invade their lair. All of the humans took hits, and the powerful fighter was struck hard across the brow, ripping his helmet off and digging deep, bleeding gashes across his forehead. He cried out as blood poured down his face, blinding him, but instead of retreating, he leapt forward, swinging his club around in a low arc. This time, even though it passed through a false image, it kept going and clipped the creature hard in the jaw. Bone shattered from the force of the impact, and the beast fell back, suddenly less interested in a fight to the finish against this unexpectedly durable foe.

A cascade of magical bolts found their way into the melee, striking one of the beasts despite the confounding aura that concealed its true location. By no coincidence, the creature was one that had already been burned by the *fireballs* earlier, and the five *magic missiles* on top of that were too much for it. It staggered back, disengaging from the melee, but only made it a few steps before it toppled over on its side, mewling in pain.

The attackers fought on with a fury that matched and surpassed what the beasts could offer. Another warrior, this one armored in a second skin of silver metal, clambered up out of the river, and charged into one of the beasts from its side. It raked him with its claws, but this time the serrated edges glanced harmlessly off its armor. In turn, the armored man began laying about him with his bludgeon, smashing into the beast with surprising strength. The first swing missed, the attacker fooled by the creature's displacement powers, but like the others he learned quickly, and followed with a wide arc that caught it in the shoulder with enough force to audibly crack bone.

The two still lingering in the river passage continued their attacks as well. Both now fired additional magical bolts, which once again struck unerringly, burning into the flesh of the hapless beasts. Another went down, its head and body covered with smoking craters.

That magical barrage broke the creatures' remaining will to fight. The survivors, several of which had been damaged to within an inch of their lives, spun and darted across the cavern toward the only apparent exit, a large opening along the far wall. The woman with the spear intercepted one with a thrust that drove through a lung; the displacer beast tore free only to veer right and miss the exit, slamming hard into the adjacent wall. It fell to the ground, wheezing as blood poured from the wound in its side.

The invaders were victorious, if battered. As the displacer beasts fled, the tall warrior with the club lifted a hand to wipe his own blood from his eyes. It didn't help much, as more blood continued to pour down from the deep gash in his forehead.

"Thas right, run. Run, you bishes!" he slurred, but even as he spoke the last word, his eyes rolled up into his head and he toppled forward.

Chapter 94

PILED HIGHER AND DEEPER

"Talen!" Shay yelled, dropping her spear and grabbing Dar's arm as the fighter started to fall. The captain grabbed a hold of his other arm before the warrior's weight could drag him down out of the scout's grasp. "Varo!" he cried, over his shoulder.

The cleric was there quickly, coming around them to face the stricken fighter. Talen and Shay bore wounds of their own, but they were not immediately life-threatening, unlike the terrible gashes that covered the mercenary. In addition to the vicious cut above his eyes, blood drained down Dar's arms and legs from hits that had found every crease in his armor, or simply smashing through the layered plate and leather where there was no such opening.

Varo placed his hands on the sides of the mercenary's head. "You certainly do take your share of damage," he said, calling upon Dagos and pouring his most potent healing spell into the injured man. Dar shuddered; at once the cut above his head closed, and lucidity returned to his eyes. He blinked as Varo released him. His face, covered in blood, was a gruesome mask.

"I'm all right," he said, but as he pulled away from Talen and Shay, he still swayed somewhat.

"It is the blood loss," Varo said. "Valus! We need additional healing."

The cleric—who was the only one of them to have engaged in melee with the creatures without taking damage—looked at them with a gaze that did not mask his feelings in the slightest. For a moment, it seemed as though he would refuse, but then he came forward, drawing out a wand from a long leather scabbard attached to the inside of his left bracer. The wand was a lesser device, empowered only with the *cure light wounds* spell, but he did not stint it, releasing its energy until all of them had recovered from their injuries. All save Varo, who quietly healed his own wounds with a wand of his own.

"We'd better keep moving," Talen said. "Even if those things don't come back, they'll alert other guardians to our presence."

The companions hastily readied themselves and took up positions near the exit. Shay, still empowered with Malerase's *darkvision*, let them through the opening into another cavern beyond. This chamber was smaller than the river cavern, and empty save for another exit that opened onto a narrow passage on the far side.

They carefully checked the cavern, shining their light into every crevice and corner to verify that none of the displacer beasts were lying in ambush. Shay checked the far passage, and reported that it split in three directions after only about fifteen feet. The stench of the beasts was everywhere, but she hadn't seen any more of them, only scattered tracks leading down all three forks.

As Shay gave her report, they could hear a familiar sound coming from the passage.

"Somebody breaking down a door, sounds like," Dar said. "Could be our friends had enough of us, and they want out before we catch up for a rematch."

"Or it could be a trap," Valus pointed out. The sound of crashing wood lasted only a few seconds, and then faded away.

"Varo, any more hints on where we're going?" Talen asked.

"I am afraid that I do not have a specific map of this level," the priest reported. "I only know that the river would lead us to the second temple."

“Let’s get moving,” Dar said. “If the cultists realize that we’re this close...” He didn’t finish the thought; each of them could fill in a suitably dire conclusion.

Shay led them out again, taking them down the left fork, toward the sounds they had heard. They saw the source of the noise just a few seconds later, as the passage culminated ahead in a ruined door, now just bits of wood and metal dangling from hinges recessed into the stone.

“Come on,” Talen said. But he and Shay had taken only a few steps toward the door before something stepped into view, blocking the exit.

The creature was a muscled hulk that stood over seven feet tall. It was humanoid, its sculpted body covered in coarse brown fur. Narrow, beady eyes stared at them from a face that was a strange mixture of man and bull. It carried an axe with a blade that was almost too large to fit through the doorway.

“Minotaur!” Talen hissed in warning.

But his companions had their own problems. Almost as soon as the minotaur had appeared, those in the rear of the group heard a familiar hissing noise coming from the opposite passage, the right fork. Dark shadows came forward, accompanied by the swirling of more razor-edged tentacles above them.

“Ambush!” Varo warned.

“And we walked right into it,” Valus added, snapping down the visor of his helmet as he lifted his shield to defend himself.

Chapter 95

ANOTHER DAY, ANOTHER AMBUSH

Displacer beasts poured out of the narrow passage mouth, crowding together in pairs as they thrust through the tight gap into the slightly larger space where the corridors met. Zosimos, Valus, Varo, and Malerase were crowded into that unfortunate position.

Zosimos quickly opted out, casting a *greater invisibility* spell that removed him from the list of targets. Valus met the charge with one of his own, hoping to keep the foe bottled up within the tight confines of the passage. He was partially successful, as only one of the beasts squeezed past him, unsuccessfully trying to trip him up with a low bite aimed at his knee. Malerase at once tried to *polymorph* it using his wand, but the monster resisted the effect. Snarling, the creature turned on him, slashing one of its long

tentacles across his torso. Seriously wounded by the critical hit, the elf fell back, bleeding from deep cuts in his chest.

Varo had prepared to summon aid, but on seeing Malerose seriously threatened, he lifted his own mace and rushed forward to engage the beast.

A scant twenty feet away, on the far side of the battle, the minotaur lowered its head and rumbled forward toward Talen, snorting violently. The fighter was caught off guard, but the minotaur had failed to spot Shay hiding in the shadows ahead of it, and that oversight cost it dearly. Shay barely got her spear up in time, but she set it into a crevice in the rough stone just as the minotaur hit it. Its momentum impaled itself deep on the slender head of the weapon, driving it through the creature's side and out through its back. The minotaur let out an inhuman scream and staggered against the adjacent wall, critically injured. Talen surged forward, hoping to take advantage of the creature's discomfort and distraction, but it recovered quickly, bringing its axe down to sever the shaft of the spear a few feet below where it jutted from its body. Thus released, it was able to slash the weapon up, hitting Talen with the spike that protruded from the back of the weapon. Had the creature been at full strength and speed, the blow might have penetrated the captain's armor, and hurt him greatly. But as it was, Talen was able to bring up his shield, partially deflecting the blow. He grunted as the point jabbed into the armor protecting his shoulder, but it only slowed him for a moment. Lunging with his magical sword, he thrust it deep into the minotaur's body, further worsening its precarious situation.

But the minotaur too had friends, and another two of them appeared in the doorway. Unable to get a clear line of charge with their stricken comrade in the way, they nevertheless lifted their axes and came forward to join the melee.

Varo grimaced as the displacer beast's deadly tentacles raked his body. His own armor protection was marginal at best, and he could feel the rough edges of the creature's natural weapons biting into his flesh through the thin mail links. He held his own attack, though, as the monster shifted and shimmered in front of him. Finally, it lunged to bite him, and that was when he acted. Ignoring his mace, he laid a palm upon its skull even as its jaws seized upon his left leg. His concentration remained unbroken as pain exploded through the limb, but that was nothing compared to what the beast felt as an *inflict critical wounds* spell tore through its body. The displacer beast released its grip at once, drawing back with a new respect for this foe.

A few feet away, a continuous series of clangs sounded as the displacer beasts in the passageway assailed Valus. The cleric's heavy armor and magical shield withstood most of the blows, but he staggered a step back briefly as one caromed hard off his full helmet. The displacer beasts tried to exploit the gap, but the cleric quickly recovered, holding them at bay with the sheer force of his presence. His mace harried them, bolstered by a *spiritual weapon* that he summoned, a five-foot torch of shining energy that he directed into the tunnel. In the tight confines of the passage, there was nowhere that the displacer beasts could go to escape the powerful strikes of the divine weapon,

and their own attacks upon it had no effect. Their angry howls expressed their frustration.

They didn't like it any better when a *lightning bolt* erupted out of thin air a few feet away, surging down the passage to the sizzle of roasting flesh. The *bolt* was targeted to shoot past Valus, but the metal-armored cleric nevertheless felt something of its force as it blasted by, grunting as blue surges stabbed into his body.

The ground shook as the two minotaurs came clomping down the passage. One let out a loud roar, swinging its axe down at Shay as soon as it came within reach of the scout. Shay sprang nimbly back, her magical boots augmenting her own natural agility, but the edge of the axe still managed to graze her arm, digging a long red gash down her bicep. Grimacing, she drew her elf-forged sword and prepared to defend herself.

Talen tried to come to her aid, but the critically injured minotaur he was facing refused to go down easy. It couldn't quite stand, leaning against the passage wall for support, but it reached out with bloody arms and seized Talen, taking another hit from the captain's sword for its troubles. But once held, Talen found himself dragged down with the creature, its superior size and strength giving it the advantage despite being near death. Unable to bring his sword into play, Talen grabbed at his belt for his dagger, while the creature tried to gore him with its long horns.

Dar had been caught in the middle of the group during the initial seconds of the ambush, but he now joined the melee in dramatic fashion. With his own roar, echoing off the passage walls to rival the minotaur's cry, he rushed forward, leaping over the tightly engaged Talen and his foe to meet the second minotaur head-on. It tried to bring him down with a swing of its axe, but it moved too slowly; Dar was within its reach before it could effectively strike. Dar held *Valor* in his hand, and the blade seemed to thrum with power as he brought it down in a two-handed strike. The axiomatic blade clove into the minotaur's chest, cutting through its rib cage, opening its torso from shoulder to hip. The creature looked down incredulity at the bloody cavity, its heart still pumping madly away adjacent to a lung that had been sliced neatly open. It managed to look up at the fighter before its axe fell from its hands, and it collapsed in a messy heap upon the floor.

"You're next," he said to the last creature. The minotaur, to its credit, did not falter, lifting its axe and bringing it down in an attempt to do the same to the human that had been done to its fellow. Dar spun neatly aside, turning the devastating swing into a glancing blow that hurt him, but didn't fully penetrate his magical armor.

"You had your shot," he said, stepping into its reach and bringing up *Valor* in an upward arc. This time, he started low, but the hit was no less devastating, taking off the minotaur's leg at the hip. Spinning out of control, the creature fell to the ground, roaring in pain. It was unable to do anything to stop Dar from thrusting his sword deep into its neck, ending it.

Breathing heavily, his sword shining blue as blood sloughed from the blade, Dar turned to see if Talen needed help bringing his foe down. But Shay had already intervened, and was extracting the captain from the death-grip of the slain monster.

The fighters returned to aid their companions, but the battle back at the intersection was already winding down. Varo had managed to keep his opponent busy, distracting it long enough for Malerese and Zosimos to take it down with ranged attacks. Valus, holding the breach alone, had withstood the assault of the few beasts that had will to fight after being hit by the wizard's *lightning bolt*. He had now brought his mace into play, and against the scorched survivors it had been used to good effect, finishing one of the creatures, and driving off another. The remaining beasts had disengaged already, retreating back down the passage, leaving three of their kin cluttering up the narrow tunnel with their smoking corpses.

"Nice work," Talen said, spelling Valus at the gap, keeping watch so that the cleric could heal himself of his injuries. The cleric flipped up his visor, his expression angry.

"You caught me in your blast, wizard," he said.

Zosimos shrugged. "Regrettable but necessary. I made every effort to avoid you, but your metal armor served as a conductor for the electrical energies of the spell."

"That is all you have to say?"

"Enough, we don't have time for this," Dar said. "We beat the crap out of these guys, but we still haven't seen any clerics."

"There are still fiends to consider as well," Varo said. "Recall the vrock that we confronted last time, and failed to slay."

At the mention of demons, Valus seemed to focus back on the mission, but his expression indicated that he was not finished with the evoker over the friendly-fire incident.

"Gods, were we ever this tetchy, our original team, I mean?" Dar said as an aside to Varo.

"You have a short memory," Varo replied, turning to heal Malerese of his injuries. "Perhaps now you have a new appreciation of what Marshal Tiros had to put up with."

"Bah, I'm no leader," Dar returned. But Talen turned to him, as they regarded the dark tunnel where the displacer beasts had fled. "They might come back again, once we move on," the captain said.

"This was a different pack," the elf said. Several of the others looked up in surprise; normally the elf did not volunteer comments about their mission.

"I believe he is right," Zosimos said. "These were not marked by my earlier *fireballs*."

"Shay?" Talen said. The scout, her latest injury healed by Valus, nodded and headed toward the tunnel. "Be careful," Talen whispered, as she moved past him.

The clerics continued to treat the remaining injuries from the brief but violent ambush while Talen and Dar kept a close watch out for additional foes. Shay was gone only about twenty seconds, before she rematerialized out of the darkness. "It's a dead-end room, looks like," she said. "Rough cavern, like the others."

"Are they in there?" Talen asked.

"Oh, they're in there. Hiding, but they're there, I could hear them."

"We'd better finish them off," Valus said. "Lest they recover their courage and come upon us from the rear at an inconvenient time."

Zosimos came forward. "Show me." He cast a spell and became *invisible* again. Shay looked around in confusion for a moment, until she felt the wizard's hand on her sleeve.

Shay led the evoker into the tunnel for a moment. There was a roaring sound and another series of howls, and then the pair came hurrying back. "They didn't like that," Shay said.

A shadowy form exploded out of the tunnel, hurtling toward them. But the companions were ready for it, and as it got close enough to lash out with its tentacles, the fighters were already laying into it with their weapons. The wounded creature did not last long.

"Any more?" Talen asked.

"Only one way to find out," Dar said. He walked down the passage, stepping around the mangled corpses of the displacer beasts they'd killed. The others followed behind, but by the time they'd caught up to the mercenary, they could already hear the howls of the creatures from ahead. They hurried after him, but Dar was already laying into one of the wounded monsters, smashing it roughly aside with his club. Another creature came at him from behind, but Zosimos blasted it with a quintet of *magic missiles*, finishing it off. There was another creature lying on the ground on the far side of the room, but it did not stir, black char covering half of its body from multiple magical impacts. Dar went over to it anyway, and made sure.

"All right," he said, coming back to them, the head of his club dripping gibbets of gore. "Let's move on."

Chapter 96

THE RITUAL

As the sack was torn roughly from her head, Allera could see that she was in a huge chamber, surrounded by the servants of Orcus.

The place was shaped like a giant cross, and stretched for hundreds of feet in each direction. She knelt upon a symbol carved into the stone beneath her, part of a very large and very intricate pentagram that stretched across the center of the room. Directly in front of her stood a broad stone altar, upon which hovered a slowly spinning crystalline orb that flashed with a dizzying mélange of colors. It made her eyes hurt to look upon it, but it took some effort to tear her gaze away.

To the sides of the pentagram she could see large stone pools to the left and right. Ugly red splatters around the perimeter of those basins hinted at what was inside; that and the foul stench of this place—an odor of decay—caused her gorge to rise in her throat.

She could not move; the cruel barbed cords were wrapped tightly around her body and legs, binding her limbs to her, and holding her in a position that was a mockery of prayer. She was not the only prisoner; there were two others held in similar poses in adjacent positions along the perimeter of the pentagram, goblins. One knelt with its head down against its chest, either dead or unconscious. The second met her gaze with intelligence shining in its yellow eyes, but also a grim resignation.

They were not alone. She tried to swivel her head around, but moving her body caused the barbs to bite painfully into her flesh, and so she could only manage to turn enough to sense vague forms at the edges of her peripheral vision. There was a power here, a slowly building feeling that caused a prickling sensation against her skin. She felt her stomach twist with terror, and it was only by summoning her will and her faith that she kept from collapsing in a paroxysm of frantic sobs.

“It will soon be over, priestess,” came the familiar voice of Gudmund from behind her. She could feel the priest’s presence as he came closer, could feel the hot warmth of his breath against her skin. His voice became a silken whisper, words for her ears alone. “You and your friends helped me bring down Zehn... the least I can do is grant you the gift of oblivion. You will not witness the destruction of your world... but you can go to your doom knowing that you have helped to bring it about.”

“You will fail,” Allera said. “The powers of Good will not suffer you nor your abomination of a master to live.”

The evil high priest stepped past her, moving into view. He was clad in full plate armor that clanked as he moved, the whole covered by unholy vestments dominated by a

bloody red sigil of the horned god he served. He wore no helm, but his face was covered by a mask in the shape of a skull, its white surface edged by what looked like splatters of fresh blood. He dominated her, a dread prince of darkness himself, full of his power and the power of his patron.

And he was not alone. Terrors out of nightmare accompanied him, one passing to her left, another to her right. The vrock screeched at her, gobs of spittle trailing from its beak, while the glabrezu merely looked at her coldly, like a piece of meat beyond its notice.

The conscious goblin struggled, although its bonds were as tight and as painful as those holding Allera. "This will mean an end to our alliance, priest, and war between my people and yours," the creature croaked.

Gudmund turned to him, and laughed. "That arrangement was merely one of convenience, wretch. Your people shall be chaff before the reaper's scythe, their souls provender for the True God."

The glabrezu's gaze shifted to fall upon the goblin, and its bravery collapsed before that otherworldly stare. The creature let out a keening sigh and subsided, shivering. But Allera had drawn some strength from the creature's defiance. "You may kill me, but others will come to destroy you," she said.

"Of course they will," Gudmund said. "I am counting on it."

He lifted his arms, letting his robe fall back to reveal scarified flesh upon his hand and forearms; he wore neither gauntlets or bracers. He drew out a knife from under his mantle, and used it to add another cut to his own flesh. Bright red blood dropped in fat orbs upon the floor. The shimmering aura from the crystal globe obscured his body, blurring his features, making him almost impossible to see clearly. But his voice rang out through the chamber, every syllable crashing against the healer's ears.

"Blood of the True God!" he shouted. "You came here to serve, to bring about the Final Coming!"

A dozen voices, maybe more, echoed from behind her in response. "His coming shall wipe away all before him!" The voices were male and female, young and old, and she knew them. The voices of her captors, her tormentors. The acolytes and priests of Orcus, Prince of Demons. The energies coming from the crystal sphere seemed to pulse in cadence with their words. Gudmund's face had become hazy, blurred, but she could still see his eyes, fixed upon her.

"We bring these offerings, so that their lives may speed his coming!"

She sensed movement to her sides, and saw hooded and robed priests come up behind the goblins. Daggers flashed in their hands, and blood spurted as one yanked back the

head of each goblin, while another drew his blade across their throats. The goblins, already near death, deflated, their bodies sagging back as their blood exploded from the deep cuts.

And then, as Allera watched in horror, a miasma of gray tendrils swirled out of the bodies of the dying creatures. Tiny motes of light flickered within those insubstantial clouds, which were drawn out of the bodies and forward, toward the center of the pentagram. The sparkling wraiths grew longer and thinner as they passed the high priest's outstretched arms, finally dissolving into the crystal sphere, which pulsed brightly as they were absorbed.

Allera instinctively knew what had happened, knew enough about the tenuous flicker of life to recognize that the sphere had devoured the souls of the hapless prisoners. She looked up at Gudmund in horror. The evil priest's eyes shone deep within the hollows of his skull mask.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, you understand. And your soul, burning so much brighter than those wretches, will help sunder the bindings upon the door."

She struggled, ignoring the sharp pains that pierced her body from the barbed cords. Fresh blood soaked into her already sodden shift. A scream bubbled up within her as rough hands grabbed her head, but she felt a sudden calm come over her, and she did not give them the satisfaction of crying out. She trembled as her head was yanked back, and steel flashed before her eyes.

"So strong," she heard Gudmund's voice. "Yes, yes."

She never felt the actual stroke, but felt the hot warmth pouring down her chest. Her strength seemed to ebb away with that flow, and her senses began to drift. The flashing energy of the sphere muted everything else as her vision clouded, and she could feel it tugging at her. She tried to fight it, but her will faded with her lifesblood, and she could not. But then she felt another presence there with her, taking her into its shelter, and that evil pull faded as the blackness deepened around her.

Gudmund watched the healer bleeding out her life, her blood seeping through her ruined clothes, and spreading out upon the floor, seeping into the carved runes of the unholy circle. The ritual had reached its climax, and he waited for his reward, as the woman's bright soul was drawn into the Sphere.

But as her life faded, nothing happened. The woman was dead, that much was obvious. Her slashed throat had stopped its gory fountain, and she'd slumped down, kept upright only by the tightness of her bonds. Frowning under his skull mask, Gudmund lowered his arms and stepped forward. The two priests standing behind her exchanged a look, realizing that something had gone wrong.

As the priest came forward, he saw something. Under the blood-soaked remnants of her garment, there was a faint flickering flash, just between her breasts, close against her heart.

His moment of glory had been denied him; he had been cheated of his prize. The high priest's face twisted with fury, and he'd started forward to grab the dead woman's body when suddenly the outer doors to the temple burst open, and a dire wolverine charged forward into the unholy chamber.

Chapter 97

IT'S ON

The huge wolverine, its eyes blazing red, let out an angry bellow and started lumbering forward toward the row of acolytes.

A *fireball* shot past it, exploding into a bright sphere of flame near the edge of the pentagram. Several of the acolytes caught within the blast screamed and fell, their skin reduced to blackened char. A split second later, a perfectly structured grid of cascading blue energy materialized in the center of the room, sizzling as it impacted the protective auras of the pentagram and the Sphere of Souls. *Valus's order's wrath* killed two more acolytes and seriously injured a pair of senior priests. The vrock shrieked as the spell cut brightly glowing lines across its torso, but the blue energy fizzled as it hit the glabrezu, and likewise Gudmund simply shrugged off the worst of the spell.

An arrow went flying at the high priest, bringing with it a *silence* spell. But this time Varo's tactic failed to have an effect, as the missile glanced off the powerful cleric's magical armor, and caromed off past the altar into the back of the room, where it could have no effect upon the battle. Other arrows went flying toward other targets; one pierced a heavily burned priest's arm, while another bounced off the armored carapace of the glabrezu, doing no damage.

In the wake of the dire wolverine's charge, a trio of fiendish apes loped forward into the room, looking for foes to tear apart with their claws. Behind them came the companions, led by Dar, with *Valor* shining with blue light in his hand.

The cult forces had suffered heavy damage in the initial volley of spells; only three acolytes of the initial ten remained standing, mostly due to luck in where they'd been standing in the room. The four senior priests were still on their feet but likewise showed heavy wounds; they stood next to three bound, limp forms laid within the pattern of runes that formed part of the inlaid magical circle in the floor. Beyond that it was difficult to see clearly, due to the shifting field of wild, radiant energies that shone from a bright object atop the room's central altar. The high priest was a man-sized blur, flanked by a

pair of fiends straight from the darkest pits of the Abyss. There was another figure in the room as well, a bulbous humanoid thing several times the size of a man, but it could not be clearly distinguished through the *blur* effect thrown off by the *Sphere*.

Gudmund lifted his arms and called to Orcus, evoking a *blade barrier* that split the room in two, separating most of the cult forces from the invaders.

The three surviving acolytes were left on the far side of the wall of blades with the companions, fodder to delay the attackers. They accepted that role with aplomb, rushing forward to engage Varo's summoned creatures.

They did not fare well. The huge wolverine merely lifted a claw and crushed one of the cultists beneath it, barely breaking its stride. The apes hopped forward and fell upon the other two with similar relish, tearing them apart with their muscled arms. The acolytes died messily, calling upon their god.

The *blade barrier* formed a shimmering wall across the room, their enemies just vague shapes behind it. Shay and Malerese continued to fire their bows, but the arrows were deflected by the swirling blades of the magical wall, having no effect.

"Zosimos!" Varo shouted. "Can you bring down the *barrier*?"

The wizard, sheltered by a bevy of *mirror images* and a magical *shield*, shrugged. "Why bother? My attacks are not foiled by such." To prove his point, he summoned an *ice storm* that came blasting down on the far side of the *blade barrier*, the huge hailstones blasting into the priests and their fiendish allies.

"Damn it, we need to engage them before they can buff up! Just do it!" Varo yelled.

The wizard shrugged, and began casting again.

Dar and Talen had rushed forward to join the summoned creatures at the edge of the barrier. The fiendish monsters hesitated, but for a moment, it looked like Dar wasn't going to stop. Finally, though, he drew up short, his face twisted with frustration.

"We've got to get through this!"

"Let the wizard bring it down!" Talen returned. He saw something through the blades, and pointed with his sword. "Something's coming through!"

Dar saw it too, and drew back into a ready position as the hulking form approached the barrier from the other side. It stepped through Gudmund's wall, but the magical blades passed through it as though it wasn't even there. It was a hulking, humanoid monstrosity, a construct of living clay that stood well over eight feet tall.

The dire wolverine slashed at it with a claw as it came forward, but the creature's sharp talons sliced through its clay body with absolutely no effect upon it. The golem countered with a powerful smash that hit the creature in the shoulder; Dar and Talen could hear its bones cracking from ten paces away.

Dar let out a yell and charged at it, with Talen moving to flank it from the other side. But the golem's reach was considerable, and it brought a huge fist around that smacked hard into Dar's shoulder, spinning him half around, driving him to his knees.

As the fighter shook his head to clear it, Varo's otherplanar creatures surged forward to join the attack. Before they could reach it, however, they shimmered and vanished, *dispelled* back to whence they came.

Dar looked up in alarm as the clay golem lumbered forward, its huge fists coming up to finish what it had started.

Chapter 98

COUNTERSTRIKE

Dar roared and leapt up, swinging *Valor* through the golem's body. The sword did not thrum with power as it sometimes did when he wielded it against certain foes, but the sheer force of the blow overcame the golem's resistance to damage, and a considerable gob of its substance went flying as his sword passed through it. It was like trying to cut through a hill of dirt.

He brought his sword around to hit it again on the backswing, but the golem struck before he could launch another attack. Knowing how hard it hit, he tried to dodge aside, only to take a pulverizing hit as its meaty fist slammed into his thigh. His greave kept the bone from breaking, but he still felt as though a hot poker had been stuck into the limb. The golem was following his every move, and if anything, it seemed to be getting faster.

Talen did his best to help the embattled fighter, attacking the golem from behind. His sword passed through its body like the other failed attacks upon it, but he was able to have at least some effect, leaving shallow gouges on its torso where he had hit. Grunting in frustration, the fighter tried to put more strength into his attacks.

Glancing to his left, he saw Shay running up to join them, her sword drawn. "No, Shay! You cannot hurt it!" he warned.

The scout ignored him, rushing forward to engage. The golem seemed to sense her coming, and brought down a heavy fist to smash her, but she leapt and tumbled inside

its reach, narrowly avoiding being hit. Her own stroke had no effect, but the creature's attention had been distracted, letting Dar get in a full attack upon it unimpeded.

The fighter held nothing back. With the monster distracted, his powerful attacks bit deep into its substance. Huge chunks of clay went flying, and he tore through one of its legs, unbalancing it. The golem staggered back a step, trying to recover.

The others had not been idle during the violent exchange between the golem and the party's fighters. Zosimos clucked in frustration as he failed to dispel the high priest's magical barrier, but the arcanist immediately began preparing another potent evocation, moving forward to give him a clear shot around the swirling melee.

Valus had spent those seconds filling himself with the *divine power* of the Shining Father, and calling upon a *shield of faith* to protect him. That complete, he too began casting one of his more powerful spells.

Varo knew that their enemy was growing stronger on the far side of the barrier, but he knew that there was little that he could do to stop them. He cast a *confusion* spell through the barrier, not really expecting it to affect the powerful beings on the far side, but unable to come up with a better alternative. He made sure that Malerase remained close by him in the chamber's entry, the elf alternating between arrows and his magical wand. Neither thus far had managed to have any effect upon their enemies.

There was a hiss and a pop, and the vrock demon materialized on their side of the *blade barrier*, protected by *mirror images*. Varo pointed him out, and Malerase fired an arrow that hit it at the joint where its left arm met the shoulder, striking the real form among the images out of sheer luck.

The vrock, displeased if not seriously hurt, ignored them to dive at the wizard. Zosimos saw it coming, and shifted his aim upward, blasting the vrock with his *cone of cold*. The blast overwhelmed both the demon's spell resistance and its inherent resistances, and it swooped away. For a moment it looked like it was about to disengage, but then it opened its beak wide and unleashed a piercing shriek that echoed through the chamber. Zosimos staggered back, stunned, and Shay, still battling the clay golem, was likewise rendered temporarily overcome by the piercing blast of sound. Satisfied, the vrock spun back around and dove toward the evoker.

As it spread its wings to land, the demon's attention was drawn about by Valus. The cleric had grown to a height of twelve feet tall, his stature empowered by the *righteous might* of his patron god. The vrock turned to him and hissed, confident as the cleric's charging blow tore harmlessly through one of its *mirror images*. The vrock leapt up to engage the priest, tearing at him with its claws as it released a cloud of spores that swirled around them both, digging into the cracks of Valus's armor to burrow painfully into his flesh.

In the center of the room, the clay golem reared back from another heavy blow from Dar. Cracks spread across its body and it began to crumble, showering bits of itself upon the floor and upon its enemies. Talen stood over the stunned Shay, holding his shield over her to protect her as the golem came apart. Dar ran his gauntlet across his lips, which came away bloody; the golem had managed another hit to his body, and he was once again in pretty bad shape.

He looked up as the *blade barrier* suddenly and without warning came down, the spinning blades just dissolved into nothing. None of the underpriests were left standing; one of them had his hands wrapped around the throat of his neighbor, testament that Varo's *confusion* spell earlier had not been a complete waste. But the evil high priest still stood, sheltered in the protective aura of the glowing sphere at the room's center.

And the glabrezu was there as well. It stepped forward, the ground shaking at its coming.

"Talen," Dar said, but the captain had seen it too. Helping Shay to her feet, the captain then lifted his sword, turning toward the great and terrible demon.

"Come for this?" the demon hissed, its deep voice booming from its chest. It kicked over one of the slumped figures kneeling on the floor at the edge of the pentagram. The bloody figure was knocked over, revealing the bloody and lifeless form of Allera. "You're a bit late," it cackled.

Dar shouted and charged, but he'd barely managed two steps before the glabrezu gesticulated with one of the small hands that jutted from its chest. As the demon unleashed its power, Dar, Talen, and Shay went flying upward, slamming hard into the ceiling twenty feet above.

Chapter 99

UNTRAMMELED VIOLENCE

Valus and the vrock demon exchanged a titanic series of blows. Thus far, the cleric was getting the worst of it, as the demon's *mirror images* continued to confound him. Thus far, he'd vaporized two of the shifting images, but in turn he'd taken a pair of vicious claw hits that had torn into his arms through his armor, and the creature's spores continued to burrow deeper into his flesh.

Zosimos provided him with assistance as he recovered from the vrock's stunning shriek. Drawing out a wand, he fired a barrage of *magic missiles* into the creature. Four of them hit false images, causing them to dissolve, but the last hit the creature in the back.

The missile failed to overcome the creature's damage resistance, but it gave Valus a clear target.

The cleric took full advantage, driving his mace into the demon's chest. Not only was his strength augmented by divine intervention to that of a hill giant, but the priest had *aligned* his weapon, allowing it to smash through the demon's fiendish resistances. The vrock was driven back by a pair of truly titanic blows, and all of a sudden it was in real trouble.

The demon clearly realized this as well, for it flapped its wings madly and *teleported* away.

All that was left of the defenders was the glabrezu and the evil high priest, but they had more than enough firepower to deal with the intruders, a fact that was clearly demonstrated as they unleashed a pair of *unholy blights*, one targeted on the three pinned by the glabrezu's *reverse gravity*, and the other focused on Zosimos and Valus.

"Stay here," Varo said to Malerese, before he cloaked himself in *invisibility*.

The elf clutched his bow, uncertain.

Zosimos and Valus returned the high priest's assault with their own magical attacks. The evoker launched a pair of *scorching rays* into the enemy high priest, while the cleric of the Father followed with a beam of *searing light*. Valus's spell faltered against the priest's spell resistance, but Zosimos's beams washed over his armored body, searing his flesh. Gudmund had healed himself of the damage from Zosimos's earlier spells, so he withstood the rays of fire well enough, but as fixed his dark gaze upon the wizard, an angry rage burned in his eyes.

A red glow erupted around the edges of the skull mask worn by the evil priest. The skull flew from his head, animating in a sick parody of life, its jaws opening wide in a soundless scream. The wizard tried to retreat, to summon some spell to save him, but he could not outpace the streaking skull. It struck him in the face, the white bone expanding around the wizard's head until all of it was engulfed within the skull. Red fire exploded out from the openings of the skull, and Zosimos's screams were abruptly cut off.

Valus bent to aid the wizard as he toppled over, but there was nothing that could be done; the man was dead. The cleric reached for the unholy mask, but before he could lay hands upon it the device released its grip, falling to the side, once again an inert piece of bone. All that was left of Zosimos's face was a blackened mess, and as Valus watched in horror, a pale gray wisp alive with sparkling motes of light rose from the fallen mage's body. The priest recognized it at once, but there was nothing he could do to stop it as the soul was drawn into the center of the room, where it was absorbed by the slowly spinning crystal sphere that rested atop the altar. All he could do was stare after it, his expression twisted into a snarl of revulsion.

The roar of the glabrezu stirred the holy priest from his reverie. Looking over, he saw that the glabrezu was getting the better of its foes; Dar was down, and by the look of things, Shay and Talen would soon join him. The priest felt a rare moment of indecision; the crystal sphere was clearly a focus for evil that must be destroyed, but on the other hand, the demon, left unchecked, might end up destroying all of them.

Valus stood; the Father was with him. Opening his mind to the glorious righteousness of his god, he charged once more into the fray. As he ran, a brilliant blue glow began to gather around him.

Once they'd recovered from the sudden reversal of gravity, and the accompanying impact on the ceiling, Dar, Talen, and Shay had quickly moved to rejoin the battle. The three rushed forward, passing through the glabrezu's *blight*, falling as soon as they left the area of effect of the glabrezu's *reverse gravity* field. Shay tumbled into a roll and came up on her feet, and Talen, though he landed harder, was quick to get up as well. But Dar, already battered heavily by the clay golem and by his first twenty foot fall *up*, felt something in his ankle snap as he hit the ground, and he fell forward, his sword clattering out of his hand.

The fighter tried to get up, but pain exploded up his leg into his body, and his vision began to swim. He reached for his sword, but it was out of his reach. Looking past it, he saw the ruined corpse of Allera, covered in her own blood, her skin blackened by Zosimos's *fireball*, but not enough to hide the unholy symbols that had been burned into her flesh. The sight should have driven him into a rage once more, but all that he felt was pain, and a sick emptiness inside of him. Those feelings followed him into the black as he lost consciousness.

Talen felt completely overwhelmed as he looked up at the fifteen-foot tall demon. How could he, a mere man, battle such a monster? Then he heard its voice within his mind, and he felt a cold chill run down his spine.

That is right, little mortal, you are right to fear me. For I am ageless, a horror from your nightmares... and I shall take everything from you that you hold dear.

The demon's words, far from reinforcing his terror, caused something to break inside of him, releasing a groundswell of righteous fury. Talen rushed forward, hacking at the shifting images of the demon. Malerase's ineffective barrage of arrows had at least thinned down the number of its illusory doubles, but there were still three of the demons overlapping each other, concealing the creature's true location. The odds did not favor the captain, and his sword passed harmlessly through an image, disrupting it. A shimmering pair of doubled arms came around, but the force of the pincer that cracked into his side was anything but illusory. He staggered back, and looked up to see the creature looming over him, its smaller arms reaching down to seize him. He tried to lift his sword to defend himself, but he felt as though his muscles had turned to water, and he could not.

“Leave him alone!” Shay cried, leaping forward. She ran by the demon, striking with her sword as she passed. The keen elvish blade sang as it bit into the armored joint covering the demon’s knee, penetrating its rough hide and tearing the muscles beneath. The demon roared and swept its other pincer around to crush the scout as she continued her rush.

“Shay, look out!” Talen cried. He tried to rush to her aid, but he barely made one step before his strength disappeared, and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

For a moment it looked like she was going to be crushed as the pincer came crashing down upon her back, but at the last instant the scout leapt into air, somersaulting forward as her magical boots boosted her ten feet straight up. The glabrezu’s claw swept under her, clipping the nearby chamber wall with enough force to gouge the stone.

“Fight me, wretch of the Abyss!” Valus roared, as he charged hard into the demon. The demon lifted a pincer-claw and slammed it down into the priest as he charged. Valus brought up his shield to deflect the blow, but the sheer force of the demon’s strike drove the magical steel down against his body. Valus grimaced as his shoulder was dislocated from its socket, but he kept coming. The demon’s smaller claws reached out for him as he entered their reach, but the cleric, instead of striking with his mace, reached out and laid his gauntleted palm against the center of the glabrezu’s chest.

The demon’s roar shook the chamber walls as the blue glow surrounding the priest poured through the contact between them into its body. The *dispel chaos* spell enveloped it, sundering the powerful connection that kept it here on the Prime Material. The fell auras of this place provided layered protections against the power of Good, and bolstered Evil. But the power unleashed by Valus focused on another aspect of the demon’s existence, its inherent Chaos, and here it found a weakness.

There was a slight sucking sound as the demon was cast violently back into the Abyss.

Valus, grimacing with the pain of his damaged arm, staggered back from the empty space where the glabrezu had vanished. The *divine power* he’d invoked at the start of the battle was starting to fade; within moments, the *righteous might* would expire as well. Talen and Dar were down, but the scout had returned, and was already administering a healing potion to the injured captain. The battle was not over, but he felt more than a bit unsteady as the holy power sustaining him drained swiftly away. He started to call upon the power of the Father to heal himself, but before he could complete the spell, he sensed a dark presence behind him.

He spun to see the enemy high priest looking up at him. “Your soul will make a fine gift to the True God,” the evil cleric hissed.

“Yours will join him in the Abyss!” Valus shouted, as he lifted his mace to strike. But the enemy cleric was faster, reaching in and seizing the enlarged cleric Valus by his left knee.

Dark power flowed between the two men. Valus's eyes widened in terror as Gudmund's *death touch* entered his body. Weakened as he was by the damage that the two demons had inflicted upon him, there was nothing he could do to resist. “No...” he breathed.

“Yes,” the evil cleric said. He released Valus, who collapsed to the ground, dead, an expression of pure horror frozen on his face.

Valus's soul emerged from his ravaged body, a gray veil that was alive with bright motes of vibrant light. But it too shared the fate of Zosimos, and the goblin prisoners, and the priests of Orcus that had lost their lives in the battle. The hazy whisper of fog and energy faded as it floated reluctantly into the center of the room, disappearing into the brightening aura of the Sphere of Souls.

Chapter 100

VICTORY AND DEFEAT

Dar felt himself jerked back to full consciousness, and the full catalogue of pain that accompanied it. He looked up, but there was no one there; still, a moment later he felt the familiar hilt of *Valor* being pressed into his hand.

“You are needed,” Varo's voice whispered to him. “Strike down the high priest!”

Gudmund, flush with exultation at the defeat of a potent enemy, felt a series of slight pressures as a magical attack faltered against his *spell resistance*. Turning, he saw the source of the attack, an elf, crouched over the body of the wizard he had slain earlier. The elf was holding a wand, but the high priest's gaze was drawn to the foe's eyes, and something latent within them.

“You...” he said.

But before the priest could do anything to deal with the elf, he was distracted by a pair of warriors coming at him from the other flank. Both men looked barely a shade better than death themselves, but they clutched their swords menacingly, staring at him with hatred and determination glowing in their eyes. Behind them was the woman scout, already moving around to cut him off from behind.

Gudmund had burned through most of his more powerful blessings from the True God, but he still had enough power to quickly channel a *mass inflict light wounds* that blasted

hard into the damaged bodies of his enemies. Both of the fighters fell to the ground, pushed once more past the point of exertion by their wounds. The woman was not seriously hurt, but her weakness was obvious in the way that she turned to one of the fallen men, abandoning her attack, and rushed to his aid once more.

Fools, the priest thought. An arrow shattered on his heavy armor, and he started to turn back to the elf, but a subtle shift in the radiance of the Sphere of Souls suddenly drew his attention back around. What he saw there caused his eyes to widen in alarm, and thoughts of the elf, the dying warriors, and the battle behind him faded as he charged back toward the Sphere.

The cascading swirl of raw chaotic energy had rolled over Varo like a wave as he had neared the floating crystal sphere. The cleric of Dagos had recognized the potency of the unholy auras present in this place at once, and had sensed that this object was the source. Now, as he drew near, he lifted his mace, intending to put an end to it, whatever the cost.

But as he prepared to strike, a dark shadow fell over him. Looking up, he saw a horror out of nightmare staring down at him from across the Sphere.

It was a demon, but that word alone did not give adequate measure to what it was. The creature stood only nine feet tall, but it carried with it a presence that made the glabrezu seem a pathetic wretch. Bat wings sprawled from its back, and coarse black hair covered its body. But its flesh was pitted with decay, and its horned head was little more than a skull, with brightly glowing eyes of sinister ochre set deep within its cavernous depths. It radiated pure power, and as Varo recognized it for what it was, he knew his death was upon him.

Still, he wasn't one to go down without a fight, so he lunged at the Sphere with his mace.

The demon moved surprisingly quickly, a huge claw closing around the device even as Varo struck. The cleric's weapon glanced harmlessly off the demon's skeletal fingers, and somehow Varo sensed that it seemed amused as it drew the glowing sphere close against its chest.

Then it vanished, taking the object with it.

With the demon's disappearance, the confusing aura of shifting colors it had projected vanished, leaving the center of the room dark save for the faint glow of the companions' *everburning torches*. Varo turned to see the enemy high priest facing him, a look of stricken fury on his face.

"You... you stole it from me... you stole the power that was to be mine!"

“It looks like that big demon was the one interested in stealing things,” the priest of Dagos replied, but Gudmund was already rushing forward, his hands extended. His heavy mace dangled forgotten at his side, but Varo already knew that this man did not need it.

Varo waited for him, and poured the energy of one of his few remaining higher-order spells into a powerful *inflict wounds*. But as he touched the enemy cleric, he sensed the ward that absorbed the negative energy of the spell.

“The True God protects me, fool,” the cleric snarled, smashing Varo across the face, hitting him with his own *inflict critical wounds*. Varo resisted the surge of destructive energy as best he could, but it still left him staggered.

Stumbling back against the altar, he saw that the cleric had taken a scroll out of a small pouch at his belt. “You have some strength, priest of the Deceiver, but your god will not protect you against the might of the True God.”

“The words of the *Codex* would suggest otherwise,” Varo said.

“Liar! The *Codex Thanara* chronicles our inevitable triumph! The souls of your pathetic people will open the door to His coming!” The priest’s voice had become increasingly agitated, even mad, but Varo saw that he had unrolled the scroll, which no doubt held some particularly nasty spell that he had kept in reserve.

But before Gudmund could read the scroll and unleash his spell, he staggered as Malerase charged into him from behind. The elf thrust his slender rapier into the gap between two interlocking plates of the cleric’s armor, drawing back the blade with blood covering its tip. The cleric spun in a rage, and slapped his palm down over the elf’s forehead. Malerase fell back, blood gushing from his nose and mouth, and fell to the ground. The cleric took a step forward, perhaps to finish the foe, but Varo leapt at him, wrapping his arms around the cleric’s body from behind. He tried to drag the cleric down, but his adversary was far stronger.

“Pathetic,” he said, driving an elbow into Varo’s face. The blow forced Varo to loosen his grip slightly, allowing the evil cleric to reach down and grab him by the groin. The hold wasn’t painful, not through Varo’s layered garments and armor shirt, but it was enough of a contact for the evil priest to hit Varo with another *inflict wounds* spell. This time, Varo could not resist the full force of the negative energy surge, and he found himself lying upon the altar, dazed.

The face of the high priest of Orcus appeared above his. “And now I send you to meet my master,” he said, lifting his mace high.

But instead of delivering the killing blow, the cleric’s body jerked roughly forward. He fell forward against the altar, nearly toppling onto Varo. He quickly recovered his balance and started to push himself back up, but in that moment Varo slid a bent metal

rod into the cleric's belt, his fingers brushing against a subtle protrusion at its center as he released it.

Gudmund heaved, but he remained stuck where he was, unable to get up. There was a loud clang as something hard struck him across the shoulders. Trapped off balance, he lifted the hand holding his scroll, but Varo grabbed onto it, keeping him from clearly reading the writing upon it.

"I can kill you with a single touch, wretch," the cleric spat.

"Better do it quickly, then," Varo said. "I think you're about out of time."

Gudmund lifted a hand to strike, but before he could unleash a final spell, a blow caught him solidly across the back of his head, cracking his skull open like a ripe melon, and splashing his brains across the altar—and Varo.

The battle was over.

Chapter 101

SUFFERING AND LOSS

The dead cleric remained standing at a sharp angle over the altar, pinning Varo in place. Talen appeared over his shoulder, heaving at the body, which still refused to move. "I can't... he's stuck somehow."

"One moment, captain," Varo said. He reached down and reclaimed his *immovable rod*, touching the button again to disengage its power. Once it was deactivated, the dead priest slid easily to the side, landing on the ground in a loud clatter of metal.

Talen helped Varo to his feet. Dar was there, his club covered with pieces of what had been inside the Orcus priest's head. The fighter swayed back and forth, and looked barely better off than the dead priest.

"Those extra vials of *cure light wounds* potions you insisted we each carry made the difference," Talen said to Varo. "Shay was able to bring Dar and myself around in time to help you. But we're all in pretty bad shape."

Varo nodded absently to the captain. The cleric's head felt as though a dozen dwarves were excavating inside of it, but he fought through the pain, and walked over to where Malerese lay sprawled out on the ground.

"Yeah, I'm fine, don't mind me," Dar said.

“He lives,” Varo said with relief. He took out his healing wand, and began channeling healing power into the stricken elf. After a moment, the elf groaned and stirred.

“Zosimos and Valus are both dead,” Shay reported, coming over to join them.

“Can you restore them to life, priest?” Talen asked.

Varo shook his head. “That sphere, whatever it was, consumed their souls. I... I will make an effort, but I do not believe that it will be successful.”

Dar turned and walked away, ignoring Varo’s proffered wand. The others watched as he walked over to where Allera’s body lay. Drawing his dagger, the mercenary cut her bonds, and laid her out gently upon the stone.

Varo came to stand behind him.

“I am going to kill every last one of those motherfucking bastards,” Dar said. “Do you hear me, Varo?”

“I hear you,” the cleric said. “You need healing. You can barely stand, and this place is not safe.”

“Leave me alone.”

“Did you mean what you just said? You cannot avenge her, if you are dead.”

After a few moments of silence, Dar stood. Without turning to face the priest, he said, “Do it.” He waited while Varo poured healing energy from his wand into his body. Some of the wounds he’d taken—more specifically, the heavy blows he’d taken from the clay golem—seemed to resist the effects of the wand, but as the blue glow faded into him, he grew visibly stronger. Varo cast one of his own few remaining healing spells on the fighter, which did appear to help more. During the minute or so that it took Varo to complete his work, neither Dar’s expression nor the look in his eyes changed. When Varo was done, he walked away without a word.

Varo looked down at Allera’s body. He shook his head, and started to turn away, but hesitated. Kneeling beside her, he bent and recovered something lying close against her chest, pinned under a scorched remnant of what had been clothing.

The cleric stared intently at the green gemstone, and the two points of flickering light that glimmered faintly deep within. When he heard Dar coming back, he tucked it into a pocket, and rose to help Talen and Shay with their other fallen companions.

Once Varo had healed their wounds, the five surviving companions quickly and efficiently searched the rest of the temple area. For the moment, they laid the bodies of Allera, Zosimos, and Valus, covered with cloaks, in a quiet, shadowed corner.

The place seemed less oppressive with the absence of the crystal sphere, but none of them felt comfortable lingering here. The room quickly began to stink of death, with the bodies of over a dozen men scattered about, not to mention the vile wreckage of the fallen glabrezu. Varo collected some magical equipment from the bodies of the temple's defenders, and took a few items from Valus as well, including his healing wands. He gave Zosimos's arcane wands over to the custody of Malerese, instructing him to use them freely if they were attacked again.

Shay and Talen found two doors that exited the temple. One led to a small chamber crowded with hundreds of skeletons, a grim burial mound. The other led to a small chamber with beds and footlockers for a half-dozen people. After their misadventures the last time they explored living quarters of the priests of Orcus, they elected to leave that room for now. Neither of the two rooms had any other exits.

Dar and Malerese had checked the rest of the temple area, and secured the main doors as best they could. As they closed the heavy iron portals, Dar had lingered for a long minute, staring down the dark corridor that led back into the complex. But ultimately, he closed them, driving several iron spikes into the tight gap between the doors and the floor with his club.

Once they had completed their search, the five of them gathered again at the bodies of their fallen companions. Varo had remained there, examining several objects, and casting spells. He'd removed the evil cleric's plate armor, which he said radiated a potent magic, but for the moment they left that in a pile nearby, along with several other items of potential importance.

"Well?" Dar asked.

"We have done what we came to do," Talen said. "We must return to Camar."

"And let those bastards get away with this?" Dar said, gesturing to the cloak that covered Allera's body. He roughly kicked the garment back, revealing the woman's mangled head and upper body.

"Dar, please," Shay said.

"We have several choices open to us," Varo said. "But first, we must verify that Allera and the others are beyond our help."

"I thought you said that their souls had been consumed by that orb," Talen said.

"I saw a radiant mist drawn from the bodies of those slain, both enemies and allies alike, and drawn into the sphere," Varo said. "But for the sake of our friends, we must eliminate all doubt."

"How do we do that?" Shay asked.

"I would recommend a *commune*," the cleric replied. "I will need to rest, and prepare in a safe place. Well, relatively safe, anyway. Then I can petition Dagos for guidance."

"What are our other options?" Talen asked. "You said that there were several choices."

Varo indicated a pair of scrolls, one taken from Valus, the other from the enemy high priest. "Both of these scrolls contain a *word of recall*," he said. The spell is a potent one; it instantly returns the caster to a prepared sanctuary, over any distance. Valus was not powerful enough to cast the spell, but he could read the scroll; I presume it returns the caster to the sanctum of the Shining Father in the Great Cathedral in Camar."

"Can you take others with you?" Talen asked. "What about the bodies of our fallen?"

"Unfortunately, the spell is not powerful enough to take all of us," Varo said. "I can bring three people with me; I suppose each of you could take a body, if you are strong enough to carry it."

"We don't leave people behind," Shay said. She didn't look at Talen, but a momentary spasm of guilt passed across his face at her words, as the memory of her being carried away by the river trolls under Rappan Athuk stabbed at him.

"What about the other scroll?" Malerose asked quietly.

"It would take the caster to the enemy high priest's private sanctuary, I would presume," Varo said.

"And there is no way of knowing where that is?" Talen asked.

"I would guess that it is in a place that would be not entirely... friendly."

The captain glanced at Dar, who stood with his hands crossed over his chest, silent but with eyes as cold as icicles.

"What about the river tunnel?" Talen asked.

"I can recover my *water walk* spell at the same time that I prepare my *commune*," Varo said. "If it happens that our best option is flight, then I will be prepared to take us out."

“It will be difficult, carrying these bodies,” Shay said. “We can put Allera into the *bag of holding*, but it can only hold a single person.”

“Malerase has a spell that can create a disk of magical force,” Varo said. “It can help us bear the burden.”

“We should find a secure place to turtle up and rest,” Talen said. “Perhaps then we can...”

He trailed off, his eyes widening in surprise as he looked beyond Varo. Shay’s hand had dropped to the hilt of her sword, and Malerase had dropped back a step.

Varo turned to see Dar standing there, his sword held to within an inch of the cleric’s throat.

“I think it’s time you cut the bullshit, priest, and gave us the straight story,” the fighter said. “Or so help me, I’m going to cut your fucking head off right here.”

Chapter 102

CONTENTION

“What in the hells are you doing?” Talen asked.

“Stuff it, captain,” Dar said. “And if you take another step to the side, Shay, you’re going to be taking a bath in the cleric’s blood.”

The scout abruptly stopped her subtle movement.

“This is madness,” Talen said. “We cannot afford to turn upon ourselves, especially not now.”

Dar ignored him. *Valor’s* blade seemed to shimmer up its length with a faint blue radiance deep within the metal. “It seems that my sword does not like you, cleric,” the fighter growled.

“Many do not like me,” Varo said quietly. “Why don’t you tell me what this is about, Dar?”

“What it’s about, Varo, is that you haven’t been clean with us. Even back when it was just you, me, and Tiros, all you gave us was the barest minimum of info needed to get us to go along with you. It’s the same damned thing now. I put up with it when it was about survival, but no longer. You told us about that book, that Coda thing or whatever,

or some dribbles that your god gives you, but there's more to it than that. I know I'm just a dumb grunt and all, but even I can see that there's something bigger going on here, and that you're right up to your neck in it."

Varo simply stood quiet, calm during the fighter's diatribe, careful to keep his hands in plain view at his sides. "Very well," he said, finally, when Dar had finished. "What is it you wish to know?"

"First off, what is going on here? What is this cult after?"

"The followers of Orcus are attempting to use the power of life essences trapped by the sphere we saw—a device known as the Sphere of Souls—to open a way for their god, the demon prince Orcus, to enter the Prime Material Plane. In other words, for him to come here, to this world, in the flesh."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "I thought... I thought that wasn't possible," Shay said. "Gods... in the mortal realm?"

"Demon princes are an interesting conundrum, theologically speaking," Varo said. "I could go into greater detail if you wish, but suffice it to say, yes, it is possible. But it involves tearing the very fabric of reality to make it so."

"What happens if the demon comes through?" Talen asked.

Varo shifted his gaze slightly away from Dar to glance at the captain. "Basically? It would be the end of the world as you and I know it."

Dar let out a sigh. "And you didn't feel that it was important to share this tiny fucking detail with the rest of us?"

"I can only ask you to believe me when I say that I have been, until very recently, as much in the dark as the rest of you. If you would care to lower your sword, I give you my word that I will attempt no evasion, and will tell you what I know until you are satisfied."

Dar looked hard at him for a long minute, before he finally lowered his sword. But he did not move to sheath it, keeping the blade close at his side. "Speak, then."

"What I know about the cult of Orcus comes mainly from a text known as the *Codex Thanara*."

"You had told us about this before," Talen said. "I remember, in the interview with Marshal Tiros after Allera's capture."

"Yes," Varo said. "I first encountered the book almost twenty years ago, when I was still an acolyte of the Shining Father. The book was fragmentary; the copy that I found had

only approximately ten percent of the entire text intact. But what was there, was... disturbing. It sent me down a trail that ended up with me changing faiths, and working to uncover more information to fill out the gaps in the book. Every step I made, every nugget of information I uncovered, let me to the next. And with each step, the more convinced I became that the threat that I was revealing was nothing less than the end of our world."

Dar looked at him with suddenly dawning comprehension written on his face. "You... you *wanted* to come here, all along."

Varo said nothing. The fighter turned and walked several paces away, and then spun and came back, until his face was only a few inches away from Varo's. "You set it up! You set us all up! Ukas, Navev, the others that died... *it was all because of you!*"

For a moment, it looked as though the fighter would strike the priest. Varo stood there motionless, not offering any provocation. *Valor* gleamed in the fighter's fist, as if eager to strike down the cleric. The others watched tensely, but did not move to intervene.

"Well?" Dar all but shouted. "What do you have to say?"

"I did not arrange to have you sent to Rappan Athuk," Varo said. "Nor any of the others. I made arrangements to be included with you, but the Duke was no ally of my religion; most of my companions in the faith of the Watcher died in the torture cells deep under the palace citadel."

"You've already proven yourself a liar."

Varo shrugged. "Then nothing I can say will sway you, for good or for ill."

"I should kill you where you stand."

"Then you will never leave this place!" Varo said, suddenly vehement. He took a deep breath and mastered himself. "I wish you no ill will, Dar. You were damned to this place through the whim of the Duke, but I fought beside you and Tiros to get out, and to help you return to Camar safely. I used my powers to bring the marshal back to life, and helped you overthrow the illegitimate and evil rule of the Duke. I even brought you back from death, and purged the lycanthropic corruption that was vying for your soul."

"You brought me back as a tool," Dar said. "I remember what you told me, when you explained why you had cured me of the wererat-sickness. You said that you needed me, for what was coming."

"We all need each other," Varo said. "What we face cannot be overcome by one man's actions. The cult of Orcus has been preparing for this for centuries."

“What about Allera?” Dar asked, pointing to the body. “What does she have to do with all this? Why did they go through so much effort to take *her*, in particular?”

“An hour ago, I would have said that they took her because of her unique identity. She is one of the most powerful healers in Camar; there are fewer than a dozen individuals alive today that can match her talents, and only the Patriarch himself exceeds it. That, combined with her virtue, and the purity of her bloodline—the pale hair is a dead giveaway—would have made her soul a particularly potent source of power for advancing their plan.”

“Wait a minute,” Talen said. “You said, ‘would have said.’ Why?”

Varo looked at him. “Because what I have seen here has changed my view. Because now, I would say that they *wanted* us to come here. All of this, from the start, from the original sentencing of our company to doom us to Rappan Athuk, to Allera’s capture, to our inevitable response. We have been playing right into the hands of the cult, doing their bidding all along.”

“What?” Shay interjected. “That doesn’t make any sense. We destroyed two of their temples, killed a bunch of their priests. And those demons we fought, I don’t know *what* in the hells those things were, but I bet they don’t come cheap!”

“No, they do not,” Varo said. “The vrock, the vulture demon, we’d tussled with once before. It is a potent being quite adept at unleashing destruction. The other was a glabrezu, analogous to an aristocrat of the abyssal hierarchy. They are even more powerful, and not entirely common even in the lower planes. Sending one here, to the Prime, for any length of time represents an awesome expenditure of power.”

“Then I don’t get it,” Shay said. “If we beat it, how can we be advancing the cult’s agenda?”

“I think I understand,” Talen said. “It’s all about power, power for their sphere and their ritual. They are using all of it, the life energy of every being that dies in Rappan Athuk is all going to open that gate, to bring their master through.”

“Well, they can take their sphere and shove it up their collective asses,” Dar said. “I’m done with this; I’m getting out of here. And if you give me any shit about it, Varo...”

“Think about it, all of you!” the cleric said, emotion cracking through his calm façade once more. “Have you not paid heed to what you have seen in this place? This,” he said, gesturing around him at the contents of the temple, “this will be the fate of our entire world, should they succeed!”

There was a long silence, thick with tension.

“I have seen it,” a quiet voice said.

They turned to see the elf, standing a short distance away, lost in shadows but for the faint outline of his cape against the darkness beyond. His thin white hands were clutched tightly together in front of him.

“Some years ago...” he said, his voice so tight that they had to strain to hear him, “I came upon a secret place. It was a place of... of shadows, of evil. There was a sphere there, like the one that we saw... only much smaller. I was much stronger then in magic than I am now; by the standards of your Guild, I was an archmage. I was complete, full of myself and my power. I could sense the potency of the magic in the device. I allowed myself to ignore the taint of evil upon it. Rather than report my discovery, I made to seize it, to take that power for myself.”

“I knew almost at once that I had made a mistake, but it was too late. The power in the sphere was not only far beyond my own, but it was evil, hungry. For a time, I battled it... I do not know how long. But then, it came *into* me, and I could no longer resist it.”

“I saw... things. I saw the world I had known, changed. Darkness replaced light; clouds as thick as a sludge of oil blocked out the sky. The trees, blasted and unrecognizable black forms, their bare branches twisted and reaching up like claws. The creatures of the forest were gone, replaced by abominations that hid in dark holes under the ground, darting from shelter to shelter, devouring each other and anything else they could find.”

“All beauty... gone. All life... fugitive, fleeting. And the masters of this realm... horrors beyond horror, the undead, walking through the world of their creation...”

“My people tried to help me, but they could not see what I saw. In my visions, they too became sinister, insubstantial, mere echoes in a world more real to me than theirs. Madness took me; the touch of our gods through the hands of our strongest clerics could do nothing to abate its coming. I escaped... fled, driven by my madness...”

“Driven here,” Varo said. “To the source of your visions.”

“The Duke’s men brought him here,” Dar said.

“They only brought him to where he was already destined to come,” Varo said.

“How was it that you were able to heal him, when his people could not?” Shay asked.

“They did not understand the source of his affliction,” Varo said. “I stumbled upon it by accident, when I recited a passage of the *Codex* in his presence. “His contact with that unholy artifact had infused him with knowledge of the fate of his world, knowledge that drove him into insanity. He could not be rendered sane again, until that knowledge had been drained from him.”

“Until *you* took it from him,” Talen said.

“Yes. I recorded every word he said... And as he spoke, the missing passages of the *Codex Thanara* were filled. I still do not know everything about the cult or its plans; there are still considerable gaps, details that no one living, save perhaps for those few who are conducting the ritual, can know without being driven into complete and utter madness.”

“How is it that you were not driven mad as well by that which destroyed Malerese?” Talen asked.

Varo looked at him. “Because, my dear captain... I am already insane.”

Chapter 103

LATE ARRIVALS

Varo’s announcement was met by another long pause, as his companions struggled to assimilate what had been told to them. Finally, Dar snorted. “Yeah, big surprise there,” he said, turning away and moving over to where he’d dropped his pack.

“It is almost unbelievable,” Shay said. “Demons, gods... what are mere mortals like ourselves supposed to do about something like this?”

“A good question,” Talen said. “What do you expect from us, priest?”

“I expect nothing,” Varo said. “Except that we do what we can to save our friend.”

Talen looked at the priest for several long seconds, then nodded. “I will personally see that Marshal Tiros knows of what we have found here, and what both you and the elf have told us.”

“A prudent course,” Varo said.

“Something is coming,” Malerese said.

Talen and Shay drew their swords and looked around. “Where?”

The answer came before the elf could respond, as they heard a pounding on the double doors of the temple. Dar’s spikes held and the doors failed to open, and after a few seconds the pounding went away.

“Whoever it is, I doubt that they’ll be satisfied with that,” Talen said. “They probably found the bodies of the minotaurs and displacer beasts, and are coming to check on the temple.”

“You should take Valus’s scroll, and return to Camar,” Malerese said. “I will remain behind.”

“You will not,” Varo said, simply.

“We’re not leaving anyone behind,” Talen said.

The door sounded again with another heavy blow, and then more; it was clear that this time that whoever was behind it wasn’t going to give up and go away.

“We’re out of time,” Talen said.

“Bring them on,” Dar said, lifting Valus’s heavy shield, and sliding his arm into the straps. Before the others could stop him, he walked out into the center of the room.

“So much for tactics,” Shay said.

“At this point, all he wants is blood,” Talen said, taking out his bow, and setting up a firing position at the nearby corner. “I don’t think he cares whether or not it’s his or theirs.”

Varo had taken Malerese aside, and now pointed to the doors, and to the center of the room near the edge of the pentagram, where Dar took up position, *Valor* balanced easily against his shoulder.

The assault on the doors continued. Metal groaned and spikes dragged gouges into the stone floor as the huge double doors to the temple were slowly but inexorably forced open. A huge, hairy fist appeared, grabbing onto the inside of the jam and pushing forward. The gap between the doors widened, revealing a number of bovine faces: more minotaurs.

A *fireball* exploded in the gap between the doors, and the minotaurs let out angry cries of pain as the flames rushed over them. But the assault did not dissuade them; if anything, they assaulted the doors in a greater fury, driving them fully open and charging through into the temple.

This group was much larger than the last; there were well over a dozen of the creatures. They looked around the room for enemies, and settled their attention on the solitary foe standing in the center of the room, his sword flashing blue in his hand. Valus’s shield shone at his side, the sigil of the torch across its face blazing with the light of a *continual flame*. It was just an illusion, but it looked impressive nevertheless.

“Come on, you fucking cows!” Dar yelled.

The minotaurs roared and charged as one, their hooves shaking the ground, crushing the bodies of the temple’s priests beneath them as they charged. Dar held his ground, bringing his sword up into a ready position.

A second *fireball* exploded in the midst of the onrushing creatures, but again the charge did not falter, and the minotaurs kept on coming. Arrows lanced into them from the flank, and one of the hulking monsters fell, clutching the missile that protruded from its gut. Two of the minotaurs, bringing up the rear, swerved in their charge to rush at the small group of enemies now evident on the side of the room, the source of the barrage of spells and arrows.

The lead minotaur, a crusted old veteran with gray beginning to mark its furry mane, lowered its head and put on an extra burst of speed toward Dar. But it suddenly lost control of its feet, as it hit a slick of magical *grease* that had been summoned by Malerese while the door was being forced. The minotaur hit the ground hard and slid forward, colliding into a mound of bodies of slain priests.

The minotaurs following behind the leader swerved to avoid the black smear on the ground, which allowed them to keep their footing, but cost them the momentum of their charge. Still, as they spread out to come at Dar from the flanks, it looked as though the fighter would be quickly overrun.

Dar simply stood there, waiting.

One of the minotaurs in the second rank didn’t turn aside, but just kept on coming. It fell into a crouch and leapt forward, clearing the *grease*, its fallen companion, and the bodies of the dead priests alike. It landed and drove its head down, slamming into Dar’s shield with enough force to drive him back several steps. The much smaller human shook his head; the blow had driven the edge of the shield into the front of his helmet, breaking the visor and momentarily stunning him. The minotaur immediately sought to exploit its advantage, bringing up its axe to cut its foe in two.

But Dar recovered quickly. Stepping forward under the minotaur’s reach, he swept *Valor* around in a low arc that sliced neatly through the creature’s belly, disemboweling it. The monster fell, but Dar immediately found himself forced back as axes and long horns came tearing down at him from the left and right, as the minotaur’s fellows joined the fray. It was only their sheer size that kept him from being taken down at once, as the creatures blocked each other from getting at the incredibly outnumbered warrior.

Talen fired off a last arrow—at the ones battling Dar, not the pair that was charging toward their position—and dropped his bow, sliding his sword out of its scabbard. “Shay... help Dar!” he yelled, remaining behind the cover offered by the protruding wall, while making sure that the minotaurs could see him. The two charging creatures could

not get a clear line on the fighter for an all-out charge, but as they lifted their huge axes and ran closer, that seemed like a small advantage for the human.

After a moment's hesitation, Shay turned and ran out toward Dar. Another *fireball* streaked out past her, exploding out in the open space of the chamber. Malerese had placed the blast precisely, so that the flames did not extend as far as Dar, but that also meant that only a few of the minotaurs were caught within the flames. The majority were already engaged in close combat with the mercenary, who could no longer be seen within a rage of hulking figures and flashing axes.

And blood. There was a lot of blood flying around.

Talen took a glancing hit that only a quick jerk to the left kept from being much worse. The minotaurs had a much longer reach than he, and they put it to good advantage as they came at him with their axes and goring sweeps of their horns. The wall gave him some cover, so they couldn't easily flank him, but their blows were backed by an incredible, animalist strength. Within ten seconds he was bleeding from a pair of deep gashes to his torso, while he'd managed only a fairly weak cut in return. These two minotaurs had been at the rear of the enemy column, so they'd only been caught in one of the *fireballs*, and had only suffered minor damage from that one.

That could not be said for the creatures facing Dar, and now they began to fall, staggering back to crumple to the ground, blood gushing from terrible wounds. But there were still more of them to take the place of the fallen, and it was not clear how Dar could possibly still be standing as they rained heavy blows down upon him.

Shay came upon the melee from behind. The minotaur she targeted, its thick brown fur singed and blackened, never saw her coming. She sprang ahead, her elven blade darting in and out so fast that a blink would have missed it. The creature roared in agony and fell, dropping its axe as it clutched at the deep puncture in its back. A moment later, it spun around violently, its throat wide open and spraying red.

Talen found himself driven back against the wall, but suddenly the tide turned abruptly in his favor. The minotaur he'd wounded turned as Varo walked up to it, slashing his axe around in a broad arc designed to take the cleric's head off from his shoulders. Varo calmly ducked under the swing, and reached out to touch the creature on the arm. The minotaur shrieked and dropped its weapon as a long red gash exploded along the limb. It reached for him with its other hand, but staggered as a pair of five *magic missiles* from Malerese's wand blasted furrows into its chest. The cumulative damage was too much for the creature, and it slumped to the ground, wheezing pitifully on the edge of consciousness.

Talen exploited his advantage, taking the attack to the second creature. He scored a pair of hits that had it reeling, although it refused to yield the fight in the face of multiple adversaries.

In the center of the room, the bodies were piling up around Dar. Valus's shield was making the difference; that and Shay's attack, which had secured one of his flanks and was distracting several of the minotaurs on that side of him. The scout darted nimbly back and in to strike, not giving the minotaurs a chance to unload a full attack upon her. In turn, she wasn't able to inflict much damage, but Dar was doing more than enough for both of them. Already six of the monsters lay bleeding their lives out upon the floor. The minotaurs tried to hang back and unleash powerful strokes with their axes at a distance, but Dar would simply deflect the strikes with his shield, then step up and deliver powerful blows to their bodies that left them bleeding from deep wounds. *Valor* seemed to pulse in his hand, the blood shearing off of the blade as it darted back and forth in his hand. He wasn't able to deliver attacks of the magnitude he had before when he wielded the sword with both hands, but with most of his foes already wounded from Malerase's blasts, the creatures were going down before his attacks like wheat before the farmer's scythe.

Not that Dar was getting off easy himself; already he bore several serious wounds, both cuts from the minotaur's axes that had partially penetrated his armor, and puncture wounds where their horns had gored him. But every hurt drove him to a greater fury. He fought as though every swing was a personal retribution for what had been done to them, and especially for what had been done to Allera.

Finally, those foes remaining began to belatedly realize that they could not stand before the raging human that was killing their companions. One turned to flee, only to go down as Dar sliced through its left leg, scoring to the bone. A second fell as Shay slashed its hamstrings. One last one broke away and started for the door, but Dar spun from the one he'd just taken down, roared, and brought his arm back, *hurling* his sword through the air at its back. *Valor* pierced its body, driving through a lung, and the minotaur made it barely a half-dozen steps before it collapsed to the ground.

The battle was over; Talen had taken down his remaining adversary, and Shay was quickly putting the coup to those few left breathing. Dar stepped over the bodies of the creatures he'd killed, and walked over to the minotaur he'd impaled. It was still struggling, feebly, sucking in gasps of air. Dar drew out his punching dagger, and drove it through the minotaur's neck, killing it. Then he yanked *Valor* out from its body, snapped the blade to flick a few clinging gobs of blood off of the blue steel, and slid it back into its scabbard.

He walked back over to the others. Blood trailed behind him at every step, and continued to drip from the rents in his armor. Ignoring Talen and Varo, he walked past them, to where Allera lay cold upon the ground. Drawing the cloak back over her features, he bent and lifted her up into his arms.

"Let's get out of here," he said, heading for the door. His companions gathered up the remaining bodies and followed him, leaving behind the bodies of fifteen minotaurs to add to the wreckage of the second temple of Orcus in Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 104

THE FLICKERING MOTES OF FATE

They were not attacked again as they left the evil temple. Talen carried the body of Zosimos, while Shay and Varo dragged the armored form of Valus between them.

“Well, we’re not going to sneak up on anybody,” Shay commented, grunting as Valus’s armor scraped on the stone floor.

They did not have to explore far; they found a complex of unoccupied rooms not far from the passage leading to the caves where they’d battled the displacer beasts. The corpses from their last battle there were where they had left them, but Shay pointed out fresh hoofprints tracked through the blood, suggesting that the others had indeed stumbled upon the site of the battle earlier, alerting them to the presence of intruders in the complex.

“Lucky for us we didn’t find them until after we’d taken out the temple,” Talen said. The others agreed; if the minotaurs had come upon their rear during that battle, it was almost certain that they would all have shared the fate of Zosimos and Valus.

After checking several rooms, they found one that was defensible, and made preparations to rest. Varo and Malerase were given preference, as always; they needed to refresh their spells. That meant long shifts for the others, but despite showing clear signs of exhaustion, none of them complained. Dar took the first watch, *Valor* sitting bare across his lap. He let Varo heal him, but he said nothing to the cleric, either before or after. When Talen woke to take over for him several hours later, the fighter merely rolled over and went to sleep, his sword still clutched in his hand.

Talen lingered on his watch, but finally he could not keep his eyes open any longer, and he nudged Shay, who woke at once and spelled him to collapse into his bedroll. More hours passed, and finally Varo woke on his own, nodding to the scout as he took himself a short distance off to pray.

Shay prepared a cold breakfast of trail bread and hard cheese, and then took several bits of charcoal, a waterskin, a small iron pot and cooking frame, and a fist-sized cheesecloth bag out of the *bag of holding*. These tools came together with practiced efficiency to make coffee. The smell woke the others, who gathered around the tiny flame to take draughts of the almost magical elixir and shake off the last vestiges of sleep. Only Malerase refused any of the coffee, instead sipping water while he reviewed his spellbook a short distance away.

“Gods, Shay, this is better than a healing potion,” Talen said, cupping the beaten iron mug in both hands, letting the steam rise up into his nostrils. Dar downed his ration in a single gulp, then got up and walked over to the far side of the room to piss noisily into a corner.

“What do you think about all of this?” Shay asked Talen.

“I don’t know,” the captain replied quietly. “I do not trust Varo any more than he does,” indicating Dar with a nod of his head. “But I’ve seen enough with my own eyes to know that he’s not lying about the threat posed by these madmen. And he’s our only chance, right now, for Allera.”

“What if... what if her soul is...” she trailed off.

He took her hand in his. “We’ll do whatever we can,” he told her.

“You lovebirds want some quiet time?” Dar said, as he returned to the camp.

“Shut up, Dar,” Shay said, getting up to attend to her own personal needs.

Varo finally stood and returned. He looked haunted, and his glass eye was cocked to the side, its pupil off-center, but in the other burned a furious intensity that belied his calm exterior.

“When will you attempt the *commune*?” Talen asked.

“I have already completed the spell,” the cleric said, as he took a small piece of biscuit.

“What? I thought that we were going to do it together...”

Varo interrupted him with a raised hand. “A *commune* is among the most personal experiences that a cleric can initiate,” he said. “It is not like an idle conversation; it involves direct communication with the intermediaries of a god, if not some fragment of the god’s consciousness itself. It is not something that can be shared.”

“What did Old Creepy tell you, then,” Dar said. “If you feel you can share that much.” The fighter had calmed considerably since the previous day, but there was still a clear undercurrent of danger in his tone, and *Valor* still sat naked against his hip, the sword shining blue in the light of their *continual flames*.

Varo took something out of his pocket, and held it out in the palm of his hand.

“Where did you get that?” Dar began angrily. He reached for it, but Varo snapped it back. The green stone flickered slightly in his grasp.

"I found it on Allera," he said. "Her life force, her soul, is trapped inside the stone." He looked at Dar. "I take it you have some knowledge of the device?"

Dar muttered something under his breath.

"If we are to help her, I must know what it is," Varo persisted.

"I found it on the body of one of the clerics we fought in the first temple," Dar said. "Not the boss guy, but one of the reinforcements. I gave it to Allera... as a gift."

"Interesting, that the priests of Orcus would just let her keep it," Varo said. "There is a very complex weave of enchantments upon it. I do not fully understand it myself, but I believe that it saved Allera from having her soul drained away into the cult artifact."

"Can you free it?" Talen asked.

"Possibly," the cleric said. "I have prepared a spell that should be able to weaken the enchantment enough to free her, and another to restore life to her body. Mind you, this will require a great investment of my power, and I cannot guarantee success."

"Do it," Dar said, rising, pointedly taking his sword into his hand as he stood. He went over to where they'd stored the bodies of their erstwhile companions. The corpses were starting to stink, but all of them were so covered in blood and sweat and dirt that they barely noticed.

"What about Zosimos and Valus?" Shay asked.

Varo shook his head. "It is as I feared; they are gone."

"Did you ask about the cult's plans?" Talen asked.

"I did."

"And?"

"The response was... not clear."

"I thought you were talking to your god."

"Even the gods are not omniscient," Varo said. "And such matters grow complicated when more than one being of divine power is involved."

"Enough of this bullshit," Dar said, as he brought Allera's body over to them. He kicked out Talen's bedroll fully, and laid her upon it. "Do your magic, priest."

Varo nodded. He came to kneel in front of Allera. He looked up at Dar. "Stand watch, if you please. I will need some space."

Talen took the fighter by the shoulder. "Come on," he told him, drawing him off a short distance.

"Shaylara," Varo said. He indicated the space opposite him, on the far side of the dead healer. When she had knelt there, he handed her the green gemstone. "Hold this a few inches over her chest. Don't do anything else unless I say so."

She nodded, and held the stone as directed.

As the others watched, he first took his divine focus from around his neck, laying it on the floor before him. Then he drew a small drawstring pouch out from under his armor. He sprinkled its contents upon Allera's body, a fine, sparkling powder that glittered brightly in the light of their flames.

"What's that stuff?" Dar asked.

"Diamond dust," Varo said without looking up. "Now kindly do not interrupt me again; this requires considerable concentration."

He began casting, muttering syllables in no tongue that any of them could comprehend, all the while making complicated motions with his hands.

The spellcasting went on for a full minute. As the cleric's chant reached a crescendo, the gemstone in Shay's hand began to pulse with tiny surges of light from within.

Then, the cleric spoke a final word, and the gem shattered.

Shay started in surprise, but kept her hand in place as a pair of silvery wisps emerged from the pieces of the broken gemstone. Varo was already chanting again, moving his left hand out over Allera's body. One of the two wisps flashed in the air, and descended toward Allera's chest. The diamond dust he'd sprinkled over her began to glow softly, and it was as if her body was infused with the light of a dim starscape.

The others watched in amazement as the cleric completed his spell, and the mote vanished into Allera's body. The glittering sheen of dust flashed once and then faded. She lay there for a heartbeat, and then her stricken body convulsed once, and she took a breath.

"By the gods," Talen whispered.

"Indeed," Varo said.

The other mote, meanwhile, had also begun to descend. It settled upon Allera's chest as Dar and Talen came up and knelt beside Shay. Faint tendrils of substance began to take shape around it.

"What's happening?" Talen asked. "Is that part of the spell?"

"The spell is complete," Varo said, sagging slightly as he leaned backward upon his haunches. "This is not my doing."

As they watched, the flickering mote was obscured as a body took shape around it. It only took a few seconds, and when it was done, there was a tiny dragon sitting on the healer's softly rising chest.

At least it *looked* like a dragon. In truth, it was unlike anything any of them had ever seen. Its entire body was maybe a foot and a half long from head to tail, and colored a faintly orangish hue of brown infused with a silvery sheen in its scales. Tiny silver horns jutted from its head, matched by little silver claws. Instead of typical dragon wings it possessed a pair of brightly colored, almost delicate butterfly wings, which flapped slightly as it materialized. It seemed a bit disoriented, and as it looked up at them, it opened its tiny jaws and let out a tinny little bleat.

Chapter 105

A NEW COMPANION

"What in the hells is that?" Dar asked, reaching for the little creature. The dragon hissed and retreated, crawling up to Allera's neck, entwining itself in what was left of her hair, its tail twisting around her throat.

"Get off her, you little beast," the fighter snarled, grabbing the hilt of his punching dagger with his other hand. But Varo raised a hand in caution, and Talen restrained the fighter. Dar shot a dark look at the captain, but did not break free.

"I would recommend against precipitous action," Varo suggested. "Allera? Are you all right?"

The healer stirred. A faint moan escaped her lips. The dragon looked down at her, but did not loosen its grip.

"Allera?" Varo repeated, his voice insistent.

The healer's eyes fluttered, then finally opened. "Aaagh," she managed to get out, her throat rasping.

“What’s wrong with her?” Dar asked, still looking with suspicion at the tiny dragon.

“She’s been *dead*,” Shay said, shooting a cold look at him.

“Indeed,” Varo added. “Give her a few moments. Shay, some water, perhaps.”

The scout was already unslinging her goatskin bag, and carefully lifted Allera’s head, trickling a few drops into her throat. The dragon drew back enough to let her provide help, but it did not relinquish its position entirely. The healer coughed, but then gratefully drank a more generous stream before leaning back. Her breathing was easier, now, but her body still bore all the marks of ravage from her torment at the hands of the cult of Orcus.

The dragon let out a concerned croon, and drew its mouth to her lips, its tiny forked tongue whisking out to brush the cracked and blooded skin.

Finally, Allera’s eyes opened. They seemed vacant, at first, as they drifted from one to another of her friends, but they finally focused on Talen and Shay.

“You... you came.”

“A bit late, but we’re here,” Talen said. “Don’t try to talk... we’ll get you out of here.”

“No,” she said, closing her eyes. She tried to move, but was forced to give up as her face spasmed with pain. She took a deep breath, and moved her lips in soundless speech. A blue glow flickered around her, weak and hesitant, but it seemed to give her some added strength. She stirred again, but it took Shay’s help to get her up to a sitting position. As of yet, she had not appeared to notice the little dragon clinging to her.

“The... cult?”

“Dead,” Varo said. “At least those that were conducting the ritual.”

She nodded.

Malerase had crept forward unnoticed, until he was almost within arm’s reach of the dragon. “What of the fae?” he whispered, almost inaudibly. The dragon looked at him, blinking its tiny eyes.

Allera lifted a hand to the dragon, and brushed the creature’s neck, careful not to foul its delicate wings. The creature crooned again and rubbed its head against the tender, scarred flesh across her temples. “He... saved me,” she said.

“The dragon,” Dar said, looking at it dubiously.

"Its essence was trapped within the gemstone," Allera said. "When the sphere tried to take my soul... somehow, he drew me inside with it, gave me sanctuary against destruction."

The elf had reached out a hand, but stopped short of actually touching the creature. He whispered something to it in a strange language, and to the surprise of everyone, the dragon responded in a faint, tinny voice.

"You can communicate with it?" Talen asked.

The creature turned and bleated something at Talen, and Allera smiled. "He asks that you not refer to him as an 'it'," the healer said. "His name is Snaggletooth."

"I did not know you spoke elvish," Shay said to Allera, recognizing the language that the dragon had used, if not the meaning of the words.

"I don't... Somehow, I understand his speech, in my mind..."

"Many of the fae are masters of telepathy," Malerose said.

Dar had hung back, on the edge of the ring surrounding Allera. Now, he stood. "In case all of you are forgotten, we're still in the middle of Rappan Athuk. I don't imagine the cult is going to be happy when they find out we've trashed another of their temples. I don't know about you, but I'd just as soon get out of this hellhole, sooner rather than later."

Talen nodded, but looked down at Allera. "Can you walk? We can build a litter for you, if necessary."

Allera shook her head. "I... I can manage. Just... just give me a few minutes."

Shay turned to Talen. "That means get lost for a few minutes. I'll help her."

Talen looked down, and seemed to just then realize that Allera was lying there nearly naked, save for the cloak that she clutched to her battered body. "Ah... yes, we'll strike camp, and get ready to move out."

The men moved a short distance away to give the women some privacy, while Shay took out some extra clothes from her *bag of holding*.

"What about them?" Dar said, nodding to the corpses of Valus and Zosimos. His jaw was clenched tightly, and he seemed to be avoiding looking in the direction of Shay and Allera.

"They cannot be *raised*; their souls are well and truly gone," Varo said.

“We should bring the bodies back for proper burial,” Talen said.

“Are you going to carry them?” Dar returned. “Zosimos is just bones and skin, but Valus, he was a big man. And don’t forget, we still have the river to go back over, and then dung monster again beyond that. Unless that’s part of your plan for getting out?” he added, looking at Varo.

The cleric shook his head. “We should cremate the bodies. We can bring the ashes back to their respective orders, but we should not leave corpses, unless we want to encounter them again in undeath in the future.”

Talen shuddered slightly at the thought. “Fine, we’ll burn them once we’re ready to go, so we can open the doors and let the smoke escape.”

“Also, I would strongly recommend that both you and Dar take the heavy armor worn by Valus and the enemy high priest,” Varo said.

“I don’t like full plate,” Dar said. “Too constricting.”

“He’s right,” Talen added. “We’re going to need mobility, especially on the river...”

Varo shook his head. “I know that I am not a warrior, but I must respectfully disagree. Speed has proven to be less vital than protection, here in Rappan Athuk. As one of those who has had to patch you two fighters up after every battle, I would suggest that you consider how frequently both of you are brought to the edge of death. It is true that I can *raise* you should the worst occur, but Dar, at least, will understand how serious a matter that is. One drawn back from beyond the veil never comes back with the same strength as before.”

Talen looked guiltily at Allera. Dar looked thoughtful, but did not reply.

“In any case, both suits are heavily enchanted, and of masterwork quality. I suspect that you will find them less constraining than you think.”

Dar fixed Varo with a heavy stare. “You haven’t addressed how we’re going to run past the dung monster, loaded up with heavy gear. You don’t intend for us to return that way at all, do you?”

“I had an alternative in mind, yes.”

Dar stabbed a finger into the cleric’s chest. “I thought I’d made it clear... no more bullshit. You’re going to come clean with us; no more secret plans or hidden agendas.”

Varo withstood the fighter’s verbal attack with equanimity. “I had no obfuscation in mind, Dar; I was merely waiting until everyone was ready before I made my suggestion. In brief, it is this; that we bypass the upper level, instead taking the river to the wererat

cave, then down to the second level of the dungeon. From there, we have an easy route to an alternative exit.”

Dar nodded. “The fungus cavern. But that place was dangerous; Tiros almost got killed there.”

Varo nodded as well. “True. But at that time, we did not have him,” he said, pointing to Malerese, who looked up as three heads turned toward him in unison, a slightly confused look on his face.

Chapter 106

RETRACING STEPS

The large cavern was silent save for the constant sound of rushing water, and dark save for a faint glow that came from a tunnel on the far side, where the underground river exited the chamber. That glow began to brighten steadily, finally resolving into several flickering flames held aloft by the companions from Camar.

Shay was the first to step off the river, followed momentarily by Dar. The fighter clanked more prominently now, his breastplate replaced by Valus’s heavy plate mail. Dar also wore the cleric’s shield, and his small arsenal of weapons. Behind him came Talen, helping Allera, with the faerie dragon Snaggletooth fluttering along a few feet behind them. The healer was moving under her own power, but she looked wan, and frequently relied on Talen’s supporting arm to steady her.

Finally, Varo and Malerese emerged last from the tunnel, leaving the river tunnel dark again behind them. Varo wore the magical breastplate that had until recently been Dar’s; the armor looked out of place on the bony cleric, ill-fitting and ill-suited to him. But Dar had pressed the armor on him, using Varo’s own arguments against him, and the priest had ultimately acquiesced.

While Shay headed across the room to check for foes at the two exits, Dar paused by the cavern wall, straightening and cracking his back. The low tunnel, combined with the awkwardness of his new armor, had wrought havoc on his spine and the surrounding muscles. Multiple dousings in the river had washed away most of the dirt and blood that had covered the armor and his clothes, but it could not wash away the tired lines at the sides of his face, or the dark pouches that hung under his eyes. Dar wasn’t old, not really, but at that moment, he looked a good decade or two beyond his years.

A sudden flash of bright energy swept through him; a minor healing spell, but one that temporarily eased his body’s multiple complaints. He turned to see Allera standing there. Talen had gone over to back up Shay, and Varo was engaged in quiet

conversation with Malerese, leaving the two of them alone for the moment. The faerie dragon had fluttered up to take a perch on a narrow outcrop of stone on the nearby wall, about eight feet up. It watched the two humans intently.

“Should have saved that,” he said. He almost added, *for yourself*, but it was clear that Allera understood the subtext. Her physical wounds had been treated, but her body still bore the marks of her captivity, from her rough-hacked hair, to the brands that still showed faintly against the pink newness of her newly-healed skin. And in her eyes, but those she kept low, not meeting the fighter’s gaze.

“You have been quiet of late,” she said. “For you, at least.”

“What is there to say?” Dar said, coldly.

At that she did look up, and the pain in her eyes was obvious, brimming out on in a shimmer of barely withheld tears. “Thank you, for coming for me.”

Dar looked at her, his own expression a warring medley of expressions, but he said nothing. She started to turn away, but he stopped her.

“I... I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said, touching his forearm. He flinched, as though her fingers were the flame of a burning brand. Dar turned his head away. Although she couldn’t see it, in that moment, a thousand cultists died in the eyes of the fighter. Painfully.

Neither of them spoke for a few seconds. Finally, Allera opened her mouth to speak, but she was interrupted as Talen signaled to them from across the room.

“Come on,” the captain said. “The way is clear, for the moment, but the dung monster, or something else, could come along at any second.”

Allera and Dar had moved a step apart, the fragile contact between them broken. Snaggletooth landed on the healer’s shoulder, and let out a little hiss. Allera brushed his neck idly, but did not respond.

With Shay again in the lead, the companions made their way past the wererats’ berm and down the stairs to the second level of the dungeon. They all watched warily the dark tunnel mouths high in the walls, but there was no ambush waiting there for them, this time. The stench of the second level, thick with odors of smoke and piss, greeted them as they emerged into the long, wide hall that the four Doomed Bastards had originally traversed, not so long ago.

“You cleared this level, right?” Talen asked.

“Yes, and the stairs to the next lower level of the dungeon were blocked by a collapse, after we came through last time,” Varo said. He didn’t elaborate on their encounter with the purple worm; that was an experience none of them were particularly eager to revisit.

“If we’re lucky, maybe there won’t be any new guardians then,” Talen suggested.

Dar looked at him. “Are you new here?”

“Which way?” Shay asked. Varo indicated the door down the corridor to their right. “Beyond the door is a long corridor,” the cleric explained. “We go to the right; the entrance to the fungus cavern is at the very end.”

Shay nodded, and they moved out. They paused at the door while the scout checked for traps and listened for anything that might be waiting beyond the door; that done, Talen pushed it open, revealing only the empty passage extending to their left and right.

“What lies down that way?” Shay whispered, nodding to the left.

“Dead end,” Dar said. “In more ways than one.”

They headed right, down the long passage. They passed one door, which led to a small room where the Doomed Bastards had once taken refuge. The lock that had once secured the door had been smashed, and the door now hung ajar. Pausing just long enough to verify that the room was empty, they continued forward. A short distance further down the corridor, they encountered a second door, or rather the remnants of one; only a broken hinge and a few scraps of wood scattered about the floor were left. Both the walls and floor around the threshold were covered with old bloodstains, but the room beyond the doorway was again empty. There was another door on the far side of the room, which led to the stairs that Varo, Dar, and Tiros had once used to enter the cavern of the purple worms. That was blocked, now, the stairway collapsed by the worm that had killed the marshal.

“What happened here?” Talen asked.

“We got our asses kicked,” Dar said. “Same as always.”

“We battled a small company of ogres,” Varo said. “The bodies are gone; we encountered a pack of ghouls that had... had their way with the corpses. We also left behind some green slime nearby, last time. Keep an eye out.”

Shay nodded, and led them onward. The scout kept to the shadows on the right side of the passage, letting the light sources held by the others shine on ahead. Their *continual flames* revealed that the passage came to an eventual end up ahead. There were three more doorways visible; two on the right, and one at the end of the corridor. Only the first and the last had doors still in them, and those had been obviously battered, and dangled open from bent hinges.

“Somebody’s been wandering around here since we left,” Dar muttered.

Shay reached the first doorway and cautiously looked through it into the dark room beyond. The threshold was charred black; when they’d explored the room before, all they’d found was wreckage scorched by an old fire that had predated their coming. The place smelled of death.

“Allera!” Talen hissed, as the healer staggered against the wall. The dragon, flying a pace behind her, let out an alarmed chirp and landed on the wall above her.

“I... I’m all right,” the healer said, pushing away the captain’s supporting hands. “Just... need a moment, that’s all.”

Shay, distracted, glanced back. So it was that she didn’t see the huge form that materialized out of the shadows of the room, dark and silent.

But she certainly felt the impact of its fist as it smashed into the side of her face. The scout spun around as she was knocked backward, and she fell to her knees, stunned.

Her attacker, an ugly, bloated ogre, staggered out into the light of the corridor. One look was enough to reveal that it was dead, its eyes empty black hollows that fixed on the companions as it turned. Its ragged garments, caked in old blood, had been mostly torn away, revealing a mangled, gashed torso that was covered with fuzzy growths.

The zombie slowly lifted its huge arm to deliver a finishing blow to the dazed scout. Dar was already charging, *Valor* bright in his hand; Talen was only a step behind him, turning from Allera and drawing his own sword. But Varo got to the creature before the fighters could close the distance. Lifting his divine focus, the cleric called upon the power of Dagos, filling the corridor with a violet surge of negative energy. The zombie immediately froze, its fist stopping in mid-air above Shay’s dazed form.

Dar let out a low growl as he rushed toward the zombie, uncaring whether or not Varo had it under control. He brought back *Valor*, letting his momentum build up for a strike that would rip through the unholy power that animated it, sending it back to death for good.

Further down the tunnel, a low moan announced the arrival of other ogre zombies, one from the empty second doorway, and another that staggered through the open door at the far end of the passage. But they were too slow to be a threat, for the moment.

Shay shook her head to clear it, and looked up at the zombie looming over her. Her mouth trailed blood where the zombie’s fist had smashed her lip, and her jaw dangled at an unnatural angle, broken by the force of the impact. But as she saw the growths that covered the zombie’s body, she immediately recognized the greater danger.

“Dar, no!” she tried to yell, but the words came out as a garbled slur, and she was too late to intercept the fighter as he brought his sword up in a blur, slashing through the ogre’s body, tearing its body open from its crotch to its shoulder.

Unfortunately, the titanic blow also disturbed the yellow mold that covered the zombie, which exploded out into a toxic cloud that engulfed both the fighter and the scout.

Chapter 107

JUST A COUPLE OF ZOMBIES

For a moment, the explosive yellow cloud obscured Shay, Dar, and the zombie. Talen barely came to a halt at its edge, shielding his face against the spray of deadly spores.

“Shay!” he yelled. For a moment, it looked as though he would ignore the danger, and charge forward heedless of his own safety, but Varo forestalled him.

“Hold!” the cleric urged, coming up to join him. “You will not help her at all if you join her!”

Allera had come forward as well, using the wall for support. “We must... help them before the spores can fully infest their lungs,” she urged.

But as the mold blast cleared, showing Dar and Shay on the ground, coughing violently, it also revealed an additional threat; the other two zombies, closing rapidly. Dar’s blow had driven the first back into the side chamber, but it still hovered in the doorway, still animated but under the effects of Varo’s rebuke.

“Bow to the will of Dagos, mindless creatures!” Varo said, as he lifted his holy symbol again. Another wave of negative energy poured into the passage, but as it washed over the zombies, it flickered against something, a dark, shadowy nimbus that flared around the creatures once, and then faded.

“Some power counters mine... they are resisting my rebuke!” Varo warned.

Malerase was already acting, and as Varo finished speaking the elf lifted one of his wands and shot a *fireball* down the passage. The blast engulfed the two approaching ogres. Neither went down, but perhaps more importantly, the flames destroyed any more of the mold that might have been growing on their bodies. The two creatures continued forward, shuffling on legs that still bore the marks of the wounds that had killed them.

Talen and Allera knelt beside Shay and Dar, who were still gripped by violent spasms of coughing. Dar tried to get up, but Allera pushed him roughly back down, holding his head in her hands as she examined his eyes and throat.

“Can you do anything for them?” Talen asked, holding Shay as her coughing grew weaker, interspersed with desperate gasps for air. Blood flecked her mouth, evidence that the mold was wreaking havoc on her lungs.

“I don’t have any diamond powder... I cannot purge the mold from them!” she cried. “I can try a *lesser restoration*... it may be enough... but I only have one of those...”

“Captain, we still have a situation,” Varo said calmly, as the zombies drew within range. “Hit them again!” he said to Malerase, who launched another *fireball* down the passage. Both zombies were once more caught in the flames this time, the backblast of which was close enough to ruffle the cloaks of Talen and Allera. But the zombies proved capable of withstanding considerable damage, and while their flesh was blackened with char, neither fell. The passage was filled with the sickly sweet odor of roasted flesh.

Varo called upon his patron once more, sweat beading on his brow from the heat of the *fireballs* and the strain of fighting the strange surge that was resisting his will. Once more negative energy erupted from his sigil, and this time the first zombie hesitated, trembling a moment before it staggered back, cowed.

But the second was unaffected, and it pushed forward past its comrade. It still had its club, and it lifted the weapon to strike the unprepared defenders.

“Talen!” Varo yelled.

The captain looked up to see the zombie looming large above them. Tearing himself away from the weakening Shay, the captain lifted his sword and slashed at the ogre’s left leg. His sword tore through the leathery flesh down to the bone, and the ogre staggered, nearly collapsing as the injured limb faltered under its weight. The zombie tried to smash at Talen with its club, but the off-balance blow glanced off the captain’s heavy armor, doing no damage.

Allera, caught between Shay and Dar, hesitated. “Varo... I need your help!” she said.

The cleric lifted his holy symbol for a final rebuke attempt on the crippled zombie, but it became unnecessary as Malerase hit the creature with a quintet of *magic missiles* from another of Zosimos’s wands. The zombie, battered beyond the ability of its animating force to keep it intact, collapsed. Varo knelt beside the healer. “Unfortunately, I used my *lesser restoration* this morning, on you,” the cleric said. “I do not have access to the greater version of the spell. You will have to choose, and the other will have to fight off the effects of the mold on his or her own.”

Talen turned from the ruined corpse of the destroyed zombie, and looked down at Shay, and then at Allera. The healer's expression betrayed her feelings at having to make the choice, and for another second she hesitated, caught between the two coughing victims of the mold. But then she fell forward, as Dar grabbed her and thrust her roughly toward Shay. The gesture cost him; the fighter fell to the ground, his body wracked with coughing that left a red spray on the tiles at his feet.

Allera looked back at him, then cast her spell on Shay. The *lesser restoration* eased her coughing some, but she was still clearly weakened, wheezing for breath.

Talen started toward her again, but Varo forestalled him with a raised hand. "Captain, we still have a situation." He pointed toward the zombie that stood in the doorway a pace away from them, still cowering. "My rebuke will last only a few more moments, and I am not one hundred percent certain that I can reestablish it. We must move out companions back, so that Malerese can destroy them for good."

Nodding, Talen helped the cleric drag first Shay, and then Dar, away from the cowering undead creature. Dar grabbed onto Talen's arms and used them to pull himself up; he was still unsteady, but he was able to remain upright on his own as the captain returned to Shay's side. The scout was far worse off, her chin covered with bright red blood coughed up from her abused lungs. Allera had healed her jaw, and she was starting to breathe easier, but she remained very weak.

Another rush of flames erupted through the passage as Malerese fired off a last *fireball*. The last two zombies, already seriously damaged, collapsed as the flames ravaged their bodies, leaving only mangled heaps that continued to smolder as thick smoke drifted down the length of the passage, only slowly draining out through the exits. The companions, huddled in a group around Shay a short distance away, rubbed their tearing eyes and held cloths over their mouths to filter the air enough to breathe.

"Are you all right?" Varo asked Dar.

"Peachy fucking keen," the fighter said, rubbing his mouth with the back of his hand, leaving blood on the leather of his gauntlet. "How's the scout?"

Allera looked up. "She's alive, but very weak," the healer said. "We'll need to carry her, until she can rest and regain some of her strength."

"This may help her," Malerese said. The elf knelt beside the scout, and removed a small amulet from a slender silver chain around his neck. "It belonged to Zosimos." Allera helped him by lifting Shay's head, and tucked the amulet under her tunic. The effect was almost immediate; the scout groaned, and her eyes fluttered open. She tried to speak, but Allera quieted her with a finger to her lips.

"Save your strength," she said.

“You’ll need it,” Dar said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Talen helped Shay to her feet; with her constitution bolstered by the *amulet of health*, she could walk, if barely. Talen remained at her side, an arm around her waist to bolster her. For once, she didn’t complain about his assistance.

“You’d better be right about the way out,” Dar said to Varo as they moved out again. “I don’t think they can handle another fight.”

Varo said nothing. As Dar headed after the others, the cleric turned to see Malerese staring at him. There was an odd look in his eyes, which flashed within the depths of his cowl. Neither the priest nor the elf spoke for a long moment, then both turned and headed after the others, toward what was hopefully a way out of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 108

GETTING OUT

A dank, musty odor filled the corridor as the companions made their way carefully forward. The walls and ceiling here were packed dirt rather than dressed stone, which led to more than a few alarmed looks as their movements caused faint trickles of earth to fall down around them.

“Are you sure this place is stable?” Talen asked.

“If the ogre zombie didn’t provoke a collapse, it is unlikely that we will,” Varo said. “Not to mention the earth tremors that we have occasionally felt in Rappan Athuk. Still, I would recommend against any unnecessary contact with the walls, if that can be avoided.”

“I hope you’re right,” the captain said. Shay groaned, and he turned his attention back to her, helping her through the narrow passage.

“There’s a bend up ahead,” Malerese reported. With his low-light vision, the elf was standing in for Shay as scout, although he did not wander ahead of the group as had been Shay’s wont. With his lean, angular form, scoured of every superfluous gram of unnecessary flab under his pale flesh, the elf looked almost fragile in contrast to the bulkier humans surrounding him. He held onto Zosimos’s *fireball* wand with fingers as slender as the ebon shaft of the device.

“Beyond that turn lies the fungus cavern,” Varo said. Dar was already moving forward in a half-crouch, Valus’s shield illuminating the way ahead of him. There was a small

clutter of debris at the far side of the turn, so he didn't see the threat there until something stirred beyond the small mound.

"Look out!" Dar yelled, bringing up his shield just barely in time to deflect a violet tendril that flailed against the metal. His words were barely audible over the high-pitched screaming that had suddenly begun, its source somewhere around the bend, the piercing sound echoing off the rough dirt walls. The fighter retreated as a bead of liquid fire shot past him into the piled debris, exploding into a *fireball* that swelled out into the narrow space, the heat washing over them like a wave.

"Hold your fire!" Varo yelled. "You may collapse the passage!"

Dar turned, the front of his shield and helmet blackened with char; he'd been close enough to the blast to have been caught on the leading edge of the *fireball*. "Damn it, watch where you're shooting those!" he yelled at the elf.

Shay had fallen against the adjacent wall, Talen standing over her protectively with his shield raised over them. Behind them, Allera looked up at the low ceiling above, but while there were flecks of black char floating in the air, there were no further signs of impending collapse.

The violet fungus did not attack again, evidently destroyed by the flames. But the shrieking continued, forcing them to shout to be heard.

"We have to clear the chamber before the rest of them can attack!" Varo yelled to Dar and Malerese. The fighter nodded, and grabbed the elf by the shoulder of his robe, dragging him with him down the tunnel. Talen turned to Shay, but the scout wearily pushed at him, pointing for the captain to join them. She slumped down onto her haunches, her energy spent. Allera, in little better shape, knelt beside the scout, tending to her as best she could.

Dar cautiously shone his shield around the tunnel bend, illuminating the passage beyond. He could see the large cavern up ahead, where they had first encountered the deadly violet fungi, and where Tiros had run afoul of a bed of yellow mold. There was nothing further blocking the passage, and no debris large enough to conceal one of the fungus-creatures. But as he watched, he saw movement in the chamber, coming closer to the tunnel mouth.

"Okay!" he yelled at Malerese, pointing down the passage at the slowly approaching forms. "Now you can start blasting, elf!"

Malerese nodded, and lifted his wand. Pea-sized spheres of fire exploded from the end of the wand, streaking down the passage into the open chamber beyond, where they exploded into *fireballs*. One, two, three of the magical blasts erupted in the chamber, searing the slowly approaching fungi to fine ash. The high-pitched scream of the

shriekers changed pitch as they were destroyed, until with the last blast, the sound died entirely, replaced with an ominous silence.

Dar looked back at the elf. "Now that's more like it."

Varo had come up to see the last of the elf's display of magical power. He nodded. "Let us continue, but cautiously. There may be more of the fungi in crevices that were not reached by the flames, or further back in the rear of the chamber."

But they were not attacked again as they traversed the remainder of the corridor and entered the cavern at its end. A faint, diffuse light drifted down from the deep crack in the ceiling high above. Evidently it was night above, rather than day, for that illumination was far too weak to be sunlight. Motes of blackened char hung in the air, the remnants of the deadly fungi, now stripped of their lethality. The companions carefully scanned for any surviving patches of yellow mold or telltale movements of violet fungi, but it appeared that Malerose's blasts had done the job. There was some growth still visible along the far wall of the cavern, at the edges of their light sources, but nothing stirred from that direction to trouble them.

"Well?" Dar asked, turning to Varo. "How are we going to get out of here? Shay's not up to that climb, and unless stick-man over there has a spell to magic us out of here..."

"Leave that to me," Varo said. "Shay, if you could spare a few coils of rope?" Talen helped the weakened scout with the *bag of holding*, drawing out several fifty-foot lengths of durable silk cord. The cleric took the offered rope wordlessly, and stepped out into the center of the room, almost directly under the opening at the apex of the ceiling above. He glanced up, briefly, but the light from above was too weak to reveal anything but that the shaft was narrow, and it was too twisting to reveal a clear view of the night sky.

Holding his arms out at his sides, Varo began to chant. His companions watched in silence as the otherworldly syllables echoed out through the blasted hall, reverberating off the scorched earthen walls. His call was answered by a sudden rush of wind that filled the place out of nowhere, catching at their cloaks and other loose garments, and forcing them to shield their faces as bits of char and dirt were driven into their faces.

"What's going on?" Talen yelled.

"An elemental!" Allera shouted back, pointing with her free hand. The others peered through the swirling storm to see Varo floating up into the air, his clothes billowing out as a rush of concentrated air swirled into them from below. As the cleric rose above them, they could better see the outline of the creature that held him aloft, little more than a cohesive whirlwind of concentrated air. It carried Varo straight up into the cleft, where he disappeared from view.

"Well, that was something," Talen said, as they looked after him.

“That man has some powerful friends,” Allera said.

“I doubt any would consider him... such,” Shay said, pausing as she coughed painfully from the debris still swirling in the air.

“I wonder if he’s thought about just leaving us here,” Dar said.

“No,” Talen said, as the noise of the elemental’s passing faded from up above. “No, Varo needs us as much as we need him.”

“I don’t need anybody,” Dar said. He looked at Talen. “As soon as we get out of here, I’m done.”

Talen nodded, and looked back at Allera. Dar turned back to the cleft, shining the light of his shield upward.

A few seconds later, a rope fell from above, uncoiling until its end slapped lightly on the ground in front of them.

“Shay first,” Talen said.

Dar held up a hand. “Think first, soldier boy,” he said. “How is she going to climb that, weak as she is? You’ll have to go first, and then pull her up.”

Talen looked indecisive, but then Shay coughed. “He’s right, Talen. A straight climb, without leverage... that would be tough even under normal conditions.”

“Why didn’t Varo just send the elemental down for us?”

“You can ask him when you get up there,” Dar said, shoving the rope into Talen’s hands. “Climb.”

Talen slung his shield, and started up. Shay’s rope had been knotted to make the climb easier, but it was still far from trivial, as he was going straight up without a wall to brace off of, not to mention the considerable weight in metal and other gear that he carried. But he was strong and in excellent shape, and he made rapid progress despite his burdens. Once he made it up to the cleft, it was easier going, and soon he was out of their view, the rope still twisting from the opening to indicate his progress.

Dar was keeping an eye on the rope, and when he saw it go slack, followed by a pair of quick jerks, he summoned Shay. He took the end of the rope and fashioned a loop that he tied around her hips, making sure that it did not foul on her gear.

“This is humiliating,” she said, as she also verified that the fighter’s work was secure.

Dar grinned. "You can't always be the hero," he told her. "Besides, that's my job." As she started up, he smacked her on the bottom, then dodged back before her counter swing could connect.

"Tell the captain to get a move on!" he said after her, as she slowly rose into the air. His tone was light, but his look back at the entrance of the room was anything but.

"You think something will attack us?" Allera asked.

"Angel, I *a/ways* think something's going to attack us. That's why I'm still alive."

Dar pointed to Malerese. "Elf, you're after Allera. I'll bring up the rear."

"Dar..." Allera began. But before the fighter could respond, the rope came back down through the shaft.

"Later," he told her. "Let's get you up that shaft."

But as they started toward the rope, a mighty rumbling noise erupted throughout the chamber. The ground bucked beneath their feet, and Allera fell to her knees; the two men were only able to remain standing through a hefty effort.

Looking up, Dar saw a massive chunk of the ceiling near the shaft give way, and start plummeting down toward them.

Chapter 109

NOTHING'S EVER EASY

Dar's eyes widened, and he leapt forward toward Allera. But Malerese was closer, and he helped drag the healer back, moments before the huge stone block smashed into the cavern floor. The force of the impact hit them like a tsunami, knocking them onto their backs.

The tremors persisted, filling the chamber with a steady rumble, and the cavern continued to collapse around them. The air was filled with dust, making it almost impossible to see, but as Dar staggered back to his feet, he could just barely make out the rope, still dangling from above.

"We've got to get out... *now!*" he yelled. Shucking his shield, he bent down and snatched Allera up, slinging the healer over his shoulder. He turned to see Malerese standing there, looking at him.

Dar started to say something, but the elf spoke words of magic, and dissolved into a gaseous mist that was quickly lost within the swirling debris. Surprised, the impact of several boulders the side a horse not three paces away startled him back into activity, and he leapt for the rope. Even as his fist closed on that lifeline, he felt the ground shift beneath his feet, and only barely was able to keep his grip. He felt Allera shift slightly, and heard a faint groan come from her.

“Hold on, princess,” he said, grimacing as he pulled them both up, hand over hand up the rope. The silk cord vibrated, either with the continued force of the earth tremor, or as it began to give under the strain of their combined weight; Dar wasn’t sure. But he knew that he had to get them out of here fast, or they would not be getting out at all.

He was strong, and his physical prowess was enhanced by the magical belt he wore. But he was tired, clad in heavy armor, and while Allera’s weight wasn’t excessive, it wasn’t negligible, either. Dar had only covered about half the distance to the cleft in the ceiling when he nearly slipped, only a last-minute grab keeping them from plummeting back to the ground. The floor of the cavern was now lost in the cloud of debris below. Had Malerese gotten out? Dar had no idea, and he didn’t waste any further thought on the elf; their own fate was too uncertain.

He thought he heard a cry from above; it was impossible to be sure with all the noise around him. Letting out a yell of his own, he pulled himself up, one arm’s length at a time, his jaw clenched so tight that he could taste his own blood in his mouth. Something hard caromed off his helmet, and again he nearly lost his grip. Despite the weight, he was glad for the heavy armor he was wearing; already he’d taken hits from falling rocks that might have killed an unarmored man. Allera had stopped moving altogether, and he hoped that she hadn’t been struck. The thought gave him added strength, and he dragged them up the last few feet to the cleft.

The tremors had eased, but the chamber’s collapse continued. Even as he dragged them up into the cleft, he could feel the stone beneath his feet shifting. The rope was being pulled up, helping him, although he could see it fraying against the rocks of the shaft as it was dragged over them. There was nothing to do but hope; the twisting shaft was near-vertical, and while having something to brace against helped, he still needed the rope to make the climb.

And then the swirling dust cleared enough for him to see the night sky above, and hands were reaching down, grabbing him and Allera. The healer was taken off his shoulder, and he was pulled away from the opening just as the ground sagged beneath his feet. He made it up a gentle slope about fifteen paces before the shaking of the ground ceased entirely, and then he fell to his knees. His throat felt like it had been packed with dirt.

“Allera?” he managed to cough out.

“She lives,” Varo said. The cleric looked around. “Where is the elf?”

“Turned himself into a cloud of mist,” Dar said. Everything was starting to swirl around him, except for the pinpoints of light in the sky above, which somehow remained startlingly clear. Varo asked something else, his voice urgent, but Dar couldn’t quite make out the words, as he stared up at those stars.

“Pretty,” he said, then he toppled forward onto the ground, out cold.

* * * * *

A short distance away, Malerose watched his erstwhile companions as they recovered from the collapse of the cavern below them. Concealed in a stand of brush that fringed a small cluster of scrub trees along the hillside, he was almost invisible in his dark cloak. The moon was empty this night, but the elf’s lowlight vision made the starlight sufficient to see quite clearly.

He couldn’t quite hear Varo’s words, but he could just make out the urgency in them. For a moment, he considered revealing himself.

But ultimately, the elf remained hidden, watching as the companions rested. Finally they gathered themselves up, battered and beaten from their second narrow escape from the dungeons of Rappan Athuk. Then, moving slowly, they moved off through the hills to the north.

The elf remained until they were out of the range of his sight. Then he drew his cloak close about his body, and headed off on his own, moving west.

Chapter 110

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

The Doomed Bastards were not the only ones discomfited by the earthquake that had shaken the foundations of Rappan Athuk.

In a dark chamber deep underground, so far down that the very pulse of the world seemed to vibrate faintly within its black stone walls, men and women clad in the dark robes of the cult of Orcus lay sprawled upon the cold tiles of the floor. Some groaned, and stirred fitfully; those would recover, with time. Others lay unmoving, their breath rattling faintly in their chests, like a trapped animal. Their eyes were wide open, but seeing nothing. Off to the side, the serpentine form of a marilith lay staggered against one of the thick bronze pillars that buttressed the ceiling, her weapons making a scraping sound on the stone tiles as her limbs twitched. Deep cracks were visible around the perimeter of the room, lingering reminders of the quake, but the effects

wrought upon the room's occupants were not the results of the earth's convulsions. The tremors had been a side effect of what had been wrought here, not the cause.

A black-robed figure stirred. As the cowled head lifted slowly up off the ground, the robe fell back to reveal pale skin, marked with twisting tattoos that spelled out foul defilements in the Abyssal language. The tattooed figure, a woman, pulled herself up into a crouch. She groaned, and clutched her gut, slowly mastering herself. Then she dragged herself over to the nearest robed form lying nearby. Reaching out, she gently shook him.

"Wheraz!" she hissed.

The man let out a low moan. Slowly, he came around. The woman helped him up. "Gernaldra?" he asked, blinking his eyes. The only light was a very faint, diffuse redness that seemed to radiate from the bronze pillars.

"Yes, my love," the woman said, placing her hands upon the man's face. Like her, his head was shaved of all hair, and marked with unholy sigils across most of his exposed flesh. There was something more, an uncanny similarity in their features that hinted at a link of blood between them as well.

"My eyes," Wheraz said, rubbing at the deep hollows with his fingers. "I can barely see..."

"Can you stand?" Gernaldra asked. When he nodded, she helped him to his feet. She was more than a bit unsteady herself, and for a moment the two priests of Orcus leaned on each other, taking in their surroundings.

"The Stone..." Wheraz said, as they inevitably turned to the altar on the far side of the room.

The altar was a vast construct, hewn from a massive slab of black onyx. It had been hollowed out to form a basin, within which a deep red liquid that could have only been blood bubbled and swirled. A miasma of heat rose off the basin. Behind it stood a huge statue that rose up almost to the ceiling high above. It was covered in blood and gore, which trailed down to gather in ugly splatters upon the surrounding floor. Cradled in the statue's open palms was the Sphere of Souls. The artifact was quiescent, utterly black and silent, a black pearl in the hands of the hulking idol.

"What... what happened?" Wheraz asked, squinting as he tried to see.

"We have failed," Gernaldra said.

"No, children," came a dark voice, a sinister sound that filled the temple with power. Both clerics immediately fell to their knees, abasing themselves, as another figure emerged from the shadows.

The demon came forward, out of the shadows. Its decayed flesh seemed to barely cling to its emaciated form, but the glowing eyes deep within the horned skull flared with brilliant power. Its mottled wings spread out behind it as it came forward, adding to the impression of pure chaos and evil that it represented.

“Lord Maphistal,” the two clerics chanted in unison.

“Rise, children, and greet the glory of the coming of the Great Master,” the demon croaked, its voice sounding like an echo within a huge cavern.

The two clerics rose quickly. “But Lord,” Gernaldra said, “I do not mean to doubt... but the Sphere is dark, and while I can feel the Master’s power...” she trailed off, uncertain. The demon came forward, and laid a skeletal claw upon her bare head. Its touch left ugly gray marks upon her skin, but she leaned into it, like a puppy being patted by its master.

“Foolish child,” it said. “The first seal has been sundered, and the path forward has been laid, but the coming of the Great Master will be an event to fracture the fundamental nature of this reality. This ritual was but the beginning, not the culmination, of that process.”

“Yes, Lord,” the cleric said, lowering her gaze. “Forgive my presumption.”

“Fear not, little one,” the demon said, turning away. It walked over to one of the acolytes, one of those that had not stirred. Reaching down, the creature lifted the hapless figure in its claws. It turned back to the two priests.

“The way forward must be lit for the coming of the Great Master. The signal fires that will announce His coming will be fueled by the souls of the people of this world.”

The demon’s claws clenched, and the acolyte’s spine and neck snapped with a sick, audible cracking noise. The demon looked at the broken body as a faint gray wisp, slick with a deep black taint, rose from the body, and drifted to the altar. It hovered there for a moment, before seeping into the quiescent Sphere of Souls. As the clerics watched, something flickered deep within the black orb, a tiny flicker that hovered deep within. The glow was barely as bright as a candle’s tenuous flame, but the clerics fixed their eyes upon it with terror and awe. Finally, they tore their gazes from it and stared up at the demon.

“We shall fill the Sphere once more, Lord,” Wheraz said. “All those who oppose the True God will forfeit their lives to abet His arrival.”

The demon smiled, a grim expression indeed on his face, but he shifted his eyes to Gernaldra. “Still you doubt, child?”

The priestess lowered her eyes. “Forgive me, Lord... but our strength... the power of the clergy of the True God, it is... depleted.” She avoided looking at the dead acolyte, but the message was clear.

The demon let out a deep growl, and darkness flared in its eyes. “The lives of your brethren are insignificant in comparison to the needs of the Great Master,” it said. “Know that your tiny lives are forfeit to His will; do not doubt that, ever!” Confronted with the demon’s anger, and the full force of its presence, the two clerics collapsed to their knees. Groveling before it, Gernaldra begged, “Forgive me, Lord!”

The demon mastered itself and looked down at them. “You are favored, child; unlike some of your peers, you do not seek to rise above your proper station. Your questions are born of an imperfect vision. Do not forget that the plans of the Great Master are far more complex than your tiny brain can comprehend.”

“How shall we bring about the True God’s mandate, Lord?” Wheraz ventured to ask.

The demon fixed him with a hot stare for a momentn before responding. “Do not fear, my gifted little wretches; your god will give you the tools you need to bring about His coming.” The demon made a gesture, and two figures came forward into the temple, stepping around the limp bodies of the temple’s priests. They were humanoid, but the charnal stench that surrounded them identified them as the unliving even before they drew close enough for the priests to see them clearly.

One was a hulking brute, looming over the other. His body bulged with muscles, but his skin was a sickly gray, and his flesh bore the marks of numerous wounds that showed signs of rot. His hair and beard were long, and tangled with filth. But he moved with a feral efficiency utterly unlike the tentative shambles of a zombie, and dark points of light flared within the deep hollow sockets of his eyes. His huge hands had grown ugly yellow claws, and his teeth protruded from his jaw, stained with old blood.

As the clerics looked at him with surprised expressions, Maphistal said, “I believe you remember Marthek.” The once-mad barbarian, now a ghast, did not react to the utterance of his name, and he only regarded the two living beings with an obvious hunger in his eyes.

The demon gestured, and the other creature came forward. It too had once been a man, tall and lean. He was still clad in the remnants of a tunic that had been ruined by the same spear that had torn the gaping hole in his chest. Blood and filth likewise covered him, but his face had not changed, and still bore the outward semblance of what he had been. But his eyes... there was intelligence in them, but it was trapped beneath a web of compulsion, by the fact of what he now had become.

The clerics saw that, and recognized what it meant. “A revenant,” Gernaldra said. The creature clutched something in both of its hands, partially concealing it from view.

“Come forward, Zafir Navev,” the demon commanded. As the undead warlock obeyed, the priests could see what it was that he held, and they sucked in startled breaths.

The device was simple and grim, a rod fashioned from a long bone of pale white, topped with a sinister ornament, a black skull. The whole was barely three feet long.

“It... it cannot be... *that*...” Wharaz breathed, looking up at the demon with an expression of alarm.

“It is not the original artifact,” Maphistal said. “That never strays from the hand of the Great Master. But it is a potent copy, granted by the Prince himself, to aid your cause.”

The priests stared at the wand and its holder. Both could sense the necromantic energies that radiated from it.

“And so begins the doom of this world,” Maphistal said, a dark laugh sounding deep within the cavernous interior of its skull.

* * * * *

As the Doomed Bastards started back on the long journey back toward Camar, and one of their former members was held captive by a fate worse than death, there was one other unintended consequence of the dark ritual that had depleted the Sphere of Souls. In another place far beneath the ground, unknown to the cult of Orcus, or to the knowledge of any mortal being upon the living world above, a field of shifting magical energies formed a huge pyramid within a chamber larger than the Palace of the Grand Duke of Camar. Huge, perfect blocks of dark gray stone formed a smooth dome high above, somehow retaining its shape without pillar or buttress to support it. A massive metal frame anchored in the walls surrounded the energy field, focusing it, shaping it. Beyond the translucent barrier dark shadows could just be seen, if there was anyone here to see it. A thrum of power filled the place, unbroken for millennia.

The earth tremors had not affected this ancient vault. But there had been one change that had marred the eternal security of this place. A black streak had appeared in the rocks along one stretch of wall, decades past. Slowly, creeping forward in intervals marked by years, it had extended deeper into the room, moving from the wall to the floor, and then out across the floor into the room. It was not a crack, but rather a darkening in the stone itself, as though a slick of oil had spilled out over the stone.

It had taken almost thirty years for it to extend from the outer wall of the chamber out onto the floor, about twenty feet from the edge of the energy barrier.

Now, as the followers of Orcus unleashed the stored potency within the Sphere of Souls to help bring about the arrival of their god to the Prime Material, the black slick had swelled and extended forward, until it almost touched the glowing pyramid.

There was only the slightest effect upon the field, a faint darkening at the point of nearest contact.

Then, the shield began to bulge slightly at that point, as though something was trying to push at it from within.

THE END OF BOOK 2

The “Doomed Bastards” in the Dungeon of Graves
Book 3

Chapter 111

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Dar turned as the knock sounded on the weathered wooden door. Before him, on the tussled blankets at the end of his bed, lay a pair of leather packs, each bulging with gear. The rest of the room was in disarray, but it was a nice room, comfortable with old but quality furnishings. The fighter, even in a clean shirt of black silk and with hair and beard that had seen a recent trimming, looked out of place in it. *Valor* hung at his side in its scabbard.

He continued putting items into the second of the two packs. The knock sounded again.

“Come in,” he said, without turning.

The door opened, and Allera entered the room. The healer looked far better than she had when they’d found her in Rappan Athuk, although her hair was still extremely short, a faint white fuzz over her scalp, and there were still hints of gray scars on her skin where the unholy sigils had been burned into her flesh. There was also something haunted in her eyes, a look that showed that what she’d experienced in the Dungeon of Graves was not something that could be healed as easily as her body.

“You are leaving?” she asked.

Dar closed the cinches on his pack. “Yeah. This place... it doesn’t agree with me.”

“Where are you going?”

“Don’t know yet. After what happened, anywhere’s starting to sound better than Camar, though.”

“If he’s right, then no place is going to be safe.”

“Not my problem.”

“No, I don’t suppose it is.”

“Where’s your little friend?”

Allera waved a hand. "Around. Since we've gotten back, he spends most of his time *invisible*. I think he's a little overwhelmed by Camar. In some ways, he's an ancient soul, wise... but in others, he's like a ten year old."

"He'll look out for you, though."

Allera walked over to the bureau, and put both of her hands on its surface. "I thought... I thought you would have come to see me earlier. To... to collect on the debt I owe you."

Dar didn't respond.

She turned to face him, but couldn't quite lift her eyes to meet his. "Unless... I know I don't look as I did." Almost unconsciously, she drew her arms into her robe, holding them tight against her body.

Dar's jaw clenched.

"Are you going to talk to me?" she asked.

"Look, what do you want me to say? That I was wrong? That I insulted your honor, called you a whore? Do you want me to apologize? Damn it, Allera, I've never tried to hide what I am. I'm a no-good bastard, you knew that from the first minute you met me."

"I just want you to say what you feel..."

"What / feel?" The fighter chuckled grimly. "Yeah, that's rich." He turned and loomed over her, his body trembling slightly. He spat words at her. "I don't feel. Anything." He turned away from her and walked across the room.

"I don't believe that."

"Your life will be better off without me in it," he said.

For a moment, there was only silence, as neither of them looked at each other.

"Take... take care of yourself, Corath," she said, softly. Then she turned and left.

Chapter 112

MORE UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Dar returned to the end of the bed. He drew aside the coverlet, revealing his weapons, each laid out carefully. In addition to his trusty metal-shod club, there was his magical punching dagger, an extra mundane dagger, a new masterwork longbow, and his magical quiver, stuffed with hundreds of arrows. Each had been thoroughly cleaned and repaired as needed, ready to be used to deal out destruction. He'd lost Valus's heavy shield in their final escape from the dungeon, but the cleric's plate armor was in the second pack, carefully disassembled for travel. He'd learned that the value of his magical gear made him a rich man, exclusive of the hard coin and other valuables he'd kept from their latest excursion to Rappan Athuk. There were many other places he could go, places where a man like him could be what he was. Places where he'd fit in perfectly, where things would make sense.

Distracted, it took him a moment to realize that he was not alone. Putting his punching dagger back down on the bed, his hand drifted to the hilt of *Valor*.

"You don't need that against me, Dar."

Dar turned to see Velan Tiros standing in the doorway. "Come to get your sword back, marshal?"

Tiros came into the room, and shook his head. "No. It is yours now, clearly. It... *suits* you. I make no claim upon the weapon."

"Good."

"I saw Allera on my way in. She looked upset."

"She'll get over it," Dar said, as he started sliding weapons into the loops on the outside of his packs. "What do you want, marshal?"

"Just to talk to you."

"Well, make it quick. I'd like to be on a ship before nightfall."

"Finally going to Drusia, as you'd said before?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe."

"Camar could still use your help."

Dar snorted. "Camar has been anything but kind to me, marshal. Or should I say, 'duke'?"

"I have never sought noble titles," Tiros said. "The new High Council is still working out the details of official ranks and such, but I was thinking along the lines of 'tribune,' or something similar."

“Power to the people, is that it?”

“Perhaps. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than what things were like under the Duke.”

“From what I hear, you’ve got a whole host of problems to deal with.”

Tiros nodded. “Dalemar to the north is under revolt. The Third Legion has gone over to the rebels.”

Dar looked surprised. “I hadn’t heard that. I mean, everyone’s heard about trouble to the north, but a full legion going over?”

“Don’t spread it around,” Tiros said. “The mood in the street is tenuous enough as it is.”

The fighter nodded. “So it’s civil war, then?”

“I hope it doesn’t come to that. We’re trying to set up negotiations with the rebels, but we’re also mobilizing the Second and Fourth Legions, if it comes to that. Camar can’t survive as a distinct state with an independent Dalemar on its northern border, and I think that the rebels know that.”

“Who’s in charge up there?”

“Kyros Livius.”

“Ah. He was commander of the Third when I was with the Fourth. He’s a prick, but I don’t think he is... well, he’s not the Duke, anyway. Might be he’d be willing to talk.”

“I hope so. We cannot afford another war right now.”

“What about the First?”

“Keeping them at Greathold, for now. Too many of its leaders were close with the Duke. Gaius Annochus does not believe that there are any more devils left in Camar, but the loyalties of the senior commanders have been made uncertain by what has happened. We may need to rebuild it from the ground up. Thankfully, the western border has been quiet.”

“I wouldn’t let your guard down, not with the elves. They’ve kept to the treaty, but they haven’t forgotten the past.”

“I understand that, believe me.”

There was a long silence between them. “What about Talen’s report?”

“I’ve spoken to him, and Varo. Talen’s presenting to the Council tomorrow, but Varo’s vanished again. That’s probably for the best.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that the Patriarch would be pleased to see him in the council chambers.”

“Varo knows that his presence is a liability to us, which is probably why he’s dropped out of sight.”

“If you think he isn’t planning something, you’re a fool.”

“I am not underestimating him,” Tiros said. “Talen told me what happened. In Rappan Athuk.”

“I suppose the question is, what are *you* going to do about it, marshal.”

“I don’t know what we *can* do, not until we’ve solidified things here in Camar.” The marshal paced around the far side of the bed. “We’ve hit the cult hard for what they did to Allera, but I’m not fool enough to think that we’re done with them, not by a long shot. We were thinking about pulling down the Border Legion from the Galerr Mountains, and repositioning them more to the east. The orcs haven’t ventured into the mountain passes in two generations, and...”

“Look, marshal, this isn’t my war. I never wanted any of it from the start.”

“We don’t always get to choose what battles we fight, warrior.”

“Yeah, but sometimes you get to choose which ones you get to walk away from, and you’re a fool if you don’t take that chance when it’s offered.”

“You know, probably better than anyone, what we’re up against. We’re stretched thin, Dar, no question about it. Which is why I could use you now, more than ever.”

Dar snorted. “One more sword isn’t going to make much of a difference.”

“I’m not asking for your sword.”

“If you’re asking what I think you’re asking, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought. I’ve told you before, I’m no leader.”

Tiros met Dar’s gaze, and held it. “I know you’ve had bad experiences with authority in the past, and your experiences with the legions was far from ideal. But we are entering a desperate time, Dar. Things do not have to be as they were in the past. You are your own man; I know that is important to you, is who you are. But consider also the value of being *part* of something larger than yourself. We are men, Dar, you and I. Our identity is created by what lies within us. But no man can stand alone. You served in combat,

you know that this is true. When in the forging fires of battle, the man who is apart from his companion is quickly cut down in the surging tide, overwhelmed. So to it will be with Camar, I think.”

“You have mocked me in the past, warrior, and perhaps I deserved some of your calumny. There are things about you that I dislike greatly. But I have witnessed your mettle in the foulest pit known to man, in the desperate struggle for life and death, and I would stand by your side against any foe.”

“You can go to Drusia, or to the end of the world. But I don’t think you’ll find what you are looking for out there. It’s here, Dar... in the struggle to create something better than what came before. It’s in this that we find meaning for why we are here.”

Dar looked intently at Tiros for a long moment. Then he grinned broadly. “Damn, marshal, sometimes I forget how good you are at laying on the bullshit.”

“I meant what I said, every word.”

“I know. That’s what makes it so funny.”

Tiros’s face twisted into a wry smile. “Perhaps.” He walked past the bed toward the door, but he paused as he reached Dar. He put his hand on the warrior’s shoulder. “At least... think about what I have said.”

“If I do, I’ll know that I need a healer to have a look at my head,” Dar replied.

“Well then. I wish you well, warrior.” Tiros extended a hand. After a moment, Dar took it, gripping the marshal’s hand firmly.

“Good luck,” Dar said. “Sounds like you’ll need it.”

“I think we all will.”

With a final nod, Tiros released Dar’s hand and left, closing the door behind him.

Dar turned back and checked his gear a final time. Everything was in its place, but he hesitated.

For some reason, he looked down at his sword. *Valor* sat dormant in its scabbard. It was just a sword... but when he’d fought with it in Rappan Athuk, at times it had seemed that... what? This was crazy.

But as he gathered up his gear, he paused again. No, there was definitely something more to the blade than blue-forged steel. Both on the first trip to Rappan Athuk, when the sword had seemed to fight him every time he’d touched it, and on the second, when it fit into his hand like an extension of his arm, he’d felt a power deep within the weapon.

When they had fought the servants of Orcus, in particular, the sword had seemed almost... *alive*.

Dar snorted and adjusted the straps of the heavy packs as they pressed down on his back. He was going to end up more nuts than the elf, at this rate.

He was about to leave, but as he started toward the door, he paused. There, on the bureau, was a small object.

He walked over to the dresser and picked up the object. It was a tiny silver amulet, threaded on a delicate chain of silver links. Holding it up to the light, he could see that the amulet held several small green shards. It took him a moment to figure out what they were.

Fragments of the stone he'd given Allera. Shay had probably brought them back. There were only a few of them, and none were larger than a sliver.

Dar started to put it back, but then paused once more. Finally, he lowered the chain around his neck. He tucked the amulet under his tunic.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," he said.

Then he left.

Chapter 113

THE COUNCIL

"It is not that we do not take your warning seriously, Captain Karedes," Patriarch Gaius Annochus said. "It is just that the future of Camar itself is in jeopardy."

Talen nodded, acknowledging the comment, but his jaw was set in a tight line, and it was evident that he did not agree with the high priest's argument. But he was a captain, and the other was the head of the official church of the Grand Duchy, so that in essence settled the argument.

"I am saddened by the loss of one of the Guild's shining stars," Archmage Decimus Vitus Honoratius said. "But as a fellow member of the family Vitus, I can say all in the Guild stand ready to defend Camar with all of the power available to them."

Talen nodded with respect to the wizard. The head of the Guild of Sorcery was a wizened husk of a man, wrapped in a robe of soft blue felt covered in faint runes stitched in silver thread. None knew for sure how old he was, but by all accounts, he

had been a full member of the Guild when Gallus Felix the Younger had become Grand Duke, and that was over seventy years ago. Time had stolen much of his vitality, but one look into his eyes was enough to reveal that his mind, and with it his magic, had not been diminished.

“I think that all of us here are dedicated to the future of Camar,” Velan Tiros said. The marshal looked tired, even in the resplendent robes that he wore as the chairman of the new Great Council of what was still being called the Grand Duchy. Most of the Council meetings held thus far had been public, at Tiros’s insistence, but this one was being held behind closed doors. To Talen, standing before the dais where the new leadership of Camar sat facing him, the cavernous emptiness of the great hall made the council seem smaller by comparison. He kept such thoughts carefully to himself, but Honoratius looked intently at him, as if he’d read his mind.

As Talen swallowed, he realized that wasn’t that unlikely a prospect.

“Gentlemen, we have more immediate problems,” the last member of the council said. His name was Gallo Eutropius, and he represented the powerful mercantile guilds of the city. He had the dusky skin of an Eremite, and oiled mustachios that curled up from the edges of his upper lip. Erem was one of the most distant of Camar’s provinces, a place known primarily for its lusty, rough, and (to Camarians) outspoken people. The merchant, clad in silks weighed down by several pounds of bejeweled gold, slapped his hand loudly onto the dais table. “If the secession of Dalemar is successful, then the realm will lose two thirds of its tax revenues within two seasons. Routing the trade from Emor province through the mountains to avoid the northern ports will be almost impossible for all but two months of the year. I hope I do not need to tell you how catastrophic that would be for the future of Camar.”

“Thank you for the reminder, Councilor Eutropius,” Tiros said. “We will address our response to the latest news from the north as the next item on our agenda. A moment, captain.” Talen had already started to back away, assuming that he’d been dismissed.

“Sir?” Talen said reflexively, coming back to attention.

“There is one more matter for which we require your attention,” Tiros said. “For which Camar requires your service.”

Talen brought his fist to his chest in a legionary’s salute. “I stand ready to serve,” he said.

The other council members had leaned back in their chairs, deferring to Tiros. The marshal took a deep breath and continued, his tone such that he might have been talking to Talen alone. “These are troubled times for Camar, captain. Not only the future of the state, but the very lives of the over a million people who dwell within the borders of the Grand Duchy and its provinces may be at stake. The people of the Duchy are divided against each other, the legacy of the corrupt rule of the false Duke.

In such times, it is vital that we gather every resource that the realm can muster to face the battles that may lie ahead.”

“Over the last few weeks, I have spent time in the ducal archives. I have read details of Camar’s past known to few, but we have all heard the stories of our past. This is not the first time that the people of Camar have faced great threats. In past ages, our forefathers came to an untamed land, and forged a civilization out of the wilds. They fought wars, desperate struggles against the orcs, the elves, and the hard men of Erem and Emor. They fought monsters out of legend, creatures like the ancient dragon Calimthrexas, the Stone King, and the colossal vermin of Athrides.”

“In my research, I found little to suggest that those heroes of an earlier Camar were any different than our people today. They lived, ate, slept, fought, dreamed, and loved. They had hopes for the future for themselves and their children. They feared what they did not know, and were wary of the threats that lived in the shadows.”

“The people of Camar today have had their faith weakened by what was done to them by the lies and evil of the Duke and his cabal. They need a symbol of hope, something to reassure them that the future can hold something better, that there are people willing to offer their lives to keep them safe.”

Talen watched his mentor and leader as he continued his oration. The other members of the Council seemed less impressed, but they listened attentively.

“In the past, there was a special order of defenders that was dedicated specifically to facing the worst of the threats that a dangerous world offered. They answered to the Grand Dukes, but more broadly, their mandate was to the people of Camar. Their ranks included men and women of diverse talents and backgrounds, brought together in a common cause. Their mantra was *Vigilo et spero*: I watch, and I hope. They were known as the Dragon Knights of Camar.”

“Captain Talen Karedes, this Council has decided that this order is to be reborn, at this time of great need. You shall be the first of the new Dragon Knights, and it shall be your mandate to reconstitute this body, with all due speed. You will be provided with a writ of authority that will allow you to develop a process for recruitment, training, and quartering of the new organization, as well as that of a staff for logistical and other support responsibilities.”

Talen blinked. “I... that is, I stand ready to serve, and I will do my best to ensure that the trust you have invested in me this day shall not be misplaced.”

“See that it is not,” the aged wizard said.

Tiros nodded to Talen, sending him a look that said, *We will speak more later*. Talen saluted the Council once more, then bowed, and departed. As he left he could hear the leaders of Camar once more talking about the rebellion to the north, and he wondered

what he and a few recruits could possibly do to arrest what seemed like an inevitable slide toward disaster.

Chapter 114

A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT

A constant patter of rain on the sheet metal roof filled the dim outline of the cavernous, empty warehouse. Other than the noise of the rain, and the occasional gust of wind through the gaping, empty doorways on either side of the building, the night was quiet. The floor was canted slightly but obviously; the ground at one end of the building was about three feet higher than that on the far end. That was a common phenomenon on Camar's South Docks. Originally built on reclaimed land to add to the crowded port's capacity, the planning that went into the construction was ultimately flawed by poor organization, corruption, and simple incompetence. After about half of the actual docks had sunk into the harbor with a few years of opening, most of the rest of the area had been abandoned. Now the seedier tiers of Camar's society made use of the place, and everyone else gave it a very wide berth.

Several dark forms materialized out of the rain and wind, walking into the interior of the warehouse. Their bootsteps echoed off the cavernous interior of the place. They carried no light, but the protruding shapes of what might have been weapons were visible under the heavy oilcloth cloaks that they wore. There were five of them.

The strangers engaged in conversation in low voices, speaking in a dialect thick with lilting vowels and short, guttural exclamations. One of them, a reed of a man with a head shaved bald, asked a question of the leader.

"I am here, gentlemen," came a voice from the shadows.

The five strangers shifted to face the figure that emerged from the deeper darkness along the far wall, into the only dim light that made it through the side doors. The leader stepped forward to meet him, his companions spreading out in a wary half-circle behind him.

"You conduct business in odd places," the man said in thickly-accented Common, drawing back the hood of his cloak to reveal his face. His skin was the color of fresh-tilled earth. A finely-trimmed beard ran along the edges of his jaw, jutting forward to a dagger-shaped point that protruded several inches beyond his chin.

"Both of us engage in trades that are not always... understood, in the bright light of the day," Licinius Varo said. "Still, Master Alzoun, I appreciate your willingness to meet me on such short notice."

“My contact said that you had something to make it worth my while,” the dusky foreigner replied.

Varo nodded, and drew out a leather backpack he’d been carrying under his cloak. Unfastening the clasps on the top of the satchel, he drew out a long bundle wrapped in heavy cloth. It became quickly clear that the pack was no ordinary object, as the bundle ended up being longer than its container by several feet.

Varo laid the bundle down on the ground between himself and Alzoun, and unwrapped it to reveal its contents. In the shadowy light, the objects inside were merely vague outlines.

The trader made a small motion, and one of his men came forward. Bending low over the bundle, he drew out a small object that cast a thin, highly focused light upon the bundle. The light revealed what they were; weapons, a half-dozen morningstars that sprouted vicious-looking spikes from their business ends. The man examined them quickly and efficiently, pausing briefly to mutter arcane words as he passed his hands over them. Then he extinguished the light and stepped back.

“*Unholy* morningstars,” he reported to Alzoun. “The taint is very strong.”

The trader nodded. “Potent magic. Given the prominence of the church of the Father in these lands, I can see why you would not be eager to draw attention to your possession of such objects.

“I assume that you have a market for such?”

“As you well know, my friend, there is a market for everything, if one can but find it.”

“It would be better if they were not used within the borders of Camar,” Varo said. “It could make things... complicated.”

“I can assure you that by the coming of dawn, they will already be far away from these shores. There is a powerful monastic sect in Drusia, that has enemies.” He didn’t offer anything more; he didn’t have to.

“And my request?” Varo asked.

Alzoun waved a hand. “The items you seek are exceptionally rare. If it even became hinted that I had taken the stones outside of the borders of Razhur... my life would be forfeit, and I would never be able to return to my homeland.”

“I am known for my discretion,” Varo said. “And for my impatience with those who would seek to cheat me.”

The trader inclined his head slightly. "I would not dream of challenging either," he said. "But while these," he indicated the weapons, "are powerful, they do not equal what you ask for. Perhaps half of what you required—"

"I will have the full quantity," Varo interrupted. He reached under his cloak again—drawing a subtle reaction of alarm from the trader's guards at the motion—and drew out another object.

Alzoun made another small gesture to his wizard, who came forward and took the item. He held it gingerly, and made a small exclamation in his own language. This time, he did not have to draw out his light or cast a spell. He held the object out to Alzoun, so the trader could see it clearly. Even in the weak light, the greed that shone in the man's eyes was palpable.

"I have never seen the like," he said. "A *mask of the skull*..."

"I have seen it used," Varo said. "It is... effective."

"A very unique item. May I ask where you acquired it?"

"You may ask," Varo said, the implication clear in how he said it.

Alzoun chuckled. "Nevermind, then. We have a trade." He gestured back to another of his men, who came forward, drawing out a small iron box from under his cloak. Varo could see that there were runes etched into its surface.

The trader marked his scrutiny. "Sometimes it is better to ensure that certain things are beyond notice, even when one is far away from those who would look," he said. "You may have the box, as well, as part of the bargain."

"Open it," the cleric said.

The man complied, working the lock a bit awkwardly, as he held the box on one arm. When it opened, Varo came forward and looked inside. The box was lined heavily with velvet cloth, and was empty save for six metal rings, each set with a dark round gemstone. The cleric summoned the magic of his god, scanning the rings, then he nodded to the armsman, who shut the box, handing both it and the key to the cleric.

Alzoun's men had already gathered up the bundle of weapons. "May Dagos be with you," he said, with a slight bow. As he straightened, a small metal object came out from under his cloak, dangling from a thin metal chain. The symbol matched the one that Varo wore around his neck.

"And with you as well," Varo said. Sliding the box into his *handy haversack*, he took up the burden and walked toward one of the exits out into the night rain. Alzoun and his men headed in the opposite direction, departing via the far exit.

Neither group looked back, and within a few seconds, the abandoned warehouse was once again empty and silent, save for the constant patter of the rain.

Chapter 115

RECRUITMENT

A figure, draped in shadow, stared up into the night sky. The storm that had covered Camar in wet hadn't reached this far south, and the skies above here were placid. Long streaks of white cloud hung high above like wisps of gauze, muting the light from the waxing moon.

For a long time, the lonely form stood there, staring in silence up at that bright spot in the sky. As the moon crept slowly out from behind its cloud, its light shone upon the dead flesh of Zafir Navev, and was reflected in eyes that were flat, dull, lifeless. He still wore a ruined tunic and the rotted remains of the other clothes he'd had on at death, but over them now rested a cape of black gossamer, a fine weave that seemed to sink into the flesh of his neck and arms, riding up to cling tightly to his scalp. Dangling in one hand, almost forgotten, was the bone wand, tipped with the ebon skull that seemed to only darken as the light struck its lusterless surface.

A shuffling noise finally drew Navev's attention around. The hulking form that rose up out of the night shadows loomed there, expectant.

Zafir Navev did not betray any reaction to the interruption; that would have been human, and there was nothing human left in the creature that stood here on the edge of Rappan Athuk. But there was something of regret in the way he turned and walked along the edge of the valley.

There were bones everywhere. In addition to the generations of corpses that had laid in the graves of the valley for centuries, a fresh garrison of bodies had been left by the soldiers of Camar who had fallen here, betrayed to their deaths by their corrupt leaders. But not all of the bones had belonged to humans; the Duke's men had accounted well for themselves, and the remains of bugbears, hobgoblins, ogres, and worse were scattered about the field, some scattered, others half-buried in the loam.

It didn't take very long to find the first intact set of remains.

It had been a man, once. A faded tunic, now shredded and torn, covered a chain shirt and bones covered in dirt. There was not enough light to make out the colors of the tunic, but Navev knew them, the orange and gold of the Duke of Camar. A cause that was dead, at least for this man.

Navev stood there, looking down at the body, his shadow hovering behind him. He didn't seem to do anything, but those sensitive to such things might have felt a cold stirring along the back of their neck, or sensed a sudden spike of power that radiated from the cold black skull held by the once-human warlock.

The body stirred. There was a faint clatter as the bones came back together in the way that they had in life, then the fallen soldier rose.

The skeleton stood there, its stance a mockery of the position of attention that the soldier had most likely taken in life. Its skull was covered in mold and dirt, and the dark hollows of its eye sockets were empty.

Navev watched it for a few moments. "Pick up your sword," he finally said.

The skeleton obeyed, drawing the weapon out from where it had laid half-buried in the dirt.

Navev moved deeper into the battlefield. The skeleton followed, along with the warlock's unholy guardian, once the man that had killed him.

Slowly, the warlock continued his work, building the army that his new master required.

Chapter 116

TRAINING

The distinctive clamor of combat echoed through the small courtyard of the manor house of Cattalia, a generous estate located on a beautiful hilltop less than a mile outside of the city of Camar.

The morning air was cold, but the five fighters wore only light sleeveless tunics and breeches. By the sweat covering their bodies, they had been going at it for quite some time, and more than one bore bruises where the wooden practice blades had already found their marks. At the moment, four of the combatants were engaged in an all-out attack against the last, who was having a difficult time of it.

It was immediately obvious that the lone defender was an expert swordsman. His attackers, three men and a woman, were no novices, but he was able to block nearly-simultaneous attacks, only their numbers keeping him from taking advantage of openings to launch effective counters. They were being cautious, however. One of the young men was moving with an obvious limp, and the woman held her off arm close against her side, favoring bruised ribs. On the other hand, the defender had taken

several hits, including a nasty purple bruise that had swollen up around his left eye, trailing blood where the skin had been split.

As the combat continued, a newcomer entered the courtyard, and frowned as she watched the display. None of the combatants paid her any heed. She spotted another observer standing on the covered porch on the right side of the yard, so she made her way there.

“Hello, Allera,” Shay said, embracing the healer briefly before she turned back to the battle. She grimaced as Talen—the lone defender in the melee—took a hard hit across his back, but as the others rushed in to finish the contest, he somehow twisted out of the path of two swords, kicking one of his attackers in the knee hard enough to send him sprawling to the ground. The woman who had struck him tried to bring her sword up into his wrist, attempting to disarm him, but he caught her arm and threw her past him, tangling her up with one of the onrushing men. The maneuver gave him time to retreat back out into the middle of the courtyard, shaking off the effects of the hit to his back. One of his opponents tried to help up the man with the injured knee, but it buckled under him, and he fell back to the ground.

“I thought these things generally just went to the first mortal strike... assuming the swords had been real, that is,” Allera said.

“Normally, they do,” Shay replied. “He’s trying something different.” She rolled her eyes, indicating what she thought of the matter.

“They fight this hard without a healer?”

“Oh, we have an acolyte of the Father in the back house, within easy call. But Talen seems to have gotten convinced that getting beaten within an inch of your life helps your body remember how not to get hit. I’d expect something like that from the men, but it pains me to see Medelia involved in such nonsense.” Even as she spoke, the young woman cried out as Talen smacked her hard in the bicep with his practice sword. She nearly dropped her weapon, but only retreated from the battle long enough to switch the weapon to her other hand and come in again.

“He’s pushing them hard,” Allera said.

Shay nodded. As they watched, the battle finally did come to an end. Talen was good, but his opponents had ultimately just worn him down. He’d dodged a feint too slowly to recover as one of the young men hit him in the thigh just above his knee, staggering him. Medelia brought her sword around with her off hand into the base of Talen’s skull, and the fighter fell hard to the dirt, coughing.

Allera and Shay ran forward. The healer grabbed Talen by the head, pouring healing energy into him. Talen gasped as the pain of his wounds was purged from him in a

torrent, and the bruise on his face shrank and faded. His four young former opponents watched in surprise.

“Damn it, Allera... the battle wasn’t over. I had not yielded.”

“It was over,” Shay said. “You were out, and the best you could have done was split your fool-stubborn head open on one of their swords. They had you cold, old man.” Some of the warriors smiled—Talen had five years on any of them, if that—but those faded as Talen fixed his stare upon them. Finally, though, he relented.

“All right, the exercise is over,” he said. “See Philokrates inside, make sure nothing important’s hurt... and then get cleaned up. I’ll join you inside later.”

As the warriors left, one helping the still-limping man with the damaged knee, Talen got up and brushed his hands clean. “It’s good to see you, Allera, and I’m not just saying that because you saved me a nasty headache.”

“I’d heard that you’ve accomplished a great deal already.”

Talen nodded. “This site is ideal. It’s outside Camar, but I think that works to our advantage. Fewer distractions, and it will ultimately be self-sustaining. And there’s lots of space. Grachus has already noted a few sites where we can add buildings, if we ever get that far.”

“Yes, it’s a pity we never got a chance to thank Lord Sobol for the use of his estate,” Shay added dryly.

“How are the recruits?” Allera asked.

“They’re good,” Talen said. “We’re still getting set up. We’ve got a good core of people, those who helped us bring down the Duke, and some others whose help has been instrumental since then. I’ve got a few senior drill masters coming from the legions, and once they’re here, we’ll be able to start a regular training regiment for new recruits. The guilds and the church have helped a little, mostly with money, although each has sent us a few people with administrative experience.”

“Yeah, and with good eyes and ears, too,” Shay said. “And mouths, to pass on what they see to their masters.”

Talen shrugged. “We’re going to be in the spotlight for a while, but we still need the help. We’re putting out contacts to draw in some more good people, but even counting the household staff, we’ve got barely fifty in all. There’s so much to do, we have to set up a whole administrative apparatus, logistics, budget, command structure. We haven’t even worked out all the details yet of how candidates will be chosen, tested...”

“We’re not accepting *all* help,” Shay said. “Talen’s already pissed a few members of the nobility, when he said that they couldn’t get their scions in as knights-in-training. He turned down some fairly... generous... offers.”

Talen frowned. “Maybe eventually we can have a corps of cadets, apprentices, or whatever, but at the moment, we have to focus on people with proven skills. If this new order isn’t going to be the best of the best, Shay, then why bother...”

The scout held up her hands. “I agree, Talen, but we’re not getting off to the best start by pissing powerful people off.”

Talen grimaced. “I’m not a diplomat. Allera, you understand how all this... *political* stuff works, maybe you could...”

“I am happy to do what I can, Talen, but I don’t have any official standing in Camar. As a healer, I cannot be partisan; my job requires that all sides be willing to accept my help.”

“Perhaps, then, you can provide Talen with some suggestions and advice, on how best to navigate the complex web of Camarian politics,” Shay suggested. “For some reason, he seems to bristle at taking sensible advice from me.”

“Yes, well, from what I understand, some men find it difficult to acknowledge that they are in error, in front of a woman,” Allera said.

Talen ran a hand through his hair. “Ah... you do remember I’m standing right here, right?”

Both women turned their eyes toward him with that particular expression known to men from time immemorial. Talen was wise enough to know that it was prudent to call for a tactical retreat. “Right... I’d better go clean up, I promised Philokrates I’d give him an hour of my time this afternoon, to go over the requirements for the dispensary. Allera, will you join us for the noon meal?”

The healer nodded, and Talen quickly—too quickly, perhaps—retreated into the manor house.

“That man can be exasperating, sometimes,” Shay said, as he left.

“Yes, but he does fill out those breeches fairly well, does he not?”

“Allera!” Shay said in a scandalized voice. Then she laughed. “I guess he does, at that.” They smiled, but then Shay grew more serious, and laid a hand on the healer’s arm. “Have you heard anything... new? From the mountains?”

Allera shook her head. "He didn't see me before he left. I think he made it quite clear that he did not want to see me again."

"He's just being a stubborn idiot," Shay said.

"Maybe it is for the best." Allera turned slightly away, pretending to be interested in a hanging plant under the porch overhang.

"Talen and I were surprised that he accepted Tiros's request in the first place."

"I don't know that he himself knew how much he needed it," Allera said. "It is a frightening thing, sometimes, to be needed. But without it, life can be bleak indeed."

Shay didn't respond, but she turned to look at the door where Talen had disappeared, and she nodded silently to herself.

Allera turned back to face the scout. "Talen is moving very quickly. I spoke to Tiros the other day, and he said that the Second and Fourth legions will be heading north in a few days, but that you wouldn't be going with them."

Shay shook her head. "No, you're right. The few dozen people that we are gathering here won't make a difference in the coming fight with Dalemar... and I think Talen and Tiros alike are preparing for a different threat."

Allera nodded. She didn't need to ask what Shay meant.

"Has there been any word... from the south?"

"Things have been quiet. Tiros has added additional patrols through the region, and both the Guild and the church have agreed to use their powers to help keep an eye on things. Assuming that Dar can get things moving quickly on his end, we should have a better idea in a month or so, of how things stand."

"Varo hinted that we would have to go back, before it is all done."

Shay's lips tightened. "The cleric of Dagos has his own agenda."

"I know. But if he is right..."

As if summoned by Allera's words, a cold breeze swept through the courtyard, stirring up a plume of dried leaves and dust, and forcing both women to tug their cloaks closer around their bodies.

Shay looked up at the sky, and gestured toward the door. "There's another storm coming," he said, leaving Allera's question unanswered. "We'd better go inside."

Chapter 117

THE BORDER LEGION

A small column of riders rode along a winding trail, little more than a track, that wound through a very difficult terrain of jagged hills and steep ridges. The trail rose steeply into the foothills, beyond which stood the impressive gray peaks of the Galerr Mountains. This nearly impenetrable range divided the continent in two. Technically, the mapmakers usually identified the mountains as the western border of the Grand Duchy, but the fact was that almost no civilized folk lived in these rough lands. Those few outposts in this region tended to be stark, heavily fortified, and occupied by hard-edged men with weapons close at hand.

The riders seemed to fit right in to the stark landscape, big, muscled men clad in heavy fur cloaks with armor visible underneath. All twelve carried weapons, ranging from swords and huge double-bladed axes, to spears and great recurved warbows.

The trail widened somewhat as it rose along the crest of a razorback ridge that navigated a treacherous drop of hundreds of feet to either side. Up ahead, the trail looked to be headed toward a gap between two of the huge peaks, a deceptively benign-looking gateway into the mountains ahead. At this time of year, snow already covered the slopes of the mountains at that altitude, and soon it would pack the passes as well. Three winters out of four, it would come as low as the trail that the armed party was now traversing. It was cold now, bracingly so, as it was only a scant hour since the break of dawn, and the early morning sun had not yet shone enough to warm the bare rocks of the hills. By the look of the riders and their horses, they had gotten a very early start this day.

The lead rider did not turn toward the pass, instead diverging the column along a track that jutted off from the main trail, to the right. This route took them into a canyon with steep, two hundred foot walls of rough gray slate. The beat of their hooves echoed off the canyon walls, and the light of the early morning sun that had shone on them as they made their way up the ridge faded, replaced with a chill like that of fresh frost. Snow was visible in a few deep crevices in the canyon, in places where the sun never quite reached.

They passed down the canyon for about a quarter mile, then a small valley opened up before them.

The place was well situated for shelter against the surrounding mountains, with high, steep cliffs in all directions save the one facing them. The valley was an elongated bowl maybe a half-mile across. A stream ran through it, dropping off a cliff to the west, then running through the valley in a steadily descending course before disappearing into a

cleft to the east. Most of the near side of the valley was denuded, but some trees still covered the slopes on the far side, in some cases even jutting from the vertical far cliffs in a display of natural persistence.

The valley was far from pristine. A stockade had been built across the canyon entrance, although the gate was open, and the two wooden watchstations looked deserted. Beyond the fortifications, at the nadir of the valley, stood a small gathering of pathetic-looking buildings, weathered one-story structures of stone and wood. But the valley was clearly occupied by more than the sparse population that the tiny village could have supported. At least two score rude shelters had been built into the sloping rises to the west and north of the village, most of them cavelike excavations that had been dug into the hillsides, with entrances of heavy logs that framed narrow doorways closed off with curtains of thick hides. Other than a few wisps of smoke that rose from the buildings or from the hillside shelters, the place seemed deserted.

The leader of the riders rode slowly forward down into the valley. As they rode through the open gate, he studied the empty watchtowers, and the darkened gatehouse of plain logs just inside the gate. He pulled up his reins, and lifted his hand to call a halt. The other riders reined in behind him.

“Gods, it’s worse than I’d expected,” one of the riders said.

“How many you think are here?” another asked.

“The roster has three hundred and seventeen listed as active. But I don’t see how there can be that many here...”

“Depends on how big those caves are...”

“Complete breakdown of discipline...”

“What did you expect? The Duke—ah, the old Duke—he was dumping trash out here for years, and...”

“Wouldn’t have done much good if the orcs had come...”

“Orcs been gone for nigh on thirty years now. Folks got short memories...”

“Leavin’ the gates wide open, my mother could have taken this valley...”

“Yeah, I’ll bet your mother could have taken all three hundred and seventeen...”

“Ha, I heard your mother serviced the entire Fourth Legion...”

A short rider with a face as craggy as the surrounding cliffs spun in his saddle to face the two men who had just spoken. Under his heavy cloak, he wore a tunic emblazoned

with the two black slashes of a Camarian non-commissioned officer. “Shut up, the both of you stupid bastards, or I’ll cut your balls off and feed ‘em to my horse.”

The leader had watched the valley silently during the exchange behind him.

“Stay here,” he told them.

The grizzled noncom said, “Ser, it might not be a good idea—”

“Stay here,” he repeated. “I’ll call you if I need you.” He dismounted, tossing his reins to the next rider in the line. After adjusting his cloak, and verifying that his longsword was loose in the scabbard at his hip, he walked down into the village.

The settlement was quiet, but as he made his way further down the trail, there were signs of it slowly coming to life. A man clad only in tattered breeches erupted from one of the hillside shelters, shivering as he drew out his member and urinated onto the stones outside his residence. Only when he was done did he see the intruder; he blinked at the man for several long moments, who finally turned away and continued on his way.

On the outskirts of the village, he encountered a mongrel dog, and a woman who’d emerged from one of the rude huts to grab firewood from one of the long, mostly-empty bins alongside the house. The woman, well past her prime, likewise looked at the newcomer with surprise.

“Galos,” he said.

She stared at him for a few seconds. “Galos,” he repeated, his tone brooking no argument. He took another step toward her, which seemed to shake her out of her lethargy; she pointed to the largest of the village buildings, on the far side of the small open space that served as a commons.

The man continued on his way, ignoring the woman, who dropped her burden and immediately rushed back into the house.

The expression on the man’s face grew darker as he walked across the open space, stone crunching beneath his boots. He could see a long structure that looked like stables off to the left, big enough to accommodate perhaps a hundred mounts. Beside it stood a darkened structure that might have once been a smithy. Now it was a sagging ruin, its thatch roof bent almost low enough to brush the floor inside.

He reached the place that the woman had indicated. The front porch had sagged so much that he had to duck slightly to get to the door. The door, not surprisingly, was stuck in its jam, but it gave before his shoulder, opening with a loud creak.

The room beyond was cramped, little more than a foyer with doors leading off to three side rooms. A table piled high with stained playing cards, empty bottles, and stuff that might have once been food was jammed into a corner, surrounded by rickety chairs.

A man appeared in one of the doorways. He had pulled a winter cloak over his otherwise naked body, but his eyes were bleary and thick with sleep. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Get Galos," the intruder said.

"*Colonel Galos* is sleeping," the man said. "I'm *Captain Valdes*, what is this about? You the messenger from Fort Taledran?"

"I don't care who the fuck you are," the other replied. "Get *Colonel Galos* out here, right now."

The captain's eyes narrowed, but there was something in the other man's manner that was dangerous. He retreated through another doorway, heading further back into the house. There was a delay, an angry yell, then some muffled voices from the next room. The newcomer didn't wait long, and pushed the door open, following after the captain.

The back of the house comprised a short hall that connected three doors. He followed the voices to the last door, which was open a crack. He pushed it open and stepped into the room beyond.

The place wasn't large, the available space taken up by an old wardrobe, a small metal stove under the room's only window, and a fairly spacious bed. A buxom, naked woman was in the bed, and dove deeper under the covers as he entered. On the far side of the bed stood the captain, and a giant of a man who was pulling a ragged Camarian legion coat over a muscled torso marked with several obvious scars. He'd already pulled on breeches, and had buckled a swordbelt sporting a broad legion shortsword around his thick waist. The man's eyes narrowed as he saw the intruder.

"Who the fuck are you?" he spat.

"*Colonel Galos*?"

"Yeah, I'm Galos." The officer pushed the captain aside and came forward to face the intruder. Stabbing a thick finger at the other's chest to punctuate his words, he said, "Now, who. The. Fuck. Are. You?"

The man shifted slightly, opening his cloak enough so that the other men could see the uniform he wore underneath it. "I'm Corath Dar. *Colonel Corath Dar*, and I'm your fucking replacement." He drew out a scroll from the pouch at his belt and slapped it down on the bedcovers. "There's your orders. You're relieved, as of right now, colonel."

The other man stared down at Dar—he had about five inches on him—for several long seconds, then he snorted. “Is that right, now.” He took the scroll, broke the seal, and scanned the contents. “Ah, I’d heard about this... new government in Camar, eh? Well, too bad for the old Duke, then. You in on that bit of business, *colonel?*”

Dar’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “As of this moment, your rank is captain. You and the other captains will bring my people up to speed on the disposition of the Legion, including numbers, mounts, arms, and supplies. And you’ll help get this crew ready to move.”

“Move?” Captain Valdes asked.

“That’s what I said. The Border Legion’s moving out, and it’s moving out *today.*”

Galos had not shifted his stare from his replacement. “I’ll be damned by the gods if I’m going to turn my command over to some city fuck with ‘orders’ from some pack of fake lords with dreams of grandeur.”

Dar returned his gaze with a steely look of his own. “Have it your way.”

As the small column sat their horses on the rise overlooking the village, they heard a loud crash from down below. One of the riders, a relatively young man clad in the blue-chased of an underlieutenant, fidgeted with his reins. “Perhaps we should ride down.”

The old veteran noncommissioned officer shook his head. “Colonel will let us know when he needs us.”

There was another crash, and then a window on the side of one of the buildings exploded outward. A big man half-dressed in an officer’s coat flew through the window and laded hard onto the ground just outside, tried to get up, and then fell over onto his back. He didn’t move any further. A few seconds later, Dar emerged from the door of the house, and gestured to his riders to come down.

The noncom extended a hand, palm up, toward the rider next to him. Grimacing, the man handed over a silver coin, then both of them joined the column that followed the lieutenant down into the valley.

Chapter 118

SOULS OF THE TAKEN

As Filcher regained consciousness, he was greeted with a wave of pain. His first instincts were to run; he tried to move, but found it impossible. The attempt only led to more pain, stabbing through his body into his brain, and nearly dragged him back down into the black.

Instinct told him that would be bad, so he let his muscles relax, and focused on breathing, the way that old Grimax had taught him. The pain receded somewhat, still there, but manageable. Only when he felt reasonably sure that he would not pass out again, did he open his eyes.

When he looked around, he almost wished he *had* passed out again.

He was not alone; not only were most of the members of his patrol here, but he recognized members of at least two mining teams. There were maybe thirty goblins here in all, and there might have been more behind him that he could not see. All were securely bound with lengths of barbed rope that wrapped around their arms and legs, binding them tightly and holding them in a forced kneeling position. A few had toppled over despite that, and lay unresponsive on the ground. A few of the fellow prisoners looked like they might be conscious, but their heads were bowed, and the only sound he heard from any of them was soft groans of pain. They were in a large chamber of dark stone, lit by a diffuse reddish light. Metal pillars reinforced the ceiling. Even before he turned and saw the huge graven idol on the far side of the room, he knew where he was, but actually seeing it sent a tremor of fear through him that threatened to send him over the edge into uncontrolled panic. It was only through a strong effort that he was able to retain control, although the terror remained a cold pit in the depths of his stomach.

He did not see the creature that had taken them. The thing had been a true horror, a six-armed cross between a woman and a serpent. Their weapons had done nothing to it, and it had easily blocked those who had tried to flee, summoning up walls of deadly blades, or simply vanishing and appearing ahead of those who were running. It had been everywhere at once, or so it had seemed, and Filcher had initially assumed that there were many of the creatures, but in hindsight, he realized that it was likely just one, using magic to confound them.

Small consolation that was; the one was bad enough. The goblins of Grezneck were hardy creatures, toughened by life in such proximity to Rappan Athuk, but even the arts of the goblin wizards and shamans might not be enough to deal with such a monster. The goblins had held a long truce with the cult of Orcus, and many of the goblins themselves even paid homage to the ancient demon god. But now it was clear that the human priests had been biding their time, waiting for the right moment to strike against their neighbors.

Filcher wondered if any of his kin had escaped. A few of his patrol were not present, at least that he could see, but he remembered seeing at least one of them cut in twain by the demon-creature's swords. He did not know how many miners had been in the other

groups that had been attacked, but he hoped that at least one had escaped to warn his kin. Maybe something could be done to prepare for another attack from the snake woman.

He remembered the others that he and his patrol had encountered, some days back. On the spider level, it had been. Those humans had claimed to be enemies of the cult of Orcus. They had fought and beaten the river trolls, so obviously they'd been powerful. What had happened to them?

Filcher tried to relax his muscles—difficult, with the barbs digging painfully into his flesh. His hands were free, but he could not move them far, with his arms immobilized by the ropes. Slowly, incrementally, he moved his nimble fingers through the folds in his tunic. His armor had been cut from his body, and his gear taken, but he'd broken an arrow yesterday, and he'd pocked the head, intending to have it recrafted by Shanis later...

He was distracted as he sensed movement behind him. He slowly lowered his head, feigning unconsciousness, while his fingers continued their subtle work. Keeping his eyes slightly open, he tried to see what was happening.

A clatter of movement, an odd sound, like dice being rubbed together in the palm. Filcher caught sight of a flash of white out of the corner of one eye, and realized that the noise was made by animated skeletons, bearing burdens. Those burdens turned out to be more of his kin, similarly bound and battered, which were deposited nearby. Once they had been propped up, the skeletons retreated into positions around the perimeter of the chamber.

"Filcher!" came a soft hiss from his right. It was Gnasher, his second-in-command. "Filcher, are you awake?"

The patrol leader responded with a soft whisper of warning, and the other goblin subsided. Their only advantage lay in letting their enemies know that they were beaten, unconscious. The goblin's fingers continued to probe, and he felt a slight thrill as he felt a hard outline in his tunic pocket. Careful not to betray himself with rapid movement, he slowly fished into the pocket, trying not to think about the agonies that stabbed through his arms with each movement.

A loud clank of metal announced the arrival of others. Filcher stiffened as the sound of armored men drew nearer, but they passed by him without stopping, heading toward the great idol. Hoping that one of the skeletons wasn't standing right behind him, he grabbed onto the arrowhead, and began cutting at the ropes holding him.

Focused on his task, he was only dimly aware of the sounds of conversation and activity coming from the far side of the room; the priests were doing something unpleasant, no doubt. But when a goblin scream pierced the relative quiet of the place, his head shot up despite himself, and he looked upon the horror of their intended fate.

Several of the goblins in the front rank of captives were conscious, and one had even gotten free of his bonds, leaping up and trying to get away. But the ropes had cut off the circulation to his limbs, and he could only stagger weakly into the arms of a pair of skeletons, which grabbed him easily and dragged him back to his position. Dark shadows, nearly invisible in the poor light, were darting in and around the prisoners, and as Filcher watched in horror, one appeared and passed into the held prisoner. The goblin screamed and stiffened, and then went limp.

A few seconds later, *two* dark shadows emerged from the dead body of the goblin miner.

The sight gave urgency to his actions, and he ignored the painful cuts on his fingers as he cut at his bonds with the arrowheads. Finally, the cords parted, and his arms were free. Free movement added new agonies as blood poured into his limbs, but the sight of the death spreading amongst his kin allowed him to overcome that hindrance. He cut his legs free, and quietly slipped to the side, trying not to cry out at the new pain that resulted.

Gnasher's body was trembling with fear, but he held himself still as Filcher cut him free. The patrol leader started to turn toward the next goblin, but as he looked up, he saw a shadow right next to it. The creature's red eyes shone evilly at him, and as he drew back in horror, it passed into the captive. The goblin's skin became pale where the undead monster touched it, and it shook slightly.

"Come on!" Filcher hissed, pulling at Gnasher, who was trying to rub feeling back into his legs. The two goblins started crawling among the bound forms of their kin, toward the back of the room where the skeletons and priests had entered. Behind them, the screams of the other prisoners continued, as the undead made progress through the captives.

The two goblins reached the last row of prisoners, and looked up to see a half-dozen skeletons coming for them. With stealth now unnecessary, the two sprang up, and half-ran, half-staggered toward the doors that they could see in the back of the chamber. Filcher ducked under a skeleton's grasp, but a second seized hold of his arm, locking into him with a heavy grip. The patrol leader tried to break free, but his weakened strength was not enough to fight the unnatural grasp of the larger undead.

Then Gnasher collided into the skeleton, and all three of them fell over, clattering loudly on the ground. The skeleton's arm-bone snapped, and its fingers loosened, allowing Filcher to get up. He reached over to help Gnasher, but he froze as he saw a terrible black form descending from above.

Gnasher perhaps saw the death reflected in his companion's eyes, for he glanced over his shoulder, raising his arms in a hopeless effort to stop the wraith from taking him.

Filcher could do nothing to help, and in fact had to stagger back to save himself from another pair of skeletons that tried to grab him. Tumbling backward, barely gaining enough control to come up into a run, he darted for the doors. The heavy portals resisted his initial tug, and as he looked back over his shoulder to see more skeletons coming toward him, he knew he was doomed.

Then the doors opened, and another part of skeletons carrying prisoners entered the room. Filcher shot past them at once, and ran. He kept running, even as the screams grew fainter behind him, and images of nightmare continued to play through his thoughts.

He did not stop running for a long, long time.

Chapter 119

HOMECOMING

The tall chamber at the top of the tower was dark, the only illumination the faint starlight that filtered in through the narrow windows of stained glass that extended high up toward the peaked ceiling. In that weak radiance, the chamber was populated by a landscape of deep shadows and vague forms that could have been anything. Faint motes of dust hung in the air, and the place had an aura of disuse that lay over it like a faded drape.

Something sparkled faintly in the light of one of the windows. It resolved as a trickle of fine mist, which rolled into the chamber through a tiny crack in one of the windows. The mist thickened as it dropped toward the chamber floor below, even as it disappeared into the shadows.

A moment after the column of mist faded out of view altogether, a new shadow began to move among the gathered collection that crowded the chamber. The intruder moved among the gathered clutter without mishap. Occasionally it paused next to an object of indefinable purpose, running a hand across a dusty metal sphere, or a shelf that supported a row of oddly-shaped jars.

A door opened, suddenly. The intruder turned slowly as someone else entered the chamber. Metal hissed on leather, and a voice of command shattered the sepulchral stillness of the room.

"Light!"

A brilliant radiance filled the chamber, shining from the slender sword of white steel held by the woman standing in the doorway. She was beautiful, with pale skin and short-

cropped hair the color of amber. Her face bore the ageless features of the aelfinn, called “elves” by the humans of Camar. She was clad only in a sleeping robe of shimmering silk, although silver bracers shone on her wrists, and a silver amulet dangled from her throat, an intricate pattern twined in fine metal. But the sword in her hand was held in a deadly, ready pose, and its tip did not quiver in the slightest as she brandished it at the intruder. The light from the sword revealed little of the stranger, who was clad in a dark cloak that shrouded its form in indiscriminate cloth.

“Who are you? Reveal yourself!”

The figure reached up with hands so slender as to be frail, and drew back its hood.

The elven woman’s eyes widened in surprise, and for a moment, she could not speak. When she finally managed a word, it hissed from her throat as if strangled.

“Father?”

* * * * *

The being that had been called the “mad elf” by the Doomed Bastards of Rappan Athuk sipped tea from an exquisitely designed cup of delicate porcelain. He was seated in an ancient armchair of plush velvet cloth, which seemed to swallow up his thin frame. As he placed the cup back down on the adjacent end table, his fingers trembled slightly.

Two elves watched him intently. One was the woman who’d discovered him earlier, clad now in a dressing gown that failed to cover the form of the sword she still wore at her hip. The other was an elven man, his silver hair restrained by a band of platinum filigree at his temples, likewise hastily dressed in houseclothes of fine silk. A small gemstone orbited his head, occasionally flashing in the light of the small magical lamps placed throughout the room. While the woman simply stood there, staring at her guest, the man clearly could not fully control his agitation, and he frequently paced back and forth before pausing to confront the seated elf.

“Lord Alderis... Eregion... your return places us in a difficult position.”

The woman turned to the man. “Selanthas!”

The older elf lifted a hand. “No, Mehlaraine, your consort has the right of it. I had not intended to cause you difficulty, or indeed that any should know of my return to Aelvanmarr.”

Mehlaraine frowned at him. “But... father, surely you intend to come before the Conclave?”

“No, daughter, that would not... I am decided in this matter. No one must know that I have returned. I know it is much to ask, but still I ask it.”

“But father,” the woman said, coming forward to kneel beside his chair, “Surely the Conclave will understand that what happened, before... you were not in command of yourself. They can help you...”

“I have made my decision!” the older elf replied, more sternly than he’d intended. Seeing the look on the woman’s face, he laid his hand over hers, and said, “I am sorry, Mehlaraine, daughter. I know that this must have been a difficult time for you. For both of you,” he added, looking up at the other man. “But there are greater things at stake.”

“He is right,” Selanthas said. “The Conclave will act to protect the interests of the community before all else, and when your father... departed, he was a danger to himself and others. They will insist that he be taken into protective custody, at the very least.”

The older elf nodded. “I expected nothing less.”

“The Conclave took custody of most of your arcana shortly after your departure,” Selanthas continued. “Since your only heir is not a magic-user, they saw no reason why those materials should not be put to better use. I believe that the Lyceum has your books, and Lord Draelai has custody of your other items.”

“It is of no consequence. But tell me... what did the Conclave do with the crystal that I bore at the time of my arrest?”

“It was destroyed,” Selanthas said bluntly.

The older elf looked up in surprise.

“The Conclave kept it locked up, heavily warded, for a time,” Mehlaraine said. “Draelai said that there was a considerable arcane potency within it, but that it was dangerous. I think... that is, I suspect that they wanted to access that power themselves.”

“Foolish.”

“Indeed,” Selanthas said. “Your friend, the archmage Sultheros, he agreed with you, and urged caution. The wards put on the artifact were considerable, and few not in the higher ranks of the Conclave even knew of its existence.”

“What happened?”

“A little over a month ago, the artifact began to surge, to release pulse of energy. It caused great disruption; a number of the Sensitive reported terrible dreams, and one of the Keepers took his own life.”

“Most of us felt nothing,” Mehlaraine said. “But Sultheros insisted that if the device could wreak such havoc beyond our strongest wards, it was too dangerous to keep

here. Draelai wanted to take it elsewhere, to continue to study it, but Sultheros acted, and destroyed it himself, thus resolving the issue.”

Her father nodded to himself, counting days in his mind, and coming up with a conclusion that gave him pause. Several long minutes of silence passed.

“Father?” Melharaine finally said. “What do you intend to do?”

He looked up. “I will seek out my friend, and take his counsel. And he has a copy of a certain book in his library that I need to see.”

“It is risky for you to be seen in Aelvanmarr,” Selanthas said.

“I have learned much about not being seen. But I do not believe that there are many that would recognize me. My daughter, of course... but would you have known me, Selanthas, had we passed on the street?”

The elven man frowned, but did not respond. The older elf nodded.

“You do not wish to say it, but I have seen my face in the glass. I look like an elf two centuries older than my years. I see it in the concern in my daughter’s eyes, if nothing else. And believe me, Selanthas, I feel as I look.”

“What... what happened to you, father?” She held onto his hand tightly, but carefully, as though afraid that she could break him.

The elf looked away, and did not respond.

Chapter 120

THE FIELDS OF WINTER

The weeks passed, and winter descended upon Camar in earnest. The winter storms dumped loads of rain upon the city itself and the adjacent lands that supported it, while to the north and west, the mountains became covered with caps of white. Two of Camar’s legions invested the city of Dalemar, and dug in for a winter siege. Trade upon the Great Eastern Sea dwindled with the season, and ships laid up for the winter in their preferred ports, or sailed south to engage in trade with Drusia and Razhur.

South of the Camar, on the far side of the River Nalos, the countryside extended for leagues over rolling hills covered with vineyards and pastures, along with frequent vales that were covered in lush farmland. Small towns and villages dotted the landscape,

providing most of the fresh produce and other provender that the great city needed on a daily basis to survive.

But as one continued further to the south, and the land grew rougher, these settlements became fewer and farther between. The placid little villages were replaced by small hamlets and steadings, more often protected by walls or stockades than not. There was still some trade over the rural roads, but this far from Camar, few had spent any time at all in the capitol, save perhaps for the pilgrimage, the one visit that every citizen of the Duchy tried to make at some point in their lives. The rural folk grew up among their kin, spent their term in the legions, saw a bit of the world, and then returned to their homes, in most cases to spend the rest of their lives tilling the same soil or hunting the same forest that their fathers and grandfathers had worked before them.

One of those isolated settlements was Gundar's Steading, a tiny community of a half-dozen log buildings set in the shadow of a low hill on the edge of the Forest of Hope. The steading supported about forty people. Most of the adult men were trappers that took furs from the forest's edge, trading them with the rare merchants that would appear on the Camar Road every few months. The forest provided wood, meat, furs, mushrooms, and other necessities, but few from the steading dared more than a mile or two into it, for the dark wood sheltered dangers as well, and the people of the frontier knew better than to play at dice with Fate.

On a blustery winter day, with gray skies above threatening, a solitary figure worked in a small winter garden about a bowshot from the walls of the steading's stockade. He was clad in the plain brown wool frock of a priest of the Shining Father, and hard lines from age and the elements were etched deeply into his face. He looked to be about fifty, but he handled the hoe with a vigor that bespoke a strength beyond his years. He whistled softly as he tended rows of winter cabbage and carrots, cutting away weeds with precise strokes of his implement. A low fence, really just enough to keep animals at bay, surrounded the small plot, which was only about ten paces on a side.

A voice on the wind drew the old friar's attention up. A boy was running toward him, from the direction of the road. "Nelan! Nelan!" the youth shouted, out of breath as he ran up, but clearly agitated.

"What is it, Gustan?" the priest asked, laying his hoe carefully against the adjacent fence.

"There's... the road... caravan..."

"Take a breath, son."

The boy nodded, and swallowed heavily. "Caravan, on the road, ser..." he said. "Merchants... attacked..."

"Attacked? By whom?"

"I... I mean, that is, I was a good ways off, watching from the ol' quarry hill. But they looked... they was white, and skinny, real skinny, just bones, like! They carried off the merchant and his guards, one of them tried to fight, but the things just grabbed him, dragged him off with the rest..."

"Skeletons?" Nelan asked. As the boy nodded, the priest asked, "Are you certain, Gustan? This is important now, no falsehoods."

"I swear it on the Father's light," the boy said. "They carried the people off into the wood, the wagon's left about a mile down the road."

"How many were there?"

"Not sure... maybe a half-score?"

Nelan frowned. At this time of day, most of the holders would be in the wood, checking their traps and hunting up food for dinner. Some of them might hear the alarm horn sounded from the steading, but like as not most would be too far off, and would not return for hours yet.

"Nelan?"

"Come with me," the priest said, stepping out of the garden, and heading toward the steading walls.

An hour later, Nelan passed his garden again, returning from the road with four men from the steading, all of them armed with hunting bows and stout boar spears. They had tracked down the merchant's wagon, and had found the two horses alive, if skittish. The wagon had gone off the road and shattered a wheel, so they'd left it, taking only a few items that they could sling across the horses' backs. They'd found nothing of the merchant and his guards, except for a crossbow that had fallen by the wayside, its crossbar snapped.

The steading was as they had left it, its fifteen foot walls imposing and dark. A young man with a bow, standing on the roof of the steading's main hall, saw them and waved an all-clear.

One of the steaders, a gruff hunter named Gravos, turned to Nelan. "What do you think, cleric?"

"I would recommend that once we get all the steaders together, we send a pair of riders on the road to Highbluff. This could just be a random attack, but where the undead are concerned, any sighting is dangerous."

The steader nodded. "I agree. I will talk to..."

“Look!” one of the younger men yelled, pointing toward the forest. All five members of the party could see the pale forms that were emerging from the woods, coming toward them. There were only a few of them, but other movement was becoming visible deeper in the woods.

“To the stockade!” Gravos yelled. The horses were too heavily loaded down to ride, but they ran along with the men, moving quickly across the shoulder of the hill toward the waiting stockade. The guard had seen the skeletons as well, and as the party approached the heavy gate swung open for them. They made it just as the skeletons reached the rear of the stockade, and by the time that the gates were secured, there were almost two dozen of the undead creatures pressing against the walls. The skeletons had already started trying to climb the walls, but the thick logs had been planed smooth, and their probing bone fingers found little purchase.

The young man on the roof of the steading hall had been firing his bow at the skeletons, but while he hit his targets more often than not, most of the shots passed harmlessly through their bodies, doing little or no damage. The men that had just come back with the patrol climbed onto the roof to join him, adding their own fire.

“Bows aren’t working... bring up some heavy rocks!” Gravos shouted. The women and children of the steading were gathered in the courtyard below, or in the doorways of the squat buildings, looking up in fear, listening to the clatter of bones that drifted over the wall. Nelan had vanished into the small structure built against one corner of the stockade that served as the Father’s House at the steading, and he shortly returned clad in a weathered old breastplate, with a light mace clutched tightly in one hand, and a light crossbow in the other. A silver sigil of the Shining Father, the burning torch, hung from a chain around his neck, and several more mundane torches were thrust through his belt.

The steading gate shook slightly, but the bar was as thick as a man’s thigh, and the skeletons did not have enough strength to seriously impact it. Still, the noise sent a tremor of panic through the people in the crowded courtyard.

Gravos’s wife, a slightly plump matron named Kaela, turned to him. “Father save us, Nelan! What do we do?”

The priest did not want to add to their fears, but as soon as he’d spotted the skeletons coming from the wood, he’d felt a sense of dread settle over him. Partly as a sign to them, and partly to help him see as the afternoon sky began to darken, he summoned the power of a *light* spell, causing his divine focus to glow brightly with a pure white light. “Do not fear, child, His light will shine over us. Get as many torches and lamps as you can, and extra flasks of oil, and help the men set them up along the walls. Set them inside as well; bathe this entire steading in the light of day. Gather every arrow and stone that you can find. Take the two horses we brought in, as well as Haylan’s horse, and the pony, and saddle them all up. Keep them in the stable, for now. Dress all the

children warmly, and give them pouches of food and water, and gather them all at Gravos's house. All of you should carry both a knife, and a stout wooden club; break a chair if you must. Now, go, go, go!"

By his last statement a half-score women had gathered around him, and they all rushed off to obey his commands. The men and older boys were all up on the steading roofs now, although there were still eight men who had not returned from the forest. None of the skeletons had breached the walls, but they continued their attempts to climb, or to batter down the gate. They made no effort to cooperate or coordinate their efforts, and the defenders' attacks were beginning to make an impact. Gravos had set up a chain of men passing up flat stones hacked from building hearths, up the ladder to the roof of the main hall, over to the men at the edge of the stockade wall. The big man was one of those last, hurling the heavy stones down to smash the bodies of the skeletons. Already a half-dozen were down, and Gravos started to direct them toward the roof of one of the houses closer to the gate, where they could attack the next-largest concentration of attackers.

The sky above continued to darken, as the last remains of the day fled.

"That's it, men, we're getting those bastards!" Gravos shouted, as he hurled another heavy rock down. Thus far, none of the defenders of the steading had been injured. On the far side, a skeleton actually managed to clamber up high enough to grasp the top of the wall, but one of the young men shouted a warning, and several archers shot it before it could pull itself over, knocking it back to fall into the seething mass of undead below.

Engaged with the skeletons, none of the defenders spotted the dark shadows that drifted forward out of the forest. Their first warning was Gravos's yell; twenty sets of eyes spun to see the big man engulfed in what looked like a shifting cloud of pure blackness. Every man and woman that looked upon that sight felt a cold chill of doom fill them.

But then Nelan filled the courtyard with the light of the Shining Father, a brilliant radiance brighter even than his *light* spell erupting from his holy symbol. The shadows withdrew from that light, screeching faintly as they retreated back into the gathering gloom. Gravos staggered and nearly fell, before two of the men grabbed him and dragged him back to the edge of the roof. The big holder was pale, and could barely move, but he was alive.

Nelan cast another spell, and opened his mind to the power of his god. He spent several seconds in concentration, as the holders continued to fight off the attacking skeletons. Finally, he released his attention from his *detect undead* spell, his hand trembling as he released his focus.

He opened his eyes to see Kaela in front of him, looking up at her stricken husband in despair. Then she looked at him, hope warring with the darkness in her eyes, a question there.

He opened his mouth to offer assurance, but he found that he could not. "Get the children on the horses," he said to her. For a moment, she just stood there, clutching her club with white-fingered hands. Some of the other women nearby had heard him as well, and while some let out wails, others simply nodded and ran for Gravos's house, where the children had been gathered.

More shadows passed through the walls of the steading, attacking both the men above and the women in the courtyard below. Once again Nelan lifted his holy symbol, but before he could call upon its power, dark, insubstantial arms emerged from the ground at his feet, stabbing up into his legs. He felt the cold touch of death pierce him, and he nearly fell, staggering away from the insubstantial grasp. The creature rose up to follow him; a wraith, faded and terrible.

"The Father banishes you!" he tried to yell, but it only came out as a strangled cough.

As the screams of the holders echoed around him, he lifted his symbol up at the wraith. White light flared in the courtyard.

Then everything went black.

Chapter 121

THE SUMMONS

Talen Karedes's footsteps and the accompanying clatter of metal echoed loudly off the bare marble walls of the Ducal Palace as he made his way in a hurry toward his summons. Even clad in his heavy plate armor, he moved quickly, forcing the page on his right to hustle to keep up.

Even the guards at the double doors ahead didn't slow him down; they heard him coming even before he rounded the last bend in the corridor, and one held the door open for him, offering a clipped salute that he returned with a crisp nod.

There were others in the anteroom, men and women that Talen did not recognize. Their professions were obvious from their garb; armored knights, and officers from both the Ducal Guard and the First Legion. Priests of the Shining Father. Guild mages. Even a rail-thin monk from the Order of Tranquility, one of the rare monastic orders in Camar that followed the teachings of the ancient masters from Drusia across the sea. Only the monk met his gaze for more than a few heartbeats, the man nodding slightly as

Talen crossed the room to the far door. It stood slightly open, but there were no more guards or pages warding the entry.

No one emerged to greet him, but a voice drifted out from inside. "Ah, Talen, finally. Come inside."

The first of Camar's Dragon Knights obeyed. The conference room looked... larger than it had last time he'd been in here. Of course, that time it had been occupied by a raging melee, and by a fiend so large that its head had brushed the ceiling fifteen feet above when it had leapt to attack.

Some of the decorations had been changed, the blood- and fire-stained tapestries and carpets replaced, but the great marble table in the middle of the room was still there. The room's occupants were gathered around it. "Shut the door behind you," Tiros said, turning back to the map spread out over the edge of the table.

Talen secured the door and came over to join Tiros and the others. He nodded to the Patriarch, who returned the gesture with a piercing look that made Talen uneasy. The high priest stood at Tiros's right, standing protectively over a bundle that had been laid upon the end of the table, wrapped in heavy white cloth. Honoratius was not present, but there was a woman mage on the marshal's other side. She seemed barely past her teens, too young to be attending a meeting of this importance, but when her eyes brushed Talen's, he was surprised to see a stare that reminded him instantly of the old archmage. The other two men at the table wore the uniforms of Camarian general officers, but Talen did not recognize either of them by sight.

Sorcery, the knight thought to himself, moving close enough to the table to see the map, without crowding the others there. Black markers had been put on it, indicating places far to the south of the city. From their position, Talen suspected why he was here, and even though a certain notorious locale had not been specifically marked, he felt a cold chill of anticipation clench in his gut.

Tiros saw that he had recognized it, and nodded. "It's starting."

"What's the situation?"

The Patriarch turned to him and pointed at the black marks on the map. "In the last four days, undead have attacked isolated settlements at these locations," the high priest reported. "Approximately three hundred citizens have been killed, or are missing. The survivors are moving north, converging on Highbluff."

"What do we know about the enemy forces?" Talen asked.

The woman mage looked at him. Her voice was as youthful as her body, but again something in it reminded him of Honoratius. "The attacks appear to be random, uncoordinated, at first glance," she said. "But that is a false impression, deliberately

cultivated. The enemy force includes skeletons, zombies, ghouls, ghosts, shadows, and wraiths. Their leaders are protected from scrying magic, but we have seen human priests in their company.”

“Followers of Orcus,” Talen said.

The young woman nodded. “They are not wearing obvious identifiers, but that is our assumption as well. They appear to be taking captives where possible, which are borne south. We lose track of them in this region,” she said, pointing out a spot on the map with a long black wand.

Talen didn’t need to look. “Rappan Athuk. What is the total enemy strength?”

For the first time, the woman looked slightly uncertain. “They are masking their presence with magic, making it difficult to track them with precision. But our best estimate is that there are between four and six hundred corporeal undead in all, scattered across a broad front, sweeping up settlements as they come.”

“What about the shadows, and the wraiths?”

“We are not certain,” the Patriarch said. “And that is very dangerous. Those undead cannot abide the light of the sun, but the poor weather aids them, and they can take shelter underground during the day in any case. All of the reports of attacks from such beings have taken place at night.”

Talen remembered the wraiths that had drained the life from one of his men under the Well, and could not repress a shudder.

“We must respond to this attack with all the strength we can muster,” Tيروس said. “But this attack has come at the worst possible time. More than half our available forces are stuck in the north, at Dalemar. The First is out of position on the western frontier, even if they were at full strength and ready to move.”

“Two centuries will be ready to move on your order on six hours’ notice,” one of the generals said. Talen saw that his lower lip trembled slightly as he spoke, but said nothing.

“That notice has already been sent, General Darius,” Tيروس said. “But even if they can make their way down the Nalos most of the way, a far from certain prospect, it will take the better part of two weeks before they could possibly reach Highbluff.”

“What about Dar?” Talen asked.

“The Border Legion is already en route to Highbluff,” Tيروس responded. “They should be there in six days, at the outset.”

“By then, the matter may already be decided, for good or for ill,” the Patriarch said. “If the enemy falls back, they give us a chance to consolidate our forces, and strike a decisive blow. But if they continue moving forward, they have a good chance of overrunning those fleeing from the destroyed settlements, and from the other communities scattered between Highbluff and the enemy.”

Talen looked at the map. Even riding hard, changing horses along the way, it would take men riding from Camar at least four days to reach Highbluff. An army on foot would take longer, even force marched. And if the roads were crowded with refugees, desperate for escape... “What forces can we gather here?” Talen asked.

“We have the Guild, the church of the Father, and we have the Guard,” Tiros said. He looked up to the second of the general officers, a lean figure who barely filled out the new uniform, with skin the texture of old leather. “Commander?”

“The Guard stands ready to provide whatever is required,” the man said. As soon as he spoke, Talen recognized the man; that rasping, gravelly voice could only belong to Doran Pravos, the man that Tiros had tapped to serve as the new head of the old Ducal Guard. Pravos had injured his throat fighting on the shield wall at Ravenford, at the same battle where Tiros had won the Golden Starburst for Valor twenty-two years ago. During the Duke’s reign he’d been banished to one of the farthest outposts on the barbarian frontier to the north, but he’d already accomplished a great deal since his return, purging the Guard of those who had hied too closely to the philosophies and manners of the late Duke. Pravos had begun a new recruitment program to restore the strength of the city’s defense force, but that work had yet to come to full fruition, and likely would not for months, if not a year or two. “Three hundred can ride south on the hour, with gear and train to follow.”

“It would not be wise to send the entire available force,” the Patriarch noted. “There will be a panic in the city, as word spreads.”

“We must find a way to delay them,” Talen said. “To give those fleeing time to reach Highbluff, and for reinforcements to arrive to help prepare the defenses. He looked at the map, his eyes drawn to a point that had already been marked with a thin “X”. Alderford, the map legend indicating that the place was barely a village, situated on a natural crossing across the Silver River. Talen knew that the “river” was barely more than a wide stream, barely fifty yards across, certainly no obstacle to enemies that did not need to breathe. But it could hold up those fleeing, especially if the recent storms had swollen the normally quiet stream into a fast-moving torrent.

Tiros saw his gaze and nodded. “If we can hold the road there, we can give those fleeing a chance to get out.”

“How quickly, and how many?” Talen asked.

Tiros looked to the young mage, who sighed. “Teleportation magic is a great strain, marshal. But I have already scried the village, and I can move a small party there. Fifteen individuals in all.”

“Fifteen?” Pravos said, turning to Tiros. “With all due respect, sir, that’s a suicide mission.”

“I’m not sending anyone to die,” Tiros said. “This is a fighting rearguard, a delaying action. And it will be volunteers only—”

“I volunteer to go,” Talen interrupted. “And while Shay always makes me pay when I speak for her, I know she’ll kill me if I go without her, so that’s two.”

“You will need the light of the Shining Father to have any chance at all,” the Patriarch said. “I will ask my priests, and am certain that I can secure up to a half-dozen blessed by the Father to accompany you.”

“I know of good men who will serve,” Pravos said.

“As do I,” Talen said. “The order of the Dragon Knights may be new, but it stands ready to defend the people of Camar.”

“What of the Guild?” Tiros asked.

The woman-who-was-not met the marshal’s gaze squarely. “After Zosimos, the enthusiasm of my peers may not be great,” she said. “But I will ask.”

Tiros turned back to Talen. “When can you be ready?”

Talen glanced at the nearest window. “It’ll be dark in about two hours... we’d better be ready before then.”

Tiros nodded. Talen saluted, then started to leave, but paused as Tiros caught his eye, then looked past him to the Patriarch. “There is one other matter, before you go, ser Knight.”

The Patriarch picked up the wrapped burden from the table, and offered it to Talen. The Knight drew back the covering, revealing the hilt of a longsword, its steel polished and brilliant, the hilt wrapped in aged and faded leather. The scabbard was brand new, but Talen could tell that the weapon itself was far older.

“You go forth into darkness, knight, but with this sword, you will carry with you the light of the day.”

Talen drew the blade, the steel singing slightly as it hissed out of the scabbard. Talen could see the sigil of the burning torch etched into the flawless steel of the blade. The balance was perfect.

“A fine weapon,” Talen said to the priest. “I will endeavor to earn the honor you have bestowed upon me.”

“The sword’s name is *Beatus Incendia*, the priest said. “Speak it aloud, knight.”

Talen nodded, and held up the sword. “*Beatus Incendia!*” he said. The name meant *blessed fire* in the old tongue, and the words felt... right, as he said them.

The sword responded. As everyone in the room watched in amazement, the sword erupted into brilliant white flames, blazing up the length of the steel, filling the room with a pure, holy light.

“Go forth, my son, and bring light into the darkness,” the Patriarch said, laying a hand upon Talen’s forehead, blessing him. When Talen sheathed the blade, the flames died, and the room darkened, but something of that light shone in the knight’s eyes, and when he left the room, those same gathered men and women who had looked past him before stared, and wondered at what had changed.

Chapter 122

THE FIFTEEN

Night was descending swiftly upon the small village of Alderford. The tiny cottages of the village’s inhabitants stood empty, their owners having already fled in great haste across the adjacent river and north toward safer lands. Some of the homes had been looted by those who had come later, looking for food or valuables. A cart with a broken wheel stood turned on its side in the central commons, and a short distance away a dead animal lay in the long grass, surrounded by a cloud of flies.

On the crest of a low hill overlooking the village to the west, there was a shimmering in the air, and five individuals materialized out of nowhere. Talen stepped forward, Shay at his side, and looked out over the landscape. There were some people visible below; a party of about ten individuals was essaying the ford, and having great difficulty. Talen’s worries about the ford being swollen by the recent rains had been borne out. He’d passed this way several times before, and most times the river was a slow plane across the shallow ford, coming up to his knees. But the current was much faster, now, and the people trying to cross were caught in water up to their chests. They were trying to push a wagon piled high with possessions, pulled by two draft horses. The wagon

had foundered, and the men and women around it were trying to get a rope set up to the far side the ford, to help pull it out.

Talen turned back to his group. Besides Shay, Allera was there, and Medelia, one of his young knights-in-training. And there was the woman wizard, who had *teleported* them here, and who was already preparing to return to Camar for the second group.

“Wait... where’s Galen?”

“He was on my right,” Medelia said. The woman wore a suit of blacksteel chainmail, with a longsword on her right side and a heavy steel shield painted with a gold dragon on her left.

“Wizard?” Talen asked.

“I brought five,” she said.

Talen looked at his companions, finally settling on Allera, who shook her head. “Talen, I’m sorry... I told him to remain behind.” The air around the healer’s left shoulder shimmered, and the faerie dragon Snaggletooth became visible, perched there. It let out a string of musical syllables, speaking in its own language—or Sylvan, maybe; Talen understood neither.

“Damn it, dragon, this is not some prank... this is a serious mission!”

The dragon flashed its teeth and let out a little roar of defiance.

“Talen, those people need help,” Shay said.

“Do you have any instructions, knight?” the wizard asked.

Talen bit off a curse. “Yes, have Galen come with the second group; bump one of the Guard armsmen. Shay, you and Medelia see what you can do to help the steaders. If necessary, they lose the wagon; it’s important that they keep moving.”

“Right,” the scout said, jogging down the hill with the other woman following behind.

Talen turned back to the wizard, but she had already vanished.

“I’m sorry, Talen,” Allera said.

“It’s not your fault,” Talen said. He looked at the dragon, which had taken flight, and which hovered a few paces above them. “Perhaps it can be of use... Can you ask it to scout out the approaches to the south?”

The dragon said something—clearly it had no difficulty understanding the knight—and flew off into the gathering twilight. To the south, the terrain grew more rugged, with more hills to the southwest, and a wedge of trees to the southeast that eventually grew into a small forest. Between them wound the road south, clear for the moment.

It was not long before the wizard reappeared with the next group of five. Three of them were members of Pravos's Guard, like him veterans from the frontier, with experience both in combat and leadership. They were all of old Camarian stock, with fair skin, strong chins, and sandy blond hair; they might have been brothers, at first glance, although they were not in fact related. Their names were Sextus, Septimus, and Octavius. They were clad in simple but functional armor, chainmail with greaves covering the arms and legs for added protection. They carried swords and flanged maces, along with heavy winch-operated crossbows, and quickly took their bearings as they looked around their new surroundings.

Galen was with them this time, clad like Medelia, but with a battleaxe in place of a sword. The young knight claimed that the weapon had been in his family for eleven generations, but its edge was still razor-sharp, bolstered by ancient magic.

The last member of this group was a small man with ugly, uneven features, including a pudgy nose and a wreckage of crooked and protruding teeth. He'd tried to grow a moustache and beard, but apparently could not be bothered to trim it properly, such that it seemed to go in every direction at once. That casual approach to his appearance seemed to extend to his hygiene as well. Attius reminded Talen of nothing more than a weasel, but he was a diviner, and since his magical talents might be essential to the success of his mission, the knight deferred to the man more than he might have otherwise.

"Galen, you and the others head down to the village, and select an appropriate building for use as a headquarters."

"Commander, I can use my magic to scan the area, but I require peace and quiet," Attius said.

Talen repressed an urge to rub his temples. Even the man's voice was nasally, and marked by a strong lisp to boot. But he only said, "Galen, ensure that the mage is set up, and that he has everything he needs." The young knight nodded and saluted, and started down the hill with the others in tow.

Allera looked down at the village. "I should see if any of those steaders are injured."

Talen nodded, and Allera departed, leaving him alone on the hilltop. He did not have to wait long for the last group, which materialized around the wizard. They quickly broke contact and spread out.

Four were clerics of the Shining Father, clad in armor rather than robes, armed with staves and crossbows and heavy maces. One stood out; Falfighar was one of the Little People, a gnome from the semi-autonomous province of Drasalia. The others were Braethan, a muscled Eremite bigger even than the armsmen, Serah, a young woman with short-cropped auburn hair, and Meaghan, a gray-haired woman still hale despite being well past fifty.

And the last, whom the clerics had moved away from as soon as they'd arrived, and who now stood alone, the evening breeze tugging at his cloak.

Talen was anything but happy about him being here. He'd shown up literally at the last minute, as the company had gathered in small private garden of the palace. As usual, Talen had no idea how he'd found out about the mission; he was just *there*.

He'd nearly refused to allow him to accompany them. But Talen was in command, and could not afford to ignore realities. And the truth of it was, Licinius Varo was stronger than any of the priests of the Father accompanying them, far stronger. And he had a particular facility in dealing with the undead, and the servants of Orcus.

Varo met his scrutiny with the same equanimity that had always driven Talen crazy. But now he turned from him, and regarded the other clerics.

"We are setting up a headquarters in the village below, and have people helping at the ford as well. Do what you need to do to get ready. We may be moving out at any moment."

The clerics headed down the hill. Talen turned to the wizard, who'd remained, watching him.

"Can you not stay for a while longer?" he asked her. "We could use your help."

She shook her head. "Unfortunately, I have already presumed upon the owner of this body too long." She started to turn away, but paused. "This will be a long night for you, knight of Camar." Then she summoned her magic, and *teleported* away before he could respond.

Talen was left alone on the hilltop with Varo. The cleric regarded him silently. "Well, priest?" he asked.

"I think that the archmage's words were true. It will be interesting, to see how you fare, in Dar's absence," the cleric said.

Talen felt a sudden surge of irrational anger. But before he could reply, Varo walked past him, starting down the hill, toward the bustle of activity that had already begun as the fifteen from Camar made their preparations to face the unliving army that was coming their way.

Chapter 123

THE LONGEST NIGHT

Night descended upon the crossing at Alderford.

The armsmen set out torches and lamps around the perimeter of the village, pushing back the night in a bubble of flickering illumination. Shay and Medelia helped the fleeing steads extract their wagon from the ford, and they quickly fled down the road. Others came to the crossing; a pair of riders, their horses frothing from overexertion. Talen convinced them to walk their beasts for a time, but could get no useful intelligence from them, save that the lands south of the river were “swarming” with undead. A family of steads, four adults and two children, arrived an hour later on foot, bearing torches. They were exhausted, and barely coherent in response to Talen’s questions. Talen was reluctant to let them remain at Alderford, but they clearly could not go any further, so he let them sleep in one of the abandoned homes of the village.

The hours passed. Snaggletooth continued scouting out the area from above, while *invisible*, while Attius waited for the return of his *prying eyes*. The diviner, guarded by the armsmen and two of the priests, also placed a pair of *alarm* spells in the nearby woods. The night continued, deathly quiet. Even the evening breeze died, and wisps of fog began to form out over the stream, as the winter chill deepened with the night.

Talen posted watches and ordered the spellcasters to start getting sleep in shifts. All but three of Attius’s eyes returned, all with negative reports. Talen was worried at first about the missing ones, but the diviner told him that it was common for the scouting eyes to run into objects in the dark, and accidentally destroy themselves. That did not ease the knight’s worries, but there was nothing to be done for it in any case.

It was about an hour shy of midnight as Talen walked the perimeter of the village, careful not to stray beyond the radius of the torches that the armsmen had thrust into the ground. They had made extra torches out of pine boughs taken from the adjacent wood, combined with a bucket of pitch they’d found in one of the abandoned houses. The improvised brands cracked as they burned, but cast an acceptable light. There were dozens of them around the perimeter. The result was some night-blindness, but he was gladly willing to pay that price if it meant being able to see a shadow or other incorporeal undead trying to creep up at them.

Talen frowned at the thought. He had been used to thinking of undead as mindless, if dangerous, creatures, to be hacked into pieces before they could do any harm. But these foes were clearly guided by some malevolent intelligence. What they were facing was not a dumb rabble, but an army. But who or what was commanding it?

He found Shay waiting for him, in the lee of what had once been a farrier's shop, little more than a lean-to built to cover an old anvil and firepit.

"You should get some rest," Talen told her.

"So should you," she shot back at once.

"Yeah, but I'm the commander," he said, then let out a whoof of expelled air as she elbowed him hard in the side. It was more exaggerated than real, as she couldn't really hurt him through his heavy armor. "Insubordination," he said, cracking a grin that quickly faded.

She came in close to him, and he put his arms around her. "Damn all this metal," she said, rapping on his breastplate with her knuckles.

"Shay, when all this is over..."

"Don't," she said, leaning into him. "Just... don't, Talen. Please."

He nodded, and held onto her in silence.

They were interrupted by the sound of someone running nearby. The pair broke apart and came around the hut to see Allera rushing into the village commons. As soon as she saw them, she ran straight toward them.

"What is it?" Talen asked.

"Snaggletooth," she said, pausing to suck in a deep breath. "He says that there's a large party of refugees coming down the road. Sixty or more."

Talen and Shay shared a quick look; they could tell that there was more coming. Allera did not disappoint them, as soon as she'd taken another breath.

"There's an army of undead right on their heels."

* * * * *

By the time that the leading elements of the column of refugees became visible from Alderford, Talen had everyone up and ready for battle. He'd had his people rig up crude barricades of old furniture and lumber between the cottages that faced onto the commons, which could be used to fall back on into a defensive position if necessary. At the moment, however, his forces were arrayed along the road at the extent of the line of torches, ready to assist the fleeing refugees.

Shay had suggested running down the road to meet the refugee column, letting them know that succor was ahead, and helping them forward. But Talen had vetoed the suggestion, insisting that they were too few in number to risk separation. "If the dragon is correct in his estimation, they will be here in a few minutes in any case," he'd told her.

The refugees were moving slowly, but they put on a burst of added speed when they saw the lights coming from the village, and a few cries of relief could be heard as they approached. Snaggletooth's estimate had been conservative, if anything; Talen counted at least sixty people just by sight, and there were likely more in the backs of the four wagons he saw. Most of the refugees walked, but several on horses formed a screen around the company, and they seemed to be fairly well-organized, if haggard and afraid. Looking for a leader, Talen finally caught sight of a man in mud-spattered armor walking at the rear of the column, urging the others on.

"Provide what aid you can," Talen said to Shay and Allera. "Have the clerics assist in treating injuries, but they need to get moving across the ford, and quickly, if what the dragon said was accurate." Talen heard a trill of protest from the empty air above Allera's head. "Snaggletooth, you could help us greatly if you could get an updated estimate of how far back the enemy is."

The invisible dragon let out a small chirp that Talen guessed might have been an assent. Leaving Shay and Allera to pass on his orders, he headed over to the armored man as he brought the last of charges into the clearing at the edge of the ford.

"Thank the Father you're here," he said, extending his hand to Talen as the knight came over. Close up, Talen could see that the man wore a holy symbol of the Shining Father around his neck. He could also see the exhaustion in the man's face; he looked as though he hadn't slept for days. "My name is Nelan, until a few days ago, the parish priest of some of the steadings along the Forest of Hope."

"Knight Commander Talen Karedes," Talen said. "Are there any others on the road behind you?"

"Just the undead. We had a decent lead at one point, but they keep coming, and they don't get tired. I... I don't know how far back."

"Numbers?"

"I'm not sure. I personally saw several dozen skeletons, and some insubstantial undead: shadows, and wraiths. Those are the most dangerous, commander; they are almost invisible in the darkness, and they strike without warning."

"We know. We will do our best to keep them off you."

He looked around. "You don't seem to have much in the way of forces here, commander..."

“We’re the rear-guard, Nelan. Our priests will help as much as they can, but you’ll need to get your people across the river, and keep going on the road north. I know you are all tired, but...” He trailed off, unable to finish the thought.

The cleric nodded. “I understand. Thank you, commander... and good luck to you.”

“We’ll be right behind you,” Talen promised.

Talen’s men and women had gone through the column, checking animals and people. The armymen shared out cups of fresh coffee that they had brewed in buckets, while the clerics provided healing magic to those who needed it. Horses were fed and watered, quickly, while crying children were reassured, given food and drink, and wrapped freshly in blankets before being put back on the wagons. The family that had arrived earlier came out and joined the column, which made space on one of the wagons for the smaller of the two children.

To Talen, it seemed to take an eternity for the column to get ready, but in reality it was barely a half-hour before the tired drivers started the draft horses forward again. Medelia and Shay stood ready again to help the refugees navigate the difficult ford again, but the ropes that the earlier party had used had been left in place, making it easier to find the best route across. One of the wagons got caught in a rut, and there was a moment of fear as a wheel nearly fouled, but a dozen men were there in a flash, working together to free it before the weight of the wagon could cause permanent damage.

Allera’s voice drew his attention back around. “They’re coming!” she said. “Just a few minutes out, on the road!”

“Everyone, take up positions,” Talen said, forcing his voice to remain even. The armymen had earlier moved the broken cart out from the commons along the side of the road where it passed the edge of the village, fashioning an impromptu barricade.

“How far off can you hit them with a *fireball*?” he asked Attius.

“I tolth you, commander, I am a diviner, not an evoker. I cannot utilize thuch magikth. But reth athured, I am not defenthleth, and am well capable of protecting mythelf. I am a mather of the diverth arth of abjurathon, conjurathon, divinathon, enthantment, illuthon, nethromanthy, tranthmutathon, ...”

“Fine, fine, take up position in that house, there,” Talen said, when the wizard paused for breath. “The window should give you a complete coverage of the approaches along the road.”

The wizard nodded brusquely, and headed off in that direction.

“I am sure that Shay would say that you could have handled that just a tad more diplomatically,” Allera said quietly.

“We don’t have time for diplomacy,” he said. “I should have asked him earlier more about what he could do.” For a moment, he felt a twinge of self-doubt; it was unlikely that Tiros would have made such an oversight. Looking back, he saw that the last of the wagons was just now clearing the river. Shay and Medelia were already returning, holding up their weapons to keep them dry as the river doused them up to their chests.

One of the armsmen said, “Commander. On the road.”

Talen stared out into the darkness. The skies were still overcast, and the light that filtered down through them barely weakened the hold of the night. The road was just a line of darkness, flanked on one side by the shadowy edge of the adjacent forest, and on the other by the mounds of the nearby hills.

He heard it, first; the unnatural clatter of bones. Soft, distant, but present; a *lot* of bones. Then, as he focused on that noise, he saw the first hints of movement, vague outlines drawing slowly but steadily closer. Pale forms, too thin and aberrant in shape to be alive.

The enemy had arrived.

Chapter 124

SHADOWS OF THE NIGHT

“Wait until you have clear shots,” Talen said, loud enough for all his forces to hear. “Hold your assigned positions, keep an eye out for flankers, and watch for other surprises. If you get into trouble, fall back on the village commons. Remember to use blunt weapons against the skeletons.”

“And don’t forget to wipe your shoes when you come into the house,” Shay said, just loud enough for him to hear, as she trotted up silently beside him at the barricade. She put a hand on his arm. “Everyone knows what to do, Talen.”

Talen nodded. “Light up the road,” he ordered. A pair of clerics lifted their crossbows, touching the ends of the quarrels, which began to shine brightly with magical *light*. The shots landed several hundred feet down the road, shedding bright circles of light. The enemy had not yet come that far, but Talen could see that they would, very shortly. He’d initially intended to order another volley further on, but it wasn’t necessary.

The leading ranks of the enemy advance came into the edge of the further globe of *light*. They were mostly man-sized, but in their midst strode a half-score skeletal giants, most likely ogres or trolls. They came, and they kept on coming; Talen stopped counting at eighty. Many had weapons, but Talen knew that even those that did not could use their bony claws to kill.

The skeletons were coming forward at a slow but steady pace. Talen wondered at that; with soldiers that did not fatigue, why not come on at full speed? He saw that they kept a regular formation, spread out along the road at roughly even intervals, probably to minimize the damage that a *fireball* or other destructive magic could wreak upon them.

Not that he had such magic. Once again he glanced at the cottage where Attius's ugly face could just be seen behind the curtains. If he'd had Zosimos here, or even the elf...

But there was no time for what ifs, as his defenders began launching attacks at the oncoming horde. The armymen launched heavy quarrels from their engines, the missiles shooting over a hundred yards without difficulty, and still containing enough deadly force to shatter bones. They were not as effective as they would have been against mortal foes, certainly, but two of the three first shots did at least some damage.

The clerics added to the barrage, but their lighter weapons were much less effective. Talen knew that their role would be greater at close range, when they could bring their divine powers to bear.

A green orb shot from Attius's position, firing in a straight line down the road, hitting one of the ogre skeletons in the chest. The *acid arrow* began to eat away at the bones, but the undead monster paid it no heed whatsoever, and did not even interrupt its stride as it continued to close the range.

The skeletons continued on past the two spheres of *light*, slipping temporarily into shadow again as they entered the gap between the crossbow bolts and outer line of torches set along the road. New skeletons finally stopped coming, and Talen guessed that there were over a hundred and fifty in all in the enemy formation.

They were less than two hundred feet away when the road seemed to buck and quake under the leading elements of the skeleton formation. Talen didn't know what was happening at first, but whatever it was, it was clearly not helping the skeletons. Dozens of the creatures were coming apart in loud crashes of snapping bone. It was as if the road had suddenly come alive.

"Black tentacles... nice," he heard Varo say from somewhere behind him.

The skeletons kept on coming, either pushing straight on through the stretch of living road, or moving around it. The skeletons seemed to be possessed of nothing resembling a survival instinct, and no appreciation for tactics at all. But they could take

a beating, especially the big ones, and there were so many that they could afford to take losses and keep coming.

The tentacles would have most likely continued to decimate the rear ranks of skeletons as they pressed forward, but they'd only been going for about ten seconds before they shimmered and disappeared.

"They have a caster," Varo said.

The skeletons continued to advance, and were now approaching the edge of the inner ring of light.

"Here they come," Talen said, drawing *Beatus Incendia*, but keeping the sword close low against his leg. His companions had kept up their fire, and a few skeletons had gone down with shattered skulls or smashed legs, but they were just a drop in the bucket that was pouring down toward them. Attius kept up a steady barrage of *acid arrows* from his wand, and the ogre skeleton he'd hit earlier collapsed as his caustic blasts finally ate through its spine. Two of the clerics fired blasts of *searing light* at others of the larger undead, and another ogre skeleton fell to pieces, blasted into non-existence by the holy magic.

"Foolish," Varo said. "Do not waste your magic on these enemies; they are just a distraction."

Several of the clerics looked at Varo with open hostility. Talen glanced back to him. "What do you mean?" But the priest of Dagos was already casting another spell.

"It's a probe," Shay said, launching another arrow at the skeletons over the barricade. "A frontal assault, to test our defenses, make us expend our resources."

Just at that moment, Attius's *alarms* sounded from the nearby forest. Talen shouted over to Galen, who was holding the left flank, "What do we got?"

"Movement in the woods... can't see any more, commander... no, wait... more skeletons, coming through the trees!"

Talen nodded to himself; the woods blocked the newcomers from their defensive fire, but they would have to come into the open to attack, and he'd assumed that it would come to melee in any case, with neither side really able to seriously hurt the other at range.

But he was proven wrong a moment later. The skeletons coming through the wood advanced to the edge of the line of trees, their white forms half-hidden in the undergrowth. There they paused, and lifted weapons. Talen recognized the slight whistling noise in the air a moment before the arrows started landing among them.

“Take cover!” he urged, but his forces were already well protected by armor and the barricades they’d erected, and nobody took any hits in that first barrage. Talen felt an arrow glance off his shoulder plate, but he ignored it as he tried to spot out the leaders behind the lines of the skeletal army. A lucky hit could cause a lot of trouble, but at the moment, there wasn’t anything he could do about the archers, unless they were willing to give up their defensive position.

“We wait for them to come to us!” he said. He started to turn to Varo, to see if the cleric could do anything about the half-concealed archers, but as he watched the edge of the forest seemed to come alive around the second body of skeletons. The brush, the lower branches of the trees, everything that was growing began twisting around the skeletons, tangling around their limbs and interfering with their ability to shoot their bows.

“Who did that?” Talen asked.

“It was Snaggletooth,” Allera reported. “He commands a considerable magic of his own.”

“Well, remind me to thank him, later,” Talen said. The main body of skeletons was still coming, moving at the same measured pace. Their formation had been disrupted somewhat by the *black tentacles*, but their advance was still broad, a front almost thirty feet across, filling the space between the woods and the slant of the nearest hills. The skeletal archers kept up their fire from the left flank, but most of them were heavily *entangled*, and their fire continued to be mostly ineffective.

Closer came the enemy line. A hundred feet... ninety... eighty... seventy...

“Prepare to see something that you will not soon forget,” Varo said.

As one, the four clerics of the Father lifted their holy symbols, and called upon the power of their god. A brilliant white radiance shone from those silver torches, driving back the night. As that light shone upon the leading rank of skeletons, they just came apart, the moldering bones crumbling into dust. Within two beatings of a heart, fifty skeletons had just ceased to be.

“By the gods,” Talen breathed, impressed.

The next ranks of skeletons continued forward, including the seven ogre and troll skeletons that were still intact. Those loomed over the skeletons of the smaller humanoids, clutching clubs or huge spears in their bony fists. As Talen watched, a pair of huge fiendish centipedes materialized on their right flank, close to the greatest concentration of the larger skeletons. Varo’s summoned allies immediately laid into the enemy flank, drawing a number of skeletons into engaging them. Most, however, kept approaching the barricade.

The clerics fired off another burst of positive energy. Once again skeletons crumbled into dust, but fewer this time than before, maybe two dozen. Talen thought he could see flickers of black energy around some of the skeletons, as the holy light from the priests intersected with some competing power. One of the ogre skeletons faltered and came to a stop, lifting up an arm as if to shield itself from the light. But while three of the big ones battled the centipedes, the other three kept coming, surging forward behind a row of their smaller cousins.

“Someone is bolstering them!” Allera said.

“There!” Shay hissed, pointing at a point in the skeletons’ line, where Talen could just make out a dark shadow behind them, back just at the edge of the torchlight.

“Priests of Orcus,” Talen said. The larger skeletons would be close enough to engage in seconds, but there were less than twenty of the man-sized ones left in the initial rush. “Well, if our clerics can just keep this up, it will be a moot point...”

He was interrupted by a terrible scream behind him.

As he turned, he saw something that stabbed an icy knife of fear through his body. Shadows... everyone, rising up out of the ground, surrounding each of the four priests of the Father. Their black fingers passed through the clerics’ armor as though it was not even there, draining their strength directly from their bodies. As he watched in horror, the little gnome Falfighar stiffened, his skin becoming as pale as fresh parchment as he fell under the eager grasp of four shadows. A few feet away, Meaghan, just a few moments ago as vital as any person Talen had ever known, likewise collapsed. Shadows were swarming around Braethan and Serah as well, draining their life energy with hungry touches.

Talen yelled and leapt up, *Beatus Incendia* coming alive in his hand of its own volition. He started to the aid of the clerics, but he’d barely managed three steps before a shadow emerged from the ground directly ahead of him. He hastily reversed and threw himself back, narrowly avoiding a swipe from the creature’s deadly claws.

But there were more of them, all around him. He felt cold touches pierce his armor, and with them his strength drained from his body. Suddenly his armor felt like a mountain upon his back, and *Beatus Incendia* sank low, until its point touched the ground.

Despair filled the knight’s heart, but even as he tried to rally what was left of his strength for a last desperate effort, another form rose up out of the ground, directly at his feet. Talen tried to thrust his holy weapon through it, but he was too weak to even lift the sword, unable to do anything as the wraith eagerly seized him, driving its insubstantial arms into his body.

Talen screamed, as his very life poured out of him, into the eager embrace of the undead monster. He could hear the cries of the clerics as they died, and behind him, the

crash of weapons sounded loud at the barricade, as the remnants of the skeleton force hit hard what was left of their defenses.

Chapter 125

A SLENDER THREAD

The shadows surrounding Talen pressed their attack aggressively, unwilling to yield their prize to the wraith. At this point, it seemed like a race between them to consume him, for Talen could do nothing to stop them.

Suddenly a wave of power exploded around the knight. Unlike the blazing radiance of the priests of the Father, this burst was more like a storm of insubstantial violet-black shrapnel. The power of the spell, aptly named *undeath to death*, passed harmlessly through Talen's body, but those vaporous shards tore into the shadows with devastating force. All six of those around Talen were blasted into non-being in the blink of an eye.

The wraith resisted the spell, and if anything it dug deeper into Talen, refusing to give up its victim. Talen's face was twisted into a rictus of agony, but there was nothing he could do to stop it; his physical strength was utterly gone, and only the involuntary clenching of his muscles kept him standing at all.

Then Allera collided into him, knocking him down, tearing him free from the wraith's enfolding grasp. The creature let out a cold hiss, and turned to finish its feast, but before it could touch the knight once again, Allera infused him with the power of a *sanctuary* spell, driving it back. Frustrated, the wraith turned on Allera, slicing its insubstantial claws deep into her chest, drawing life from her body.

The priest Braethan had been a blacksmith before he had been called to the service of the Father, and his thick arms still bore much of the strength with which he'd wielded the forge hammer. The shadows had drained him deeply, but he still managed to lift his divine focus, filling himself with divine energies that he released in a *greater turning*. All three of the shadows facing him dissolved before that flash of white light, but the reprieve proved temporary, as the four shadows that had killed Meaghan descended upon him in a violent fury. They enveloped the brave cleric, obscuring him from the light as they bore him down to the ground. Within a few seconds, his struggles had ceased, leaving his pale face frozen into a mask of horror.

A scant few paces away, Serah likewise fought for her life. Her *protection from evil* spell, cast at the beginning of the battle, had helped her weather the initial surprise attack, but one of the three shadows attacking her had gotten through her defenses, draining a portion of her strength. She did not have the power of the Sun domain to call

upon as Braethan had, but still she lifted her sigil, and called upon the light of the Father to drive these foes back.

Her holy symbol flared with light, but the divine power faltered against the shadows of the dark. As the radiance from her focus flickered and died, the shadows surged into her, driving her back into the wall of the nearby cottage, screaming.

Varo had obscured himself with a *hide from undead* spell at the start of the battle, but that protection faded as soon as he'd hit Talen's attackers with his *undeath to death*. The four shadows that had just killed Falfighar rounded on him with a vengeance, surging forward to deliver touch attacks. Varo made no effort to evade them, but as their insubstantial claws pierced his body, the shadows recoiled.

"Dagos protects me, dark wretches," he said, as his *death ward* foiled their assault. He presented his own divine focus, the same golden idol he'd crafted in Rappan Athuk. "He commands you to obedience."

The shadows tried to retreat, but three of them were overcome by the cleric's power. Two hovered before him in thrall, while the last drew back, rebuked. The last vanished back into the ground, but whether it was fleeing in earnest or just repositioning for another attack was uncertain.

A scream came from the house where Attius had taken shelter earlier, but none of them could spare any attention for the Guild mage at this point.

Just a few yards away from the desperate battle with the shadows, the Guard armsmen and Talen's pair of young knights were engaged in their own fierce struggle with the remaining skeletons. The five had formed a rough line at the barricade, the armsmen on the left of the cart, the knights on the right. Their position allowed them to protect their flanks, while using the cottages on either side to anchor their position. A canny opponent would have sent part of their force around to come at the foe from behind, but the skeletons attacked without any concern for tactics or subtlety, relying upon sheer numbers to overcome the defenders.

The living warriors fought with heavy maces, smashing into the bodies of the skeletons, shattering one of them into splinters with almost every blow. All save Galen; he used his magical battleaxe, relying upon its power and his own skill with the weapon to overcome the skeleton's natural resistance to cutting and piercing attacks. It seemed to work; in the first rush he destroyed two of the man-sized skeletons, easily deflecting several other counters with his heavy shield. On his right, Medelia held her ground against three others, parrying several attacks from spears and clubs, and tearing free of a skeleton's grasping claws before she crushed its skull with a solid blow from her mace.

The line buckled as the first three giant skeletons slammed into the barricade, but it held. Septimus took a titanic blow from a spear that snapped as it drove through the

plate covering his shoulder, but his comrades came together to protect him, lunging forward to smash the ogre skeleton's legs with heavy blows. As the undead monster fell to the ground, the armsmen had to swiftly turn to face another of the larger undead. Its fire-blackened bones suggested that this one had been a troll, in life. It had no weapons, but its claws were deadly enough, and its jaws were still full of jagged, protruding teeth. Within moments, both men were hard-pressed. Galen and Medelia could not immediately move to their aid, as an ogre skeleton engaged them from the right, swinging a long wooden club almost as tall as the knights. Against the bigger foes, the barricade was little more than a footstop, providing little in the way of cover for the defenders, especially given the larger monsters' extended reach.

The two young knights responded as they'd been trained, falling back a step to lure the enemy forward, then rushing in to flank it and strike as it navigated the barrier. Galen deflected the first powerful swing of its club with his raised shield. Ignoring the weaker blows from the man-sized undead that continued to harry them over the barricade, they came in together under the skeletal ogre's reach. Medelia smashed its arm as it tried to bring the club around for another swing, causing it to drop the weapon. Galen drove his axe down through its chest, shearing away the left side of its ribcage, and digging a deep gouge in its spine with an effective power attack.

The knights, as yet not seriously injured, had the initiative, but that changed a moment later as Galen suddenly stiffened, paralyzed by an unseen attacker. Medelia sensed that something was wrong, but as she turned the ogre hit her across the brow with its other hand, driving her to her knees, stunned. Three man-sized skeletons leapt over the barricade and fell upon Galen, hacking and clawing at their suddenly helpless opponent.

Shay had rushed to Talen's aid as soon as he'd been surrounded, but her elven-crafted sword, for all its magic, passed harmlessly through the incorporeal creatures. As Allera broke him away from the wraith's touch, Shay reached down and picked up *Beatus Incendia* from where it had fallen inert to the ground. The sword flared to life as she grasped it, and she felt an odd sensation fill her as its holy flames engulfed the blade, almost as if part of that fire was pouring *into her*, not harming her, but nevertheless wreaking a subtle change with its touch. There was no time to ponder this effect; she quickly mastered herself, and slashed the sword through the wraith's back. The magic of the sword bit on something hard, and the creature screamed as the sword's power tore into its substance. The wraith spun on her immediately, but before it could attack, Allera lifted her hands, and unleashed a *mass cure light wounds* though the area. She focused the healing magic not on her companions, whose strength drain could not be treated by that spell, but on the undead, and the corrupt wells of negative energy that powered them.

The weakened wraith shrieked and dissolved, and the shadows that were swarming about the clerics likewise were damaged by the wave of positive energy. But the power of the spell was limited, and none of the shadows was fully destroyed by the healer's efforts.

It did, however, draw their attention, and as Braethan fell, dead, the four that had killed him turned and flew directly toward the healer.

Shay saw them coming, she yelled a warning as she lifted *Beatus Incendia* into a defensive stance, stepping in front of the healer and Talen. Allera drew out the small pouch of diamond dust she carried for her *restoration* spell, but that casting took time, and she knew that her *sanctuary* spell was not infallible against a determined opponent. If even one shadow were to touch Talen, in his weakened state...

A momentary indecision gripped her, but then Talen, touched her arm weakly, and pointed toward the nearest cottage.

She looked up to see that their situation had just gotten worse. There had been nothing but silence from the adjacent cottage since Attius's single scream, a few moments ago. But as Allera watched, a pair of wraiths emerged from the place, ignoring the half-open door to drift straight through the whitewashed wall. They were followed, a moment later, by a third wraith. This last one had a more defined form, its wispy features still clearly recognizable, as the twin red points of its eyes fixed upon her.

Attius.

The undead creatures converged upon her.

Chapter 126

THE BLOOD OF THE LIVING

With each passing second, the situation was growing increasingly dire for the defenders at Aldenford. Huge numbers of undead had been destroyed already, but the undead could afford to trade many for every one of the foe they killed. Four of the fifteen from Camar were already dead, and several others tottered on the precipice of oblivion.

Varo walked forward, the two shadows that he had made captive to his will trailing behind him. He presented his sigil again, sending out another pulse of negative energy through the undead that were mobbing Serah. The three shadows reluctantly drew back from their victim, who lay there in the lee of the cottage where she'd fallen, her eyes glassy, unable to move, but still barely clinging to life. Varo ignored her, instead focusing on the two shadows he now controlled. He gave them a mental command, and the undead rose into the air, where they were swallowed up by the night in just a few seconds.

Shay heard Allera's gasp, and saw the wraiths coming out of the cottage from the corner of her eye. But she had to deal with the oncoming shadows, and had to trust that Allera could take care of herself, at least for a few seconds.

The shadows flew straight toward her. She held her position until the last possible instant, then pivoted into a perfect upward slash that clove through the first shadow. *Beatus Incendia* flared, and the shadow dissolved into nothing. The second shadow lunged at her, but she snapped her upper body back, and its claws passed through empty air. She thrust the sword up through it, but this time the holy weapon failed to penetrate its incorporeal substance. She felt a sudden chill in her side as the third shadow brushed her skin, and she was forced to dodge back, narrowly avoiding the last. She'd gotten lucky in that first exchange, but she knew that she could not evade them forever, especially if her counterattacks were ineffective half of the time.

Meanwhile, she knew that Allera was fighting for her life behind her. But as the three remaining shadows formed up and came at her again, she couldn't even spare a glance back, and could only hope that Talen and the healer were still alive.

Allera abandoned her initial plan to *restore* Talen, offering a silent prayer that her *sanctuary* would continue to hold. She leapt up to confront the wraiths, her fists balling, determination flaring in her eyes, that these dark things would get to her charge only over her dead body.

The wraiths came forward, eager to comply with that condition.

The healer lunged forward as the first wraith came within reach. Blue energies flared from her fist as she thrust it into the wraith's body. She cried out as the icy chill of its touch spread into her, but the wraith in turn suffered greatly from her *cure critical wounds* spell. Disrupted, it reached out to touch her, to steal back some of what it had lost.

A shimmer in the air was the only warning it got, before another surge of healing energy tore through it. Snaggletooth, still invisible, veered off, as the wraith came apart and dissolved into nothing.

The other two pressed the attack. Allera was hit by both, and only by summoning every last vestige of her strength did she resist having her life energy drained fully out of her body. But she still felt weakened, and knew that another assault would likely finish her.

The armsmen and knights were having just as much trouble on their side of the battle. Fighting furiously, the three veterans of the Guard had held the barricade, inflicting serious damage on the troll skeleton. But all three now bore serious wounds, and at least a dozen man-sized skeletons were pushing at the barricade, tearing at them with claws and weapons and forcing them to break off their attack to defend the line. The troll skeleton used its long reach to swipe over the smaller ones, tearing at the armsmen with its claws. It was obvious that they could not hold out for long.

On the other end of the barricade, Medelia could not get to them, standing alone against the damaged ogre skeleton and another half-dozen man-sized undead. She focused on the skeletons attacking Galen, smashing them off him with blows from her mace. The helpless knight was seriously injured, his eyes wide with fear and pain, but as he stared at Medelia as her mace wove a deadly arc before her, it was clear that he was silently urging her to retreat.

But Medelia held her ground, even as the hulking ogre skeleton loomed up over her. The knight brought her shield up, taking a blow from its fist that staggered her even through the heavy steel. She let out a guttural cry as she drove forward, smashing the shield like a club into its body. The ogre skeleton, already seriously damaged, began to come apart as it fell back over the barricade, crushing one of its smaller companions. But yet more skeletons were clambering over the low barrier.

The young knight lifted her mace to face them, but before she could engage the foe, a stream of liquid energy streaked out of the night, from the hands of a shadowy form standing almost invisible at the edge of the torchlight. The dark figure had come from the woods, unnoticed in the chaos of the battle, accompanied by a larger companion that hovered protectively behind it. The twisting tendrils of raw power blasted into the knight's chest, drawing an agonized scream from her that died before it could fully form. As Medelia was flung back, the bolt rebounded, arcing back into the air, twisting as if alive, before slamming back down into the back of Septimus's head.

The armsman never got a chance to scream, as his head exploded.

The bolt kept going, clipping Octavius. The armsman's right shoulder was seared as the energy tore through his limb, knifing through the steel links of his mail, and laying open the flesh beneath down to the bone. He fell back, his mace clattering from his hand as he fell to the ground, clutching the wound in a paroxysm of agony.

The blast had been devastating, and left only Sextus holding the barricade, as the skeletons surged forward again.

Chapter 127

COLLAPSE

Shay felt her muscles weakening as a second touch got through her defenses, sapping more of her strength. Desperate, she swung *Beatus Incendia* before her in a wide arc. The stroke bisected a pair of shadows, and to her own surprise, both came apart with a faint echo of a shriek sounding in their wake.

She looked around for the last shadow, but there was no sign of it.

Allera faced two more wraiths, including one that had until recently been the Guild mage Attius. The other one was damaged, with insubstantial rents in its faded outline, evidence that at least the wizard had managed to fight back before he'd been killed. Allera went for that one, meeting its attack with one of her own, blasting it with another *cure wounds* spell. The blue tendrils of energy ripped through it, and it dissolved. The other lunged in to attack her, but again Snaggletooth intervened, deliberately becoming visible as he darted in between her and the wraith, slashing at its face. His claws did no damage at all, but he cast a *cure light wounds* as he attacked, the spell drawing bright white gashes against the dark outline of the wizard's face. Attius lunged at the little dragon, but the creature nimbly darted up out of reach, narrowly avoiding the attack.

The dragon's intervention gave Allera a few seconds of respite, time enough to hit the wraith with her third and final *cure critical wounds*. Something that could almost have been gratitude flashed in the dead wizard's eyes, and then he too joined the other undead in oblivion.

Allera staggered back, and fell to the ground beside Talen. Her hands trembled as she took up her dropped pouch and began casting her *restoration* spell on the stricken knight.

Shay came over to them, holding the flaming holy sword like a beacon. "Will he live?" she asked. But Allera was focused on her spell, and did not respond.

A shadowy figure materialized out of the darkness, and Shay lifted *Beatus Incendia* to strike. "Stay your hand, scout," Varo said, as the light of the sword fell upon his features.

Relieved, Shay started to go to Talen, but Varo said, "The skeletons are breaking through; you must help the warriors."

Shay felt like she could barely keep lifting the sword, but as turned, she saw that the cleric was right; nearly all of the defenders were down, and skeletons were crawling over the low barrier. Lifting the holy sword, she ran toward the barricade. Varo looked around, verifying that all of the shadows, including those that had risen from the bodies of the slain clerics, were held at bay by his rebukes. He could not control any of them, not without relinquishing command over the first two he had dominated. The enemy cleric he'd sent them against may have already regained control over those, but at least it would keep him busy for a little while. His rebukes would only last about a minute; it would have to be enough.

The situation was grim. His summoned centipedes were still keeping about a dozen skeletons busy on the right flank, but on the left, he could see that the skeletal archers were coming out of the woods, switching to melee weapons as they came. These were clearly moving to come around the village, avoiding the barricade entirely to come up

upon their rear. There had to be a priest in there, somewhere, giving them commands, but he couldn't worry about that at the moment. One look at the line was enough to tell that in a few seconds, there would be skeletons all over their position. Varo looked down at Talen, but he knew it would be precious seconds yet before Allera's spell could be of any help to him.

He walked forward, drawing the power of Dagos into him.

The sight of Medelia being struck down, while he stood helpless to intervene, finally gave Galen the strength to shake off the *hold person* spell that had left him helpless. The skeletons all around him continued to rain blows on him, but he ignored them, roaring as he charged toward one that was coming toward the unmoving form of Medelia. A skeleton slashed at him, its legion sword glancing off his helmet, opening a deep cut in his forehead that sprayed blood down into his eyes. Half-blind, Galen swept his axe around in a powerful arc that caught the skeleton in the spine, severing it. Galen bent to help Medelia, who was not moving. With his back momentarily to the foe, he didn't see the skeleton behind him until he felt something cold and hard drive into his body. Looking down, he saw an inch of bloody steel protruding between the links of his chainmail, just under his right breast.

Grimacing, the knight turned enough to see the skeleton that had stabbed him. It still wore the remains of a Camarian legion coat. He recognized the faded insignia, crusted with mud and old blood. The markings were those of a Camarian colonel.

That was the last thing he recognized, as he fell forward, the skeleton's sword stuck in his body.

The skeletons started forward, but a wave of power washed over them, holding them in place.

On the other side of the barricade, the troll skeleton smashed Sextus hard on the side of the head. The armsman's helmet kept his head from coming apart, but the blow still hurt, and he staggered back, falling to his knees. With him down, several man-sized skeletons surged forward, clambering over the barrier toward him.

Boosted by her magical boots, Shay leapt up onto the edge of the fallen cart. The troll skeleton started to turn to face her, but she was moving too quickly, and before it could bring around a claw she leapt past it, the holy sword flaring in her hand as she swept it through the skeleton's skull. The troll's skull exploded in a shower of hundreds of fragments, and as Shay landed lightly on her feet a few feet away, it collapsed to the ground.

Unfortunately, the scout looked up to see three more large skeletons, along with a handful of the man-sized ones, charging straight at her. Varo's centipedes were gone, either destroyed or banished back to where they had come.

She also saw the duo that stood alone in the shadow of the forest. One moved, slightly, lifting an arm to point at her. That was all the warning she got, as a second blast of eldritch energy shot out at her, a probing, deadly surge of magic. Instinct alone saved her, as she flung herself to the side, coming up into a roll, her skin tingling with how close the blast had come to hitting her.

“Fall back to the cottage!”

Talen’s voice sounded loud over the din of battle. The knight commander stood leaning against the overturned cart, Allera at his side, continuing to pour restorative energies into him to replace the drained strength and constitution that the undead had torn from his body. He had drawn his backup weapon, the glowing sword that had carried him through dozens of fights in Rappan Athuk. As he strength returned, he held the sword above his head, drawing the attention of his companions, and their foes.

The fighting men and women of Camar fell back, still battling the skeletons that continued to press at them from all sides. Varo gave them a brief respite, as he directed the skeletons he’d dominated to assault their attacking peers at the barricade. That allowed Talen and Allera to drag Galen and Medelia to the cottage door, while on the other side of the barricade, Shay leapt back over to help Sextus with the crippled Octavius. Keeping her head low, wary of exposing herself to another magical attack, she glanced back once to see what the shadowy spellcaster was doing, but he was gone, swallowed up again by the night.

Eleven skeletons had been sent back into the fray as soldiers of the Dark Creeper, hacking apart their fellows. The few human and hobgoblin skeletons on the enemy side were quickly decimated, but the three giant-sized skeletons started ripping through Varo’s temporary allies, their clubs smashing them into fragments of bone. But they served their purpose, giving the defenders a chance to retreat with their fallen companions back to the cottage. Varo was the last inside, and just as Talen slammed and bolted the door, they caught sight of the group of skeleton archers from the forest group pouring around the undefended end of the house across the way to the left. At the same moment, the last three large skeletons tore through the original barricade, surging toward the cottage.

“Commander, the rebuked shadows... they will attack us again, once my power fades,” Varo said, as Talen barred the cottage door. Shay had come back to help him, her forearms covered in blood from handling Octavius, and she helped him move a bureau from the nearby wall to reinforce it.

“Varo... I’ve got a few things on my mind right now, okay?” As if to confirm his words, the door shook hard in its frame, but the bar held, for now.

“If we do not destroy them, then they will be able to pass through these walls with the same ease as before. I do not know if I will be able to stop them, this time.”

Talen grimaced, as the door shook again. A moment later, the cottage itself seemed to shake as a hard impact battered the wall.

“Damn it! How long?”

“About thirty seconds, give or take.”

“Well, there’s nothing I can do about it right this second,” Talen said. “Help the wounded!”

The cleric nodded, and walked over to where Allera was trying to channel healing into their stricken companions. Galen groaned as the healer drew out the sword impaled through his body, pouring positive energy into him as she did it. Serah was conscious but very weak, unable to move. Octavius was likewise conscious, if in obvious agony, and Sextus was helping to feed him a healing potion. But Medelia did not move at all, her chest and neck blackened where the enemy spell had hit her.

“I will need a few uninterrupted moments,” the cleric said, kneeling beside Serah.

Talen nodded, though he wasn’t sure what he could do to guarantee that right now. The door continued to shake, and several of the planks shattered inward from a hard impact. Through the gap, he could see a lot of moving bones. He hadn’t seen exactly how many skeletons were in the second cohort from the woods, but it had been at least a score, and maybe more.

“Are you okay?” Talen asked Shay.

“A little weak,” she said. “I can fight. Here, you’d better take this.” She handed him *Beatus Incendia*. For now, the sword was dormant, and Talen quickly slid it back into its scabbard, leaving his hands free to bolster the bureau pressed up against the door.

A few feet away, a section of the wall about three feet high and a foot wide collapsed into the room. The metal-studded head of a club appeared in the opening for a moment, before its owner yanked it back.

“Varo...” Talen said, glancing back to see that the cleric was still focused on helping the crippled cleric. Sextus and Octavius were both back on their feet now, restored somewhat by the healing draughts they’d consumed, but both armsmen were still pale from loss of blood. Allera was continuing to pour healing into Galen, reversing the mortal wound he’d taken, dragging him slowly back from the brink of death. There was no sign of her little dragon; if he hadn’t followed them inside, he would have to fend for himself.

The door continued to come apart. Even with Talen and Shay both pushing against the bureau, it would only take a few more blows to cave the entire door in. Skeletal hands gripped the slats of the door, ripping them away. The club hit the wall again, expanding

the hole, now nearly five feet high and two across. The cottage had only two rooms, and they heard a clatter from the back room, where the only window was located.

Talen caught the eyes of the armsmen. “Go,” he told them, and both went to investigate whatever was trying to get in that way.

“Talen!” Shay warned.

Talen turned back to the door, and barely avoided being grabbed by a skeletal arm that had thrust through the wreckage of the door over the bureau. He drew back and thrust *Beatus Incendia* into the skeleton. The sword itself did little damage, the blade passing right through its ribs, but the holy fire scorched its body, and the skeleton fell backward out of view.

Unfortunately, that gave an opening for the troll skeleton, which surged forward, smashing the damaged bureau out of the way with a single powerful swipe of its claws. Shay and Talen were forced back, and several man-sized skeletons crowded in through the new opening. As the pair tried to form up in a defensive position, they could hear the shouts of the armsmen from the next room.

The enemy was inside.

And if that wasn't yet enough, Talen felt a familiar cold chill, an announcement that was followed a moment later as three shadows passed through the wall, heading right for him, seeking the feeding they had been denied before.

Chapter 128

FURY AND DESPAIR

As Talen and Shay held the rapidly collapsing door, Varo had completed a *restoration* spell, returning the strength that had been stolen from the cleric Serah. As the cleric regained control over her muscles, he thrust her holy symbol into her hand. “When the shadows come through that wall, use this,” he commanded.

The woman's hands shook, and she barely maintained her grasp on the small silver torch. “I... I cannot... before... failed...”

“Use it, or you will become one of them, like your companions,” Varo said harshly, lifting his own divine focus as the door crashed open, and Talen and Shay staggered back into the room.

The shadows came, just as he had expected. Varo raised his symbol, but before he could act, the brilliant light of the Father filled the room, and all three shadows fled, turned by the divine power channeled by His cleric.

“Good,” Varo said, looking down at the woman, still sitting in the middle of the floor. “There will be more, be ready.”

She nodded, still pale.

Talen and Shay met the skeletons surging into the room, joined a moment later by Galen, who still looked terrible, the lower half of his tunic drenched in his own blood. The young knight had lost his axe outside, but he had drawn his dagger. Neither Galen nor Shay were able to destroy a skeleton with their edged weapons, but Talen’s holy sword cut through them like a scythe through ripened wheat, and two had been shattered into fragments within a few seconds.

Two more shadows came through the wall and fixed on Talen at once, but once again, before they could attack, Serah summoned the power of the Shining Father and drove them back.

Varo had been chanting, holding his divine focus; now he opened his eyes, and pointed through the opening in the wall.

A loud roar sounded, and the noises of battle sounded from just outside the door.

Shay had seriously damaged the skeleton she’d been fighting, and now kicked it solidly in the pelvis, knocking it back into the doorway. Talen’s sword clove through it a moment later, along with another one that was still trying to get in. The commander turned to help Galen, but the injured knight had gotten a solid grasp on his foe, and drove it into the wall, smashing it to pieces. Galen bore fresh scratch marks on his cheek and forearm from the skeleton’s violent resistance, but at Talen’s look said, “I’m all right.”

Shay crept up to the doorway, but no further skeletons had appeared; the sounds of violence continued from the darkness outside. “Fiendish apes?” she asked, turning to Varo. The priest nodded.

The noises from the back room had ceased; Allera had gone back there during the battle for the front door. “Sextus, Octavius, you all right?” Talen shouted back.

“We’re fine,” Sextus’s voice came back to them. “They tried the window, but we’re holding it, for now.”

“We should take the fight to them, while the summoned monsters are still there, distracting them,” Talen said, lifting *Beatus Incendia*. Its light revealed the troll skeleton

looming outside the doorway, its attentions, for the moment, focused elsewhere than on them.

“Careful,” Shay said, holding him back with a hand on his arm. “There’s a wizard out there. He killed Medelia and Septimus with some kind of lightning bolt, and nearly hit me with another.”

“No, not a wizard,” Varo said. “That was an *eldritch blast*. A warlock invocation. I would not have recognized it, except for the fact that I knew such a caster before, who used a very similar power.”

“The one sent into Rappan Athuk with you?” Talen asked. “Nadev, was it?”

“Zafir Navev. Warlocks are very, very rare in Camar; he is the only one I have ever met.”

“And now another. Coincidence?”

“I do not believe in coincidence, commander.”

They were interrupted as the troll skeleton crashed hard into the threshold of the door. The entire cottage, already heavily abused, shook heavily from the impact. Talen was quick to take advantage of the opportunity, smashing *Beatus Incendia* into the creature’s body from behind. The holy sword crashed through its thick thigh bone, and the skeleton collapsed to the side, nearly blocking the doorway. Something big and dark and ugly fell on it from the opposite side, and for a moment a stench of brimstone washed over them as Varo’s summoned ape ripped apart the huge skeleton’s rib cage.

“I think they’re beginning to run out of steam,” Shay said, looking out the doorway without exposing herself. “Or at least numbers.”

“I would not make that assumption,” Varo said. The cleric was healing Galen with a wand as he spoke. “The enemy may be bringing more undead forward as we speak. Or this may have just been a holding force, sent to keep us bottled up here while the enemy moves up the road, attacking the refugee caravans. Or they may have another plan that remains hidden to us.”

“So what do you recommend we do, priest?”

“What you had originally intended. Fall back on the road. Protect the rear of the refugee columns. Return to Highbluff, and join up with the forces from Camar, and with the Border Legion.”

Talen nodded. “Armsmen! Allera! Get ready, we’re leaving!” He turned to Shay. “Keep an eye out for that wizard, warlock, whatever the hells he is. If he makes an appearance, we have to be ready to hit him, hard and fast, with everything we’ve got.”

The scout nodded. A man-sized skeleton appeared at the smashed-open gap in the cottage wall, but Serah blasted it with holy power before it could crawl through, and it disintegrated, along with several others out in the courtyard behind it.

“How many more *turnings* do you have available?” Varo said to her.

“Two more,” she replied.

“What about Medelia?” Galen asked, looking at the body lying on the floor, covered by a cloak.

“Shay, Allera, can you... the *bag of holding*,” Talen asked, as the healer and the armymen came back into the room. The two nodded, and went over to the body.

“What about Septimus?” Sextus asked. “We left him, out there.”

“And the other priests,” Serah said. “They should be brought back, for the rites of passage, and proper burial.”

“We cannot fit more bodies into the magic sack,” Shay said.

“The bodies should be burned,” Varo interjected. “So they cannot be animated and used against us.”

“It is not right,” Serah said, still trembling, but with a hint of her earlier force in her voice. They all looked to Talen, who stood there, his face grim.

“We cannot spent time on the dead, not while the living need our help,” the knight commander said. “Shay, get the oil from the *bag*; we’ll form a pyre before we go. Priestess, we will offer prayers for their spirits when we return safe to Camar.”

“Don’t forget to collect any healing potions, scrolls, or other items that we may need from the bodies, first,” Varo said. Serah looked at him with an expression of scarcely-concealed revulsion on her face, but she said nothing. She still clutched her holy symbol, her fingers white with the pressure of her grasp.

Having helped Allera put Medelia’s body into the *bag of holding*, Shay returned to the door, holding the pouch that contained their oil flasks. The sounds of battle had faded, leaving nothing but an eerie stillness outside. “The apes are gone,” she reported. “It’s quiet out there, for now.”

“They may be waiting for us to leave,” Galen said. “Another ambush.”

“If they had more forces, they would not have waited to use them,” Varo said. “As you saw, knight, the incorporeal undead had no difficulty entering the structure. The ambush was perfectly set to remove the greatest threat, our clerics.”

“They didn’t attack you, not at first,” Serah said.

“I had warded myself from their sight,” Varo said. “And from their touch. A pity that the *death ward* was beyond the four of you. At the very least, Gaius could have provided you with scrolls.”

“How can you just... coldly, while they lie out there, they gave their lives...”

“Serah,” Allera said, softly, putting a hand on the older woman’s shoulder.

Talen drew Varo aside. Putting his body between the priest and the others, he asked quietly, “What are you saying, Varo? That they knew we would be here? How? Do they have spies in Camar, or are they tracking us with magic?”

The priest frowned. “It could be any of the above, commander, or something else entirely. I was thinking, there is a passage in the *Codex*, that I may have misinterpreted before. It refers to a crucial battle between the forces of Orcus and those seeking to stop them. The passage is very cryptic, but there is reference to events that may refer to what we are doing here. The fragment reads:

*And so the clash shall come at the bend of argent,
Where the legion of the fallen shall face the scions of those who came before
The Darkness shall bring forth in answer the very shadow of the land
To blight all hope, and seal the doom of the world of man...*

He trailed off, a look of intense focus on his face.

“Are you saying that this book that you are so obsessed with, it predicts the future? If it tells us what’s going to happen, why haven’t you shared the contents of it with us before? Gods, man, if they have this information, and we do not...”

Varo raised a hand to forestall him. “It is not so simple as that, commander. The *Codex Thanara* is not a work of prophecy, or at least not mainly so. It chronicles events of the past, when the followers of Orcus first tried to take over this world, and deliver it into the hands of their foul master.”

“So you’re saying that this... all of this, what we’re doing... it’s happened before? The same as now? I find it difficult to believe, Varo.”

“It is not the same, but you are right, there are a large number of parallels. It raises interesting questions about the metaphysics of what theologians refer to as ‘free will,’ but we have neither the time nor the leisure to ponder such things at the moment.”

“But you are using the information in this book to guide you, are you not? If you have information that can help us, you should be sharing it with the Council, with us.”

Varo made a negative motion with a slash of his hand. “You do not know of what you speak, commander, and if you really knew your Council and its politics, you would know that what you ask would be an unmitigated disaster for your cause, and for Camar.”

“Perhaps you underestimate us, priest.”

“And perhaps you forget that many swords have edges on both sides. The book, or at least fragments of it, was held by your Holy Church for centuries, its warnings clear to those with the insight and the will to confront them. Ask yourself, consecrated knight of Camar, why does it fall to an outcast faith of a banned sect to lead the fight against the Demon? Why has Gaius Annochus not marshaled the full power of the church, and called for a holy crusade to eradicate the evil blight of Rappan Athuk from the presence of this world?”

“Camar faces many dire threats...”

“As dire as what you have seen with your own eyes? You have *been* in the Dungeon of Graves, commander. You have seen what I have seen, for the most part. What do *you* think?”

Talen, troubled, did not reply.

His voice more even, Varo continued, “The *Codex* is as much a weapon of the enemy as a potential boon; its words are thick with falsehoods and cloying whispers of hopelessness. To read it, that can be dangerous; to *know* it, that leads inevitably to madness.”

“You have said before that you are already mad,” Talen said. “If so, how can we possibly trust you, Varo?”

“I do not ask for your trust, commander. But if you listen to nothing else I say, hear this, and *know* this; for all of Camar’s current troubles, and the many distractions you face, what we do here will determine the fate of this entire world. And it will come down to Rappan Athuk, before all of this is finished.”

Talen turned. The others had all gathered near the door, and were watching him. They hadn’t heard what he and Varo had been saying, but their feelings about the priest were clear in their faces, and their eyes.

The commander sighed. “All right, we’re moving out.”

The companions took up their gear, but as they moved out of the battered cottage, alert for any signs of the enemy warlock or any other undead, they could hear a faint noise in the distance, to the south. A regular, deep thumping noise, a vibration in the earth as much as a sound.

“What is it?” Talen asked.

“Something big, coming this way,” Shay said.

Talen looked at Varo. “It is coming,” Varo said. “We’re out of time, commander.”

Chapter 129

A SECOND FRONT

The central market and gathering space of the goblin city of Grezneck was located in a huge irregular cavern, approximately three hundred and fifty feet wide, and over five hundred feet long at its furthest extent. In typical times, the place was crowded with hundreds of goblins and other creatures, guests and traders at the goblin city. Orcs, giants, and ogres were common visitors, and sometimes even drow, duergar, or derro could be seen moving between the dozens of market stalls set up around the perimeter of the place. A constant din of activity usually filled the cavern, as the voices of those many visitors filled the place with a constant and tumultuous babel.

But not now.

A thick haze of smoke filled the air, obscuring a clear view of the place. Several fires continued to flicker around the perimeter of the cavern, as the remnants of a few stalls and shops burned. Through the haze, bodies could be seen, scattered here and there, many of which had been hacked to pieces. An overpowering stench of blood and smoke and shit filled the place, slowly turning as the inevitable sweet smell of rot crept in.

Goblin prisoners, many heavily bound, lay in occasional groups scattered across the chamber, guarded by undead monsters, mostly skeletons and zombies, many of which had until recently been residents of the city themselves. A few taller, heavily-armored figures clad in black walked among them, directing the undead. Files of prisoners were marched out of the chamber even as new groups were escorted in.

A goblin entered the chamber in the company of one of these groups of prisoners. This creature was clearly not a captive, clad in the black robes of the cult of Orcus, which could not entirely conceal the plate armor it wore, or the weapons that dangled from its belt. A pair of shadows followed it, hovering behind its shoulders.

The goblin crossed the cavern to the raised mound that jutted out into it from the far wall. The mound was surrounded by a low moat, crossed only by a crude and narrow bridge fashioned of bones and leather. Bodies bobbed in the moat, the corpses already bloated near to bursting.

The goblin crossed the bridge and ascended the mound, having some difficulty due to the weight of its gear. A pair of armored humans awaited it. They were looking out over the scene as it finally gained the summit of the mound, about fifteen feet above the level of the surrounding cavern floor. A large stone block was set here as well, an altar carved with unholy markings. Neither human turned to greet the newcomer.

“Lord Theron,” the goblin hissed.

One of the two humans turned. The other, a female, stood behind him, offering only a desultory look through the eyeslits of her full helm. Both wore surcoats over their armor that bore the sigil of Orcus. The goblin had power, that much was obvious in the way that it held a pair of shadows in thrall, but it clearly deferred to the humans.

“Report,” Theron said, his voice deep and sonorous within the depths of his helm.

“Herzord has rallied several hundred warriors in the barracks complex,” the goblin said. “Most of the rest of the city has been pacified; there are a few pockets of resistance, but none will last the day.”

“It would seem that your treachery was not completely unanticipated, Tribitz,” the woman priest said. “What of the clerics that betrayed their oaths to the True God?”

“Nearly all have been taken, Lady Celleen,” the goblin said. “I swear to you, by day’s end, all will begin their repentance for their sins against the Master.”

“And Herzord?” she asked.

“His position is very strong, great lady. In addition to his own forces, he was able to evacuate a large percentage of the city’s garrison before loyal forces could cut them off.”

“And they managed to destroy your vaunted stone golem in the process,” Celleen said.

“Regrettably, true. But the spider demon that the Master granted me proved quite effective in destroying the other cells of resistance. Unfortunately, such a creature cannot fit into the narrow confines of the barracks complex. The entrance has been heavily fortified.”

Celleen started to offer a reply, but Theron forestalled her with a small gesture. “What of the incorporeal undead that were loaned to you?”

The goblin paused, just for an instant, but one that was noted by both humans. “Ah, that was my first thought as well, as no mundane defense can stand against such creatures. Most disappointingly, they were destroyed. It would seem that the enemy has priests among its ranks.”

“Priests? I thought you had said that the worship of your goblin-god had been supplanted by the true faith here in Grezneck.”

“Yes, that is true, great lord,” the goblin said. It pointedly did not look at the altar stone, which, though covered with fresh sigils and symbols across its top and sides praising the demon prince, still had faint markings along its base that were just visible, reminders of the earlier loyalties of Grezneck’s religious community. “However, it would seem that there were a few... ah... some individuals that paid homage to the Dark Creeper, in secret.”

“Dagos,” Theron said. “What a surprise. And I presume that most of these heretics are now with the guard captain and his allies?”

“Yes, great lord.”

The human looked away for a moment. “You may go,” he finally said. “Continue mopping up the resistance. For now, set a strong guard at the entrance to the barracks. We will deal with them soon enough.”

The goblin nodded, and quickly departed. The humans stood there in silence until it had crossed the bridge, and vanished back into the haze of the cavern.

“That creature is a filthy worm,” Celleen finally said.

“Do not underestimate him,” Theron replied. “He managed to successfully conceal a plot to destroy his own city, gained power over a greater stone golem, and, as he so pointedly reminded us, summoned a bebilith and bound it to his will. And under the circumstances, the defection of a third of his priests is to be expected. In all honesty, I thought that it would be an even split between those who remained loyal to the True God, and those that chose loyalty to their own race and people once Tribitz betrayed them.”

“Once the last resistance is quashed, we should sacrifice the lot of them, starting with Tribitz. That a creature so loathsome should have such power...”

“It may come to that, but do not be so quick to promote cannibalization of the ranks of the faithful,” Theron said. “After all, that logic, taken to its furthest extend, can be dangerous to us as well.”

“We are favored,” Celleen said, but her tone made it clear that the man’s words had scored.

“For the moment. And do not forget that a mere month ago, we were just functionaries ourselves, middling priests, in the ranks with Severus, Dallia, Acheros and the like. Zehn and Gudmund were far more powerful than we.”

“We were chosen for greater things.”

“Perhaps. I wonder if even Maphistal realized what would happen, when we were sent into the slave pits to take charge of the prisoners, and begin refinement of the Rite of Sacrifice. The rituals we helped craft are what has allowed the plan to move ahead; without the ability to siphon life energy into the Sphere of Souls, we never would have gotten this far. But that we would draw some of that power into ourselves as part of the process... I believe that this was an unexpected side effect.”

“Whatever the cause, we are already more powerful than Gudmund ever was... and you above all, Theron. With these new prisoners, we will gain even more power. Soon, perhaps, even Maphistal may have reason to fear...”

Theron lifted a hand to stop her. “Do not say it, and if you are wise, do not even think it, Celleen.” He turned away and looked out over the city. “In hindsight, none of this is really unanticipated. As the hour of the final breaking approaches, old ways will crumble, new realities will emerge, and the situation will become fluid. Zehn and Gudmund have fallen, and new powers have risen in their places. But these events have only been the beginning. Do not imagine that we will be allowed to move forward to the end without intervention from those whose world lies on the cutting board.”

“I too have read the *Codex*, my love. Our victory is inevitable.”

He turned back to her. “Perhaps.”

“Heresy?” she asked, her voice light.

“If it were not for heresy, we never would have perfected the Rite,” he told her. “Come, we are done here, for the moment; Phesor will have already prepared the temple in the pits for the ritual. Let us grant the True God his tithe, and then... enjoy our reward.”

Something eager flashed in her eyes, and she stepped closer to him. “Yes,” she said, the single word filled with meaning.

The pair left, ignoring both the undead moving about the cavern, and the pathetic cries of the captives, whose torment was only just beginning.

Chapter 130

RUNNING

The surrounding night was pushed back by a bubble of light as the eight surviving members of the company of fifteen from Camar ran along the dark road north. They made a considerable amount of noise, mostly from the clanking armor of the group's fighters. But a deeper noise filled the night, a faint, rhythmic thumping that shook the ground at regular intervals.

"It's gaining again," Shay said, bringing up the rear of the company. She was by far their fastest, even without taking her magical boots into account, but she had spent much of the last two hours doubling back, checking on the status of their pursuer.

They had considered dropping their heavy armor, which would have added considerably to their average speed. But that would have only postponed the inevitable; Shay had reported that the thing following them was faster than any of them save she herself. It moved slowly, but it was so damned *big*, that each stride it took carried it over ground that the humans had to spend dozens of steps to cover. Talen had also suggested sending those without armor on ahead, but he'd barely gotten the first sentence out before Shay and Allera had both vetoed the plan.

"We can outpace it in sprints, but I don't think it'll need to rest," Shay had told them, shortly after they'd crossed the river at the swollen ford. They'd lost time there; the swollen river had barely paused the monster at all.

"It will not stop as long as there are living bodies ahead of it," Varo had noted, with his usual dark candor.

"We're going to have to stop and face it," Talen said, for the third time since their flight had begun. "We may as well have it be when we have at least some strength left to us."

They were already flagging. The fighters had the strongest constitutions, allowing them to keep up the hurried pace. But even with all excess gear discarded, the weight of their armor was slowing them down. Serah, not used to such extremes of physical activity, had already removed her breastplate, and while she was not complaining, she looked far from rested. Allera, accompanied openly again by Snaggletooth, who had survived the undead siege at Aldenford without difficulty, was helping everyone she could, but her healing powers were all but depleted. She gave them each herbs to chew, mild stimulants that helped them keep putting one foot in front of the other.

"I have told you, that we have little chance against the creature," Varo said.

"Maybe we can draw it off," Galen said. "Make it chase us off the road, give the refugees more time."

Talen shook his head. "This terrain is pretty rugged," he said. "It will slow us greatly, but from what Shay's said, I don't think it will inconvenience the creature much. And if it doesn't follow us, there will be nothing we can do to stop it before it gets to the refugees."

"Further, you are forgetting the shadows," Varo pointed out. Several of the undead monsters had attacked since the ford, coming out of the night sky or rising from the ground ahead of them. They had been few in numbers, attacking in small groups, and Varo and Serah had turned or cowed them each time. Talen had used *Beatus Incendia* to swiftly destroy those held in thrall by Varo. But several of them had been slightly drained of strength, and the harassment was keeping them on edge, preventing them from relaxing their vigilance for even a few seconds. "If we depart from the road, the creatures will be able to come on us from any direction, and we will have a much harder time responding to their attacks swiftly."

"Varo, if we do have to fight it, what can we do to kill it?" Talen asked.

"I know little of that type of undead creature," the cleric admitted. "In theory, they can be hacked to pieces like any other corporeal undead, but it will be... difficult. A being of that size will have incredible durability, and the material of its construction will provide further resistance to damage. Blessed weapons may be of some use; I think your blade may be the only thing that can seriously discomfit it, commander."

"I can enchant a weapon with blessed power," Serah said, huffing slightly. "But the spell does not last long, a few minutes, at best."

"Do it for Sextus or Octavius, then, if it comes to that," Talen said. "Galen's axe is already magical." Galen nodded; he'd recovered his heritage weapon when they'd fled from the cottage.

"The decision may be made for us soon," Shay pointed out. "We've got to be outpacing that last caravan of refugees, and we will almost certainly come upon them before too much longer."

"All right," Talen said. "Start looking for a place that favors defense."

"That hill on the left," Shay said. It was tough to see with their magical torches damaging their night vision, but up ahead the road seemed to curve between two rows of low hills, rising up out of the ground like sets of knuckles. The largest knuckle on the left was topped by a hillock that rose maybe fifty feet above the level of the road, and was covered in big boulders that looked to offer decent cover.

"Oh, crap," Talen exclaimed. For as they came close enough to see the curve of the road, they saw light sources, which inevitably resolved a minute later into the slow-

moving tendril of the refugee column, already jammed into the tight space between the hills.

“Checkmate,” Varo said.

Chapter 131

THE GATHERER

The refugees must have seen them by their lights; the priest Nelan and another two men met them at the base of the nearest hill as they rushed forward. The priest saw something in Talen’s eyes, for his first words were, “They are coming, captain?”

“Yes. Something big, a few minutes behind, at most. We will take up positions here, on this hill, and cover your retreat. You’ve got to get your people moving, and fast.”

“Our people and animals are all exhausted, commander. I don’t think they can run anymore. Some of us, many of us, we can fight.” The two men flanking him nodded; each carried weapons, a bow and an old Legion spear respectively.

“With all due respect, what’s coming... you and your people won’t have a chance of stopping it.”

“And you will?” the cleric asked, quietly.

“We’re going to give it our damnest. You are just going to have to ask your people to dig a little deeper, priest. I’m sorry to make it so blunt, but if they cannot run, then they’ll die here, and not well.”

“We will do what is needed, then. Good luck to you, commander.”

Talen nodded, already turning to his followers. “Serah, you and Allera should go with them...” he began.

“Like hells,” Allera said, while Serah added, “Sir, you are going to need my magic.”

Talen snapped his hand across in anger. “Look, you’ve already said that your powers are all but depleted, and you can’t be much good to me...” But he left off as Shay touched his arm.

“We’ve all go to do what we can,” the scout said. “What we must. And right now, we’re wasting time we don’t have.”

Talen looked at her, and smiled softly. "All right. Let's get set up on that hill."

The eight survivors rushed up the slope, helping each other up the difficult ascent. Rocks dislodged by their passage tumbled down the hill behind them, until they lay forgotten in the road. Around the far edge of the hill, they could see the refugee caravan moving again, its animals and humans moving numbly, slowly.

But at least they were moving.

"I think I see it," Sextus said, pointing at the length of road they had just traversed. In the weak light of the night, the moon and stars still obscured by clouds, the landscape was just a *mélange* of shadows, but the sound of the creature's steps could still be heard, drawing their attention to what might have been a darker shadow in the near distance, moving closer.

"Set the torches up on the summit, behind us," Talen said. "We want it to see us, but don't want to ruin our night vision."

There was about a minute of mostly silent preparation, as the companions selected positions, prepared missile weapons, and otherwise readied themselves for what might come out of the darkness.

Talen turned to Varo. "I suppose you have some nasty power in reserve, priest?"

With the light of the torches somewhat removed, Varo looked like a shadow himself in his black cloak. "Unfortunately, my remaining higher-order spells are not of much use in battling the undead."

"No more summons?"

"I have one of the less powerful variety of those spells remaining," Varo said. "I will use it to conjure another centipede, which may hinder the creature slightly."

"Be careful, Varo. Your optimism may be contagious."

"I view events as they are, commander, not as I might wish them to be."

"Never mind." The sound of the approaching foe was getting louder, and Talen peered out into the darkness. Now it was possible for all of them to see the oncoming thing, a massive, lumbering bulk, dark in the night. It was at least forty feet tall, and just vaguely humanoid; it may have been the darkness, but it seemed to lack any clear distinguishing features. The ground shook with each step it took.

"Gods protect us," someone said.

"Do you have a *light* spell, Varo?" Talen asked.

"I do. You wish to see your enemy?"

"Yes. Shay... your bow?"

The scout came over with an arrow nocked, offering the missile to Varo. The cleric cast the spell quickly, and as soon as the end of the shaft began to glow, Shay drew and fired. Her composite bow had a decent pull, and the shot flew far out into the night, covering a good three hundred feet before it reached the apogee of its arc, and started down. It covered another three hundred feet before it struck its target, sinking into the shoulder of the creature.

The light revealed it to be a giant, walking hill, a thing of earth and stone. It almost looked like an earth elemental, a creature that several of them had seen before. But its true nature was revealed in the objects that jutted from its body. Gravestones, weathered slabs of granite, even pieces of what had been small burial tombs. Other things, impossible to discern at this distance, except that some of them... *moved*.

The corpse gatherer was a walking graveyard, and the dead that it bore lived on in undeath.

"Let that thing have it!" Talen yelled, lifting his own bow high, and unleashing a shaft into the air.

Missiles shot out from the entrenched defenders, arcing out from the hilltop across the road. Most of them struck the creature, even at extreme range, but none of them appeared to have any effect. The monster continued toward their position, the ground shaking with each step it took.

As it neared the base of the hill, Varo cast his summoning spell, conjuring a huge monstrous centipede that appeared about fifty feet away. The centipede shot down the hill toward the corpse gatherer, slithering smoothly across the uneven rocks. The defenders continued their barrage of missiles, but while they continued to score hits, there was no evident damage from the impacts.

"It's like shooting a mountain!" Shay exclaimed in frustration.

"Keep firing, we may be weakening it!" Talen said. But even as he drew another arrow from his quiver, he glanced at Varo, who shook his head.

"It will come down to close quarters," the cleric said. As they watched, the centipede lunged into the monster, snapping its jaws into a massive thigh. The monster swatted the creature like a human swooshing a fly, and while the centipede was over thirty feet long, it was knocked flying as the "hand" smashed its body. It landed twenty feet away, oozing fluid from its cracked body; the monster had barely broken its stride.

“Look! Around its head!” Serah said, pointing. As the monster continued to approach the hill, the companions could all see what the cleric indicated; orbiting the monster, familiar dark forms flying close around it.

“Damn it, that’s all we need, more shadows,” Talen muttered. He hadn’t meant to be heard, but Varo came up close behind him. “Can you hold them?” he asked the cleric.

“My ability to channel the power of Dagos was spent on the road,” the cleric said. “But even if I could, I doubt it would have any effect. That thing radiates negative energy like a beacon; I can feel it from here. Even Gaius Annochus would be hard pressed to turn those shadows within its radius.”

Serah, huddled a few feet away, shuddered. She’d left her crossbow behind in Aldenford, so all she could do was clutch a healing wand and wait.

Varo clapped Talen on the shoulder. “Brandish the holy blade; that will draw them.”

Even as he spoke, the shadows detached themselves from the creature, and drifted up the hill, becoming almost invisible as they left the radius of the otherworldly *light* that still shone from the arrow stuck in the gatherer’s shoulder.

Behind them, the undead monster reached the base of the hill, and with a ponderous step forward, started up.

Chapter 132

SHADOW BOXING

Talen stood up from behind the cover of his boulder, brandishing *Beatus Incendia* high above his head. The holy sword erupted into white flames, driving back the night, and filling the defenders with hope.

The shadows saw it, and flew toward that light, drawn to it like moths to a flame. Or perhaps more accurately, drawn to the pulsing life energy of the man brandishing the weapon.

Talen saw them coming, and drew back into the open space beyond the boulder. The rules of cover worked differently with shadows; the rocks would serve to conceal them until they were right on top of him. They could still come up from the hill below him, but these shadows did not appear to be interested in subtle tactics, and instead came straight toward him.

The corpse gatherer took another step up the hill, but paused as Varo's centipede attacked again, coiling around its leg, and surging up to stab its mandibles into its torso. The undead monster paused for a moment, reaching down to seize the creature. Tearing the centipede off its body, ignoring the bites it delivered to its hand and forearm, the gatherer lifted the fiendish vermin, and *squeezed*.

The companions on the hilltop could hear the cracking of the centipede's body as it was crushed. The gatherer pressed the centipede's body against its chest, and it started to absorb it into itself before the summoning spell died, and the slain monster dissolved into greasy black smoke.

Frustrated in its primal urge to add more bodies to its mass, the gatherer at once started forward again, toward the life forms clustered around the top of the hill.

Talen held his ground, waiting until the last possible moment as the shadows dove toward him, faint points of red flickering where their eyes would have been, had they been mortal beings. The pure light of the sword cast them in stark relief against the surrounding night, and that allowed him to time his stroke perfectly. The holy sword clove through the shadow, flaring with energy as it passed through the undead creature.

The blow had absolutely no effect.

Talen threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding the shadow's attack, and nearly losing his footing on the uneven stones of the hilltop. But there were other shadows swarming at him, and he could not avoid them all. He felt a cold touch pierce him as one touched him, draining strength from his body. Several others swept around to take him from the flanks.

And there seemed to be nothing he could do to stop them.

But Talen was not alone, and his companions hastened to his aid. Varo stepped out from behind a nearby rock, and stabbed a wand into one of the shadows attacking Talen. The blue flash of a *cure moderate wounds* spell erupted from the device, and the shadow let out a hollow scream as tendrils of positive energy ripped through it. But the shadow, bolstered by the presence of the gatherer, remained intact, and it turned on Varo with a fury.

On the opposite flank, Shay and Serah attacked another of the shadows trying to flank Talen. The scout's magical sword passed through one of the shadows without harming it, but Serah copied Varo, poking it with a wand and casting a healing spell at it. The wand was only a minor one, and the *cure light wounds* spell did not harm the shadow greatly, but it did get its attention. The creature dove at Serah, who screamed as it tore strength from her body. The cleric fell back upon the rocks, while Shay tried in vain to help her.

Talen was still facing a pair of shadows, and as they came at him again, he lifted *Beatus Incendia* and roared out a challenge. The sword pulsed with potency, and this time his strokes met resistance as the weapon tore through the substance of the undead monsters. Even bolstered by the gatherer, the shadows could not absorb the power of the dragon knight, and both shadows came apart, hissing as they dissolved into nothingness.

Varo held his ground calmly even as the shadow touched him, taking his strength. His expression did not change as he stabbed it again with his wand, destroying it with a second pulse of positive energy.

Serah was clearly weakening, but she managed to lift her wand again, hitting the shadow with another *cure light wounds*. The shadow continued to feed on her. Shay, standing over the cleric and her enemy, yelled in frustration as her sword continued to pass harmlessly through it. Finally she took the weapon in both hands, and thrust it through the shadow's head. The elven steel flared as it bisected the red points of the creature's eyes, and finally the sword cut into it. Already damaged by Serah's healing, the shadow expired.

Talen spun, holding *Beatus Incendia* above his head, scanning for any more of the undead. There were no more shadows, but as the ground shook beneath his feet, he looked up to see the massive figure of the corpse gatherer looming above him, close enough now for him to see the animated bodies that jutted from its hideous mass, and to even to see the faded writing on some of the gravestones that were impaled within its substance.

Then there was no more time; the creature attacked.

Chapter 133

GRIM FINALITY

While Talen and the clerics had been battling the shadows, the rest of their group had not been idle. Sextus and Octavius had continued firing heavy quarrels into the gatherer's body as it had climbed ponderously up the slope, while Galen moved into position behind a boulder a short distance down the hill. He carefully put down his shield, recognizing that it would offer next to no protection against a monster as huge as the gatherer, and took up his axe in both hands. He looked at the engraving on the blade, a griffon with outstretched claws, the sigil of his family. Within his gauntlets, his hands were slick with sweat, but he calmed himself both with a prayer to the Father, and with a glance up the hill, where Talen stood silhouetted within a white radiance of holy fire.

The young knight remained hidden in cover as the undead hulk continued its ascent. The slope that had given them such trouble when they'd climbed it seemed to give the monster no difficulty, except to slow it slightly. But then again, the thing was nearly as tall as the hill itself, and it had to weigh thousands upon thousands of pounds.

How did one fight an animated mountain?

Galen could hear something else over the massive thuds of its feet... groans, coming from the undead bodies trapped within the hulking colossus. The boulder he was hiding behind was now shaking with each step, even though it was twice his size. He wondered what would happen if the creature decided to step on it, and resisted the urge to peek around for a look. Maybe it didn't matter; the thing could probably sense his presence, anyway. Would it even care, that he was waiting here to attack it?

But as another deep thud shook the hill, it appeared that the creature was heading for the summit, where Talen was fighting the shadows. Galen looked up, and saw the monster now, looming high over him. His body trembled; he felt infinitesimally small.

A huge foot came forward, and landed not ten feet from his position. He saw the gatherer start to lean forward, its intent clear. Talen stood before it on the crest, lifting his holy sword in challenge; he was not afraid of it.

The sight energized Galen. Taking up his axe, a war cry erupting unbidden from his lips, the knight leapt at the creature, and with all his strength behind the blow, he smashed the weapon into its ankle.

The axe bit deep, and to his surprise, the weapon clove into its substance, ripping out a considerable mass of packed earth from the joint. A smell of rot washed over him, and he could see bones jutting out of the gray dirt of its body. Tangled black tendrils were visible within, and Galen thought they were roots, until they *moved*.

Yelling, he lifted the axe to hack at it again.

The two armymen fired off a last pair of bolts from their crossbows, then dropped their weapons as the undead monster reached their position. They saw Galen rush out of cover to attack it, and shared a look.

"I never thought I'd end up fighting a mountain," Octavius said, as he drew his sword.

Sextus nodded. "I didn't expect I'd die an old man." His sword flashed slightly as he drew it; Serah had *aligned* the weapon when they'd taken up position atop the hill, and it still contained the potency of that magic.

"For Camar!" he yelled, as both men leapt out of cover to attack.

The gatherer shifted a massive leg, forcing both men to abort their charge, leaping to the side. Octavius was struck by its foot, and was unlucky as a slab of granite headstone the size of a serving platter hit him in the collarbone. He was knocked flying, and landed in a heap nearby, unconscious. The monster seemed oblivious to the effect of its attack, bending down to grab Galen as the knight slammed his axe down into the monster's damaged ankle once more. Galen tried too late to dodge back, and was caught up in the creature's huge fist. It lifted him high into the air. His axe glittered in his hand; he was still trying to attack with the one hand he had free.

Talen and the others on the hilltop charged down to the aid of their companion, but it wasn't immediately obvious what they could do to help him. Galen was already twenty feet above them, a prisoner in the monster's implacable grasp. The young knight screamed as the colossus squeezed him, then it opened its fist, smashing him into its chest. The others watched in horror as the knight was held there, pinned by the grasping arms that protruded from the creature's body. Then a dark opening gaped in that ugly mound, and Galen, now unconscious, vanished inside.

"Galen!" Talen yelled, charging down the hill with *Beatus Incendia* blazing in his hand. Unfortunately for him, exhaustion and weakness from the shadow's touch conspired against him, and his boots slipped on the treacherous footing. His heavy armor kept him from breaking bones as he hit the ground, but he shot down the hill, sliding twenty feet past the gatherer before he came to a rough stop by slamming into a boulder the side of a horse.

Trying to recapture the breath that had been knocked out of him, Talen staggered to his feet.

The knight's companions continued to press their attack upon the monster. Sextus sliced through its right shin with his sword, cutting the head off a zombie as he did so. The *aligned* weapon seemed to have a good effect upon it, and dark matter was hacked from its body from the hit. Black tendrils trailed a sick-smelling ooze from where they had been shorn by the blessed blade.

The armsman lifted his sword to strike again, but before he could follow up with another attack, the monster lifted its foot, and slammed it down onto the fighter. Sextus was crushed under its full weight, and there could be no doubt about his fate, as his armor crunched loudly under the impact, and bright red blood splashed out from under the edges of its massive tread.

Allera was nearby, having dragged the unconscious Octavius a safe distance away, but she knew at once that there was nothing she could do to help the other armsman now. Swallowing back the gorge that rose in her throat, she dug deep into her reservoir of energy, casting one of the few healing spells she had left to stabilize the dying warrior.

Shay was not far from its foot after it had crushed Sextus, but as the monster shifted toward her, she realized that staying put was not at all a good idea. She charged past

it, swinging her sword in an attack that was little more than a feint. It swept its hand down at her, but she saw it coming, and leapt into a roll that took her behind a boulder a moment before it smashed hard into the ground with enough force to uproot the slab of stone. The impact knocked her off her feet, but she narrowly was able to somersault back into a crouch, dodging fist-sized shards of stone that flashed through the air around her.

Serah, still on the hilltop, cast a spell from a scroll she'd taken from the body of one of her fellow priests. A piercing blast of sound exploded around the creature's head, but it seemed to have no effect upon it.

"Spell resistance, most likely," Varo said. "I doubt that our cure wands would have any more effect, if we could get close enough to use them."

"What can we do?" Serah asked, her voice bordering on panic.

"Pray to your god," the cleric said. He reached into his pouch, and drew out a scroll. As Serah looked at him in amazement, he invoked the power of his patron, and disappeared.

Talen yelled out a wild challenge as he rushed back up the hill toward the corpse gatherer. Once again, its reach gave it the advantage, and it swept a hand around to meet him before he could get close enough to strike. Talen lifted his shield as the hand came around, but the corpse gatherer merely grabbed him, closing his huge fingers around him, crushing his arms and legs against his body as it lifted him off the ground, helpless to do anything but struggle uselessly against its incredible strength.

Chapter 134

A DUBIOUS RESCUE

"Talen!" Shay yelled, rushing back to engage the creature, which bore Talen high into the air. With his arms pinned, he could not wield *Beatus Incendia* against it, nor could he overcome its unnatural strength to break free.

Serah stared up at the creature in horror. The others were all gone, dead or likely to be so soon; she stood alone, helpless to stop it. Varo's words of a moment ago echoed in her mind, mocking.

But then a noise echoed through the night; the sound of a horn, its low dirge echoing between the hills, and the cleric of the Father turned to see a new source of hope appear.

A column of riders appeared on the road at full gallop, weapons and torches held high. There were over two dozen of them, led by a man in heavy armor riding a big destrier, steam flaring from its nostrils in the chill night air. The sword in his hand was an unusual one, recognizable even at a distance; few blades bore the blue-steel tinge of *Valor*.

“About time, general,” Varo whispered to himself. The cleric, cloaked in *invisibility*, had carefully crept down the hill, moving closer to the corpse gatherer while trying not to reveal his position. If he’d known how sharp the creature’s senses were, he wouldn’t have bothered with stealth, but at the moment the gatherer was too preoccupied with other things to deal with the cleric.

The corpse gatherer, still holding onto Talen, turned slowly as the company of riders turned smoothly off the road and up onto the shoulder of the hill, still riding in a tight formation two or three abreast. Their pace slowed somewhat as their horses left the road, but their mounts were western breeds, sure footed and used to riding in the rough mountains of the frontier. Their leader let out a roar that was echoed down the line, and he lifted *Valor* as he came charging toward the enemy.

Ignoring Shay, who was hacking in vain at its ankles, the gatherer responded by taking a step down the hill, swinging a long arm low with the full force of its mass and momentum behind it.

The creature smashed its fist—with Talen still inside—into the onrushing riders with devastating force. Horses and men screamed as the gatherer’s blow crushed bones and bodies. The charge had been blunted with that one fell strike, and the few attacks that came at it as it rose back up were almost completely ineffective against it.

Dar shook his head as he rose up where he’d been flung to the ground fifteen feet away. He’d dropped *Valor*, but it was easy to find, lying in the stones nearby. His horse was just a mangled heap.

A half-dozen riders from the rear ranks of the cavalry formation rallied and swept around the hill to come at the monster’s flank before it could reset and recover for another attack. They slashed at its legs with swords and axes as they rode past, but even with the added momentum from the speed and mass of their horses, the damage they did was minimal at best. The monster lifted a leg and brought it down onto the back of the last horse in the charge before it could get free, smashing it into the ground, and sending the rider flying through the air. He landed badly in the rocks, and slid down the hill, limp and bloody.

Varo became visible near the creature, crouched behind a rock a few feet from the gatherer’s left leg. Holding up his scroll to catch the light still shining from the torches atop the hill, he invoked the power that had been initially placed there by Gudmund, priest of Orcus. As the markings on the scroll faded, a soft blue glow began to

materialize around the cleric's fingers. Thrusting the scroll back into his pouch, Varo crept out toward the creature's huge foot.

Having gained a moment's respite, the gatherer lifted its fist high. A gaping opening appeared on the side of its head, black and sinister.

Shay had abandoned her attack, and darted back twenty feet, sheathing her sword. Getting a running start, she leapt onto a nearby boulder, and used that as a springboard to leap up onto the monster, landing at the point where its right leg joined its body. A pair of animated, rotting arms jutting from its body tried to grab onto her, but she leapt up, using the protruding bits of gravestones and other tomb fragments to climb higher up onto its body. She was clearly trying to make her way to the fist that held Talen prisoner.

But before she could get there, the creature opened its fist, and smashed Talen into the yawning maw that had appeared in the side of its head. The light of *Beatus Incendia* flared briefly, then vanished as the knight disappeared into the corpse gatherer's body.

Chapter 135

HACK AND SLASH

Dar felt a moment's flashback as he saw the huge whatever-the-fuck-it-was swallowed Talen. He surged up the hill toward it, *Valor* pulsing eagerly in his fist.

He heard a yell above, and saw Shay clambering on the monster's body. He wasn't sure exactly what *she* was trying to do, but it didn't look like it was going to help Talen any. As he lowered his gaze again, he heard Allera's voice, crying out somewhere from the shadows on hillside beyond the creature. "Dar! The left ankle!"

The fighter looked that way, and saw that the creature's joint had been damaged, a black gash visible where someone had managed to hew away part of its substance. He nodded to himself and ran toward it. The gatherer, distracted by swallowing Talen, and the returning riders coming at it from the far side of the hill, did not attack him.

Time seemed to slow as he covered the last ten yards between him and his target, but finally he was where he needed to be. The monster started to move, lifting its foot for a step, but before it could get away Dar was in range, bringing his sword around in a powerful swing that had his full strength behind it.

The sword tore deep into the gatherer's body, ripping through dirt and bone and the fibrous tendrils that held it together. The injured foot moved out of his reach as he finished his stroke, but as it came down fifteen feet away, the crippled joint collapsed.

The huge monster lost its footing, and fell hard onto its back, crushing a rider who could not get out of its way in time. It slid thirty feet down the hill, and lay there for a moment, like a man who'd slipped and fallen on a set of stairs.

Then it started to get up again.

Dar saw Shay lying in the rocks, trying unsuccessfully to rise. The scout had been flung from the creature's body as it fell; blood trickled down the side of her face where she'd smashed into the rocks. She looked at him, her eyes trying to focus as he rushed over to her.

"Are you all right?"

"Talen... he's inside that thing! You've got to help... him..." She herself thrust herself to her feet, only to fall back to the ground, still dazed.

"It never ends," he said, turning and charging back down the the hill.

Varo pulled himself to his feet; he'd been struck inadvertently when the creature had fallen. His *heal* spell, cast from the scroll he'd taken from the high priest of Orcus, had faltered harmlessly against the corpse gatherer's spell resistance. The thing was a force of nature, almost unstoppable. Varo had also sensed something else when he had touched it; the negative energy that fueled it was continuing to grow. Varo did not have to ponder long to guess its source. The monster was drawing life from the bodies it was absorbing into its mass.

If they didn't defeat it soon, it would quickly become unstoppable.

Dar's men were doing their best. The remaining riders, joined by a few men on foot who had survived the death of their mounts, continued to harry the creature as it rose. Realizing that their regular attacks were having little effect on it, they had resorted to all-out power attacks, using both hands on their weapons to hew at its dense substance. A big piece of its leg had just come apart as it had fallen, but as it got up, the damaged leg began to expand and shift, forming a new foot to support its mass; the other leg shortened slightly to even out its stance. The regeneration cost it, and it immediately sought out fuel to restore its animating power. As the riders came past it again, it lashed out with a hand, snaring a horse and mount together, smashing them into its body, which opened to receive them. The horse had its neck snapped by the rough treatment, while the rider screamed as gray hands seized him from inside the creature's body, drawing him in.

Dar ran toward a boulder that jutted out from the ground near the monster, and as he finished his charge, he ran out onto it, leaping into the air. Armored as he was, he didn't get very high, but his path brought him close to the monster's knee, and as he came down he drove *Valor* down like a spike through the joint. He felt his breath knocked out of him as he hit the creature's leg; a protruding gravestone had hit him hard enough to

dent his breastplate. Hanging from the hilt of the sword with both hands, he looked up to see the monster reaching down for him.

Dar planted his feet, and tried to get leverage to rip *Valor* out, and hopefully take a good chunk of the monster's knee with it. But he was too slow, and it snagged him, doing to him what it had already done to Talen, and to several of the other defenders. He lost his grip on the sword as the creature crushed him in its huge paw, and *Valor* was left jammed into its knee, useless.

The monster's body quivered; Dar could feel it shake through the thick fingers holding him captive. The fighter looked down and saw Varo standing beside its foot, pouring healing energy into its ankle, marshalling his considerable will and power in an effort to get through its spell resistance. His men were continuing to hack at the creature's other foot and leg, slashing and thrusting with spears, axes, maces, and swords. The creature paid no heed to any of them, instead lifting Dar up to his chest.

"I'm not going to be eaten by the likes of you," the fighter growled. But his struggles to break free were useless; the monster was insanely strong.

A bright, flickering light from above caught his attention. Looking up, he saw that the light was a point of white radiance shining from the bottom of the creature's jaw. It was very faint, and as the monster shifted, the light vanished, leaving only the dark mass of its head.

Dar heard a yell from below, Shay's voice but from his prison he could not look down to see what was happening. And then everything went dark, as the creature thrust its fist, along with Dar, deep into its own body.

Chapter 136

SACRIFICE

The men of the Border Legion were tough men from a region known for dire threats, but none of them had confronted anything even remotely like the corpse gatherer. While they had followed Dar's blind charge into battle against this seemingly unstoppable foe, the creature had withstood their attacks without much apparent effect. Now, as it simply *absorbed* their new leader, their courage began to falter, and they started to fall back.

Varo thought he felt a slight weakening as one of his *cure* spells penetrated its resistances, but he too felt that their time was running out. With both Talen and Dar consumed by the creature, their ability to harm it was rapidly diminishing. And he was nearly out of spells, at least those with any chance at all of affecting it.

For a moment he felt despair, as he saw the darkest prophecies written in the *Codex Thanara* come true in his mind.

Then Shaylara's yell drew his attention up, and he saw the young woman rush forward, a sword in her hand. She leapt onto the same boulder that Dar had used as a springboard a moment ago, but whereas the fighter had leapt onto its knee, the scout sprang high into the air, driving the sword down with both hands into its chest, just above where it had absorbed Dar.

The attack hit where the creature's heart would have been, had it been a mortal creature. But to Varo's surprise, the attack had an obvious effect; the monster reared back, and Shay's weight dragged the sword deeper, opening a gash in its chest that trailed crumbling clods of packed gray earth instead of blood.

Realization came in a flash. *She's using Sextus's sword!* he thought. The weapon, *aligned* earlier by Serah, could hurt the monster, and penetrate its considerable resistance to mundane damage. But Varo doubted that even that would be enough.

His suspicion was born out a moment later, as the gatherer smashed its hand into its chest. Shay was crushed against its body, and when it pulled its hand away, the scout had been all but absorbed into its mass, with gray hands grabbing her, drawing her further in.

Knowing it was useless, Varo touched the monster again, burning his last healing spell. The *cure light wounds* spell dissolved against its spell resistance. He knew better than to try his wands; the potency within them would have no chance whatsoever of harming it.

The gatherer, however, was beginning to shake. Its protruding "head" shifted toward Varo, who clutched another scroll, ready to invoke a *word of recall* that would yank him out of there. But before the monster could lunge for him, the bright point of light that Varo had seen earlier reappeared along the curve where the monster's jaw met its face. This time, instead of vanishing, it grew brighter, until Varo could see the white flames that appeared along the length of the blessed steel, and knew its source.

At the same time, a gout of earth exploded out of the creature's chest, and Varo realized that Dar was not giving up without a fight either. And then, the thing just started to come apart.

Varo fled, running back as clods the size of wagons smashed into the ground, spraying showers of gray earth and dust around the area. He was blocked as a huge mound—one of the creature's arms—crashed into the ground in front of him, blocking his escape. Clods glanced off of his body, and he flinched as a gravestone slammed into the ground next to him, having narrowly missing his head by less than a foot.

Then, it was over. The cleric of Dagos turned, and saw a new hill had formed where most of the creature's body had collapsed. Gray dust hung thick in the air, drifting into his lungs, making him choke.

The cleric started back toward the mound. Something stirred in the dirt, and he headed for it, thinking it would be Dar, or one of the others absorbed by the creature.

But the thing that rose up out of the dirt was not one of his companions. Covered in dirt, Varo nevertheless instantly identified the gray, mottled flesh, the stiff movements, and above all, the unnatural aura of undeath that hung about the creature. Even before it turned its vacant gaze upon him.

And all around him, more zombies were stirring, rising up out of the remains of the corpse gatherer.

Dozens of them.

The battle, as it turned out, had not been won; if anything, it had just begun.

Chaper 137

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

Surrounded by zombies, nearly shorn of spells, Licinius Varo found himself in a rather precarious situation. The zombies closed around him, a tightening ring almost without break.

Varo lifted his hands to his divine focus, but said nothing as he waited there, silent.

The zombies surged forward, eager to rend him apart. But as several lunged laboriously to seize him, their groping hands passed through the cleric, and they collided into each other.

Varo, shrouded by his *mislead* spell, moved cautiously away as the zombies dealt with his illusory double. He started circumnavigating the mound of the gatherer's remains, searching for signs.

He didn't have to go far. He heard Dar before he saw him, laying about him with a dagger in each hand, knocking back the zombies that were trying to bring him down. As Varo watched, he drove his punching dagger up through the jaw of one, impaling it through its skull. As the zombie flailed at him he roared and hurled the creature behind him, knocking it into a second that had come on him from behind, sending both collapsing back into the dirt. Several other zombies were approaching fast, but he

looked to be all right, at least for the immediate moment. With his heavy armor, they would have a tough time hurting him with bare hands, and he wasn't going to bet money on their being able to drag him down, earlier.

Varo saw the other thing he'd been looking for, a flash of white light, and headed past Dar toward the center of the mound. He left deep prints in the piled dirt, but fortunately for him, zombies were not very observant.

He saw the sword jutting from the mound, but Allera had beaten him to it. The healer, ignoring the zombies that were already starting to grab at her, was digging frantically through the dirt, trying to find something.

Varo considered his wand; nearly out of charges, but very effective against lesser undead such as these. The only problem was the sheer number of foes.

His gaze shifted to his left. He took a few steps, and lifted *Beatus Incendia* from where it had fallen in the dirt. He could feel the surging hatred in the blade as soon as he touched it, but he'd expected that, and he ignored it as he swept the blade into a zombie that had grabbed onto Allera, and started to drag her up from her digging.

Allera let out a tiny shriek, but tore free as Varo clumsily hacked into the zombie with the holy sword. He wasn't a trained fighter, but the power infused in the weapon more than compensated, and the zombie collapsed. A second zombie reached for Allera before she could turn, but it was distracted by a flutter of wings, and shallow gashes appeared across its forehead as Snaggletooth appeared in front of it. The zombie reached for the faerie dragon, but the nimble creature easily avoided its grasp.

"Who's there?" Allera asked. Varo, protected still by his *mislead* spell, remained invisible even after his attack. A zombie, perhaps slightly brighter than its kin, seemed to realize that *something* had to be holding that flaming sword in mid-air, and it lurched at him.

"It's Varo," he said, as he dodged its attack, and took off one of its arms with *Beatus Incendia*. "Have you found Talen?"

"He's here, I can feel it..." she said, but trailed off as she continued probing through the dirt. Varo left her to her work, and focused on keeping the zombies off her. The dragon helped, although it wasn't really able to hurt them, instead focusing on keeping the enemy distracted.

Looking around, he saw that some of the riders had returned, and were fighting their way to Dar. The zombies attacking his false image had finally realized their mistake, and were moving either toward the fighter, or toward him and Allera. There was no sign of Shaylara.

"I've found him!" Allera yelled, digging even more furiously in the dirt.

“Is he alive?” Varo asked, grunting as a zombie raked dirt-encrusted claws across his jaw. Stepping back, the cleric raised the holy sword in both hands and drove it through the zombie’s neck, nearly taking its head off its body. The zombie crumpled, but was replaced by three more that were clambering up the mound.

For several long seconds, Allera didn’t respond. Then, finally... “Yes! He’s breathing again... I’ve stabilized him, but I don’t have any more healing...”

“Here,” Varo said, sparing a moment to toss his wand of *cure moderate wounds* into her lap. “It only has a handful of charges left, but it should be enough to bring him around. Do it quickly; I am getting tired of swinging this slab of iron about.”

“We’ve got to find Shay, as well, she’ll suffocate...”

“First things first, healer.”

Dar’s men had fought their way to him, but the mercenary-turned-colonel had already started up the hill, slaying zombies as he came. As soon as he’d gotten close enough to take the pressure off of Allera, Varo stepped a few paces away, and cast a *detect magic* spell. He started scanning the mound, searching for the familiar signatures of Shaylara’s magic items. If she was further than a few feet below the surface, then he would have no chance of finding her, but if he was fortunate...

There; he didn’t bother to refine the scan, but instead negated his lingering invisibility with a thought, and pointed toward the spot that his spell had revealed. “Shaylara... she’s there,” he said, indicating a heap of dirt on the far side of the mound.

“Dig her out!” Dar yelled to his men, even as he grabbed onto a zombie from behind and hacked its head from its shoulders with his dagger. “Move it!”

Serah had come down the hill, and she ran to help the soldiers, half of whom started tearing at the small heap, while the other half took care of the few remaining zombies on that side of the mound.

Grunting with effort, Allera helped pull Talen free from the mound of dirt. The knight looked terrible, caked in dirt and blood, and with one eye swollen shut from an ugly bruise that covered the entire right side of his face. A few of his teeth were missing as well; clearly his jaw had encountered something hard during his time inside the gatherer’s body. But he was alive, and conscious.

“Thay?” he managed to spit, as Allera pulled him free. He lay there, coughing dirt from his lungs, unable to do more.

“They’re getting her,” Allera said. Looking up at Dar, who was engaged in hacking up the last two zombies atop the mound, she gave Talen a final burst of healing from Varo’s

wand, before standing and running down the mound to where the other soldiers were digging out Shay.

They found the scout's body a few seconds later; they couldn't get it out at first, and finally found a buried zombie clutching her ankle. After they'd hacked her free, they were able to pull her from the embrace of the loosely packed dirt. Her leg had been broken, and her boot had been torn off, revealing a swollen purple mess that was her left foot.

Allera all but fell onto her, checking her pulse quickly, then using the wand on her. The power of the device faltered after just one more charge, and still Shay lay there, pale, covered in dirt.

"No, damn it, don't you give up..."

Ignoring the sounds of combat that still continued a few feet away, Allera bent and pulled open the scout's mouth. Clearing the airway, she forced a breath of air into her body, then pressed onto her chest with both hands, hard. She repeated the action, and on the second breath, Shay gasped. The scout sucked in a breath, and then started coughing uncontrollably. Allera helped her, holding her to the side so she could force some of the dirt and dust from her body.

"Don't you ever do that again," the healer said.

"Ta... Ta..." She couldn't finish, as her body shook with spasms of coughing.

"He'll be fine," Allera said. "Don't try to move." Looking up to the top of the mound, she saw that Dar was already helping Talen to his feet, proving her right. But the others, she knew, would not be. Not Galen, the young knight who had been the first to strike, and the first to be drawn into the creature. Not Sextus, who had been smashed under its foot like a bug. Several of Dar's men had been killed, too; some of them might still need her help, although she would have to rely on mundane treatments for now.

Releasing Shay, she staggered to her feet. Turning, she caught sight of Varo, standing off to the side, alone. The cleric met her eyes, and for an instant, she thought she could feel him reading her thoughts, weighing them. They had won, had defeated this monstrosity of undeath, but in his eyes, she saw no triumph, only a long and dark road stretching ahead as far as anyone could see.

Suddenly, she felt very, very cold. She shuddered, and turned away to help those still among the living.

Chapter 138

PLANS OF RETRIBUTION

Bastion was a castle in the old style, an edifice of huge stone blocks formed into a large square, with cold, cramped passages inside. Its owners over the years had tried to moderate its stark interior with plush rugs and thick wool tapestries to cover the bare walls, but there was no mistaking what Bastion was: a fortress.

Situated on the edge of the angular outcropping of granite that gave Highbluff its name, Bastion had once marked the farthest extent of Camar's authority to the south. In those days, Highbluff had been on the frontier, and the fortress had been constantly manned by alert men in the orange and gold of the Duchy. Now, the frontier had moved on to the west and south, and the lands around Highbluff were fairly tame, but the place still lived on a symbol of Camar's power.

Another storm had moved in, and most of the five thousand-odd residents of Highbluff remained in their homes this night as a fierce rain fell on the town in a deluge. But despite the inclement weather, there was a flurry of activity continuing through the night going on both inside the town, and in the two large camps that had been set up on the edge of the bluff. Even this late, columns of men continued to arrive at the camps, making their way up the steep road that led up to the top of the bluff. Hooded lanterns persisted against the rain, driving back the night, while armored men walked patrols in groups of ten, peering cautiously into the rain for any hint of a threat. Each patrol carried both a large horn and a beacon lantern, and the men who carried those were especially alert.

Bastion's crowded inner bailey was also busy. Grooms cared for horses that filled its stables well beyond their intended capacity, and more patrols walked battlements that had scarcely seen a guardsman over the past year. The narrow windows of the castle itself were almost all bright despite the late hour, and a constant low din rose from the castle's tiny smithy, where men would work metal all throughout the night.

High in one corner of the castle was the private study of the Baron of Highbluff, Lord Tiberius Zenocrates. The baron was not present this night, but the room was crowded with almost a dozen individuals, seated or standing around the small conference table. Young wood cracked in the small hearth, banishing the chill of the night, but the sounds of the storm were still clearly audible, as the sound of rain and wind blowing hard against the thick lead-pane windows sounded clearly even through the closed shutters.

"We need to decide how to proceed," Talen said, laying his hands flat on the table in front of him.

"What's to decide?" Dar asked. "We *know* where they are. We just need to go in there, and clean the bastards out, once and for all."

"It is rarely that simple," Shay said. The scout huddled in her chair, and looked bone-tired. Even with magical healing, she still had an obvious limp; her foot had been seriously mangled. But Talen hadn't even tried to get her to rest instead of coming to this meeting.

"General Pravos, what further aid can we expect from Camar?"

The commander of the Ducal Guard straightened. He had only just arrived with the lead column of his men less than an hour ago, and while he'd changed clothes, his armor still bore a lot of the dirt and muck of the mired road. "The rest of my three hundred will be here by dawn," he told them. "Darius's centuries will still be a week yet, if not more; the storm has fouled many of the roads, and there has been some flooding in the lowlands."

"Apparently the rain didn't stop *you*," Dar said.

The old soldier's instinct for avoiding public criticism of a fellow officer kept his tongue, and Pravos did not respond.

Talen waved a hand dismissively. "You've all done amazingly well. Colonel Dar, getting the Border Legion all the way from the Galerr Mountains in half the time we expected was an accomplishment. And if your advance column hadn't come when it had..."

Dar nodded at the simple truth of the statement. "In all honesty, they're going to need a few days before they're ready to fight. It was quite a march."

"I think we're all going to need a few days. Allera?"

"I've spoken to the healers and clerics who arrived with General Pravos from Camar. I think we can keep any outbreaks of sickness or disease in check, but we'll need better quarters for the soldiers as soon as they can be prepared, and regular supply lines."

"I have good men on the logistical side," Pravos said. "It would be better if this damned storm passed, but we'll handle it either way."

"I talked to the baron, briefly," Talen said. "He's working with the merchants and householders to see how much space we can free up for a garrison. The barracks here at the castle wasn't built to accommodate more than a few dozen, even for short stretches."

"Why are we talking about staying here?" Dar said. "I thought this meeting was to plan our attack on those bastards in Rappan Athuk."

That name, put to words by Dar, created a moment of quiet. "We haven't forgotten, colonel," Talen said. "But if we don't attend to these things, we're not going to have much of an army to use, when it comes to it."

“We cannot take an army into that dungeon,” Shay said. “The place is a deathtrap. In such cramped quarters, the traps, secret tunnels, we’d only be shoving meat into the grinder.”

“If you’re afraid of going back...” Dar began.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Shay shot back. “A small, elite team, that is the best chance of success, now as it was before. These soldiers we have... they’re good, and a lot of them have combat experience, especially among the Border Legion. But they haven’t fought in dungeons before. They haven’t faced powerful undead... at least most of them,” she amended, as Dar opened his mouth to comment. “How many have confronted a demon? How many know the difference between yellow mold and harmless growths?”

“Shay’s right,” Talen said. “We need to select our best for this.”

Dar scowled. “Do you disagree with what’s been said, colonel?” Talen asked.

“No, dammit, it’s the right call,” Dar said. “But this is going to get bloody no matter how you call it.”

“Serah?” Talen asked. The cleric, seated at the end of the table, jumped slightly at being called upon; she’d been looking away, slightly distracted. The young woman flushed. “Yes, commander?”

“Are there any more clerics in the contingent that came from Camar with General Pravos... with sufficient power for what we intend?”

“Several have considerable skill, but I am afraid that I am the most powerful cleric in the cohort currently at Highbluff,” she said. “The most powerful cleric of the Father,” she added, with a furtive glance at Varo. “There are some individuals that can command more of the blessings of the Father in Camar; I am sure the Patriarch will send more help as soon as he can, but I cannot estimate when such help might arrive.” She smiled weakly. “It looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“Serah, you’ve already given a great deal, you don’t have to...”

“Commander, I think that we all will have to give more than just a great deal,” the young cleric said. “I... I cannot stay while you go to confront this evil. You will need the power of the Father at your side in Rappan Athuk. My own meager talents are at your disposal.”

“We think we are going to need all the divine intervention we can get,” Shay said, quietly. Talen looked at her, then shifted his gaze to the far side of the room, at the shadowy form that had remained there throughout the discussion, silent.

“Varo,” Talen said. “We need to know what we’re up against.”

The cleric of Dagos came forward. He had taken a large leather folio from his backpack, and now laid it upon the center of the table. Pieces of parchment protruded from the edges of the folder, which was fastened by a pair of leather ties on one side.

“Is this the book, the *Codex*?” Talen asked.

Varo made a small, slightly derisive smile. “No.”

“What is it then, your geometry homework?” Dar asked.

“This folio contains some of the information that I have gathered about Rappan Athuk,” the cleric said. He waved a hand carelessly at the folio. “Go ahead, open it up. The commander there,” he said, with a nod at Talen, “convinced me that I need to be more forthcoming, for the greater good of our mission.”

Dar glanced at Talen with a raised eyebrow, but didn’t say anything. No one made a grab for the folio, so Dar finally stood up and reached across the table, yanking the leather ties apart before spreading open the folder.

The folio was bound with a number of sheets of very fine parchment, most of which was covered in tiny print in a precise hand. But also included was a set of larger free sheets, which included not only writing, but diagrams, illustrations, and maps.

Shay leaned over, interested, and pulled aside one of the maps. It contained a representation of a dungeon level, or at least the portion of one that they had traversed. Those who had been there could recognize the caverns where they had confronted the ogres and Max the otyugh, and then the temple complex where they had battled the clerics of Orcus. Symbols on the edge of the map presumably indicated where the level connected to others in the dungeon. “This... this is exceptional. I do not remember seeing you drawing these while we were in the dungeon.”

“I drew them later, from memory,” Varo said.

“That is a considerable gift,” Allera said.

“No, healer, it is not,” he replied, fixing her with a cold stare. “If you saw what I have seen, and could not forget it, you would call it a curse.”

“Regardless, you know more of the cult of Orcus and its plans than any others here,” Talen said. “What must we do to put an end to their plans?”

Varo flipped open the folio to a specific page. It was covered in thaumaturgic symbols and drawings that were alien to them, but they could clearly mark out three

interconnected symbols, linked by a number of curving lines. Within the triangle demarcated by the three symbols was a depiction that they were all familiar with; the horned skull of the cult of Orcus. The skull had been drawn in exceptional detail, with flames flaring out behind it, and dark eye sockets that almost seemed to look back at them from the page.

Varo pointed to the bottommost of the three symbols. “Your objective is here, the third of the three temples of Orcus in Rappan Athuk. It is there you will find the Sphere of Souls, and from there that the cult of the demon prince prepares the ritual that will bring about the end of this world.”

Chapter 139

OPTIONS

Varo’s announcement was met with a long moment of silence. Even for him, it was a dramatic statement.

“So?” Dar finally said. “We already knew that. What the fuck are we going to do about it?”

“Varo, do you know how to get to this third temple?”

“Not specifically,” the cleric said. “In that I do not have a map of its location. However, through petitioning Dagos for information, I have determined that there are two points of access through the dungeon. The first is through the wight catacombs, where we encountered Banth.”

“Then that’s easy,” Shay said. “The bee tunnel will drop us right there.”

Varo shook his head. “That route is no longer open. I would guess that the earthquake we experienced on our last visit closed it, but it is possible that the shaft was deliberately closed after our escape from Banth’s lair.”

Dar pointed at him. “Do we *know* that?”

Varo blinked. “I know it. We can verify that it is so, if you prefer.”

Talen broke in. “You mentioned another way in.”

“Yes. I know almost nothing about it other than that it exists, and that it passes through an underground goblin city, not far from the main dungeons of Rappan Athuk.”

“Gobbos? You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“That may be where the goblins we encountered in Rappan Athuk were from,” Allera said.

“What is this city called?” Talen asked. Varo started to shake his head.

“Greznack,” Shay replied. Their faces all turned to the scout, who had leaned back in her chair again. “The goblin city is called Greznack.”

“Sounds like you know about it first hand,” Dar said.

“Not first hand,” Shay said.

The scout went on to remind them of her experiences in what the goblins called “the Great Cavern”, after her narrow escape from the river trolls on their first visit to Rappan Athuk. She’d already told them most of the story, how she’d fled the river to encounter a group of sentient but not unfriendly humanoid fungus-creatures. They had helped her rest and recover from her close call with the trolls, and then had given her food and directions to a possible exit from the cavern. It had taken her days to cross the cavern, avoiding the many hostile wandering denizens of the place. On the far side, while heading for the river exit that the fungus-men had told her of, she encountered several active mines in the cavern walls being worked by parties of goblins. The goblins had detected her, but they were not immediately hostile, and Shay spoke their language well enough to start up a dialogue with them. They had given her additional information about a possible way out, and the use of a small kayak that she eventually used to escape.

“I helped them deal with a problem they’d been having with a small group of umber hulks that had been interfering with their mining operations,” she told them. “In exchange, they helped me get out. I learned a fair amount about their tribe in the process.”

“The goblins we encountered did not seem too fond of the priests of Orcus,” Allera said. “At least, when we said that we were enemies of the cult, they did not turn on us.”

Shay nodded. “From what I understood, there are goblin priests of Orcus as well, and one of them—a fellow named Tribitz—is a big-shot in their city. I think that over time, the influence of the cult supplanted the worship of their own racial gods. But most of the miners I spoke wouldn’t give a clipped copper for the demon-worshippers. At best, I think that the two sides have an uneasy truce.”

“How many goblins in this city, Shay?” Talen asked.

“I have no idea. None of the goblins I spoke to got very specific, for obvious reasons.”

“So we can get there through this underground cavern?”

“There has to be some way, though I didn’t find it. I wasn’t really looking for anything but the way out, of course.”

“Is the river exit you took navigable?” Doran Pravos asked.

“With great difficulty,” Shay said. “We’d need either the ability to breathe water, and maybe flight as well. The current of the river was very swift, and the river exits on a cliff in a river canyon a few days’ travel from Rappan Athuk.”

“Is there another way to the goblin city, Varo?” Talen asked.

“Possibly. If we assume that the party we encountered in the troll caves came from Grezneck, then there may be an entrance in that area. I believe that there may also be a connection between the goblin city and the second temple of Orcus. Remember that we found two captive goblins there, along with Allera.”

“Those are an awful lot of ifs,” Dar said.

“Once we get close, I can call upon the power of Dagos to show me the shortest route to the temple,” Varo said. “If we come upon a dead end, we can try an alternative route.”

“So we just have to decide which way we’re going to try,” Shay said.

Talen was watching Varo. “Anything else?” the knight asked.

“There is another option,” Varo said. “We can return to the Oracle, and seek additional information.”

There was an immediate sense of disapproval, at least among those who knew what Varo was talking about. “Not a good idea,” Dar said, while Shay added, “The floating skull? That’s asking for trouble.”

“With the connector between the second and third levels destroyed, we’d have to go back down the Well to get there,” Talen said. “I do not think that this is our best option.”

Varo nodded in acceptance. “I have also found reference to another above-ground entrance to the dungeons.” He looked briefly through his notes. “Ah, yes, this is it... the ‘Temple of the Final Sacrament.’ I believe that it is located not far from Rappan Athuk, but it enters the dungeon only by a very circuitous route, if my sources are accurate.”

“Guarded?” Talen asked.

“By fell things, according to the clues provided in the *Codex*. It passes through something called the ‘Bloodways’ before linking up to another part of the dungeon complex.”

“That doesn’t sound very appealing,” Shay said.

“What about magical transportation?” Talen asked. “Honoratius, and maybe others among the Guild mages, can *teleport*. Could he send a party directly into Rappan Athuk, or this temple?”

Varo shook his head. “The temples are all protected against scrying magic and transportation of this sort. It might be possible to enter other parts of the dungeon, but I would not recommend it as a first choice. There are powerful, dangerous energies that permeate the entire complex. *Teleportation* is not an especially safe means of transport even aboveground.”

“And we would have to go all the way back to Camar, and ask Archmage Honoratius to help us,” Allera said.

“There is that,” Varo acknowledged.

“It would appear that we have many options, and none of them are especially pleasant,” Talen said.

“I say we go through the goblin city,” Dar said. “Should serve as a nice warm up before we get to the priests.”

“If we do go that way, we’re not going to be looking for a fight,” Talen said. “From what Shay said, some of them might even help us.”

“If you’re dumb enough to trust a gobbo with your back, then don’t be surprised when you find a knife in it,” Dar said.

Talen rubbed his face. “It is late, and most of us have been up for a full day or more. See to your men, and get some rest; we’ll talk again in the morning, over breakfast.”

“The decision’s not going to be any easier then, general,” Dar said, pulling himself up. The others got up as well, while Varo reclaimed his papers and sealed them back in the folio. The group broke up, and a heavy mood hung in the air as the group gathered up their possessions and headed for the door.

“Damned if I don’t need a drink,” Dar said. “Say, any of you know if this town has a brothel?”

“You look like you can barely stand, let alone handle a woman,” Shay said, her voice thick with scorn.

“Hey, for that, you don’t need to stand. You can let the woman do most of the work...”

Shay ignored him and headed out into the hall that led to the stairs. The guest quarters were all on the ground floor of the castle, accessed by a narrow staircase that connected the citadel’s four main levels, as well as several sub-basements that burrowed down into the foundations of the bluff. Talen was speaking to General Pravos as they walked to the stairs, but Varo was waiting for Shay, and pulled her aside as she left the room.

“Tell me more about this cavern, and the river you used to depart it,” he asked. The two of them continued after the others, engaged in quiet conversation.

Dar and Allera were among the last to leave. For a moment, they stood there in the doorway, an uncomfortable silence hanging between them.

“I’m glad that you decided to accept Tiros’s commission,” she finally told him. “Camar needs you, now more than ever.”

“Just Camar?” he said.

She put a hand on his chest, just for a moment. “Go to bed, Dar,” she told him, turning and walking past him down the hall. After a moment, he followed, catching up to her at the top of the stairs.

“So, was that an offer?”

“Somehow, it’s reassuring, in times of chaos and change like these, with our lives and the very future of Camar in doubt, that there is at least one thing in the universe that will never change: Corath Dar.”

“You know, sometimes I’m not completely sure whether or not you’re insulting me.”

She shot a dry look over her shoulder. “When in doubt...”

She trailed off, as they rounded a bend in the stairs and saw a small commotion below coming from the ground floor. A gust of cold air rushed up the steps, and they could see that the outer doors of the castle were open, and a number of drenched newcomers had crowded into the foyer. There were four of them, clad in heavy winter cloaks, attended by a number of tired-looking servants in the baron’s livery.

Talen and Shay were speaking to two of them, a pair that Allera recognized even before she heard Talen use their names.

“Pella, Baraka, it’s good to see you. What word from the marshal?”

Allera hurried down to join them, but as she reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard a familiar voice speak her name.

“Allera.”

She turned to her left to see a slender figure draped in a heavy gray cloak, standing in an adjacent archway just off to the side of the main doors. He wore a cowl that covered his features entirely, but as he came forward, he reached up to pull it back, revealing a face Allera had not expected to see again anytime soon, let alone here.

“Ikarus!”

“It’s good to see you, Allera.” The young man embraced her, then pulled back quickly as his soaked cloak dampened her clothes. “Ah, sorry about that. Rough road, tonight. Gods, it’s good to see you,” he repeated.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

“It’s been five years. I guess you could say I’ve grown up.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I had heard that there was a war on,” he said, dryly.

“But your work at the hospital at Greenrise...”

“Come on, Allera, you were the one who taught me about the ‘greater good’, remember? Undead armies marching across the land, a dark evil stirring underground... *this* is where we’re needed.”

“Who’s this?”

Allera coughed and turned to see Dar, still standing on the steps, looming over them. “Ah, Ikarus Davaron, this is Corath Dar. Ikarus is one of the best healers in Camar, and was once... one of my students.”

“Allera flatters me, and is herself too modest. What limited skills I possess today are solely attributable to her expert instruction.” The young man put a hand on the older healer’s arm in a way that caused Dar’s expression to darken slightly. But Allera quickly turned, breaking the incidental contact as Talen came forward to address those gathered in the foyer.

“We’re going to have a long road ahead of us soon,” the knight commander said. “There’s not much of a night left to us, but get what rest you can. We’ll talk in the morning.”

As the group began to break up, Ikarus touched Allera's shoulder. "I guess I'd better find my bunk, then. We'll talk again tomorrow, I'm sure. Nice to meet you, Corath."

As the younger man left, Allera turned to Dar. "Ikarus was one of my first pupils," she said. "His gift is considerable... he was... is... one of the better healers I've ever worked with."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, Allera," Dar said, walking past her to the corridor that led to his assigned quarters in the castle.

Allera remained a moment, until she was the last one in the foyer. She felt a familiar weight settle on her shoulder, although there was nothing visible there. A soft voice warbled in her ear.

"Complicated? Yes, you could say that," she said quietly, then headed to her own room.

Chapter 140

A PARTING OF WAYS

The rough storm had passed. As the morning gave way to afternoon, the dense gray cloud cover actually parted to reveal a cool winter sun that shone on the column of riders headed down the coast road from Camar. The blue sky contrasted with the bracing chill in the air, and the lingering signs of the storm, from the mud that covered the legs of the horses, to the frequent fallen branches and uprooted brush that cluttered the road. But the road was still much better than traveling crosscountry, and the riders made very good time.

There were nearly a hundred riders in the column, clad in heavy wool cloaks over their armor and thick winter clothes. The majority were clad in uniforms, either the orange and gold of the Ducal Guard, or the orange and brown of the legions. Talen rode in the van, accompanied by Shay, Pella Dorin, and Baraka Suhn. The last two, killed in the battle against the cornugon that had ruled Camar as the Grand Duke, had been *raised* by Licinius Varo and Gaius Annochus in the aftermath of that violent and decisive day. Velan Tiros had kept his promise to have the men and women who died in that battle brought back to life, even though the cost had been a fortune in diamonds needed to augment the power of the clerics' spells. Both had a slightly haunted look to them, perhaps understandable as people who had twice made a journey that almost all mortals made but once.

Further back in the column, Allera rode with Ikarus and Serah. The two healers carried on a quiet conversation as they rode, but the cleric of the Shining Father rarely joined in

unless directly spoke to. Snaggletooth occasionally made an appearance, flying overhead or riding on Allera's saddlebags; Ikarus seemed fascinated by Allera's friendship with the creature, and once the tiny dragon deigned to land on the male healer's saddle to accept the gift of a pear. Serah would frequently reach up and grab onto her holy symbol, only to hastily lower her hand when she realized what she was doing. She wore a new shirt of chain links over her tunic, provided from the baron's armory at Highbluff.

Toward the end of the column, Dar rode with a small contingent of men from the Border Legion. The legionaries were hard-edged men who wore mismatched furs over their rather threadbare uniforms; a traveler might have been forgiven for mistaking them for brigands at first glance. They spoke little amongst themselves, and rode with the surly mein of soldiers riding off to another dirty, unwanted job.

At the very end, last save for the half-dozen riders of the rear guard, rode Varo. No one made an effort to speak to the cleric, nor did he seek out any of the others. Even his horse seemed unsatisfied with its proximity to the priest of Dagos, frequently shying in protest as Varo prodded it after the others down the road.

The group grew wary as the ground to their right became marshy and fetid with the smell of mold and rot, and Talen sent out extra outriders to ward their flank. But nothing stirred out of the Dragonmarsh Lowlands to trouble them.

After a few more hours, they came to a weathered old bridge that spanned a river gorge. The river, swollen by the recent rains, rushed by thirty feet below in a white froth. The bridge was barely wide enough to accommodate a wagon, and its heavy boards creaked as the soldiers of the company dismounted and walked across, but the entire group made it to the far side without incident.

On the far side, Talen gathered his people together with the officers of the military contingent. The soldiers took advantage of the pause to tend to their mounts, and to grab a quick meal.

"All right," Talen said to the senior officer, a captain named Talemon. "We'll be taking our leave here. Is there anything else you need, captain?"

"No, sir," the officer said. "We've got decent maps of the region, and should be able the old ruins of Southwatch without difficulty. Once there, we'll start setting up the advance base, and wait for the main force to make its way down from Highbluff."

Talen nodded. "Send out scouting parties, but don't divide your strength unduly until Pravos arrives. And don't go near Rappan Athuk, not without orders."

"No need to worry about that, sir," one of the younger lieutenants said. Talemon silenced him with a hard look, then added, "Good luck to you as well, sir. We'll be at the rendezvous, in case you need help."

Talen nodded. He hadn't shared many details of their own mission, and the captain, an experienced officer, hadn't asked. The knight saluted, and all four officers returned the gesture crisply.

A short distance away, Dar was making his own farewells to his troops. "Right, you lot play nice with the other kids," he said. He turned to his senior sergeant, the same noncom who had accompanied him to the camp of the Border Legion, and tossed the reins of his horse to him. "I expect you to keep Valdes and the other captains out of trouble, sergeant. Show these city pukers what bordermen can do."

"Yes, sir!" several of the legionaries replied.

Dar grabbed his pack from the back of the horse, and jerked a thumb at three of his men, who had likewise dismounted and gathered near him. The other fifteen legionaries headed over to join the main force that would be continuing down the road.

The young healer, Ikarus, came over to Talen, who was working out a few last-minute details of supplies and marching order with Shay and Baraka. "Commander?"

"Yes, healer?"

"I'd like to request that I be added to your group, sir."

Talen looked the young man up and down. "The military contingent's going to need a healer."

"With all due respect, sir, you're going to need all the power you can get, where you're going."

Talen shot a loaded glance at Allera, who had handed over her horse to a soldier and came up to join them. "Allera didn't tell me anything, commander, but it doesn't take a genius to know that you guys are going to be taking on the cult of Orcus, wherever you are going."

Allera didn't say anything, but her will was clear in the look she gave Talen.

The knight finally shook his head. "I appreciate the offer, but my orders stand. We've spent some time in this region, and those soldiers are going to need your help."

"It's not just injuries, Ikarus," Allera said. "That ruin is going to have to accommodate hundreds of men, for who knows how long, and Pravos is going to need your help in ensuring that sickness doesn't debilitate his men and women."

"I understand," Ikarus said. "Good luck to you, then, commander. Allera."

“And to you,” Talen said.

Allera walked with Ikarus for part of the way back to the soldiers, who were already starting to prepare to move out again. “That was foolish,” she told him.

“Why? Because I want to use my gifts where they will do the most good?”

“It is going to be incredibly dangerous where we are going, Ike.”

“That isn’t stopping you. Or do you feel that I am not up to the challenge?”

“No, it’s not that. I don’t know.”

He smiled and touched her hand. “I know. Still looking out for me, eh?”

“I don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

“We are in full agreement on that score,” he said, with a chuckle.

“Do be careful. Even when the main body of soldiers arrive, your group is going to be far from safe. The enemy has potent and terrible allies, and who knows what they will call upon to throw next at Camar.”

He nodded. “I may not have always done my homework, but I have learned to keep my eyes open.” He dug into his satchel. “Here. I want you to have this.” He presented her with a leather scroll case, which contained a parchment scroll, wound around a slender wand carved with intricate spiral patterns in the dark wood.

Allera examined the scroll and the wand. “This is good work,” she said.

“The wand is fully charged, with a *cure moderate wounds* spell.”

She slid the scroll back into the case. “I cannot accept these; you will need them...”

“I have another wand, with a few dozen charges left,” he told her. “If I can’t go with you, at least I’ll know that I’m able to help you at least in this way.”

She nodded, and the two healers embraced for a moment, before Ikarus headed back to rejoin to column of soldiers that was about ready to move out.

From a short distance away, Dar watched them, his eyes cold.

The two groups split apart, with Talen’s force taking up their packs and extra gear, while the soldiers gathered up in formation again on the road south. The smaller company, with Shay and Baraka in the lead, set out on foot along the edge of the river gorge, heading west. In addition to the scouts, this group included Talen, Allera and

Snaggletooth, Varo, Serah, and Pella. Dar and the three legionaries that he'd selected out of his group brought up the rear of the column.

The three soldiers of the Border Legion were named Bullo, Travius, and Kalend. The first two were warriors through and through, with thick arms and legs, and numerous scars visible wherever bare flesh showed. Bullo favored the greataxe, while Travius fought with a pair of viciously sharp Legion shortswords. Kalend, while only marginally smaller than the first two, was more subtle; while he referred to himself as a "finder", it was quite obvious what he was in fact; he made no effort to hide the pair of thief-brands burned into his cheeks. All three carried short composite bows in addition to their other weapons.

The terrain to the west of the road quickly grew rough, and within just a few minutes the cavalry column had vanished out of sight behind them. The land seemed as though it had been smashed by a mighty fist from the heavens; gaping crevices and deep cracks frequently blocked their path, the wider of those requiring them to shift their course to go around them. Small ridges and canyons likewise appeared across their path, and they quickly found use for both their climbing gear and the coils of heavy rope that they'd packed. It was clear within an hour that they'd made the right decision in leaving their mounts with the main body of soldiers. Shay kept them on course by roughly aligning their course with the river gorge, although their wandering route often forced them to lose sight of it for hours on end.

They had only covered a few miles when night caught up with them. The rough terrain worked to their advantage in this one instance, and they were able to find a jutting tor with steep sides and a narrow, defensible gap in the summit. With so many experienced veterans in the group, they were able to efficiently set up a very secure camp, and after a hasty meal and establishing double watches they retired for the night.

Dawn came swiftly, and without incident. The air was bracingly cold, their breath forming plumes as the companions worked to prepare the morning meal and break down their camp. But the weather had thankfully held, although an ominous new bank of gray clouds had formed along the eastern horizon.

"If we don't get to our destination soon, we may have another storm to deal with," Talen said, looking east.

"We should get there by midday," Shay said. "Last time, I made it only a few miles before the rapids claimed my boat. We'll have to go all the way up here; the river is still swollen with the rains, and there's no way we could navigate the gorge itself. I tried to pay attention to where the underground river came out, and I think I can find the landmarks I noted before."

"Things may look different from up here than they did from the bottom of the gorge," Pella said.

Shay shrugged. "If we find ourselves in a swamp, we'll know we went too far."

Talen cinched up his pack and slung it across his shoulders. "All right, let's get moving."

By the time that the day had fully broken, the morning sun still shrouded behind the line of clouds to the east, their trail had shifted back to the edge of the gorge. The gorge had deepened as the surrounding land had risen, and the rushing froth of the river was now at least sixty feet below them, its passage making a dull roar that echoed off the walls of the gorge. The land on the other side of the river was rougher, if anything, than that on their side.

There was something else of note on the far side of the gorge as well.

"Trolls!" Pella warned, although it was doubtful that any of them would have missed the six hulking forms that appeared around a hillock along the edge of the opposite cliff. From the harsh cries from that side, it was clear that the creatures had spotted them as well.

Chapter 141

STRANGERS ACROSS A CHASM

Arrows filled the air, and despite the uncertain updraft from the river gorge, several shots from that first volley scored hits. The gorge had widened somewhat from the bridge, but it was still less than a hundred feet across, well within the range of the compact but powerful bows that most of the companions carried.

But the trolls merely plucked the missiles from their leathery hides, and started grabbing stones, hurling them across the chasm at their foes. Most of the heavier rocks fell well short, but a few stones the size of a child's head landed in the ranks of the Camarians, shattering as they impacted the ground on their side of the gorge. None of them were hit in that initial exchange, but the threat was clear enough to drive them into cover.

Arrows continued to fly across the gorge, but while several of the trolls were starting to sprout arrows from their upper bodies like porcupine spines, none of them went down.

"Focus your fire on one of them!" Pella urged, sighting down the length of a shaft held in her powerful longbow. The archer fired with cool precision, and each of her arrows had found a mark thus far, driving deep into the body of one of the trolls. This one was no different, stabbing into the center of the troll's forehead. The troll staggered back, injured, but clearly the arrow hadn't penetrated through its thick skull. "The one on the end!"

“You may as well save your shafts,” Varo said. “They will just regenerate, and we don’t have any fire or acid attacks that can be utilized at range.”

“Gods damned motherfucking sons of bastard shitfucks!” Travius yelled, grimacing in pain as he fell back, clutching his left leg where one of the hurled rocks had finally found a mark. Allera hurried over to him, pulling him back into a sheltered space behind a boulder before healing his injury.

The troll on the far end that Pella had identified slumped down, staggered by no less than ten arrows jutting from its body, but as it fell, still conscious, it began to pluck out shafts from its body.

“Varo’s right,” Talen said. “This isn’t accomplishing anything. Hold your fire!”

“You’re lucky we can’t get over there, you pricks!” Bullo yelled across the chasm. The trolls shouted back comments that were in all likelihood just as pithy, but they made no move to descend into the raging torrent below. Instead, they headed back into the hills to the west, disappearing quickly from view. The last to depart was the wounded one, still yanking out arrows, leaving a bloody trail behind it.

“Yeah, that’s right, run you motherfuckers!” Travius yelled, adding a shout of pain as Allera adjusted his leg to help her healing knit the broken bone back together.

“If you think they’re done with us, you’re a fool,” Baraka Sunh said, unstringing his bow and putting it back into the case across his back.

“If we’re lucky, we’ll reach our destination before they return,” Talen said. “Shay, Baraka, take us out.”

The companions continued on their way, with more than a few looks back across at the trail where the trolls had disappeared.

It took the rest of the morning, and a few more shifts of direction to navigate around crevices too wide to jump, before they found themselves back at the river gorge. Shay walked ahead to the very edge of the cliff, kneeling at the edge and scanning the canyon in both directions.

Talen came up, removing his helmet to wipe his forehead of sweat. The trek had been particularly difficult for him in his heavy armor, but the knight commander had not complained. That was in stark contrast with Dar, who had offered commentary on the cold wind, the hot sun, the ill fit of his armor (and the parentage of whoever had originally forged it for Gudmund), the rough terrain, various gods, and both the collective and individual members of the cult of Orcus. If nothing else, the other members of the company had been given the opportunity to learn creative new applications of profanity from the members of the Border Legion, who were true craftsman of the genre.

Talen quickly replaced his helm. Despite his warmth from the hike in armor, the sun had been chased by the storm clouds from the east throughout the morning, and while it still shone high above them for the moment, it seemed pretty clear that the clouds would overtake it before the end of the day.

“Shay?” Talen asked. “How much further?”

Shay had leaned out precariously over the edge of the chasm, peering left, where the river gorge bent slightly to the south. “There,” she said, pointing at an outcrop of stone below. “We’re here.”

“How do we get down?” Serah asked, staying well back from the edge.

“We climb,” Baraka said, lifting a coil of heavy rope from across his shoulders.

It took them a good thirty minutes just to get above the spot that Shay had indicated. The overhang in the gorge was less than a hundred feet away, but between them and it the ground rose up in a stunted ridge, with a crumbling cliff fifteen feet high blocking them. They could have gone inland to look for a cleft or a break that would have allowed them to bypass the barrier, but the scouts warned that the seemingly minor detour might cause them overshoot their destination, forcing them to backtrack. Glancing up at the inclement skies, Talen agreed that it would be better just to tackle the obstacle.

Boosted by Baraka, Shay leapt up the cliff easily enough, and secured their rope to a boulder. The climb was theoretically an easy one, but the rocks of the cliff came away with random ease, and more than one of them had bruised arms and shins by the time they had all made it up. The far side of the rise was a more navigable slope back down to the level they’d been at before, but Serah put a foot on a loose stone and fell hard, spraining her wrist as she slid eight feet to the base of the ridge. Allera quickly moved to help her, and healing magic eased the damage caused by the fall, but the cleric looked chastened.

“I’m sorry,” she said, as Talen and Pella came over to her. “I guess I’m not much of a climber.”

“Don’t worry,” Talen said. “It could have happened to any of us; I’m surprised that we haven’t had more injuries thus far, given the difficulty of the terrain.”

“Besides, better to get the fall out of the way on the eight foot hill, rather than on the sixty foot cliff,” Dar said. The fighter was standing at the edge of the gorge, looking down at their objective below. Bullo came up beside him, and hurled a fat gob of spit out into the chasm. Both men watched it fall into the raging torrent below. If anything, the river seemed more violent here, smashing against the rocks on the side of the gorge.

Kalend came up, and took a look. "Long way down," he said.

Shay and Baraka were already talking quietly about the best approach to the climb. Talen came over to them. "What do you think?"

Shay turned to him. "It's a more or less straight shot down. The problem's not going to be the descent, but what's at the bottom. There aren't a lot of flat spaces down there, and everything's going to be covered in water. Slick, cold, and noisy to boot."

Talen glanced over the edge. "And the river... you said it's navigable?"

"For most of its length, yes. At least when I came down, there were banks on the side that could be walked almost all of the way back into the cavern. But at the end, where it emerges from underground and hits the river, it's almost entirely underwater, pretty rough."

Talen turned and saw that Varo had made his way down the hill, and was standing a short distance away, giving the cliff edge a small but definite berth. *Don't tell me he's afraid of heights!* Talen thought.

But the cleric merely met his questioning gaze with a small nod. "I am ready, commander."

"Shay?"

"I'll go down first, and set up a guide rope along the top of the overhang," the scout said. "We've got plenty of spikes, better to use them, and minimize the chances of someone falling. Baraka can help, he's got the footing of a mountain ram."

The ranger nodded, already replacing his gauntlets with tight leather climbing gloves.

The pair worked efficiently in tandem, securing a pair of ropes to some very large boulders, and then tossing the coils out over the chasm. Talen set a few of his people to watch the ridges to the south and west, and then crept up to the edge of the cliff to monitor the climbers.

Shay and Baraka had already reached the overhang, and were affixing the ropes to the stone ledge using pitons. Talen wasn't quite sure how they would get to the outlet itself without being blasted away by the surging water, but Varo had said he would handle that, and while the knight did not trust the cleric as far as he could throw him, he had to admit that his divine talents were considerable.

He saw Shay look up and wave to him.

"All right, Varo, you're up."

The cleric nodded, and went over to the rope. If Talen's suspicions about Varo's fears were accurate, the cleric gave no sign at all as he descended on the rope. He was a bit clumsy, but the scouts had rigged everything carefully, and it only took him a few minutes to make it down to the overhang.

"You want me to head down and babysit him?" Dar asked.

"Shay and Baraka can do that," Talen said. "Let him do whatever he's going to do, first, and then we'll head down. I want you to bring up the rear; you're a good climber, and if there's trouble while we're heading down, you can handle it."

Dar grinned. "The more things change, the more they stay the..."

But before the fighter could finish his thought, he was cut off by a loud cry from Travius, keeping watch on a protruding knot of boulders a short distance to the west. As the legionary lifted his bow, shouting a warning, something hard slammed into his chest, and he toppled over, falling six feet onto his back. The man struggled to get up, but could not.

Allera was already running toward him, even as Talen shouted orders to his people. Dar and Bullo, hefting their weapons, headed toward Travius's position, beyond which the ground rose again in a rough, uneven slope up to a jagged crest about a bowshot away.

But the enemy that had felled Travius was much closer. As Dar reached the knot of boulders, he saw that there was a culvert that began on its far side, and which cut deep into the opposing ridge. He couldn't see far into it, as it curved out of view, but what he saw was enough.

The culvert was packed with trolls, who saw him at once, and surged forward to attack.

Chapter 142

THE MEN OF THE LEGION

Dar had not chosen the three legionaries by accident.

Following his initial encounter with the former commander of the Border Legion, the bowl-shaped valley of the legion camp had been thrown into chaos. Noncoms had rushed about shouting orders, and common soldiers and officers alike had run about as they hastened in their preparation for departure.

A particular building, half-buried in the hillside overlooking the camp, had seen a particular intensity of foot traffic. Men had come and gone in a steady stream, often leaving with burdens wrapped in sackcloth, or entering with items and leaving without them a few minutes later.

Inside, the place had been crowded with crates, barrels, and other sundries, packed close around the walls. Legionaries came and went, exchanging words with the lean man standing to one side of the place, his iron eyes weighing every detail of the men who entered. The light was weak, cast by a few tallow candles set into niches in the walls, but it had been enough to reveal the twin brands blazed into his cheeks; the mark of a convicted thief.

The branded man had worked quickly. Goods and coins exchanged hands quickly, the men turning and departing as soon as their business had been completed, only to be replaced by another. The thief was assisted by a pair of brawny youths who moved gear out of the containers into the hands of the soldiers, as needed. The coins all vanished into the pockets of the thief, as if by magic.

A tall man whose head and shoulders were masked by a cowled cloak entered, ducking as he passed through the crowded lintel. "All right, move it along, move it along," the thief said, chivvying the men who moved past the newcomer toward the exit, their business just concluded.

"Kalend?" the newcomer asked, his head still low, although the rafters inside were high enough to provide sufficient clearance.

"Yeah, what you got?" the marked man said. "I'm sorry to rush things, but we've got to get moving, I'm liquidating everything at reduced prices. The new colonel..."

He trailed off, as he looked at the newcomer, who had still not straightened to reveal his face. "Ah," Kalend said. "Welcome, Colonel Dar."

The man now did stand fully, pulling back his hood. Kalend's two assistants pulled back in alarm, and those legionaries waiting behind him very suddenly decided that they had to be someplace else, *now*.

Kalend just looked at his superior officer, his eyes calm. "Is there something I can do for you, colonel?"

Dar reached over and yanked open one of the crates. He took a look inside. "Illegal dealing in legion supplies during a time of war is a capital offense," he said simply.

The two young soldiers blanched, but Kalend merely nodded. There was a dagger on the small table beside him, but he made no move for it; he reached slowly into his cloak, drawing out a fat purse. He dropped it onto the knife; the purse landed with a fat clink. "You see these marks, colonel," he said, turning his head slightly to clearly show the

brands on his cheeks. "I spent a great deal of time trying to hide them... until I finally realized, one day, that they merely identified what I am."

Dar regarded him for a long moment. Finally, he gestured to the two soldiers. "Get out of here. Tell Sergeant Callus to get a crew up here, to clear out these supplies."

The two men let out a pair of audible sighs of relief and exited with great dispatch.

Kalend said nothing, waiting. Dar motioned to the purse. Kalend tossed it over to him. Dar looked at him, and after a moment the thief drew out another purse, which went over as well.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear," Dar had said. "I am going to need every single man for what we're heading into, but I am neither forgetting, nor forgiving." He extended a finger and pointed to the thief as he pocketed the two purses. "Your life, it belongs to *me* now."

Kalend nodded. "Fair enough."

* * * * *

True to Dar's initial word, the first lines of soldiers and animals had been moving through the mountains by the time that the sun had disappeared behind the line of peaks to the west, trailing a long stream of auxiliaries, pack animals, supply carts, and camp followers. The latter had been forced to hurry to keep up; their new colonel had set a harsh pace, one that had sparked more than a few complaints from the men of the Legion. But after word had spread of how their new commander had handled the reluctance of the old, nobody had offered an official protest.

They had maintained their march until the twilight had deepened almost to full night, setting camp in the foothills already a good distance below the mountain valley. Exhausted even from the half-day's march, and sensing that even longer days were ahead, the men of the Legion had staked their tents and retired to an exhausted rest.

They had been right about the tenor of the march, and the will of their new commander. The pace was even rougher the next day, and their supplies and support had fallen further behind as they reached the lowlands and really began to eat up the miles. A number of men had fallen out, unable to continue, but every time someone had flagged, it seemed that Dar had been there. He had a horse, but the colonel walked as often as not, and those who faltered had to face their leader's cold stare. A few had been left behind to catch up with the supply train, but the majority of those who'd had problems rejoined the column, digging deeper into reserves of energy to somehow keep on going.

They had pushed on that day until they came to one of the small, scattered settlements that lay in the shadow of the Galerr Mountains. The place had been barely long enough to even be called a "village" proper, occupied by only a few dozen steads. The Legion

set up camp in a ring around the place. The steaders had protested when Dar had claimed their animals and extra food supplies for provender for his men, but they had been wise enough not to press their complaints too aggressively. Dar had paid with the coin he'd taken from Kalend, which had at least mollified their protests somewhat.

That night, the legion had fallen into another exhausted sleep, but a commotion in the village had disturbed their rest just after midnight. Dar had shown up quickly, a cloak hastily thrown over his muscled form. A light drizzle had begun to fall, as he and several of his officers entered a sagging old barn in the back of the village.

The barn had been occupied by several villagers, including the headman, a grizzled but broad-shouldered man who carried an axe handle as though it was a Legion broadsword. He had been the one who had negotiated with Dar earlier, for the animals and foodstuffs.

Dar had taken in the scene quickly. There was a girl, her hair and dress quite obviously mussed. And one of his men, a muscled hulk clad only in a legion undertunic, flanked by armed soldiers.

"This bastard prick raped my daughter, colonel," the headman had said.

"She gave it up, right eno—" the legionary had begun, but was interrupted as Dar lifted a finger.

"Shut. Up."

Dar had turned to the headman. "We'll handle this."

"But my daughter..."

"We're at war, steader. You will be... compensated... for your loss, but I need to be on the road at dawn."

The man had not been happy, but he saw the look in Dar's eyes, and did not challenge him. Taking his daughter and his men with him, he had allowed himself to be escorted from the barn by one of Dar's officers.

Dar had walked over to the half-naked legionary. "You are out of uniform, soldier."

"Sir, yes sir!"

"What is your name?"

"Arias Bullo, sir!"

"I have heard your name before, Bullo. Your officers say that you are a fierce fighter."

“Sir, I like to kick some ass, sir!”

“But apparently, your talents in the fight do not carry over to good decision-making.” Dar stepped closer. “Legionary Bullo, did I, or did I not, give orders that the legion wasn’t to fuck with the locals?”

“Sir, as I said, she came to me...”

Dar smashed him hard in the stomach. The legionary was as big as he was, but the blow blasted the air out of his lungs, and he fell to the ground. “I don’t give a *fuck* about what some peasant bink did or did not do, soldier. Did I, or did I not, give *orders* not to fuck with the villagers?”

The soldier managed to look up, but wasn’t able to respond.

“Pick him up,” Dar had said to the other soldiers. He turned to leave. “Give him fifty stripes in the morning, in the middle of the village.” He started toward the doorway of the barn, but paused.

“I am going to need every man for what’s coming,” he said, looking at Bullo, but his words were meant for all of them. “We are heading into some serious shit, mark me. I need to know I can count on the men who have my back.”

Bullo had been helped up by the soldiers flanking him, but now he shrugged them off. “Sir, yes sir!” he rasped.

Dar nodded, and left.

* * * * *

The weather had turned nasty. Gusts of wind caused the walls of the tent to flap madly, and the flames of the two lamps flickered fitfully, casting everything inside into shadow.

Dar looked at the man that had been brought before him. The soldier was covered in blood and mud, and he looked as though he’d been trampled in a stampede. He had been healed, but he still bore the marks of his wounds, his face and bare arms scarred with acid burns. A faint trickle of blood trickled down his face from a gash over his left eye.

“Legionary, I most assuredly do not need this shit right now,” Dar said.

The injured man did not respond.

Dar looked him over. The man had to be in pain from his wounds, but he did not quiver under the scrutiny.

“You’re a fighter, Travius, and I’m going to need every fighter I can get for what’s coming,” Dar said. “But this is a legion, soldier, not a mob. I don’t want a man at my back who will not follow orders.”

Something flickered in the man’s eyes, but he remained silent.

Dar glanced over at his senior sergeant, a scarred man by the name of Callus. He had already heard the legionary’s story from him. “Jovran was already dead. All you managed to accomplish by your reckless charge was to jeopardize your own life, and the lives of your squadmates.”

At that the injured man finally spoke. “I had to try to save him, colonel.”

Dar rose from his camp chair. He turned and walked across the interior of the small command tent. “It’s true then, what they’ve said about the two of you? Or are you going to deny it?”

Travius looked up at him. “I won’t deny his memory, not now, not ever, colonel.”

Dar nodded to himself, and continued pacing across the limited interior of the tent. “Personally, I don’t give a shit who or what you stick your dick in, soldier.” He sat back down. “But you disobeyed a direct order from your superior, in a combat situation. Never mind that you killed those two ankhegs by yourself,” he added in a quiet undertone, almost to himself.

Travius did not respond.

“What am I supposed to do with you, Travius? Captain Valdes has made it clear that he doesn’t want you back in his century.”

“Because of what I am.”

Dar smashed his fist down on his folding camp table, nearly unbalancing it. “No, damn it, because you defied his orders!” But the colonel frowned; he was too much a veteran of the camp life to deny that the man’s words rang of truth. Prejudice, in this instance, could be lethal in some cases.

“As I said, Travius, I can’t afford to lose a single man. Starting now, you’re in *my* century. But let me be clear. We’re marching into war, here. I don’t want to hear a fucking peep out of your sergeant regarding you, do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ten lashes,” Dar said to Callus. “Put him in Durvan’s squad, it’s understrength. And have Callipetes look at those burns.”

“Sir, yes sir!”

As the sergeant escorted the Legionary out of the tent, Dar sat quietly, a contemplative frown on his face. “Disobeying orders,” he muttered. He looked around the interior of his tent, his gaze finally settling on *Valor*, the sword lying in its scabbard atop his cot.

He was tired, and they had a long march ahead again tomorrow, but he sat there and looked at it for a long time.

Chapter 143

FLASH FLOOD

“Hold my flank!” Dar ordered Bullo, taking up position to meet the first of the onrushing trolls. The monster lashed out at him with a long arm, smashing its claw hard into the fighter’s armored shoulder. Dar merely grunted and stepped in under its reach, sweeping *Valor* two-handed across its belly. The troll’s guts erupted out of the vicious wound, but it kept fighting, sweeping both arms around the fighter while it lowered its head to seize his head in its jaws.

Dar’s left was protected by the mound of boulders, but another troll came around to his right, looking to surge past. Bullo was there, and he met the troll’s rush with an overhanded chop of his greataxe. The blow hit with enough force to bury the weapon’s huge blade a foot deep into its shoulder, but the troll kept on coming, smashing the fighter back with a powerful sweep of its claws.

More trolls came charging around the far side of the boulders, toward where Allera was desperately trying to heal the stricken Travius. But even as the monsters turned the flank, more defenders were rushing into the breach. The first troll rounded the obstacle to take an arrow deep into its chest. Roaring in fury at Pella, who calmly fit a second missile to her string, the troll had to content more immediately with Talen, whose burning sword immediately caught its attention. Its longer reach let it slam the onrushing foe before the flames could get to it, but Talen had expected that, and he deflected the tearing claws with his upraised shield. *Beatus Incendia* flashed, and the troll screamed as it staggered back. It left behind its left arm, down to the elbow, smoking on the ground where it had fallen.

Thus far the defenders had held up against the rush, but trolls continued to pour out of the culvert in a violent surge. The charge was disrupted somewhat as a swarm of rats suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the tight confines of the culvert, biting as they crawled over the lower bodies of several trolls. Their attacks didn’t seriously injure the

trolls, but two paused to claw the little vermin off of them, temporarily blocking their peers lined up deeper in the culvert.

But the diversion gave the Camarians only a brief respite, and those trolls already engaged were doing a lot of damage. Dar withstood his foe's full attack, narrowly avoiding a grasping claw as it sought to rend him apart. He countered with a potent assault of his own, but while his first blow bit deeply into the troll's body, adding a second devastating wound to its tally, he overextended himself on his follow-up, slipping on the troll's slick entrails and staggering hard to the ground. He was only barely able to keep his grip on *Valor*, but felt an explosion of pain in his back as the troll smashed both its claws down hard into his body.

A few feet away, Bullo was also in trouble. The fighter held his ground as the troll hit him, bringing his axe up into an arc that smashed in one side of its jaw. A more intelligent adversary might have withdrawn to regenerate from the nasty wound, but the battle-mad troll only intensified its attacks, seizing the legionary with both claws, its yellow nails digging deep into his body through his armor. Bullo screamed in pain, but fought on, tearing his arms free to lift his axe up again.

Talen's foe did fall back a step, wary now of the deadliness of this foe, but its confidence returned as a pair of its fellows swarmed around the boulders to join it. All three trolls rushed forward to flank him. One broke off as an arrow sank to the feathers in its side, aborting its attack on the knight to deal with the archer twenty paces away. It rushed past a rock that barely came up to its knee, only to stagger as the nimble form of Kalend appeared from behind it, hacking the troll's knee from behind with his shortsword. The sharp blade bit deep into the troll's joint, and in a fury it turned on him, taking another arrow in the back as it attacked the retreating rogue.

Dar roared as he staggered to his feet, taking yet another hit and shrugging it off as he drove *Valor* up through the troll's jaw into its brain. The creature fell backward in a heap, although its wounds were already beginning to slowly knit shut.

Looking over its body, Dar saw another four trolls, still clawing rats off their legs, emerge from the culvert. The lead one pointed at him.

"Nothing's ever easy," the fighter said, spitting a gob of blood to clear his mouth.

"Stand strong," Allera said, touching him, easing his wounds with a powerful flow of positive healing energy. The healer drew back into cover as Dar met the troll charge, dodging under a swiping claw and taking the troll's leg off at the knee with a devastating power attack. The troll went down, but two others leapt over it onto him, and the fighter was quickly engulfed in a desperate struggle just to stay on his feet. The last simply stood there, dazed; it had heard a flutter of wings in front of it, but before it could act, a warm feeling had suddenly spread through its body, sweeping away its battle-lust. While the battle raged on, the troll wandered off, realizing that nature had colors and shapes it had never truly seen before.

Travius, healed by Allera, came to Bullo's aid, slashing at the troll's flank with his twin swords. The fighter was still struggling, although he could not get much clearance to use his axe effectively with the troll still holding onto him.

On the opposite side of the boulder mound, Talen stood against two trolls. With his back to the rock, and *Beatus Incendia* in his hand, he had thus far held his own. He smote the one he had already wounded with his holy sword, the troll's flesh sizzling as the burning weapon bit deep into its flesh. The troll staggered backwards and collapsed, but its companion leapt at Talen, seizing his sword arm with its claws, smashing the limb back into the rock in an effort to disarm him. Talen held onto the sword, although he could not move at all, not with the troll holding onto him with its incredible strength.

Kalend was flung backward, blood gushing from the deep gashes along the side of his jaw where the troll had struck him. The troll started forward to finish the rogue, but was distracted again by another arrow that sank into its back. Reaching down, the troll seized up a boulder almost as large as Kalend. Grunting with exertion, the troll spun and flung the boulder straight at Pella. The archer nimbly leapt aside, but the missile still clipped her hip, spinning her around from the force of the impact. Her jaw tightened in pain, but she calmly reached for another arrow as the troll roared and charged toward her.

But before it reached her, it caught a blast of *searing light* square in the center of its face. Serah had not been idly hiding during the battle; her *prayer* had bolstered her companions, and now her magic staggered the troll, which finally fell as a final arrow buried itself deep in its chest.

Serah looked fearfully down at its body; the troll had gotten within ten feet of them before they'd dropped it.

"It won't stay down long," Kalend said, staggering forward, unscrewing a flask in his hands as blood continued to pour down his face.

Dar was learning the same thing, as he continued to hack at his foes. He was inflicting incredible damage with *Valor*, the anarchic blade flaring with power as it opened terrible wounds in the bodies of the chaotic trolls. One tried to grab him and drag him into its body, only to have half its hand sheared off. But there were just too many of the trolls, and while the flood coming out of the culvert had finally stopped, there were at least three of the creatures still standing within reach, while those on the ground continued to regenerate.

Allera cast a *mass cure moderate wounds* spell, bolstering them all, pouring life-giving positive energy into their battered bodies. The spell saved Bullo's life, although the troll continued to rend him, inflicting new damage even as the spell closed his old wounds.

Travius continued to hack at it, but the troll was clearly not going to release its victim until it was dead.

Allera started toward them, hoping somehow to help, but she was brought up as a cold, clammy claw locked onto her leg. Looking down, she saw a troll, the first one that Dar had taken down. The monster was grievously wounded, but even as she watched the terrible wound at the bottom of its jaw stopped draining black fluid, and strength flowed back into its limbs as it dragged her down into its deadly grasp.

The healer screamed, as she tried unsuccessfully to break free. Dar spun around at the sound, but before he could rush to Allera's aid, one of the trolls fighting him leapt onto his back, bearing him to the ground, its jaws snapping down hard on the fighter's neck from behind.

Chapter 144

BLOOD AND ASHES

Talen felt like his body was about to explode. The troll holding onto him continued to pound his arm into the boulder, but Talen stubbornly refused to relinquish his grip on his weapon. The other troll, the one whose arm he'd taken off, had gotten back up and apparently had decided to get into the game as well, picking up a rock and smashing it into Talen's head. Even through his full helm, the blow sent a flare of bright lights dancing across his vision, and he tasted his own blood, warm and salty in his mouth.

A shadow fell over him, and suddenly the troll holding him was flung backward as a loud scream echoed through Talen's battered senses. Blinking against the flashing lights that still threatened to blind him, he saw the troll battling a creature of wings and claws almost as big as it was. The other troll, the one that had bashed him with a rock, was reaching for a smaller form that Talen only belatedly recognized as Varo.

Talen tried to shout a warcry, but it only came out as a bloody hiss. He made his point, however, as he thrust the full length of *Beatus Incendia* into the troll's body. The creature screamed and collapsed as the holy sword pierced it, and this time, it didn't get up, at least not at once.

"Good timing," Talen tried to say, but only gibberish came out. He would have fallen, but Varo held him up, leaning him against the boulder as he began casting a healing spell.

Allera tried to squirm free of the troll holding her, but its claw holding her leg may as well have been a steel cable for all her efforts. She was not frail by any means, but her leg was already growing numb, and she knew that if the troll got a secure purchase with

its other claw, it would tear her apart. She heard an angry trill from somewhere above, but she wasn't entirely sure what Snaggletooth could do to help her; for all the dragon's will and magic, it was still only a foot and a half long.

She caught sight of a shadow passing above her, and then something shot right past her head into the troll. The creature stiffened, and Allera felt its grasp loosen. The healer at once pulled herself up, to see Shay standing there, her sword buried into the monster's throat.

"Thanks," the healer said. But the scout had already drawn out her sword, and was rushing to the aid of the others.

Dar had been driven to the ground by his foe, but felt an incredible pressure as the troll bit down on his neck—thankfully protected by a gorget, or his story might have ended right there. Even as the curved metal plate began to buckle, Dar thrust *Valor* up blindly into the troll's face. The creature screamed as the sword pierced its right eye, and it fell back off him. He rolled over to see another troll looming over him, but before either of them could strike, an arrow slammed hard into it, and it turned just in time for Shay to leap into it, burying her sword deep into its gut. The troll swatted her, but its movements were slow, and the scout rolled with the hit, coming up into a crouch a few feet away.

Baraka Suhn had come to aid of Travius, opening deep gashes in the troll's legs with his sickles. The pair continued cutting the troll as it fell to the ground. Bullo was still locked in its embrace, the fighter no longer moving. Allera was there at once to help them roll the heavy monster off the fighter, whose limp body was soaked with blood. She reached in between the troll's leathery arms and touched his neck, letting out a sigh of relief at the fluttering pulse she felt there. She immediately started casting a healing spell.

The only trolls left standing were the pair between Dar and Shay, both covered in grievous wounds. Varo's summoned griffon was tearing apart another on the far side of the boulder mound, while Kalend applied oil from his flask to another that was just beginning to stir once more. Several other bodies were still moving.

"Commander, your sword!" Varo urged. "You can destroy them before they regenerate!"

Talen, still barely able to walk despite Varo's healing, nodded and staggered over to the nearest body. With a roar he clove the troll's skull with the burning sword, holding the blade in place until the troll's flesh had melted away from the holy flame. Then he headed over to the next, stabbing it in the heart even as it tried to get back up.

Dar and Shay had already put down the last pair, and Shay was already getting oil out of her *bag of holding*, while Dar looked around for any that looked ready to get back up anytime soon. The fighter's cloak and surcoat had been torn away from his body, leaving only dull metal caked with mud mixed with black troll blood.

From that point, it was just cleanup. The troll that Snaggletooth had befuddled with his breath weapon did not return; possibly it saw the smoke rising from the pyres of its brethren, and elected to avoid a similar fate.

“We would be wise not to linger here,” Varo said, as his summoned steed vanished back into the aether from which had appeared. The cleric had escaped serious damage in the melee, but that was more that could be said for most of his companions. Bullo had been brought to the very brink of death before Allera had yanked him back, and Talen and Dar might have joined him, but for the healer’s potent *mass cure* spell during the melee. The clerics assisted the healer in treating their wounds, using their innate abilities to conserve as much as the power in their wands as possible.

“Perhaps we should seek out another fortified place to rest, before proceeding,” Pella said. The archer had fired most of her shafts, but Shay had a few extra bundles in the *bag of holding*, enabling the armswoman to refresh her quiver during the lull.

Shay shook her head as she handed arrows to the archer. “That storm will hit within the hour, and it won’t be pleasant up here when it comes. And it will be that much harder to get down into the gorge with the rain and wind.”

Talen nodded. “Do what you need to do, but Shay’s right. We’re moving on.”

The companions cleaned their clothes and gear as best they could, and once the healers had finished their work, they gathered again at the edge of the cliff, leaving eight burning mounds pouring smoke into the dreary sky behind them.

Chapter 145

INTO THE DARKNESS

After a last quick search to verify that there were no enemies in the immediate vicinity, the Camarians once again tackled the cliff descent. Shay and Baraka made their way back down to the overhang, followed by Varo. Earlier, just prior to the troll attack, the cleric had used a *stone shape* spell to create a series of protruding steps that descended from the edge of the overhang down to its base. From the bottom step, anyone could step out into the raging torrent that emerged from a wide opening in the base of the cliff.

Shay went down that slippery path first, hammering several more spikes into the cliff, and securing another guide rope. Baraka was already helping other members of the group down the cliff, as Shay handed the guide rope over to Varo.

“We will need to move quickly,” he told her. He slipped on the second step, but the guide rope held in its moorings, and he recovered after a few awkward moments. By the time he got to the bottom, his clothes were soaked with spray. He reached up, and touched his divine focus with one hand, tossing a pinch of dust into the torrent with the other.

The results of the spell were immediately obvious, as the water coming from the underground current rapidly lowered, until there was only a faint trickle pouring from the opening. It was a trivial matter to step into the tunnel, although he still had to be careful not to slip on the slick surface.

Shay joined him a moment later, and set another spike in the river passage, extending the guide rope down from above. She looked into the dark mouth of the tunnel that had been full of surging water just a few seconds ago.

“Impressive,” she said.

“Before the power of the gods, we men are insignificant creatures,” Varo said.

She raised an eyebrow. “I’ve heard those words spoken in sermons from priests of the Father.”

Varo’s mouth twisted into what was not quite a smile. “Indeed.”

The scout turned to help those descending into the tunnel. The fighters, clad in heavy armor, had the most difficulty, but Shay and Baraka had done well with the ropes, and while several people lost their footing as Varo had, they did not lose anyone to the river. It took only about ten minutes for all of them to come together in the mouth of the river tunnel.

“How long will this last?” Talen asked Varo.

“Almost two hours,” Varo said. “But we still need to hasten. The river will back up at the end of the spell’s range, and the pressure will make things difficult when we need to transition to the path that Shay mentioned.”

“All right, let’s get moving. Shay, Baraka, you’re on point.”

They made their way down the tunnel. They came to the end of Varo’s spell after a few hundred feet, and true to the cleric’s words, a wall of water awaited them there. Varo cast a second *control water* spell, and once again the waters fell away to a mere trickle.

“I assume we just can’t do that until we get to the end,” Pella asked.

“If you have clerical powers that you have not thus far revealed, please do so now,” Varo said.

“The spell is a powerful one,” Serah explained. “Even a gifted cleric can only use it a few times per day, at most.”

“We’re coming up on where the trail begins,” Shay said. Shining the light of one of their *everburning torches* along the walls, she indicated where watermarks showed the usual level at which the river flowed. The tunnel was higher now, almost fifteen feet from the ground to the ceiling. The passage was nearly smooth except at the very top, any irregularities worn down by years of fast-flowing water.

By the time that their light indicated the end of the Varo’s second spell up ahead, there was an actual trail high along the side of the passage, a natural ledge formed just above the high-water mark, with only about four, maybe five feet of clearance between that and the roof.

“There’s more headroom further on,” Shay explained. “It’s a few miles to the great cavern, but the tunnel has six or seven feet of clearance for most of it.”

“Good, I’ve had enough with crawling,” Dar said.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” Travius said, pointing at the wall of water that blocked the passage. “How are we supposed to get through that?”

“Once the spell is released, the water will quickly return to its usual level,” Varo said. “That is why we should not dally; the longer we wait, the longer we will be... discomfited.”

“Wait for what?” the legionary asked. But Shay and Baraka were already moving up to the ledge, the ranger boosting the lithe scout up into position. Shay was quick with her hammer and pitons, securing another rope from her *bag of holding*.

“All right, everyone up on the ledge,” Talen said. Those without armor helped boost those with it, and it took a good fifteen minutes of pushing and jostling, but eventually, they all made it into position.

“All that water’s going to wash us away,” Pella said, looking at the surge, held back by the invisible power of Varo’s magic.

“Just hold on, and it’ll be all right,” Shay said. She and Baraka were hammering multiple pitons, all that they had left, and securing several heavy ropes to multiple anchors.

“I am not a very good swimmer, either,” Serah said, a hint of panic edging her voice as she stared at the wall of water.

“Remain calm, and the flood will pass,” Varo said, coming down the line, touching each of them, infusing them with the power of *water breathing*. “By the power of Dagos, you will be able to breathe the water as if it were air.”

“Wonderful, this again,” Dar said, but he didn’t flinch from the cleric’s touch, and he took the rope that Shay offered him, coiling it around his bracer. His other hand was wrapped tightly around the hilt of *Valor*.

“Secure everything not waterproof in one of the oilcloth wraps,” Talen said, as he doublechecked the fastenings of his own pack. A lot of their delicate supplies were in Shay’s magical *bag of holding*, and the scout carefully wrapped that in a lined but otherwise mundane leather container before securing it tightly to her belt.

“Is everyone all right?” Shay asked. She had taken a position in the front, where she could look back and verify that everyone was secure and connected by at least two of the safety ropes. She had tested each of the pitons herself, and gave the one nearest her one last tug before she nodded at Talen.

The knight, in turn, looked to Varo, who had already turned to the edge of the ledge. He stretched out his hand, closed his eyes, and made a subtle gesture.

The flood began at the bottom, blasting forward in a violent white surge. The noise was deafening in the tight confines of the tunnel. It continued as the water level rose in the tunnel they had just traversed, as more water swept back into the tunnel.

“Oh, damn!” Serah shrieked, as the top of the frozen wall gave way, and engulfed them all in a violent surge of bracingly cold water.

Chapter 146

THE GREAT CAVERN

“Nothing’s ever easy,” Dar muttered, ducking to avoid a stone formation that jugged out over the trail. The only answer he got was a sneeze from Serah, who continued to shiver despite the heat from the torch—a real torch, taken from Shay’s *bag of holding*—that she held almost in front of her face.

“We need to find someplace to rest soon, and have a real fire,” Allera said quietly to Talen, her short hair still slick against her face with damp. “That water wasn’t quite freezing, but it wasn’t far from it, either. I can treat someone who comes down with cold sickness, but it will be far better if we can avoid that.”

“As soon as we’re away from the river,” the commander said. His clothes were soaked too, and he looked as miserable as any of them, but there was also an iron determination shining in his eyes.

It had taken about ten minutes for the river’s initial surge to decline back down to its usual level, a time that felt much, much longer for those immersed in the flood. Two of their pitons had come loose, but thanks to Shay’s backups, none of them had lost their grip. They had not escaped completely unscathed; Travius lost his quiver, and the seal of Serah’s backpack had been less than perfect, leaving her extra clothes and other gear completely sodden. As soon as they could move they could, pausing only once, at a slightly wider space along the river ledge. There they stopped to wring out their clothes, while Shay prepared hot coffee for all of them using the portable charcoal stove stored in her magical sack. They had all huddled around the stove, soaking up what heat they could, but Serah was not the only one who still shivered as they set out again.

“It’s our best chance of catching the followers of Orcus off-guard,” Talen went on, almost to himself. “They’d be watching the mausoleum, and I’d take a soaking over going back through the Well.”

Allera nodded. “We’ll make it through,” she said. A tiny draconic sneeze from the empty air above Allera’s shoulder indicated that Snaggletooth was not happy about the situation either.

A light flickered from up ahead. “That’s Shay’s signal,” Talen said. “Let’s get moving.”

They could see the end of the river tunnel ahead even before they saw the scout; Shay and Baraka had withdrawn to a nook in the side of the passage about fifty feet from the opening, where they were talking in low voices.

“I assume this is it?” Talen asked. They couldn’t see anything except a black opening where the tunnel ended, but there was a subtle change in the air pressure and the background noises of the tunnel, and a vague sense that the area up ahead was much, much bigger than the river passage.

Shay nodded. “Unfortunately, we’re on the wrong side of the river; the goblin mines are clustered along the north face, here.” She took her dagger and began sketching a crude map in the muddy ground.

“Any bridges?” Pella asked.

“No. But we can probably find a place where we can rig up a crossing line; at most places the river’s only about fifty feet wide, and it’s not really that deep. The source is up here,” she said, drawing a connecting line up to the wall of the cavern she’s sketched earlier. “It flows into a lake a few hundred feet across here. This branch,” she said, indicating the river flowing beside them, “is one of two that come off that lake; there’s

another that goes over to the west, it dumps into a much, much bigger lake in the middle of the cavern, that one's a half a mile long, at least."

"Gods, how big *is* this place?" Kalend asked.

"It's huge, believe me," Shay said. "I walked a lot of it, and it goes on for a very long ways."

"We'll want to start at the goblin mines," Talen said. "But first, we'd better get dried out, and warmed up."

"We're going to get wet again crossing the river," Shay pointed out. "May as well get it over with."

Talen looked over at Allera, then at Serah. The cleric shivered, but said, "I'm all right, commander."

"All right," he said. "You know the terrain, Shay; we'll follow your lead."

"Don't worry, priestess," Dar said. "Smashing a few gobbos will warm you right up."

Rolling her eyes, Shay stood and led them out of the tunnel in the cavern.

It was impossible to truly discern the size of the cavern, once they had left the confines of the river tunnel behind. Their light sources formed bubbles of illumination around them that failed to reach the ceiling high above, or any but the nearest walls. Ahead of them, a massive spire of stone rose up into the darkness, a column whose farthest extent they could not even determine. The place was not silent; many subtle sounds filled the cavern, most of them distorted by echoes and distance until their source was a complete mystery. Fungi grew in a number of places, but Shay warned them against messing with strange growths, a lesson that those who had already experienced Rappan Athuk knew all too well to heed.

"Is that a light, to the south?" the sharp-eyed Kalend asked, once they had all left the tunnel.

"There are a few forests of fungi in this place, and they include varieties that are phosphorescent," Shay said.

"Fosfa—what?" Bullo asked.

"It means that they glow, idiot," Travius said, elbowing his companion as he passed.

"Quiet," Talen said.

"I wouldn't worry too much about being loud, commander," Dar said. "It's not like every creature within a mile can't see our light sources, anyway."

"Actually, many creatures that live underground have poor vision," Baraka said. "In the darkness, sound and smell are far more useful senses."

"Either way, if they want trouble, they'll find us. That's how it works, down here."

"Cheerful," Pella said, scanning the darkness, a fresh string fitted to her bow.

They followed Shay's lead as the scout took them deeper into the canyon along the bank of the river. The ground was soggy and slick with mud for several hundred feet beyond the tunnel mouth, but once they had reached the extent of the river's backup the soil became rough and sandy. They passed the footings of the huge column on their left, the river bending almost to the base of that steep ascent.

They trudged onward for several hundred feet more, before Shay called a stop. The river ran through a smooth channel here, maybe four feet below the bank. There was a cluster of boulders here, none of them larger than a man. Shay gave one a push, and nodded to herself.

"How are you planning on getting across?" Serah asked.

"I'll jump," Shay said.

"But that has to be fifty feet across!" the cleric exclaimed. Shay only winked, and took out a coil of rope, uncoiling it as she handed one end to Baraka. She tucked her *everburning torch* into a pouch, the illusory flame dying as she covered it.

As the others watched, the scout took a running start toward the river. At the edge of the bank, she leapt, surging high into the air, bolstered by the power of her magical boots.

"She's not going to make it," Bullo said. And in fact Shay plunged into the river a good twenty feet short of the far side, disappearing with barely a ripple in the water. Baraka, holding onto the rope, continued to play out the length.

A few seconds later, the scout reappeared, springing from the water only about ten feet downstream from where she'd hit. She found a suitable anchor for the rope after just a few moments, and as Baraka secured his end, she drew it taut.

"End over end," the ranger said. "The current's not that strong here; the river's wider and slower than in the tunnel. You'll get a little wet, but just hang on, and keep moving, and you'll be fine."

"I've had more fucking baths today than I've had all year," Bullo complained.

“A fact for which our companions are considerably grateful, no doubt,” Travius interjected.

Pella had already started across the rope, and made it to the far side without incident. “Ah, see, not so bad,” Travius said. “Are you going to let a girl show you up, legionary?”

Bullo replied with something that made Allera flush. But the legionary crossed without any trouble, followed by Travius, Kalend, Varo, and Allera.

“You’re up, cleric,” Dar said. “You can leave your pack, I’ll bring it.”

Serah nodded, removing her extra burdens and heading out into the river. The river was only too deep to wade in the center, but the rope was set high enough to easily keep her chest, head, and arms out of the water. She wasn’t as strong as the fighters, but neither was she weighed down by as much metal. She grunted as she pulled herself forward, and let out a small smile of triumph as she felt hard stone under her feet again.

Unfortunately, even as she stood something slammed into her legs, and she fell with a loud splash back into the deep channel of the river, the current quickly dragging her downstream. She tried desperately to swim, but even as she flailed in the current, she was dragged under, leaving behind swirls of red blood that quickly vanished in the dark waters.

Chapter 147

A TASTY TIDBIT

Even as Serah yelled and tumbled back into the river, her companions were quick to act. Shay was off and sprinting down the far bank before the current had carried her fifteen feet. As the cleric was dragged underwater by her still unidentified adversary, the scout leapt again, flying like a knife through the air before she hit the water about five feet ahead of where Serah had disappeared. On the far bank, Baraka, Talen, and Dar likewise ran back along the route they had just hiked, while the rest of the company hurried after Shay on the other side.

Talen shucked his shield and looked ready to jump in himself, but Dar grabbed him by the shoulder and yanked him back. “Don’t be an idiot,” he said. “With all that plate, you’ll sink like a rock.”

“Let go of me,” Talen said, his voice dangerous as he hand dropped to the hilt of his magical sword.

“Fine, but don’t expect me to jump in after *you*,” Dar said. He released Talen, but as the knight turned back to the river, Shay’s head appeared near the far bank, followed a moment later by the still-struggling form of Serah. The scout dragged herself and the cleric into the shallows, where the legionaries quickly pulled them out of the water. Serah’s left leg was oozing blood from a series of nasty-looking gashes, but the cleric was conscious, and was able to help Allera as the healer examined the wounds.

“What happened?” Talen yelled across the river.

“Some kind of giant fish,” Shay replied. “I stabbed it and it broke away, but it may come back.”

“You could have mentioned giant killer fish before we took this little swim,” Travius said.

“I did not encounter any last time,” Shay said, looking up at him. “Can you make it across?” she yelled over at Talen.

“I’ll be damned if a *fish* is going to make a snack out of me,” Dar said, as they returned to the rope. The fighter was the first to tackle the rope, while the others shone their lights on the water, or trained loaded bows in waiting for signs of the creature’s return. But Dar made it over without incident, and Talen and Baraka were both able to follow without being attacked. Baraka rigged the rope so that they could tug it free once he’d crossed, enabling them to recover it. They had brought a lot of rope with them, but a good percentage of that was still rigged up on the cliffs in the river gorge, awaiting their return.

“Well, if the goblins don’t know we’re coming after all that, then they’re deaf and blind both,” Kalend said, once they’d gathered together again on the far bank of the river.

“Who cares,” Dar said. “If they want to play, we’ll show them a few dances, eh Bullo?”

“Right, sir,” the legionary chortled, as he tested the edge of his axe.

“Whose idea was it to bring three *more* of him?” Allera said quietly, as an aside to Talen.

“They know how to fight. We’ll need them, where we’re going,” Talen replied, shaking out some of the water soaking his cloak. It was a useless gesture, for the most part. “All right, let’s get moving,” he told them, gesturing again for Shay and Baraka to take the lead. But as Dar and the legionaries passed, he said, “Remember, we’re not looking for a fight if we can avoid it. If the goblins know of a back way into Rappan Athuk, we’re far better off getting them to share that information with it, then having to fight our way through them.”

“You worry too much, commander,” Dar said, with a grin. “Gobbos or priests, either way, we’re ready to kick some ass.”

The cavern wall loomed ahead of them, a vast shadow at the edges of their light sources. Shay signaled back for them to wait, while she and Baraka stealthily approached to scout out the area.

“It’s quiet, too quiet,” Allera said softly. “If they’re mining, shouldn’t we hear the sounds of picks and shovels?”

“Maybe they heard us coming, and are readying a reception,” Pella said.

“Quiet,” Talen said. “Shay’s coming back.”

The scout returned with a dark look on her face. “The place is deserted,” she told them. “We found several mine shafts... they look like they were cleared out in a hurry.”

“They probably heard us coming, and cleared out,” Dar said. “Can’t blame them, really; gobbos aren’t much for a fair fight.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Shay said. “From the traces, it looks like they pulled out a few days ago, maybe.”

The scout glanced back over her shoulder, a troubled look on her face.

“What is it, Shay?” Talen asked.

“I don’t know. But I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Over here!” Baraka called, directing them to a sheltered area surrounded by a partial ring of stalagmites not far from the mine traces.

The place had been a camp of sorts; they could see some old wooden crates, a few ragged bedrolls, and other assorted trash. A small, narrow wheelbarrow lay on its side nearby, its basket staved in.

“There was a battle here,” the ranger said, as the others joined him. He pointed out several spots where bloodstains marked the ground, or were splattered on the rock formations.

“Who attacked them?”

The ranger frowned. “Not sure. Never seen tracks like these...”

“Colonel,” Kalend said. The rogue held up something he’d found; it was a goblin shortsword, or what was left of it; the blade had been sheared off a few inches above the hilt.

Dar took the blade. “Cut clean through.”

“No bodies,” Travius noted.

“They might have been carried off,” Pella said. “Or if the goblins won, maybe they took their dead with them.”

“Spread out, take a look around,” Talen said. “But everyone stay within line of sight. Whatever attacked them may still be in the neighborhood. Shay, Baraka, see if you can find some more tracks.”

“What about the mine?” Varo asked. “There may be enough room inside for a sheltered campsite.”

“As soon as we’ve cleared the area,” Talen said. “I want to know what happened here.”

Shay headed to the north, with Dar and Bullo close at hand, while Baraka headed south, back in the direction of the river, in the company of Pella, Travius, and Kalend. Talen and Varo remained near the goblin camp and the adjacent mine trailings, looking around more closely, while Allera stayed to check on Serah, who all but collapsed onto the ground, leaning against a convenient stalagmite for support. The healer drew out her waterskin, and mixed herbs into a cup for the cleric to drink.

“We will need to rest soon,” Varo said to Talen. “The priestess is the worst off, but the others only manage to hide their weariness.”

“What about you, Varo? Do you get tired?”

The cleric looked at the knight with eyes that shone faintly with the reflected glow of his *everburning torch*. “I require rest to recover my spells.”

Talen looked at him for a long moment, then started to turn away. To his surprise, Varo spoke to him again.

“But if your question was intended in a more philosophical bent, knight of Camar... then the answer is yes. I am tired indeed. We are all going to be tired, tired of body and soul alike, before this is done.”

Talen opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted as Baraka and Shay both returned to report. Varo turned away, but remained close enough to hear their conversation.

“We found goblin tracks in both directions,” Shay said. “It looks like there has been a fair amount of traffic in this area. In particular, there are trails that look like they were made by more of those little wheelbarrows leading both north and south from here.”

“Any clue as to where the goblin city is located?”

“Based on the footprints we saw near the wheel tracks, those going north were deeper, while those heading south were more shallow.”

Talen nodded. “So loaded carts go north, and the empty ones came back. All right. What about whatever attacked the goblins?”

Baraka and Shay shared a quick but meaningful look. “The most recent tracks were pretty jumbled,” the scout said. “It looks like the goblins fled in almost every direction. We found tracks obviously made by skeletons, bootprints from both small and human-sized creatures, and... something else.”

“Something else?”

“I’m not sure. We found some traces that looked almost like tracks left by a snake, but somehow... *wrong*; it didn’t move like any snake I’d ever seen.”

“Whatever it was, it was big,” Baraka said.

“Good work,” Talen said. “See if you can...”

The knight was interrupted by a cry of alarm to the south. “Giant bugs!” came Travius’s yell, accompanied by the thrum of Pella’s bow, and a high-pitched chittering noise that echoed off the cavern wall, followed almost immediately by cries of pain.

Chapter 148

THEM!

Kalend had been cautiously examining a narrow crevice in the wall of the cavern when an ant the size of a wolfhound leaned over an overhanging shelf about ten feet above and looked down at him.

The rogue’s startled cry as he fell back was echoed a moment later by Travius, who’d headed a short distance further along the base of the cliff. “Giant bugs!” the legionary shouted, falling back with about a half-dozen giant ants in pursuit. The ants were rapidly closing the distance, led by four big ones that were almost six feet long from the tips of their mandibles to the hooked stings that protruded from their abdomens.

Kalend opened his mouth to shout a warning, but his attention was drawn back around as the ant that had surprised him earlier leaned out far over the edge of the shelf and skittered down, the steep angle giving it little difficulty. Looking up above it, Kalend saw several others descending from higher up the cliff, clinging to the sheer surface with ease, moving as fast as a man at a brisk walk.

Seeing that he could not get away before the first ant reached him, he drew his sword and took up a defensive stance. But as the ant surged forward, an arrow flashed past him, burying itself to the feathers square in the center of the ant's probing jaws. The creature was knocked back by the force of the impact, and fell to the ground, dying.

"Fall back!" Pella yelled to him, fitting another shaft to her bow. She shifted targets to the ants rushing at Travius, but before she could fire, the nearest soldier ant lunged forward and seized the fleeing man's leg in its jaws. Travius yelled in pain as the powerful pincer clamped down hard on his limb, but as the ant thrust its abdomen forward he was able to tear free before it could deliver a painful sting.

The delay, however, gave the other ants time to reach him. The fighter darted back to a jutting boulder that barely came up to his waist, scant cover indeed, but all that was readily available as he drew both of his swords and met the onrushing surge. He hit the first ant in the jaws as it tried to seize him, deflecting its rush enough to avoid being hit. The second snapped its jaws into his torso, but his armor held, and it could not get a decent grip before he yanked himself free, smashing his other sword into the side of its head. The blow carved off its left antenna, and seemed to disorient it for a moment.

The two ants provided a sort of shield for the fighter, but as the others swarmed past him, several turned to come up on him from behind.

Kalend was a fast runner, but the ants were even faster, rapidly closing the distance once they'd reached the bottom of the cliff and could move over relatively flat ground. The rogue glanced over his shoulder to see a half-dozen of the vermin surging toward him.

A loud cry directly above startled him, and nearly caused him to lose his footing. Shay's leap carried her over the rogue to land directly on top of the first ant, her sword thrust before her like a spear. Her weight and momentum drove the keen elvish steel right through the ant, impaling it. The other ants were quick to turn and attack, but the scout dodged their efforts to grab her, leaping onto one ant, and rushing down its body before springing off into a defensive stance behind it.

The ants started to turn to follow, but then Baraka barreled into them, his sickles flashing. A quick swipe separated the head of one from its body, but even as the ant collapsed he was cutting the second with his off-hand. The alchemical silver weapon snagged the ant in the head, but the ant continued to struggle, biting the ranger in the arm.

Pella continued a slow, measured retreat as she continued to fire, giving ground as she maintained her barrage of arrows. Her magical arrows, augmented by the power of her mighty bow, punched deep into ant bodies, killing with a single shot more often than not. She took down one of the ants flanking Travius, but then had to defend herself, as five worker ants led by another soldier bypassed the surrounded warrior and came rushing toward her. Even in the face of that onrushing surge she did not hurry her retreat, taking step after step as she fitted arrow after arrow to her string.

And then they were on top of her, and she dropped the bow, sliding her sword from its scabbard in a single motion.

Bright light flared around her, and then Talen was there, striking with *Beatus Incendia*. He clove the soldier ant in two with a single swing, parrying an attack from the adjacent worker with his shield. One of the other ants managed to grab onto Pella's hip with its pincers, but the injury was not serious, and she kept her footing as she pounded the ant with her sword.

Varo, Serah, and Allera had hurried south after Talen to the scene of the battle, but it looked as though the situation was well in hand. The ants had attacked across a broad front, but Talen and Pella had secured the right, while Baraka, Shay, and Kalend were hacking the workers on the left to pieces. The only Camarian still outnumbered was Travius, but the warrior was holding his own against the soldier ants attacking him, and had even managed to kill two of them with heavy strikes from his twin Legion short swords. He favored his left side slightly where one of the ants had managed to sting him, but otherwise was not seriously hurt.

"Travius needs help," Allera said. "Serah, stay here with Varo," she said, rushing forward. But a loud clanking announced that Dar and Bullo, rushing from the north, had arrived to join the battle, and they ran past Varo and Serah, their weapons at the ready.

"Shouldn't we help them?" Serah said to Varo. The cleric still looked very pale, but she held her light mace tightly.

"There is little we can do here save get in the way," Varo said. "The warriors will..."

He trailed off, frowning.

"What is it?" Serah asked.

"Do you hear that?"

The cleric of the Father looked around, but the noise of the battle with the ants drowned out any of the ambient sounds of the cavern. "I don't..." But then she trailed off, as she felt a rumbling through her feet, a faint tremor that passed through the stone of the cavern itself.

Varo grabbed her arm and dragged her forward. "Look out!"

The two staggered ahead just as the cavern wall behind the goblin camp exploded outward in a shower of stone dust and debris. A huge creature strode forward out of the wreckage, an insectoid humanoid monster with long, incredibly muscled arms that dangled down to its ankles. Its body was covered with an armored carapace covered in gray dust, and mandibles that made the ants' jaws look harmless by comparison clenched as it came toward them.

Serah let out a surprised scream as the umber hulk lunged at her. Behind it, a second creature emerged from the tunnel, its alien eyes fixing on Licinius Varo.

Chapter 149

LOOK INTO MY EYE

Varo felt the unnatural power of the umber hulk's stare as it unleashed its gaze attack upon him. The swirling pattern of chaos in those eyes called to him, but the priest of Dagos was a master of chaos, and with an effort of will he tore his eyes free of that confusing gaze.

Serah tried to get away from the grasping arms of the first hulk, but the creature was both faster and far stronger than the cleric. It seized her in its claws, and pulled her up to bite. The claws that could burrow through solid stone were given little difficulty by even magical chain links, and they penetrated deep into her body. Its mandibles would have taken her head clean off, but Serah managed to get an arm up to push away. The move saved her life but cost her, as the hulk's jaws seized upon the limb, savagely crushing the bones. The priestess screamed and lost consciousness, falling limp in the monster's terrible grasp.

Dar, rushing to engage the ants, had reversed course the instant that the hulks had appeared, and now he charged into battle, Bullo close on his heels. Dar smote the hulk holding Serah, driving *Valor* through one of the armored plates covering its torso. The hulk let out a high-pitched shriek and tossed the unconscious cleric aside, turning its wrath upon the fighter.

The second hulk had surged toward Varo following the failure of its gaze attack, but it was diverted as Bullo rushed at it, his axe raised above his head in both hands. The hulk had superior reach, though, and it smashed the warrior across the body with a huge claw. Droplets of blood were flung through the air as the claws pierced Bullo's armor, but the legionary kept on coming, turning with the force of the impact to drive his axe down toward the creature's head. Unfortunately the hit he'd taken had thrown off

his angle slightly, and the axehead glanced off the side of its head without inflicting damage.

“Don’t meet its gaze!” Varo yelled in warning. Unfortunately for his allies, the warning came too late, as both fighters were *confused* by the shifting patterns that flickered the hulks’ huge eyes. Dar shook his head, dazed, unable to stop the hulk from picking him up and hurling him across the cavern. He landed hard twenty feet away, groaning in pain.

Bullo let out a wild yell and tried to attack the hulk again, abandoning all thought of defense in an all-out surge of violence. But the hulk was faster, tearing into the fighter’s armored body with its claws. The force of the blows knocked the fighter aside, his axe clattering on the rough stone as he fell hard to the ground.

The rest of the companions were coming to help as quickly as they could, but they still had their hands full with the remaining ants. Talen killed the last soldier ant on his side of the battlefield and ran back toward the melee with the hulks, while Pella recovered her bow. The knight heard Varo’s shout and averted his eyes, trying to keep his gaze on the lower half of the hulks’ bodies. It made for a difficult rush, and only a slight shifting of the legs of the nearer of the two warned him that an attack was coming. He raised his shield, barely deflecting a powerful hit from a claw that numbed his entire arm from the force of the impact. He surged forward, sweeping his holy sword across the hulk’s lower body. But the effort of averting his eyes had thrown off his stroke, and the sword glanced harmlessly off the creature’s thick torso plates.

The hulk immediately tore into him with its claws and mandibles.

Shay saw the hulk attack and Talen’s charge, but she could not immediately move to join him. Even the split second of distraction nearly allowed one of the worker ants to get its jaws closed around her knee; even as it was she suffered a painful wrench to the limb as she tore free of its bite. Baraka, having finished the second ant he’d engaged, leapt to her aid, ignoring another that was worrying at his back, trying to get ahold of a leg or arm.

“Go!” he yelled. “We’ll finish these!”

Kalend yelped as an ant bit him, but the rogue was canny enough to shift to the side, taking up a flanking position opposite the mountain ranger.

Shay leapt backward, spinning around in midair to hit the ground running ten feet away. She had heard Varo’s warning, but even beyond that had personal experience with umber hulks; she knew not to look directly at them.

Varo tried to get to Serah, but was blocked as the second hulk rumbled straight for him. He held his ground, keeping his eyes low until its claw locked onto his torso, threatening to crush his ribs through sheer strength. The cleric’s concentration held, and he

touched the hulk at the joint where its claw met its wrist, pouring an *inflict critical wounds* into it. The hulk shrieked and fell back, its damaged claw trailing blood that oozed out from the gaps in its chitinous armor.

A loud roar emerged from the rubble behind the creature. Bullo reared up, holding a boulder twice the size of his head in his hands. Ignoring the blood trailing down his body from the ill-treatment he'd suffered at the hands of the hulk, he rushed the creature from behind, driving the stone into its back with enough force to crack one of its heavy dorsal plates.

The hulk immediately spun to finish the fighter, but as it turned an arrow knifed deep into the narrow opening in its armored body, under the spot where its right arm met its body. The arrow disappeared entirely into its body, and the hulk collapsed to its knees. Bullo lifted the rock and smashed it repeatedly into the hulk's head, until the stone was covered in blood and gore.

Varo turned to see that Allera had reached Serah, who was already regaining consciousness, brought around by the healer's powerful magic. But he also saw something else more dangerous.

"Allera, look out!"

The healer turned to see Dar charging straight toward her, madness in his eyes as he lifted *Valor* to strike.

Chapter 150

THE ORIENTATION

Allera, kneeling protectively over the still seriously injured Serah, had nowhere to go; Talen was still engaged in deadly combat with the umber hulk behind her, and Dar was coming on too quickly for her to evade.

The healer quickly cast a spell, blanketing the area with a soothing wave of peace. The *calm emotions* spell pierced the veil of *confusion* that the hulk had laid over him, and he stumbled to a stop, lowering his sword just a few steps away from her. He still looked confused, but it was the genuine emotion, and not tinged with the violent effects of the umber hulk's gaze.

"Allera... what... I... I'm sorry..."

Bullo had likewise stumbled back, dropping the bloody rock as he looked around with a bewildered look on his face.

Allera's spell had had the desired impact on the two *confused* fighters, but it had a negative side effect as well. Talen and the hulk had both been within the radius of the *calm emotions*. The pair had spent a violent ten seconds engaged in an intense close-quarters melee, exchanging heavy blows, but the knight had by far taken the worst of the exchange. Talen was trained at blind-fighting, compensating to some degree for his inability to look up at the monster, but thus far ill luck had made nearly all of his attacks against the hulk ineffective, only a single glancing cut to its leg drawing blood at all. As Allera's spell hit Talen blinked and lowered *Beatus Incendia*, his fighting rage blunted. But the hulk, whether because of its alien mind or simply through sheer willpower, was clearly able to shake off the effect. Faced with a suddenly docile foe, it lifted both claws, and smashed them down hard into the knight's chest. Talen was driven back into the ground, and did not stir.

"No!" Shay yelled, charging at the hulk before it could make certain of its foe. The hulk turned to face her, but even as it swept a claw around to intercept her, she sprang high into the air, leaping over the hulk's arm. As she flew past it her hand snapped forward, impaling the creature with the full length of her elvish-made sword, driving it to the crossguard into its neck. The umber hulk staggered backward, clawing with futility at the hilt of the sword, and as Shay dove to the side it landed hard on its back, quivered, and fell still.

Dar blinked and looked at the dying creature, frowning as he looked down at his own sword.

Allera rushed over to Talen, beating Shay by a scant second. As the scout drew off his battered helm, the healer checked his pulse, letting out a sigh of relief as she placed her hands around his neck, pouring healing power directly into his body.

Talen groaned, and Shay let out her own relieved breath.

Bullo, still somewhat dazed, started to come over to them, but Varo forestalled him. "Hold your position, warrior. You are enspelled, but if the healer's magic expires before the effects of the hulk's gaze, you may again turn on your companions."

The legionary's look indicated that he didn't fully understand, but he obeyed.

"Serah, keep an eye on Bullo and Dar. If either appears to fall into the confusion-rage again, you must *hold* him."

The cleric, still barely on her feet herself, nodded.

"Cleric!"

Varo turned to see Baraka and Kalend rushing forward, supporting the limp weight of Travius between them. The legionary was heavily injured but conscious, groaning in

obvious pain. He had held off six ants for most of the battle, completely surrounded, but a few of the soldiers had finally managed to get through the deadly defensive weave of his twin swords. Blood oozed from the multiple wounds he'd taken from the ants, including a pair of nasty stings.

"Is everyone else all right?" Baraka asked, as Varo cast a healing spell upon the injured warrior.

"It appears that all will survive this encounter," the priest of Dagos said. He gave them a look that encompassed all three of them. "In any event, welcome to Rappan Athuk."

The three men shared a grim look, as Varo drew his cloak around him, and walked away.

Chapter 151

PREPARATION

After their ordeal with the ants and the umber hulks, the companions elected to seek out a secure place to camp. Shay suggested the goblin mines to the south, near the river. The distance from the site of the battle might give them some respite from the scavengers that would inevitably be drawn to the scene of the carnage, the scout explained.

"It would also leave us with our backs to the river, if something does come a' wandering," Dar pointed out. Once the *calm emotions* spell had worn off, the fighter had seemed almost embarrassed, but whether it was for almost killing Allera, or from having just stood there befuddled while Shay had taken out the last hulk, it was impossible to say.

"From the tracks that Shay and Baraka found, it looks like the entrance to the goblin city is to the north," Talen said. "Until we know the situation with them, it might be better to seek out a more out of the way corner to hole up and rest."

Once Allera, Serah, and Varo had treated the worst of their wounds, Shay led them south. The entrance to the southern mines was a little over a hundred yards from where they had encountered the ants, a dark opening in the cliff wall about twenty feet above the cavern floor. A narrow path etched in the stone led up to the opening, barely more than a series of foot and handholds. The wreckage of what had once been a pulley harness lay in a tangle below the mine entrance, along with the smashed remains of a pair of wheelbarrows.

Spreading out, Shay and Baraka found signs that the goblin miners here had been attacked as well. In addition to more bloodstains, they found a pair of fairly recent tracks that ended at the river; apparently some of the goblins had taken their chances with the fast-moving watercourse rather than face whatever it was that had attacked here. This mine site was much more defensible than the last, due to the opening being so high up, but when Shay climbed up to look inside, she reported that the place was just as empty, with only a few hints of recent use and hasty departure left behind.

With the help of the scouts, the companions made their way up to the mine entrance. The goblins had used a natural cave as the starting point for their mine shafts, so there was enough room inside to accommodate all of them. The shafts themselves penetrated at sharp angles into the cliff wall, rising or falling depending on the vagaries of the ore deposits.

“Iron ore,” Talen said, poking at one of the mounds.

“I wonder where they dumped the tracings for this one?” Baraka said.

“The river, maybe, or perhaps there’s a crevice nearby,” Shay said. “It would have been easier to build a ramp with what they excavated, but it would have also made the mine itself more vulnerable to attack.”

“That didn’t save them in the end,” Dar said.

After probing a bit more to make sure that none of the mine tunnels led to any unpleasant surprises, the companions set up their camp. Shay used some of their precious charcoal to cook a stew with dried meat and vegetables taken from their stores, augmented with some mushrooms from the cavern that she insisted were safe. Travius was suspect of those last, and the scout finally grabbed one and bit into it raw, chewing it deliberately and swallowing while he watched.

“Satisfied? Now unless you know how to cook, go do something useful and fill up those waterskins from the river.”

“Baraka, you and Kalend go with him,” Talen said. The pair nodded, and the three left the cave, passing Bullo and Pella, who were keeping watch at the entrance.

Talen looked around for Varo, and started when he saw the cleric standing just behind him. “Gods, man, we need to put a bell around your neck or something.” He turned to the others around the fire; all of them save Pella and Bullo, those who had gone for water, and Serah, who had collapsed into her bedroll almost the moment they’d arrived.

“All right, tomorrow we need to find the entrance to the goblin city. Varo, your detection spell, it can guide us?”

The cleric nodded. "Yes, but I prefer to keep it in reserve for as long as possible. The spell only lasts for a short while, a bit under two hours, and the farther we are from our objective, the third temple of Orcus, the less likely the spell is to produce an ideal path."

"Doesn't sound like your god's guidance is that much help after all," Dar said.

"The *find the path* spell is very potent, but it only indicates the fastest route to a destination. It does not reveal traps, defenses, or guardians. We should rely on mundane means, such as tracking and logic, as much as possible."

Talen frowned, but Shay said, "The goblins have been moving ore out of here... it should be easy enough to follow the barrow tracks." The scout dumped a heap of chopped vegetables into the stew pot, and went to work on the mushrooms, working efficiently with her knife.

"All right, everyone check your weapons and gear, and then..."

"If I might take a moment first, commander," Varo interrupted. "There is one other matter I would like to broach. I had thought to wait until we had entered Rappan Athuk proper, but this seems as good a time as any."

"I hope that this is not another surprise, Varo," Talen said. But the cleric merely produced a cloth bag from his backpack, dumping a collection of glittering objects from it into his hand.

"Rings," Allera said. There were four of the rings, plain bands of metal, each set with a dark stone. They matched the one that the cleric wore.

"These are for us, I presume? What do they do?" Talen asked.

"The stone is named *ul'ulira*, and it comes from Razhur. The Razhuri believe that the mineral comes from the brains of dead gods, and that each fragment holds within it some spark of the divine."

"Yeah, well, Camar has people who are fucked in the head too," Dar said. "You didn't answer the general's question. What does the stuff do for us?"

"The rings are empowered with the ability to protect the life-force of the wearer, in much the same way that Snaggletooth's gem did for Allera. If one of us dies in Rappan Athuk, their soul should be drawn into the gem, allowing a *raise dead* spell to later bring them back to life."

"You do not sound certain, priest," Talen said.

Shay looked closely at the rings, and frowned. "What you describe... it sounds like base necromancy. Upon death, the soul should ascend to the higher planes, to the side of the Father."

"Yes, I am familiar with the concept. Tell me, how well did that work out for Valus and Zosimos?"

"The Sphere," Talen said. "How far does its effect extend?"

"I am not certain," Varo replied. "But it has grown stronger, as the ritual to unleash Orcus progresses further toward culmination. I would not be surprised if it now encompassed the entirety of Rappan Athuk."

"Wonderful," Dar said.

"What about the others? Dar's legionaries, Serah, Pella, Baraka..." Allera began.

"I only have a limited quantity of the rings."

"Where did you get them?" Talen asked.

"From a dealer of rarities that I know in Camar. I traded some of the magical treasures that we found on our last visit to Rappan Athuk for them."

The companions shared a meaningful look.

"If you do not wish to wear them, then that is your choice," Varo said. "But consider this. Any of us may fall within Rappan Athuk. If it is the person next to you... would you prefer to have a chance to have them restored to life, or would you prefer that their soul is consumed by the cult's artifact, to serve as fuel for their plan to free their master?"

"You talk freely of raising people from the dead," Talen said. "You weren't so generous before, when you refused to bring back Galen and Medelia."

Varo's gaze was sharp, but Talen did not flinch from it. "I have told you, bringing someone back from the dead is not a trivial matter. The spell requires diamonds worth thousands of gold pieces, and must be cast within a limited period of time."

"Marshal Tiros gave you a huge fortune in gems, to raise those who died fighting the Duke..."

Varo leaned forward over the small fire, the flickering light from the coals casting the features of his face into stark relief. He kept his voice low, but the words hissed from him like darts. "Do you not understand what is at stake here, knight of Camar? Did you not grasp the meaning of the oaths you took?" He turned his gaze upon each of those seated around the fire. "Make no mistake, I do not make this offer out of friendship, nor

did I choose each of you above the others out of a shared camaraderie. We are in a struggle in which we either win, or lose everything, *everything*, that we have in this world. For all the wealth and power of Camar, we few here are the best chance of victory against our enemy, and do not think for a moment that our foe does not know that.”

For a moment, Varo and Talen stared at each other in silence over the fire. Finally, Varo leaned back, and took up the cloth bag again, his mouth twisting slightly.

“Wait,” Talen said.

The cleric looked up.

“Allera... can you examine the rings, confirm what Varo told us?” Talen said. “Talk to Serah, as well, when she wakes. No offense, Varo, but trust is something that is earned. And you have been far from forthcoming in the past.”

“I would consider you a fool to do otherwise,” the cleric said. He gave the rings to Allera, and then rose. “If you will excuse me, I have my own preparations to make for the morrow.”

“You don’t want any food?” Shay asked.

The cleric regarded them with a cold expression. “I am not hungry. Enjoy your rest. You will need it.”

The cleric withdrew to the back of the cave, disappearing into the shadows.

“What do you think?” Talen asked Dar.

“I think what I’ve said before; you’re a fool if you turn your back on Licinius Varo.” He took up his pack and breastplate. “Give me a kick when the meal’s ready,” he said, heading over to a nearby mound of pulverized rock from one of the mines, lying back against it. Within seconds, he was asleep.

Chapter 152

VISIONS OF SHADOW

The forest was a corrupt, malevolent place. He could remember when it had been his home, a place of natural beauty and solace, and even though the memory was faint, of another time long past, it still had the power to cause his guts to twist when he perceived what it had become.

The air burned his lungs even through his filter mask. Above, the sky was a universal gray, occasionally streaked with red lines of smoke rising from the blood forges.

He stayed far away from the trees, an instinct that did not require conscious thought. They were twisted, ugly things, their branches contorted into unnatural shapes, with cracks in the black bark that oozed a foul smelling red ooze. The entire forest smelled of rot, and things crunched under his boots that did not bear closer examination.

The fact that they had come here at all bespoke their desperation.

The party moved silently, wary eyes scanning every direction for the threats that they knew all too well could materialize without warning. The sword of the fallen paladin barely shone, now, the dull steel echoing the man's lifeless eyes. They were far fewer than they had been when they had fled Stronghold. They had been fortunate, he knew; most of the defenders had died when the walls had been breached, and the undead had come pouring in.

"Wraiths!" came a warning, drawing his attention back into the now. He lifted his wand, but the others were faster; beams of energy crackled through the air, knifing through the undead that drifted through the trees toward them. Before he could act, all six wraiths had been destroyed.

They had power; all those he encountered did. Anyone who had managed to survive this long had it. Once he'd come upon a group that contained a human child, a commoner girl, barely seven years old. Somehow, he'd thought that she was special, somehow a symbol of hope for the blasted survivors. The band had united to protect her, to keep her safe.

Like all hopes, that one had been dashed. He'd destroyed the ghouls that tore her to pieces himself, but that gave no solace; there were always more. How many had he destroyed? A hundred? A thousand? A million? Numbers were meaningless.

"They know we're here, now," the paladin growled. "I hope that this is not a fool's errand, elf."

He did not know if it was or not. All he knew was that he had to see, to know if what he had feared had come to be. He knew the devastation of hopes torn asunder, but somehow there was a small part of him that could not help hoping, despite all the pain it caused.

They pressed on through the woods. They destroyed a band of mohrgs, but the creatures did not seem to have been actively hunting them. If they had, it would have been a thousand of the creatures, rather than a dozen. Perhaps they would have been taken; there were places where the living were kept alive, mostly in the lands ruled over

by vampire lords, or other undead who needed to feed upon the life energies of the mortal.

The forest floor rose ahead, and his heartbeat quickened. They were here... He felt a cold anticipation clench in his chest as his companions rose to the ridge. He had to see... had to see...

“Gods...” someone breathed.

He surged up the last bit of the slope, ignoring the sharp rocks that cut at his hands and feet as he clambered up.

Aelvanmarr stretched before him. The once-beautiful ancient trees of the elven city were gone, replaced by a mockery of replacements, a lattice of interlocking towers crafted out of bones. The gentle stream that had brought a cool breeze through the place was still there, but its waters were red, thick with black slicks that sizzled as they hit the bare stones on the surrounding banks. There were... *things*, visible on the barren stretches of blackened grass around the towers, misshapen monstrosities that moved with the jerky animation of the mindless undead.

And within the circle of towers, there stood a ring of cloaked and cowed figures. There were twelve, just as with the ancient Conclave of the aelfinn, and they were of a size to have been his kin, brother elves, the lords of his people and masters of their magic.

As one, the twelve reached up and drew back their hoods. Bleached white skulls lifted, and malevolent red eyes stared up at the mortals on the ridge, eyes that had the power to invoke fear even this far away. Liches, all twelve, and he knew that they commanded the full power that had once belonged to his people.

A voice sounded in his mind. *Soon, all will share this fate...*

“Elegion, wake up!”

The elf started. He looked down at the book spread out on the edge of the low table before him; there was a faint imprint on the parchment sheet from where his head had laid against it. He looked up to see another elf in a gray robe standing on the far side of the table, a look of concern on his face.

“The visions have returned?”

Elegion Alderis, the mad elf of Rappan Athuk, nodded. He repressed a shudder; as was often the case in the immediate aftermath of his dreams, he saw shadows of what he experienced there. To his eyes, his friend’s skin was pale and gray, his skin sunken and sallow. It would fade, or at least it had before, but it was unnerving even when he *knew* it to be unreal.

“Worse than before, Sultheros,” he said. He looked back down at the book. The sigils and swirling script there held no meaning for him; the spells he’d been studying remained beyond him. The worst part was that he knew that he had once understood them; the writing was in his own hand. While the Lyceum had received most of his books, his friend had taken this one into his safekeeping once Alderis had fled into exile, and had gladly restored it to him on his return.

“Were you successful?” he asked, without looking up.

The other elf stood there quietly until Alderis looked up. “Only partially. Draelai has most of your former possessions in his personal custody, and I cannot access them without providing a justifiable reason. However, I did find this, in the shielded vault at the Conclave.”

He drew out an item wrapped in white cloth, and laid it on the table. Alderis reached out and carefully unwrapped the cover, revealing a dagger. The weapon appeared to have been formed out of a single solid slab of mithral, and looked to be both heavier and more substantial than necessary for an effective weapon. The blade was a triangular wedge seven inches long, and there was a gemstone set into the hilt, a bright blue star sapphire a full inch across.

“I had not realized that this was yours,” Sultheros said. “It looks to be somewhat awkward for a weapon, although the spell storing properties of the gem make it a quite useful device otherwise.”

Alderis just stared down at the dagger. The sight of it had stirred an odd feeling inside him. “I need this,” he whispered to himself.

“It is yours, then, old friend.”

The elf shook his head as if to clear it, and looked up. “This will bring trouble upon you.”

Sultheros waved a hand in dismissal. “What was done to you was an injustice. I do not pretend to know what is happening to you, my friend, but I know enough to understand that you are part of something important. I will give you what aid I can, and only hope that it will be enough for you to accomplish what you need to do.”

Alderis nodded in thanks. “I am fortunate to have you as friend.”

“When do you intend to leave?”

Alderis covered the dagger again with the cloth, and slid it over into his lap. “In a day or two. There is still something that I need to do.” His hands brushed over the words on the page, their meaning just beyond his comprehension.

Chapter 153

SCENE IN A COFFEEHOUSE

“Coffee and milk, hold the spice, right?”

“One of these days, Travos, I will order something different, just to surprise you.”

The server laughed, and handed over a mug full of steaming liquid across the high bar. The young man took it, grinning as he inhaled deeply of the rich vapors rising off the beverage. “Ahh, that’s the stuff.”

He headed across the crowded interior of the café. The place was one of about a dozen such establishments within a few blocks of the University, in Camar’s Trades Quarter, and like all of them was almost always full of students and young tradesmen, talking, studying, or simply enjoying a few moments respite from the hustle and bustle of the working day.

He was known here, and a number of people greeted him as he made his way to the back of the café, looking for a table. His smile was warm as he clapped a few men on the shoulder, and it grew wider as a few women shot him appraising glances as he passed. But it looked as the place was full, until he saw a familiar face at a tiny table crowded into a niche in the far corner of the coffeehouse. The man had a small collection of student folios spread out on the table before him, but he pushed them aside and made room as the young man approached.

“Ah, Licinius, my studious young friend. How fare you this day?”

Varo grinned and laid down his mug on the table. “Better, now that I’ve had my daily dose of the black bean.”

The older man smiled back. “I hear through the grapevine that you have a new assignment.”

Varo’s smile retreated somewhat. “Yeah, they’re sending me down to the Archives. Dusty old books that nobody’s read in a thousand years. Should be dull as dry toast.”

“I shall certainly miss our philosophical arguments. You’ve been able to make me reevaluate some of my positions.”

Varo laughed. “I find that difficult to believe, Patrides. You have a way of turning a foe around, until he doesn’t even know what side he was originally on.”

Patrides shrugged. "What can I say, the gift of rhetoric is one that almost demands to be shared."

"I guess I'll need to move up to the Gold. The new position will include a promotion to Third, and includes a billet in the rectory of the Great Cathedral."

"Your career track continues to ascend. I had always marked you as one likely to reach a high rank in the clergy. You have real gifts, Licinius."

Varo shrugged, embarrassed. He looked around. "I'll miss the Trades."

Patrides lifted his own cup, a beaten old mug that held a deep green tea. "The Gold Quarter isn't a world away. You could always come visit, and try to cast down my citadels of words over a few cups of that black ooze you favor."

"I'd like that," Varo said. He looked up as a young woman walked by. She had reddish-brown hair, cut short, and she looked very familiar. He frowned, trying to place her. She saw some friends, who waved to her. As she went over to their table, Patrides shook his head.

"She is pretty. It is too bad that it cannot be."

Varo turned back to him. "What do you mean? The church doesn't require celibacy... at least not for low-ranking acolytes."

Patrides's smile was sad. "It is not that, my friend. You *know* why it cannot be."

Varo felt a cold feeling in the pit of his gut. He looked up, past the woman, past the tables, past the young people gathered in the coffeehouse, to the large window that faced out toward the street outside. A wind had come up, cold enough to make him shiver even deep inside the warm interior of the café. Something was approaching, a dark shadow that took on substance as he watched in horror.

Within the shadow was a skull, a huge horned skull wreathed in living flame. Twin points of red burned in its eye sockets, impaling Varo with a terrible, knowing stare.

Wrenching his eyes away, he turned back to Patrides. But his friend and mentor was gone, replaced by a blackened skeleton.

He opened his mouth to scream...

* * * * *

Varo opened his eyes with a start. It was dark, but the cleric could sense the breathing of his companions nearby. Shay's fire had burned itself out, and an almost icy chill had settled inside the cave.

The cleric of Dagos quietly rose, touched his divine focus, and headed deeper into the mine, seeking out a secluded place where he could pray for his spells.

Chapter 154

FAITH

Varo encountered Serah in one of the side-chambers formed by the goblins' first exploratory shafts. The cleric knelt in front of an *everburning torch* and her divine focus, praying quietly. She heard Varo enter, and looked up at him.

"Do not let me interrupt. I will seek a place elsewhere."

Serah nodded. Varo could see that she had reflexively taken up her holy symbol, and held it tightly in her lap. He studied her for a moment.

"You have achieved transition; congratulations. Few among the clergy of the Shining Father achieve the potency of the fourth valence."

"How do you..."

"You forget, I was once a follower of the Father myself. Now, I am just an apostate," he said, a faint stirring of regret in his voice.

Serah detected that regret and misunderstood its significance. "The high tenets of the faith say that it is never too late for one to return to the Light," she said, some hesitance obvious in her voice.

Varo let out a chuckle. "Do not waste your time with me, priestess." He started to leave, but paused a moment, and turned back toward her. "As you are bereft of your spiritual counselor in this place, consider this advice: *death wards* will be of great use if we encounter more incorporeal undead, and the *restoration* spell is likewise one that will likely see a lot of use. It will be a relief to Allera to have another who can cast the latter."

"I have no diamond dust."

Varo reached into a pocket and tossed a small bag at the cleric; it landed at her knees. "Don't worry. It's mundane; I bought it at a jeweler's shop in the Gold Quarter."

She looked up at him, clearly not certain how to respond.

“And if you must unleash *order’s wrath*, please be cautious of where you direct it.”

With a final smirk, Varo turned, and vanished back into the darkness.

Varo finally chose a mine tunnel that burrowed back into the earth, crawling a short distance before it opened onto a wider space where a vein of ore had been hollowed out by the goblin miners. Smoothing out a relatively flat space clear of rocks and debris, he knelt and began his own ritual.

The cleric opened his mind to the power of his god, drawing in raw power and fixing the triggers to release the magic in his mind. It was a ritual he had completed over a thousand times, and it now came almost as easily as breathing. Once he was finished, however, he began something new. He began casting a potent summoning, reaching out with the power just granted to him by Dagos, leavened with the strength of his will. The spell was draining, drawing some small portion of the caster’s own life energy into the weaving. Varo pierced the palm of his hand with a small knife, smearing his own blood onto the tiny representation of Dagos. He spoke words in an ancient tongue, ritual phrases that bound his need to the summons he was sending across the veil that served as the boundary between the planes. Minutes passed.

The spell’s ending was something of an anticlimax; there was no burst of multicolored smoke, no yawning portal into some fell netherworld. The cleric simply bowed his head low as he spoke the final phrases, exhaustion overcoming him as he concluded the ritual.

When he finally looked up, he was not alone. The newcomer was a tall, lean figure of a man, with strong features and a neatly trimmed beard. He was worn in an expensive-looking tunic and trousers, with a leather cape dangling from his shoulders, all in gray. He looked to be about forty, with dark shaded skin. At first glance he might have been taken for an Emorite or a Razhurian, but his flesh bore not the olive tint of the former or the deep earth-brown of the latter, but rather was the color of old ashes. His eyes were solid gray orbs that flashed as they focused upon the cleric.

“Your situation grows more dire, Licinius Varo,” the man said.

The cleric did not respond for a moment, taking the opportunity to collect himself, and replace his divine focus—still smeared with his blood—around his neck. “That will not do,” he finally said. “Your current features resemble someone that will agitate my companions.” He was able to keep his voice level, although in all honesty, his first look at his guest had unnerved him as well; the creature might have deliberately chosen a face that was similar to that of the Grand Duke, or it might have been chance. Either way, he wasn’t going to let Talen get a look at him in his current guise.

“As you wish,” the creature said. His features shimmered, and a few seconds later he resembled a much younger man, clean shaven, but with skin color and eyes as before.

He came forward and seated himself on a protruding ledge of stone that jutted from the wall. "Shall we discuss compensation?"

"To save time, I must stipulate that I cannot offer anything that depletes my personal life energy, or any items in the personal possession of any of my companions."

"You narrow the field considerably."

"I am not without other resources."

The gray man smiled slightly. "Let us indulge chaos a bit, shall we?"

Varo's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Just this. Let us agree that I will assist you against the guardians, and in exchange, I will be granted choice of any item that we come across during the time of my service."

Varo considered. "Any item that is vital to our progression through Rappan Athuk, such as a key or trigger, must be exempt. As are any artifacts."

"Agreed, if you stipulate that once I claim the reward, my term of service ends."

Varo stood. The simple action took considerable effort, but Varo was not going to let the creature see him weak. "Agreed," he said.

Chapter 155

SHADOWS

Talen was buckling the straps onto his armor, Shay assisting him with the plates he could not easily reach, when Varo returned. The priest had a companion, a tall, lean youth with skin an unhealthy gray pallor, clad in garments just a shade darker.

"Who's your friend?" Talen asked, as Shay handed him *Beatus Incendia*. The commander noted the way that the newcomer's eyes followed his motion, lingering on the sword.

"This is Drakha," Varo said. "He is an outsider, summoned to assist us today."

Talen suppressed a sigh. "Varo..."

"Commander, we are beyond the point where we can scruple about using the powers available to us. I take responsibility alone for my companion's activities."

The youth made a bow that was just barely too shallow to be mocking. “Fear not, dragon knight. I am merely here to serve; I bear no love for the Demon or his servants.”

Serah came into the room from the side tunnel; she looked up at Drakha and blinked.

“I greet you, holy priestess,” the outsider said, licking his lips. Serah retreated in alarm, clutching her holy symbol.

“Wonderful,” Talen muttered.

With the morning meal consumed, and most of them fully dressed and prepared, it did not take them long to strike camp and set out again. Varo used his magic to enchant a fat bundle of arrows, which he distributed amongst the group’s archers, giving a double share to Pella. The newcomer, Drakha, followed him like a shadow, and once they had set out, hugging the cavern wall as they marched north, he tended to blend into the background, easily forgotten if you were not looking for him.

But Talen kept an eye out for the outsider, and he’d had quiet words with Pella, Shay, and Baraka before they’d departed, making his feelings about their new companion known to them.

They made their way north, with Shay in the lead. Snaggletooth, on his own initiative, had scouted out part of the cavern nearby during their time in camp, and had reported to Allera that there were at least a dozen other mine sites to the north and west along the cavern wall. All of them were deserted. Shay told them that on her last visit, the sounds of mining had echoed throughout the entire eastern half of the cavern, a constant din as the goblins had excavated the various ores they needed. Now, the almost preternatural quiet made the small sounds that did carry to them seem particularly uncanny, the echoes distorting them until their source became a complete mystery.

They continued to the scene of yesterday’s two-front battle with the ants and the umber hulks. Something had quite obviously come to clean up the mess; blood and pieces of shell were scattered everywhere, with multiple tracks heading off toward the river to the west. There were vermin everywhere, but none were larger than a man’s fist, and the companions were able to make it past without incident, giving the area a fair berth. Drakha paused at one point to pick up a beetle four inches long, chomping into it with a noisy crunch, and swallowing it with two bites. At Serah’s startled look, he flashed her a wide grin, his teeth covered with yellow gore and bits of shell; the cleric let out a strangled cry and hurried back up toward the front of the line.

“Well, I didn’t think it could happen, but we finally have someone with worse personal habits than you,” Allera said to Dar, as they continued to the north past the battleground.

Dar shot a weighing look back at Drakha, then he turned and marched forward without replying to the healer. Snaggletooth, riding invisible on Allera's shoulder, chirped something into her ear; the healer flushed, but kept marching.

They heard the river again before they saw it. The swift-moving watercourse was narrower here, as it entered a dark tunnel in the cliff face, but it was still a good forty feet across. The goblins had erected a pulley system attached to a stone outcrop that jutted from the cliff face above the river entrance. The mechanism was still intact, and included a large basket that could be shifted from one side of the river to the other, presumably to carry loads of ore across the river. There were about a half-dozen of the goblin wheelbarrows on each side of the river, some still laden with ore, hastily abandoned. As they reached the water's edge and shone their lights into the tunnel, they could see there was a narrow ledge on their side running parallel to the river, about four feet above the level of the water. The ledge ran straight and unobstructed as far as they could see, but only had about four feet of clearance to the rough ceiling.

"It looks like the goblins cut this from the rock," Shay said, bending to examine the tracks that led up to the ledge. "It looks just barely wide to handle one of those wheelbarrows we saw."

"Not much room for error," Baraka said. "Impressive, the scale of what they've managed to accomplish here. Not typical for goblins, certainly."

"There is little typical about Rappan Athuk," Varo said.

"If you're done nabbering on about a bunch of stupid gobbos, how are we going to get down that?" Dar said. "It's a tight squeeze even for someone not wearing armor."

Talen looked at Varo, who said, "That is the way we have to go, commander."

"Look at it this way, colonel," Pella said. "If a bunch of 'stupid gobbos' could get wheelbarrows loaded with ore down that tunnel without falling into the river, then surely we can manage it."

"I don't know if you've seen a goblin lately, archer, but they are pretty damned small."

"Maybe we could just tie ropes around you and your warriors, and drag you up the stream, like barges? Your egos are surely buoyant enough to keep you afloat."

"Listen, honey..."

"All right, that's enough," Talen said, cutting them off. "Take a few minutes, secure your gear, and do whatever you need to get ready. This isn't going to get any easier for more bitching."

"I'll start rigging some guide ropes, in case someone goes over the side," Shay said.

As the companions made their preparations, Drakha stood a short distance away. The outsider took a deep breath, as if savoring a pleasant odor on the air.

“Ah, chaos,” he said.

Once Shay had outfitted them with a rope that they could all hold onto, they set off down the river passage. They could only go in single file, with Shay in the lead, and Baraka bringing up the rear. True to Dar’s earlier concern, the warriors had the toughest time of it, forced to crawl on hands and knees in the tight space. After a difficult first hour of this, Talen had them redistribute some of their burdens, giving some of the extra gear to those not bearing heavy suits of armor. The knight commander himself did not offer any complaints, despite being weighed down by plate mail, a light shield, and various weapons, in addition to his own heavy pack. Fortunately the goblins had anticipated the need for frequent breaks, and there were several places where the ledge jutted deeper into the rock, forming stone shelves up to eight feet deep where they could stretch out and rest.

The only one who did not have difficulty was Drakha; as Varo’s ally made his way into the tunnel, his height diminished subtly, until he could walk along the ledge without bending over. A few of the companions sent odd looks at their unusual new companion, but there was something deeply disquieting about those solid gray eyes, and none of them attempted any conversation with the creature.

They had only one mishap, although it was quite nearly very costly. Travius lost his footing shortly after their second rest break, and plummeted over the edge of the ledge into the river. He kept his grip on the guide rope, but the current and the weight of his armor quickly dragged him down, and he might have pulled all of them over, but for the rapid response of Pella. The archer, in line just ahead of the legionary, drew her dagger and stabbed it into a crack in the rock, holding on with both hands, the rope wrapped tight around her left bracer. Her face twisted in pain as the rope, trailing back around her shoulder, put an incredible strain on her arm. But she held on, bearing most of the fallen man’s weight. That allowed Kalend, just behind Travius, to secure his own position on the ledge, while Bullo and Dar made their way back, and helped pull the soaked legionary out of the river. Shay couldn’t get back to them without crawling over several people, but she quickly hammered in a spike, and anchored the rope to it while they completed the recovery.

“Thanks,” Travius said when he was finally on the ledge, shivering.

“When I said we could pull you guys up the river, I didn’t mean you should give it a try,” Pella said, grimacing as she tested her injured arm. The shoulder wasn’t dislocated, but she was going to have a nasty bruise, if not worse.

“Pella, are you all right, or should I come back to you?” Allera asked. The healer was a few places up the line, but with only three feet of ledge, there wasn’t much space to crawl past Bullo and Dar.

“I can make it to the next rest stop,” Pella said. And she was as good as her word, although their pace continued to flag as they got more tired from the difficult crawl.

They reached another wide spot, and Talen was considering calling for a longer rest when a soft flutter of wings announced Snaggletooth’s return. Conversing quietly with her companion, Allera indicated that the river opened onto another much larger cavern ahead.

“How far?” Talen asked.

“Only a few minutes... of course, that’s flying,” Allera reported.

“All right. Pella, you okay?”

The archer nodded to the commander. “Much better since Allera healed it,” she said. “I can keep up.”

“Everyone else all right?”

“If I see a gobbo, I’m going to crack its head for not making this damned crawl taller,” Dar said. He turned to Serah. “Say, cleric, you got any of that healin’ touch for my back?”

“You’re fine,” Allera said coolly, taking her position again in the line as they moved out again.

They set out again, setting a quicker pace with the hope that the faerie dragon had given them that the journey would soon be done. As they continued, the air grew thick and moist, and warmer as well. Soon, they were all sweating, and pausing often to wipe their faces clear of beading moisture.

“It’s getting like a fucking sauna in here,” Dar said.

Talen called a halt as Shay came back to the front of the line, and conferred with him for a few moments. “All right, pass it along, we’re getting close,” Talen said to Allera, then he turned and continued after the scout.

The air continued to grow warmer, and a fog began to rise off the river, obscuring their view. By the time that the passage walls opened onto the large space ahead, the fog was a dense cloud of warm steam vapor that swirled in the eddies of air that filled the cavern, making it difficult to see clearly even within the radius of their light sources.

“There must be a hot spring around here somewhere,” Shay said.

Talen nodded; he was having some difficulty with the heat in his heavy armor. “We shouldn’t stay here too long if we can help it. See if you can find some tracks; I’ll talk to Varo.”

The scout nodded, and by the time that Talen had come back with the cleric, Shay had found where the wheelbarrow tracks headed off to the right, close along the cavern wall. The bare stone was slick with moisture. Talen gathered them all together, and pointed out the tracks.

“All right everyone... I don’t want us to bunch up, but I don’t want anyone wandering off in this damned mist. That means you and Baraka, Shay; I don’t want you guys getting too far ahead. Keep an eye on the person ahead and behind, and if you see anything, send out a warning immediately.”

“Like as not the gobbos will use this mist to their advantage,” Travius said.

“Bowstrings won’t hold up very long to this humidity,” Pella pointed out.

“We have spares,” Talen said. “Remember, stay together as a group, I don’t want any of us drawn into an ambush. And our goal is to parlay with the goblins, not attack them unprovoked,” he reminded them.

“Gods damn it, I left my tea and biscuits at home,” Dar said. When Talen glared at him, he said, “All right, all right, commander. We wait for the gobbos to make a move, boys, *then* we smash ‘em, got it?”

Bullo laughed.

Talen nodded to Shay and Baraka. “Take us out.”

They made their way into the cavern, the mists swallowing up the river tunnel exit almost at once behind them. The details of the cavern were muted in the mists, but the ground here was mostly bare stone, with occasional stretches of cracked slate littered with broken bits of rock and gravel. The latter crunched under their boots, the sound muted in the enfolding grasp of the steam fog.

With the mist scattering the light from their *everburning torches*, none of them spotted the dark thing that observed their progress from high along the cavern wall. It waited until they were fully gone, then detached itself from its perch, swooping through the darkness in a silent arc that took it ahead of them, to a protruding jut of stone cliffs that stabbed out several hundred feet into the cavern. It landed high upon the cliffs without a whisper of noise, blending effortlessly into the darkness there. It summoned its magic, invoking protections that would aid it in battle.

It waited silently, patiently, until the light sources borne by the humans reappeared in the mists, less than a minute later. They glowed like will-o-wisps in the fog, but to the silent watcher, they were like beacons.

It did not know what these intruders were, but it had seen them clearly enough to know that they were not goblins, and therefore fair game by the terms of its pact with the lords of Grezneck. It crept silently down the cliff, careful not to dislodge any loose rocks. It let the first creature, a female, move past its perch, waiting for the larger cluster of males that followed to enter its range.

The first warning that any of them had was when the creature unleashed a cone of pure negative energy upon them, the dark tendrils twisting through the streaming funnel of power into the hapless and unaware companions, stealing the life right out of their bodies.

Chapter 156

THE GUARDIAN

Talen felt an unnatural chill settle through his body, seeping through his flesh down to his bones. Blackness washed over his senses, and he felt physically ill as energy was torn from him. The dark wave passed quickly, but he could feel the lingering effects, a weakness that penetrated to the depths of his soul.

Baraka, Dar, Bullo, and Travius had also been caught in that cone of shadow, but his companions further down the line had witnessed the attack, and were quick to counter. Talen looked up to see an arrow, glowing with a *light* spell, streak up toward the cliffs above. The missile struck a dark form that vanished, the arrow shattering against the stone.

But even as the *light* fell with the pieces of the arrow, it had given Talen a look at what they faced. It was a dragon, covered with scales as dark as the blackest night. It wasn't especially large, its body about as large as a draft horse, but its sprawled limbs and spread wings gave it an illusion of greater size. It had magic, as well; Talen had witnessed enough sorcery to be able to recognize the visual distortion that surrounded it as *mirror images*.

He wasn't the only one. "Do not waste the magic arrows on the images!" Varo yelled, as more missiles shot up from the companions. As far as Talen could tell, they all either hit the shifting images, each vanishing as it was struck, or impacted harmlessly against the stone of the cliffs.

Shay stood almost directly below it, lifting her bow, carefully calculating as she aimed.

The dragon leapt from its perch, spreading its wings as it descended upon them. Talen could see a glowing circle of pale transparent energy in front of it, obviously another magical defense. But as it spread its wings to arrest its fall, both the *mirror images* and its *shield* shimmered slightly and vanished, disrupted by one of their own spellcasters.

Bereft of its magic, the dragon still came on, confident in its power. And as it struck, Talen saw that it had reason to be self-assured.

It came down almost upon Travius, who had clearly suffered greatly from the dragon's initial breath. More than a little dazed, the legionary still managed to draw his twin swords. But they were of no avail as the dragon shot out its head at it landed, seizing the fighter's neck in its jaws and lifting him into the air. There was an awful *crunch* and an audible snap, and then the legionary went limp. The dragon tossed his first victim almost casually aside, shifting to face its next opponent.

An arrow punched through the membrane of the dragon's left wing from behind. The shot did little damage, but the dragon let out an angry snarl in response. But its attention was drawn by Bullo, who rushed forward, his axe lifted high above his head, his yells echoing off the adjacent cliff walls. The dragon snapped out its tail like a whip, the end lashing the fighter hard across the chest. Bullo went down like a rag doll, hurled backward ten feet from the force of the impact, rolling to a stop a good distance further away. Dead or unconscious, he did not move.

Dar came at the dragon in the legionary's wake, swinging *Valor* at its body before it could recover to strike again. The axiomatic sword bit into its flesh just above its right shoulder, opening a gash about a foot long in the dragon's muscled body. Dar had put a good deal of his strength into the attack, but the dragon's scales may as well have been steel for their durability.

The others were rushing forward to help the fighter, but before they could get into the fray, Dar paid a high price for his attack. The dragon lashed out with everything it had, delivering deadly blows that even Dar's magical armor could not fully absorb. It tried to repeat its fatal strike on Travius, but Dar managed to shift aside, and the dragon was only able to get ahold of his shoulder with its jaws. It lifted him a few feet into the air, the fighter's struggles not enough to keep the dragon from digging its claws into his sides, or battering his head with its wings. Finally it tossed him aside, right into the snapping sweep of its tail. Dar saw it coming and tried to roll away, but he could not keep the tail from smashing into the small of his back. The impact was like a blow from a sledgehammer, and Dar screamed and toppled forward to the ground, his sword clattering on the ground as it fell from his hand.

But Dar's sacrifice had bought the few precious seconds needed for his companions to get into the fight. Missiles slammed into it from the front and flank, and a second arrow hit and penetrated, this one a shot from Pella's potent bow that stuck into its sinuous neck. A beam of *searing light* struck it in the chest, but the spell dissolved against the

dragon's considerable spell resistance. Talen came at the dragon as it turned from Dar's limp body, *Beatus Incendia* flaring into life in his hand. The dragon screamed as the knight drove the holy blade into its body, the sacred flames searing its flesh. A moment later it felt a sharp, stabbing pain in the joint where one of its hind legs met its body, as Shay surged in and delivered a nasty hit with her own keen blade.

The dragon snarled and let out a hiss thick with fury and pain. But as it looked up, it saw still more adversaries approaching, including Varo, Kalend, and Drakha. It drew its wings in close around its body and sprang up into the air, gaining at least fifteen feet of altitude from the leap. Even as more arrows continued to slice through the air around it, it summoned some sort of magic around it, shimmered in the air, and disappeared.

Allera cast a *mass cure* spell, sending healing energy into Dar, Bullo, and Travius. The first two stirred, groaning as the spell brought them back to consciousness, but Travius didn't move. The healer knelt beside the stricken legionary.

"Allera?" Talen asked.

"His neck is broken," she said. "He's dead."

Chapter 157

THE DEPTHS OF THE DARK

Talen staggered, and might have fallen but for the steady hand of Shay, who was beside him in an instant, wrapping her arm around him.

"Allera, Talen needs help!" the scout exclaimed. She looked him over. "Where are you hurt?"

"I'm all right," the knight said. "Just a little... weak..."

"The dragon drained your life energy with its breath weapon," Varo said as he came forward to join them. "We can help you, but we should not remain here. The creature retreated, but it will almost certainly be back, and with its magical defenses back in place."

Barakha looked extremely pale, but Shay had not been caught in the creature's breath. "I thought I saw what looked like a tunnel entrance on the far side of these cliffs," the scout said. "I'll check it out."

Talen's expression showed his feelings at that suggestion, but he recognized the need, and after a second's pause he nodded. "Be careful... take Kalend with you." The rogue saluted, and the two hurried off, vanishing into the mists after just a few strides.

Allera had gone over to Dar, while Serah tended to Bullo. "I cannot feel my legs," Dar said, struggling to push himself up with his arms. "Damn it, I can't move!"

"Remain still!" Allera commanded, pushing him back down. She touched her hands to the base of his spine, a potent blue glow surrounding her fingertips, seeping into his body through his armor. Dar let out a sigh as the magic eased his pain, and healed the damage wrought to his body by the dragon's terrible attacks. "Better?" she asked, after a few moments.

He rolled over, tenuously testing his legs. "Yes. Thanks."

Allera nodded, and hurried over to Talen and Varo. "How many *restorations* do you have available?" she asked the cleric.

"Only one in memory, at the moment."

Allera nodded, and turned to Talen. "We can restore everyone who was drained, but after this, we will not have any of the spells remaining until we can rest."

Talen nodded. "Do it, quickly."

While the casters worked their magic, Talen posted Pella and Drakha to keep watch. The *restoration* spells took long seconds to cast, and those awaiting treatment watched the misty darkness warily, expecting the dragon to leap out at them at any moment. Varo, Serah, and Allera sprinkled diamond dust on Talen, Dar, and Bullo, and as soon as those three were restored, Allera turned immediately to Baraka to treat him with her second spell.

"Your... *friend* didn't do a whole hell of a lot back there," Talen said quietly to Varo.

"His assistance will be needed," the cleric replied enigmatically.

"If there's something else you know, Varo..."

"I know that we are going to face terrible dangers as we move forward," Varo said. "This is just the first of several guardians that we will have to confront before we will reach the final temple of Orcus."

Talen looked like he was going to say more, but Shay came back, materializing out of the fog before them. "There's a broad tunnel that exits the cavern," she said. "It looks like the goblin tracks head that way, and I think the steam starts to thin out in that direction as well."

“All right, let’s get going,” Talen said. He glanced over at Allera, who nodded as she finished casting her spell. “The dragon may return at any moment, but it will have a harder time sneaking up on us in the tunnel than out here in the cavern.”

“What about Travius?” Kalend asked.

“We must leave him. There is nothing we can do for him now,” Varo said.

The company hurried after Shay and Kalend, who directed them to the tunnel entrance. It was difficult to miss; the entrance was almost sixty feet across, with a high irregular ceiling about forty feet above them. Stalagmites jutted from the ground near the walls to either side, but it was obvious even to Talen’s unschooled eyes that the center of the tunnel had been cleared. The ground became softer as they entered the tunnel, with a layer of sandy earth over the bare stone they’d covered in the cavern; runnels were evident that Shay identified as wagon traces.

“There’s also a lot of signs of foot traffic,” Shay told him. “Goblin-sized, I’d say.”

“Anything recent?” Talen asked.

“Not as far as I can tell.”

They hurried down the tunnel, but remained alert to the possibility of a goblin ambush ahead of them. They’d covered perhaps a thousand feet when Talen called a halt. The tunnel began to bend to the left, and it seemed to grow gradually broader up ahead.

“All right,” he said, “We need to...”

He was interrupted by a loud roar that sounded from down the dark tunnel they had just traversed.

“The guardian returns,” Drakha said, unnecessarily.

“All right, everyone, spread out, take cover!” Talen ordered. He remained in the middle of the tunnel, and drew out *Beatus Incendia*, although he did not command it to take flame.

Dar lingered as well. “Going to draw it, general?”

“Take cover,” he said. “When it dives, we’ll hit it from all sides.”

“A good plan. But the one standing here is going to be in a world of hurt.”

Talen met his gaze. “Don’t think I can take it?”

Dar let out a chuckle. "I suppose we'll see."

Allera ran up to them. "I can protect you... one of you... from the effects of its breath. The ward will only last a short time, less than a minute..."

"Hit the knight," Dar said. He saluted Talen with *Valor*, and then drew back toward a cluster of stalagmites along the edge of the tunnel about thirty feet away.

While Allera summoned her *death ward* upon Talen, the others took up positions along the sides of the tunnel. There was plenty of cover there, stalagmites and uneven heaps of debris that had been cleared from the middle of the tunnel by the goblins.

Allera finished her spell, and withdrew. Shay was now the only one left in the center of the passage with Talen.

"Get into cover," he said. "I'll be all right."

She nodded. The scout didn't say anything, but there was a lot of meaning in the look they shared, then she darted back to the side of the tunnel.

Talen lifted his holy sword, which flared into life. He stared into the darkness, and held his ground.

Varo, lingering about thirty feet back along the side of the tunnel, looked also into the darkness and frowned.

"You are troubled?" Drakha asked him.

"Why would it have announced its presence with that bellow?" the cleric said. "It must have known that we would be ready for it..."

He trailed off, as the answer came to him. *It can teleport...*

"Behind us!" he yelled in warning.

Talen turned. Brightness flared from his sword...

The suddenly brilliant glow revealed a *pair* of shadow dragons, the one they had battled before, still bearing the wounds from their first battle, accompanied by a second that was only slightly smaller. Both were surrounded by *mirror images* and protected by translucent *shields*. They swooped down silently out of the darkness behind them.

But Varo's warning came too late. Even as the radiance of the knight's sword revealed the foe, the dragons opened their jaws, and unleashed storms of pure darkness into the tunnel.

Chapter 158

DRAGONS!

The dragons swept the tunnel with their breath weapons, working silently in tandem to maximize the effects of their attacks. The companions, caught almost completely by surprise, were almost all hit by the full force of one of the blasts, staggering as the negative energies sapped away their life force.

The female dragon swooped down to engage the rear guard, targeting a cluster of stalagmites behind which Allera, Shay, and Baraka had taken cover. It shrieked as it seized onto the protruding formations with its claws, snapping its neck down to seize Allera. The healer screamed as the dragon lifted her effortlessly into the air, into the reach of its deadly foreclaws.

Realizing too late his mistake, Talen had started to charge back toward the dragons. He had been on the edge of the male's blast, but Allera's spell had shrouded him from the draining effects of the dragon's breath. The male dragon, however, came to him, sweeping down in a straight dive, picking up speed as it came. Talen lifted his sword to defend himself, but the dragon slammed hard into him, knocking him off his feet. It snapped one of its hind claws around the knight's shield as he fell, but did not get a firm grip. Talen's arm was painfully wrenched as he was flung wildly about in a full circle, before he finally smacked hard into the grainy soil of the tunnel about ten feet from where he'd been standing.

The dragon spread its wings and rose up into the air, reaching almost the top of the tunnel before it twisted over on its back, and plummeted down toward the fallen knight, claws outstretched.

Arrows flew at the dragon holding Allera, the healer giving them a clear target through the shifting haze of *mirror images*. Baraka and Pella both scored hits, but the dragon seemed as indefatigable as the bigger one had, shrugging off whatever pain Varo's enhanced missiles might have caused it.

"Let her go!" Shay yelled, springing up onto the rocks, her sword flashing in her hand as her magical boots helped boost her into range to strike. She slashed at one of its hind legs, but her sword failed to penetrate its incredibly durable hide. As the dragon shifted a wing buffeted her, and she fell back, barely twisting her body enough to come down on her feet, instead of on her back. She rolled as she struck the hard ground, coming up grimacing but intact a few feet away.

Allera, struggling in vain to free herself from the dragon's grip, screamed again as it dug its claws deep into its body. Snaggletooth was visible fluttering around its head, trying

to distract it, but the dragon was clearly not going to release its prey. But it nearly lost its grip on its perch a moment later, as the stalagmites under it rumbled and shifted. To the dragon's surprise, the limestone formations suddenly came *alive*, twisting up like fingers to grab the dragon's lower body, bearing it to the ground. Allera went flying, caroming off the wall of the tunnel before she fell in a heap on the ground.

Talen struggled to his feet as the bigger dragon dove at him. Arrows flew at it, but they struck only *mirror images*, doing no harm to the beast. The illusions continued to shift around its onrushing form, and as Talen swung *Beatus Incendia*, his swing clipped an image, disrupting the illusory double but doing no harm to the creature.

The same could not be said for him, as the dragon tore mercilessly into him. Only his heavy armor kept him from being torn to pieces, as the dragon unleashed a series of powerful blows with its claws, wings, tail, and bite. But even the enchanted steel could not keep him from being battered, and as the dragon lashed him hard across the shoulders with its long tail, the knight crumpled to the ground, his face twisted in agony. His left leg was twisted beneath him at an obviously unnatural angle where the dragon had wrenched it with a claw, and while he still held onto his sword, his shield arm hung limp, broken in two places.

The dragon loomed over him, looking down at its prey with a look of fury burning in its black eyes.

"Rrrraaaaarrrrg!" Dar screamed as he drove into the creature from the side. *Valor* blazed in his hand, but he too was fooled by the dragon's illusions, and struck empty air as his charging attack dissolved another *image*. The dragon turned on him, ready to do to him what it had just done to Talen.

But before the dragon could strike, a storm of claws and feathers fell upon the dragon from behind, as a griffon summoned by Varo swooped down to attack. More *mirror images* disappeared, but the griffon seized onto real flesh with its beak, digging open a long gash into the muscled joint where its neck met its shoulder.

Shay rushed over to Allera, but the healer was conscious, despite the blood that continued to ooze out of the deep gouges that the dragon had carved into her body. Snaggletooth hovered over her as well. "I'm all right... go, go!" she yelled, at both of them, grimacing as she rolled over, and channeled a *cure critical wounds* into herself.

The female dragon grappled furiously with the animated mineral spires of the stalagmite formation. Shards of pulverized stone flew out in every direction as the dragon fought furiously to break free. Its foe was larger in size and mass, but the dragon had incredible strength in its compact body, and it was capable of unleashing truly incredible blows. Arrows continued to lance into the melee, barely noticed as it fought on.

Snaggletooth flew up to the tunnel ceiling, where stalagmites dangled down from the uneven surface like jagged stone teeth. The dragon darted nimbly through them,

releasing magic into the stone as he passed. As he finished his circuit, cracks appeared where the stalagmites met the ceiling, and one by one the huge stone daggers broke free and fell, plummeting to the ground below.

Baraka looked up and bit back a curse, throwing himself back moments before a cascade of loose stone smashed into the floor where he'd been standing. Allera lifted her arms to shield herself, but the little dragon had been more careful with her than it had been regarding the ranger, and none of the falling stones struck near her.

The shadow dragon's incredibly sharp senses warned it to the danger a split second before the falling slabs struck. The dragon summoned its magic with incredible swiftness, and shimmered, vanishing from the grasp of the animated stones a fraction of a second before the stalagmites crashed heavily into the ground.

The dragon had not gone far. It rematerialized a few paces away, not far from where Pella was fitting another arrow into her bow. Some subtle change in sound or air pressure warned her of the danger, and she spun, bringing the arrow back to her cheek as she drew the bow. The sight of the dragon leaping at her caused her eyes to widen in sudden fear, but the head of the arrow never wavered before she released the shaft at point-blank range into its chest.

Serah ducked, and barely in time, as the male dragon's tail lashed through the air where her head had been an instant before. She all but fell, terror pounding in her heart, even though the swing hadn't been an attack; the dragon had spun to attack the griffon, and returned the hurt that the summoned creature had inflicted on it tenfold, as it dug its claws deep into the body of its foe. The griffon shrieked and tried to break free, but the dragon refused to loosen its grip.

The cleric felt as though her muscles had turned to liquid, but then she saw again what had drawn her out into the open, and the sight returned strength to her body. She all but fell at Talen's side, all too aware of the raging battle taking place just a few paces away.

Talen was grievously wounded, his body battered and bleeding, but he was still conscious. "I've got to get you out of here!" she hissed. She tugged on his shoulder plates, but while he let out a groan of pain, he somehow was able to pull free. He refused to let go of his sword, she noticed.

"No! Heal me... heal me here!"

She had been drained by the dragon's breath, purging her remaining higher-order spells. But she drew deep into what remained, and she grabbed Talen's broken leg, twisting it back into position as she poured positive energy into his body. Talen's jaw tightened, but no sound of protest escaped his lips as she worked.

Dar and his companions had not stood idly by, although their efforts had thus far been largely for naught. They'd pared back the creature's illusory doubles, but it still maintained a considerable innate protection, which Dar learned anew as his sword glanced off of its armored body. The fighter had been going for all-out power attacks, a tactic that he realized wasn't going to work against this foe. Bullo, on the opposite side of the dragon, was having an equally poor time of it. Kalend, weakened by the dragon breath and recognizing that he was hopelessly outmatched, remained in cover along the edge of the tunnel, sniping with his bow to little effect.

The griffon let out a last wheeze and expired as the dragon crunched its jaws down solidly on its neck. As the summoning dissipated, the dragon smashed down its wings, buffeting both Bullo and Dar, driving the fighters back a step. It spun to face them, sweeping its tail around, taking Bullo's legs out from under him. It focused its eyes on Dar, letting out a nasty hiss that promised a grim fate for the hard-pressed fighter.

Chapter 159

CLAWS AND BITE

Pella's shot scored, digging deep into the dragon's chest. But the arrow was not enough to stop it. The archer reached for her sword, but the blade had not cleared the scabbard when the dragon slammed into her, its dagger-shaped head locking onto her right arm. Pella screamed in pain as it lifted her into the air. She too had been weakened by the initial blasts of the dragon breaths, and her efforts to break free were utterly futile.

Flashes of gray smoke and a loud chittering noise announced the arrival of more summoned allies, a pair of huge fiendish centipedes that immediately attacked the dragon from both sides. Others were coming; Baraka was running across the tunnel, drawing his sickles while he ran. But neither he nor the centipedes could stop the dragon from reaching up and digging its foreclaws deep into Pella's torso. As the archer screamed anew, the dragon yanked down, hard, while it pulled its head, still clamped onto Pella's arm, upward. The woman was the weak link in that equation of force, and with a sick ripping noise her arm was torn from her body.

The centipedes, though unable to pierce the dragon's hide with their initial attacks, were starting to distract it, so it tossed the pieces of the human archer aside, and shifted its attention to deal with them. It sensed another smaller foe trying to sneak up on it, and with an almost desultory twist of its body it shot down its head, its jaws snapping open to surprise the attacker.

But Licinius Varo was not surprised. In fact, he seemed almost willing to give the dragon a free bite, lifting his arm to protect his head. The dragon caught his arm, biting

down with enough force to crack bones. Varo did not cry out in pain, but he did release the *harm* spell he'd cast from Gudmund's scroll.

Blood gushed from the dragon's nostrils, and it immediately released him, staggering back in agony. It let out a roar of distress, each motion of its head releasing more fat droplets of blood. The creature was far too durable for the spell to have crippled it, but it had certainly hurt it, badly.

That was what Drakha had been waiting for. Summoning the most potent of its magic, the outsider hit the dragon with a *power word*. The spell overcame the dragon's spell resistance, and sent it reeling, stunned.

The male dragon aborted its attack on Dar in mid-strike, knocking the surprised fighter down as it leapt into the air. It flew like a dart across the battlefield to join its mate, diving onto one of the centipedes that were still trying to dig into the stunned dragon's flesh. The dragon utterly crushed the first centipede as it landed on it, severing its head from its body with a single savage rip of its jaws. A blast of energy lanced into it, a *lightning bolt* from Drakha, but the spell dissolved harmlessly as it struck the dragon's spell resistance.

But it did give the dragon a target. It swiveled its head to focus on the gray-skinned outsider, its eyes narrowing with sinister intent.

But before it could unleash another deadly attack, the dragon found itself distracted by other foes. Baraka, driven to a fury by Pella's death, rushed at its flank, his twin sickles flashing in his hands. He made no secret of his intent as he raised the weapons and let out an angry roar of challenge.

The dragon met the ranger's rush with a flick of its tail. The armored appendage smashed into the ranger like a whip, its end catching Baraka square in the center of his forehead. His momentum was immediately stopped and reversed by the force of the blow. He flipped head over heels backwards, landing motionless on his back, his weapons clattering to the ground a good distance away.

Varo put the distraction caused by Baraka's futile attack to good use, creeping up close enough to deliver an *inflict critical wounds* spell by touch. But again the dragon's spell resistance held, and the spell dissipated harmlessly as it discharged. The dragon detected the attack, however, and twisted its head toward the new threat.

But before it could pulverize Varo, the dragon saw Talen, Dar, and Bullo charging it, weapons raised and ready to strike. The dragon did not wait for them to reach it, opening its jaws wide, and unleashing another blast of negative energy that engulfed all three of the attacking men, casting them into a murk of utter darkness.

Talen, still protected by the lingering potency of Allera's *death ward*, emerged from the stream of black energy unharmed, but the same could not be said for his companions.

When the blast faded, it revealed Dar barely standing, bent over, his motions stiff and jerky. His helm had fallen from his head, and his flesh was as pale as old wool. *Valor* was still in his hand, but the blade shook violently.

But he was better off than Bullo, who lay upon the ground, his limp corpse drained of even the last lingering vestige of life.

Chapter 160

THE CHARGE OF THE DRAGON KNIGHT

Talen looked up into the eyes of the dragon, and saw his death. As its deadly cone of negative energy faded, he tore his eyes from that malevolent stare, and looked back at his allies.

The dragon's breath attack had decimated his companions. Bullo was dead, and while Dar started forward again, sheer will driving him, even Talen could see that the man was balancing on a razor's edge between life and death. One attack from the dragon, that's all it would take.

But Dar kept coming, and Talen could do no less, bound in a weave of duty and honor. He felt something surge inside of him, and he let it explode out in a rallying cry that echoed through the cavern. The shout was more raw emotion than any specific command, but his companions heard it, and took heart.

Talen charged. The dragon, canny, waited for him to come within range, where it could rend him with claw and bite, wing and tail, the full tally of its deadly natural weapons. Talen knew as well as he knew his own name that he could not withstand the creature's devastating full attack. At best, he would get one shot at it.

But Talen charged, and he was not alone. Shay appeared from his left, charging across the cavern to join him, her legs almost a blur as her magical boots accelerated her across the floor. She caught her lover's eye, and the two shared plans in that look with the silent acknowledgement of two who had lived and fought together for a long time. Instead of catching up to Talen, the scout veered to her left, adjusting her arc to come upon the dragon from its flank, timing it so that she would hit the dragon at the same time as the knight.

The dragon saw and recognized the maneuver, but it refused to shift its position, keeping a protective stance in front of its stunned mate. It had not forgotten Varo, but had dismissed the cleric as a lesser threat than the armored human with the holy blade. That turned out to be a mistake, as Varo delivered another touchspell, this time overcoming its spell resistance. The dragon's powerful will allowed it to still shrug off

much of the damaging energies of the spell, but the *inflict critical wounds* still hurt it, opening a long gash in its hide where the cleric's fingers had pressed.

The dragon snapped its head around and down, catching Varo before he could withdraw or seek cover. Its head snapped down on his shoulder like a vise, and before the priest of Dagos could react, it set all four claws and yanked its upper body around. It launched Varo like a catapult stone toward Shaylara. The scout saw the cleric coming and leapt aside, changing her momentum subtly, just enough so that Varo flew past her. The cleric landed hard, bounced, and rolled to a stop a short distance away.

The attack slowed her just enough for Talen to get to the dragon before her. The dragon's long neck extended, and it smashed down its head on the knight like a club, its jaws opening to seize him by the neck. Talen staggered from the force of the blow, but he jerked away from its bite before it could lock its jaws. *Beatus Incendia* flashed as he tried to sever the dragon's head from its neck, but the beast was too fast, and he managed only a glancing hit that did little damage.

Dar and Shay followed the knight in, and attacked the dragon's flanks. The colonel, seriously drained by its terrible breath attacks, could only manage a weak stroke that bounced harmlessly off its armored body. Shay fared only slightly better, her momentum allowing her to pierce its hide with her sword as she hewed at its thick hind leg. But even the keen elvish steel only managed to score the corded muscle beneath, drawing just a trickle of seeping black blood.

This is it, Talen thought, as the dragon reared up.

But a loud, piercing crash echoed through the cavern. Looking up, Talen could only just make out the gray outline of Varo's *planar ally*, flying above near the ceiling. The outsider drew back from a large stalactite, which detached from the ceiling and plummeted down toward the battle below. Talen saw that the missile wasn't heading for the big dragon, but for its still-stunned mate... and Shay, whose position put her dangerously close to both.

"Shay, look out!"

The dragon had glanced up as well, and as it saw the stone dagger plummet down toward its defenseless and heavily-injured mate, it aborted its attack. It surged back and sprang upward to meet the falling stalagmite, driving into it with its shoulder. The impact, backed by the dragon's considerable weight and strength, deflected the stalagmite, which hit the ground a few paces from the female dragon, and shattered into a hundred pieces. Shay leapt back, narrowly avoiding getting hit by the male dragon's tail, but several fist-sized pieces of rock battered her, and when she fell into a crouch a few paces distant, blood trickled down the side of her face where a jagged piece of stone had glanced off her temple.

Talen and Dar did not hesitate to take advantage, coming up on the dragon from behind. Again Dar did little more than distract it, but Talen's second attack was slightly more effective, the holy sword cutting a gash two feet long in its back, its blood hissing as the weapon's flames seared it.

The dragon turned in a fury, but its mate let out a shriek, drawing it back again. Varo was there, holding onto the dragon's neck, drawing the energy of more of his higher-order magic to fuel yet another *inflict critical wounds*. The stunned female, weaker than the male, could not resist the magic, and it let out a keening wail as the cleric's power scored it.

The male dragon descended on Varo in a violent fury, holding nothing back. It lunged forward, slamming both claws down on his shoulders. The twin blows slammed Varo down to the ground hard enough to crack the stone. Blood exploded from the cleric's mouth as the air was crushed out of him.

The cleric's companions hurried forward to intervene, but the dragon was not done. It spread its wings and buffeted Dar and Shay, striking both of them. Dar was hit in the forehead, and without his helmet, the blow was enough to knock him unconscious. Shay tried to leap under its reach, but the leading edge of the wing smashed into her back, hitting with enough force to snap a rib. The scout cried out and staggered forward.

Talen knew he had to do something. He raised his holy sword and uttered a prayer to the Father, leaping at the dragon's back. It showed that it was all too aware of his presence as its whip-tail came around, aiming for the knight's legs. Talen yelled and leapt, and despite his heavy armor and battered body, he somehow was able to clear it as it swiped below him, so fast that the air whistled as it passed.

He lifted *Beatus Incendia*, but before he could strike, the dragon's head shot out at him, coming under its wing as it lifted from hitting Shay. Talen had avoided the tail through a miracle of luck and fate, but he could not avoid those jaws, which seemed to grow to encompass the world, an instant before they closed over his head with a snap of grim finality.

Chapter 161

THE BLESSED FLAME

Metal crunched as the shadow dragon bit down hard on Talen's helmet. The two combatants came apart as the helm's straps gave way and Talen fell back. Blood sprouted from deep gashes along the sides of his head, where the dragon's teeth had crushed the metal against his skull. Talen fell to one knee, dazed.

The dragon spat out the helmet, and surged forward to finish the job. Talen knew that he had to react, but *Beatus Incendia* felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, and his perceptions were tainted by a hazy fog. The dragon looked like it was charging down a long tunnel in his vision, with everything around it fuzzy and insubstantial. Blood fell in fat droplets from its body, which now bore well over a dozen wounds, ranging from arrows that barely stuck in its hide to deep cuts in its shoulder and torso where its foes had managed to hurt it badly.

He felt an odd tingle, then a tiny but distinct stab of pain as something pricked his neck. That momentary discomfort was followed by a spreading warmth that cut through the fog hanging over his senses, returning clarity with an abrupt suddenness.

Just in time to see the dragon's head diving for him once more.

Talen screamed and drove himself to his feet, bringing up his holy sword in a blinding arc of fire and light. The dragon tried to shift its attack, but the knight's sudden recovery had caught it off guard. The blade bit deep into the bottom of the dragon's head, a full foot of the blessed steel sliding through the tight flesh under its jaw up into its skull.

The dragon reared back, taking the sword with it. Wisps of darkness erupted from its jaws, scattered tendrils of negative energy that dissipated within a few feet. As the dragon's head darted wildly back and forth, however, light began to shine from the creature's jaws, followed by wisps of holy fire. The shadow dragon let out a terrible hissing, which faded as its struggles gradually ceased, and it collapsed to the ground in a heap.

Talen stood there stunned, looking at the dragon's corpse.

And then the female dragon reared up behind it.

The slain dragon's mate was also grievously wounded. It had finally shaken off the effects of the *power word*, but it moved sluggishly, with one wing canted at an unnatural angle, and black blood oozing from the sides of its jaws. It looked down at its fallen companion with an unbridled fury shining in its eyes, but there was something else there as well, an underlying fear.

A *lightning bolt*, fired by Drakha from where he hovered still high above the cavern, lanced down into the dragon. The arc of energy evaporated as it impacted the dragon's spell resistance, but it still shied back.

Its foes had suffered heavy losses, but there were still enemies able to strike at it. Shay had fallen back, working her shortbow despite the incredible pain from her broken rib that accompanied each draw. Arrows continued to come from the far side of the tunnel, where Kalend had remained in cover for the duration of the battle. Thus far he'd only managed one lucky hit, but the rogue's shafts could not be ignored. Allera had

stabilized Baraka, although the ranger was still unconscious, and she was already running toward Dar. Talen had drawn his backup sword, the magical steel forming a bubble of light around him that seemed pale compared to the holy brightness of *Beatus Incendia*.

The dragon spread its wings and lifted itself into the air, sending up a plume of dust and grit that obscured the vision of its nearest enemies on the ground. More arrows came at it, but as the dragon lifted higher into the air it summoned a renewed layer of *mirror images* around it, confounding their shots. Drakha drifted closer to it, but the dragon was clearly no longer interested in anything but flight; with powerful beats of its wings it darted with great speed down the tunnel, back toward the steam cavern. The outsider launched a final *lightning bolt* after it, accompanied by a few last arrows, but none of them could see whether those parting attacks had any effect.

As the flapping of the dragon's wings faded, quiet returned to the tunnel, broken only by the groans of those who had survived the brief but violent clash.

Chapter 162

CLINGING TO LIFE

"We need to make certain of it," Varo said. "The dragon is too great a threat to us to leave behind intact."

"We're in no shape for another fight, Varo," Talen said, his impatience sounding clearly in his voice. "Have you taken a look around you?"

The companions were clustered in a niche formed in a natural crevice in the wall of an elbow-shaped cavern a few hundred feet across. They were not far from where they'd fought the dragons, and another tunnel jutted off from the far end of the cavern, a smoother, straight passage a hundred feet across that Shay said likely led to the goblin city. It was not the best place to camp, but they had not yet encountered any goblins, and none of them were willing to return to the steam cavern.

"My suggestion assumes that we rest first," Varo said. "I can prepare a spell that will transform myself and three others into wisps of smoke, capable of following the dragon to its lair. Drakha is capable of following via his own means."

"You want to split the group as well? Varo, this is not a good idea."

"It is the only way. From what Allera's little friend told us, the female dragon withdrew across a broad chasm, which only flying individuals can easily bypass."

Snaggletooth, sitting on a rock nearby, lifted its head and chirped. The faerie dragon, on its own initiative, had followed the fleeing shadow dragon as it fled back to the steam cavern, but Allera's companion had not pursued it all the way to its lair.

"Maybe he just wants the dragon's hoard," Dar chimed in. The fighter leaned back against a sloping shelf of rock, his cloak rolled up and tucked under his neck. Allera had saved his life, but until their divine casters could regain their *restoration* spells, there was nothing she could do to help him recover from the draining effects of the dragons' breath weapons. Most of them suffered from similar weakness, but Dar had been the only one to have been breathed upon twice.

Varo did not respond, and after an explosive sigh, Talen said, "Is that it, Varo? You want to risk our lives for some *treasure*?"

"I am not concerned with a pile of coins or pretty baubles, commander. But surely you can appreciate the benefits of securing any items of power that the dragons may have accumulated. Clearly the goblins used the beasts as guardians; they would not have been able to access the mines in the great cavern if the pair had been hostile."

"It is an unnecessary risk," Talen said. "Baraka is still comatose, and we've already lost three. I cannot afford to send four more of our company off to confront a foe that is no longer a threat."

"That we do not know for certain, commander."

"I said, no, cleric."

"As you wish." Varo started to get up. "Wait a moment," Talen said, meeting Varo's eyes. "You are going to do this anyway, aren't you?"

Varo did not respond for a moment, then finally said. "Yes."

Talen's expression hardened. "What about the mission? I thought you were focused on our goal, priest."

"It is because I believe that this is vital to accomplishing that goal that I must do this. But I will not risk any of the others, if that is your decision."

"There is something else that you are not telling us, isn't there?"

"At some point, commander, one has to trust his instincts. I am sorry, but there is nothing more that I can tell you."

"You should be grateful, Varo, that I am not following my instincts right now." With that, the knight turned and headed toward the entrance of the crevice, where Kalend and Shay were keeping watch. As the only person—other than Varo—who had not been

drained by the dragons' breath, Talen would not likely get much in the way of sleep while the spellcasters recovered their magic.

Varo watched him go. "A dragon hoard, eh?" Dar said, looking up at the cleric.

Chapter 163

THE DRAGON'S LAIR

Four wispy, insubstantial forms drifted out of the trailing edges of the thinning steam cloud, out over the chasm. The rising air from the chasm rapidly dissipated the steam from the cavern to the south, but these four clusters of mist remained intact, drifting down to the far side of the chasm. The cavern on the north side of the chasm was dark and cold, but a soft glow radiated from the lead figure, barely enough for the travelers to see their way forward.

The four figures drifted northward, deeper into the cavern. The place was so huge that their pale light failed to reach the walls or ceiling of the place.

Finally, the group of *wind walkers* came to a stop, and sank to the ground. Slowly the misty outlines took on solid form, until Varo, Dar, Allera, and Kalend stood within the bubble of light that shone from the cleric's holy symbol.

"I don't like this," Dar said. "Why not keep flying until we get to the lair?"

"I told you before," Varo replied. "The spell requires too long to change from insubstantial to material form. I can dismiss it at once, but then we would not be able to return until I rested and regained the spell again."

"The dragon will know we are coming," Kalend said, indicating the light.

"She already knows that we are coming," came a voice from the darkness behind him, causing the rogue to jump slightly. Drakha materialized out of the black, his gray skin and garments blending with the shadows until he was almost upon them. "She remains to defend her eggs, and her hoard."

"So it's just waiting for us to show up and put it down?" Dar asked, skeptically.

"I am certain that she will have a few surprises left for us," the outsider responded. "We would be well advised to be wary."

“The time for subtlety is past,” Varo said. “Ware your eyes.” He lifted his mace, and summoned a brilliant globe of *daylight*, focused on the head of the weapon. The companions shied back, the bright light hurting their dark-sensitive eyes.

“Allera, ward Kalend and yourself against the dragon’s breath. I will likewise treat myself, Dar, and Drakha.” As he began casting his *death wards*, touching his companions to impart the magical protections of the spell, he said, “Once the wards are placed, we must move swiftly. The spell will only function for a few minutes.”

“So we just rush in, and kill it?”

“Correct. If Drakha is right, it will not abandon its nest; we can use that to our advantage. If it is utilizing magical protections, wait until I can *dispel* them before you strike.”

Dar tested the string of his bow. “Cleric, this is a new side of you.” He grinned. “I like it.”

Varo finished his castings. He looked at Allera, who nodded. “Ready.”

“All right then, let’s go kick some dragon ass,” Dar said. The companions started out at a jog. Between the light of the *daylight* spell and the clank of Dar’s heavy armor as he ran, there was no way that their foe could have failed to sense their approach. But nothing stirred out of the darkness to threaten them. The cavern floor was unremarkable, a barren expanse of flat, cracked stone, with only the occasional scattered boulder or rock formation to obstruct their charge.

They ran for a minute that stretched into two without event. The cavern continued unabated; the place was truly huge. The others had to slow their pace to match Dar, and all of them were in good shape, so they did not flag. Drakha paced them, floating a few inches off the ground, his expression mysterious as they neared battle.

And then they saw it. A huge mound of white, easily sixty feet across, and upwards of ten feet high.

“It’s made of bones,” Allera said. “Thousands and thousands of bones...”

Dar came to a stop, breathing a little heavy. Despite his excellent conditioning and his incredible strength, augmented by his magic belt, running in fifty pounds of metal armor and another fifty pounds of arms and other gear was not a trivial undertaking. But his eyes were sharp as he fitted an arrow to his bow. Varo had enchanted their arrows again; the cleric of Dagos had depleted nearly all of his higher-order spells in preparing for this assault, selecting those magics that would give them the most advantage in the coming confrontation. Allera, too, had used up most her most potent magic, both on the *death wards* and the *restorations* that had been necessary to bring the others back to full strength after the dragon battle.

“Getting up there is going to be a challenge,” Kalend observed. “If the dragon’s waiting in there, it can strike as we’re climbing up.”

“Then we must give it an incentive to come out,” Varo said. He nodded to Drakha, who lifted a hand almost casually toward the nest.

At once, the huge mound of bones seemed to come alive. They clattered together as the outsider’s *animate objects* spell caused the nest to twist together, the uppermost layer of bones snapping and cracking in a false semblance of life.

The response was immediate; a massive roar echoed through the cavern, sounding loudly off the distant walls of the place.

“Well, that got its attention,” Dar said.

“There!” Kalend yelled, pointing up to the left, where the dragon swept down out of the darkness. Surrounded again with *mirror images* and another *shield*, it opened its mouth and breathed, engulfing all of the attackers with a cone of negative energy.

Protected by *death wards*, none of them were affected by the blast.

Dar lifted his bow but held his fire, waiting for Varo. The cleric had been ready, and responded quickly, hitting the dragon with a *dispel magic* that tore its magical defenses away. The dragon, driven into a rage, descended upon them. It targeted Drakha, seizing the outsider in its jaws as it landed, biting down hard and then flinging it roughly aside. Varo’s *planar ally* withstood the rough treatment, although gray blood darkened its tunic, and an angry yellow glow appeared in its eyes as it slowly picked itself up off the cavern floor, brushing off dust from its legs and arms.

Kalend lifted his bow and fired, backpedaling out of the dragon’s reach. The dragon lashed its tail at him, smashing him hard in the left thigh. The rogue went down but rolled with the force of the blow, coming up limping a few feet away. He hung onto his bow, but continued to retreat, putting a safe distance between him and the raging monster.

Allera narrowly avoided being crushed by the dragon as it landed, and she raised her arms above her head as its wing buffeted her. Staggering back, she tried to get clear, the sounds of Snaggletooth’s wings flapping around her as the invisible dragon accompanied her.

Dar aborted his shot and dropped his bow, snapping *Valor* out of its scabbard at his hip. The dragon, perhaps sensing that he was the greatest remaining threat, turned on him at once. The beast clearly showed the effects of its wounds from the earlier combat; streaks of dried blood covered its head and torso, and one eye was a milky white,

crippled and unseeing. But it did not hesitate as it leapt upon the fighter, biting and clawing.

Valor bit deep into the dragon's torso. Dar had learned his lesson from the first confrontation with the shadow dragons, and eschewed all-out power attacks for more precise strikes that had a better chance of penetrating its scaled hide. His first blow bit deeply into its body, but the second glanced off the armored scales, failing to widen the oozing wound.

Dar lifted the sword to strike again, but the dragon shot in like a crossbow bolt, its head locking onto his swordarm, its jaws crushing the limb from elbow to wrist. Dar let out a cry of pain and tried to break free, using his other hand to try to pry the dragon's jaws open. He may as well have been trying to pry up a boulder; the dragon was incredibly strong.

Without releasing its grip, the dragon crouched and spread its wings, leaping into the air with its captive still locked within its grasp. Dar's eyes widened as the ground dropped away under him. The dragon flew up over the nest and past it, then began to bank around for a return, still gaining altitude. His shoulder had been dislocated by the rough treatment, and his arm felt like it was on fire.

Drakha hit it with a *lightning bolt*, but the spell dissipated against its spell resistance.

And then Varo called down a *flame strike*.

The spell slammed down into the dragon like a blow from a giant's maul, hitting it square in the back. The dragon staggered in mid-flight, although it refused to drop its prisoner. Blood both black and red trailed down its body, splattering on the cavern floor below, as it came toward the companions again for one last desperate charge.

Dar roared and slammed his free hand up into bottom of the dragon's jaw. His magical punching dagger drove deep into its head, only narrowly missing his own arm inside its mouth. The wedge-shaped head of the weapon pierced a narrow gap between the dragon's skull and its uppermost vertebrae, severing the precious brown cord inside.

The dragon's wings abruptly stopped flapping, and it dropped like a stone. The creature smashed into the center of its nest, shattering bones by the hundreds, scattering fragments out in a radius of nearly a hundred feet. Dar, free at last, shot forward like a steel-encased missile. He hit the edge of the nest and blasted through, spinning in mid air before he landed hard on his back on the ground below. *Valor* clattered to the ground at his feet; he'd kept his grip on the sword throughout almost the entire misadventure.

Allera was there in a few seconds, a look of concern on her face. Dar's arm was a mangled wreck, his shoulder had been pulled out of its socket, one of his legs was bent back at what had to be a painful angle, and there was a wide grin on his face.

“Ouch,” he said.

Chapter 164

THE HOARD

With the last dragon slain, the companions turned their attention to the dragon's hoard. Just getting up into the nest proved challenging, and while there was an obvious quantity of treasure, most of it was buried within the mound of bones, and would require considerable effort to retrieve.

“I will scan for magic,” Varo said. “I do not believe that there are foes other than the dragons in this cavern, but we should not dally; the commander will be worried.”

“There's a hell of a lot of silver in here,” Dar said, kicking through the heap of bones. His weight caused the nest to crunch loudly with every step, and he had to be cautious not to fall.

“There are eggs in here,” Allera said, bending down to examine an oblong orb roughly three feet long. One end of the egg was cracked, and a sick gray material was draining out of it down into the nest.

“Smash 'em,” Dar said, bending down to examine something interesting.

Allera frowned, but Varo nodded in agreement. “They must be destroyed. Dragons are creatures of innate natures; they lack the redeemability of humankind. The shadow dragons are inherently evil, that is a simple fact.”

“It must be reassuring to have such certainty to guide you,” Allera said.

“What is, is,” Varo replied.

“If things cannot be changed, then why are you here, Varo?”

“Because not everything is certain, healer. Look at what you do... death is an inevitability for us mortals, is it not? And yet you struggle against it with more ferocity than anyone I have ever seen. Why do you fight so hard, if you know that ultimately you will be defeated?”

Allera's frown deepened, and she looked away.

“What the hell is this?” Dar asked, dragging something out of the heap. His prize was a metal rod, set with protruding studs up its length, the whole topped with a large iron ball. As he lifted it, his hand closed on one of the studs.

The ball split open, and a gleaming steel blade sprung forth. At the same time, the shaft lengthened in his hand, rapidly growing until the whole device was roughly the size of a long spear.

“Whoa,” he said.

“It is a *rod of lordly might*,” Drakha said. The outsider looked at Varo. “And per the terms of our agreement, I claim it as my payment for services rendered.”

“What?” Dar asked, holding the spear a bit possessively.

Varo looked intently at the outsider, and nodded. “Give it to him, Dar.”

“Like hell! I haven’t even pushed the other buttons yet!”

The cleric was nonplussed. “Without Drakha’s aid, we would not have survived our first clash with the dragons.”

“Fine, give him *your* share then, this here rod is mine.”

“It is not wise to broach an agreement, human,” the outsider said. Chaos flashed in his eyes, and the bone pile under Dar’s feet shifted slightly.

“Dar, just give it to him,” Allera said. “We cannot afford elective battles, not now.”

“I don’t like being told what to do,” Dar said, his eyes narrow as he met Drakha’s stare full on.

“Very well,” the outsider said. “I will take an alternative prize back with me to Limbo, in exchange for the rod.”

Drakha turned, and pointed toward Kalend, who looked around in surprise, before turning suddenly pale.

Chapter 165

THE REWARD

“Are you joking?” Dar said. If his stare had been sharp before, now it looked about ready to cut glass.

“That was not in our agreement,” Varo said.

“Our agreement is void, by the actions of your companion,” the outsider said, genially. “Let him decide, his treasure, or his man; I will take either.”

“We’re not going to give you one of our people,” Allera said, turning to Dar with an expression that betrayed the smallest hint of doubt.

Dar’s jaw tightened. He pressed the stud on the rod, and the device retracted back into its original form. He extended it silently toward the outsider.

Drakha came forward, the uneven surface giving him no difficulty. As it came, its form began to subtly shift. Its human guise faded, replaced by a hideous visage that resembled nothing more than the face of a huge, bloated toad. As it took the rod from Dar’s hand, it smiled.

“If I ever see you again, creature, you will not be pleased.”

“I look forward to that meeting, human,” the slaad croaked. It drew the rod close in against its body, and dissolved into gray smoke. Within a few seconds, it was gone.

Kalend sat down on the bone heap, wiping his brow on a cloth. Varo was already digging through the treasure pile again, but he looked up as Dar came over to him.

“What I told that... thing, Varo, it applies to you as well, if you ever summon its like again.”

“Very well, Dar.”

Dar trudged off, and started digging again through the treasure, a good distance off.

They spent the better part of an hour searching through the debris. They found two more of the eggs, one crushed under the female dragon’s body, but the last fully intact. Allera did not say anything as Dar smashed it with his magical club. Varo’s *detect magic* spell revealed several interesting items, including a magical heavy shield of silvery steel, etched with the symbol of a pair of crossed bolts of jagged lightning, and an arcane scroll in a cracked leather tube. Among dozens of pieces of cheap and nearly valueless jewelry, they found a silver bracelet set with over a dozen tiny diamonds, and a platinum cup encrusted with rubies. They also found some mundane gear, likely the former possessions of past victims of the dragons, but none of it was superior to that which they already had. They also found as much gold and silver as they wanted to carry, so much so that even Dar ended up leaving the majority of it behind.

“We should have brought Shay’s magical sack,” he muttered, as they packed up and prepared to depart.

There were two other finds of note, and both came at the very last minute. Allera found a bright blue diamond wedged into a skull. She showed the stone to Varo, who nodded; the diamond was almost certainly sufficient for the casting of a *raise dead* spell.

The last item was found by Varo. The cleric had been distracted through most of the search, traveling back and forth over the huge nest, as if looking for something. Finally, he stopped right in front of the fallen dragon, and stared down at it.

The dragon looked smaller in death than it had in life. It was only barely larger than a horse, its body covered in blood and char. It was already beginning to stink.

Varo knelt in front of it, careful not to impale himself on jagged shards of bone. The brilliant light that still shone from his mace cast the details of its battered form in stark relief.

There... the light reflected on something just visible through a tear of the dragon’s wing. Varo crept over to it, lifting the dragon’s heavy wing to see what he’d found.

It was a dagger, an odd device made of a silvery metal that resembled mithral. It almost did not look like it had been designed as a weapon, with a wedge-shaped blade and a blocky, unwrapped handle. A yellow gemstone, a square of topaz, embedded in the hilt gleamed brightly in the light of Varo’s *daylight* spell.

His eyes wide, Varo took the dagger and carefully wrapped it in a torn sack before placing it in his magical haversack.

“We can return,” he told the others, who were already growing impatient with the search. Dar’s pack bulged, and a pair of small sacks likewise full of loot hung from one of the straps.

“The same way we came?” Kalend asked.

Varo nodded. “Concentrate on the *wind walk*; you will feel the power of the spell still potent in your mind. Let it transform you back into the misty form, and remain close to me.”

The companions did as the cleric bid, and in less than a minute they were speeding back toward the chasm, leaving the broken body of the dragon and the remnants of its hoard behind them as a marker of their passage.

Chapter 166

THE SHATTERED CITY

“What *happened* here?” Allera said quietly.

“It would appear that the cult of Orcus is extending its reach,” Varo replied.

The seven companions moved through the great cavern, which loomed sepulchral and empty round them, like a tomb. The place that had once been the central market of the goblin city of Grezneck was now a shattered marker of a great catastrophe.

“Violence was wrought here,” Shay said. It was obvious, even beyond the wreckage of market stalls and the broken bits of gear scattered about. This place just felt like suffering and destruction.

“There are no bodies,” Baraka noted. The ranger was still a little pale, but he held his bow tightly, an arrow held loose against the string. “Just like at the deserted guardpost at the city entrance; hints of struggle, but no remains.”

The companions kept close together as they pressed onward, deeper into the cavern. Varo’s *daylight* spell pushed back the darkness, but the reassuring warmth of the divine illumination did little to dispel the cold chill that each of them felt. Grezneck bore constant signs and reminders of the large population that had thrived here until recently, but in its current state, each of them could not help but feel like interlopers, intruding upon the uneasy rest of the dead.

Or, as it may be, the *undead*.

There was a small flutter of movement under an overturned booth as they walked past. Sword and arrows were turned upon the wreckage at once, but the source was revealed a moment later as a small, scrawny rat, which darted away, vanishing into a crack in the cavern wall.

“Well, at least *something* lives here,” Baraka said. The ranger shuddered, and stopped, rubbing his head.

“Are you all right?” Allera asked him. “We can stop to rest, if you need to.” While Allera had both healed him and purged his body with a *restoration* spell, the mountain ranger still showed the lingering effects of his injury. He’d fallen into a deep coma after Allera had stabilized him during the battle with the dragon, and no mere *cure wounds* spells had been able to improve his condition. Talen had looked to be facing a very difficult decision, when the ranger had suddenly woken shortly after the return of Varo and the others from their confrontation with the female dragon in its lair. He’d been dazed, with little memory of the battle, or for that matter anything that they’d done thus far in

Rappan Athuk. But after some more healing Allera had pronounced him fit, and he accepted his weapons and his place in the van without complaint.

“Not here,” Talen said, but Baraka shook his head. “I am all right, healer,” he said, moving ahead to join Shay in scouting out their path.

“Which way?” Talen asked, turning to Varo.

The cleric focused on his active *find the path* spell. “There,” he said, pointing to the far side of the cavern.

“Let’s get moving then,” the knight said. “I don’t want to spend a minute longer in this place than is necessary.”

Varo’s directions led them to a pair of double doors, now hanging open, on the far side of the cavern. The doors accessed a broad tunnel, easily twenty feet wide, that continued deeper into the goblin city.

They moved quickly but cautiously, their own treads muffled on the worn stone. Their care was born in part of a renewed awareness of the challenges of Rappan Athuk, and in part from what had happened in their camp after the dragon hunters had returned from the shadow dragons’ nest. With two new bodies added to their tally, Allera had insisted on using the blue diamond she’d found to try to *raise* one of their fallen. Pella’s dismemberment placed her beyond that spell’s power, so she had attempted to bring back Bullo from beyond the veil.

The spell had failed; Allera had been unable to contact the legionary’s soul. Talen and Shay had looked up at Varo, who had not looked surprised at the result.

The corridor straightened and continued onward for as far as they could see with Varo’s light. “This must have been a main thoroughfare,” Kalend said. “It’s bigger than any goblin warren I’ve ever seen.”

“These are not typical goblins,” Talen said. He held *Beatus Incendia* bare in his hand, but the sword was inert; the knight had not called upon its holy flames.

“Damned gobbos can all go to the Pit,” Dar growled.

Up ahead, at the edge of their light, Shay gestured back to them. “Quiet,” Talen said to the others. “Varo, mask the light.”

The cleric nodded, covering the head of his mace with a sack. The brilliant illumination instantly faded to a weak aura that shone through the dense wool fibers, and the companions had to grasp onto the left wall to guide them while their eyes adjusted to the sudden change.

Shay came back to join them as they approached. “What is it?” Talen whispered.

“There’s a side tunnel to the left up ahead,” the scout reported. “I thought I heard something... might have been sounds of battle.”

“*Thought* you heard?” Dar hissed.

Shay shot him a dark look, but Talen said, “All right, let’s check it out. But slowly, and as quietly as possible; we don’t know what’s out there.”

Quiet was a relative thing, with Dar and Talen clad in heavy armor, but they made their way up to the side passage that Shay had indicated without incident. The opening was far narrower than the main tunnel, and led into a tunnel that was utterly black. They stood there for a few moments, listening, but heard nothing but silence.

“I think you’re hearing things...” Dar began, but Shay cut him off with a raised hand. “Something’s coming,” she whispered.

Talen gestured to Varo, and the two of them moved to flank the opening. The cleric put his mace under his cloak, completely muting the light. Behind the knight, Dar drew *Valor* from its sheath, while the others prepared spells or missile weapons for battle.

They listened, but the darkness continued its silence unabated. Then, finally, they heard a faint sound, almost like a whisper. It *could* have been the soft sound of feet padding on bare stone... getting closer...

Shay prodded Talen, and the knight stepped into the opening, invoking the power of his sword as he did so. Behind him, Varo drew out his mace, and tore off the sack from its head, flooding the area with *daylight*.

The bright glow revealed a single goblin, who drew up in startlement, shielding its eyes in pain from the sudden intensity of light.

“All right, gobbo, on your knees, hands on your head,” Dar said, stepping into the tunnel opening, at the same time that Allera said, “It’s all right, we’re not here to hurt you.”

The goblin recovered surprisingly quickly. It darted forward, easily avoiding Dar’s clumsy grab, diving into a roll that took it past Talen before the knight could react.

“What the—” Dar exclaimed, spinning around in confusion before he located the rapidly-moving goblin. “Come back here, you little bastard!”

The goblin came up from its roll and sprang forward again, leaping past Allera and Shay. The scout was fast enough to get in an attack; she shot out a foot, trying to trip up the creature, but the goblin was able to shift and take the blow on its hip. It grunted, but did not stop.

Kalend had lifted his blow, but Serah stopped him. “No, hold your fire! We’re supposed to parlay with them...”

But it looked like the goblin was not interested in conversation, and as he made it past Shay, it looked like it was going to make a clean escape. But as it turned toward the tunnel that led back to the great market cavern, it had one more foe to get past; Licinius Varo.

Varo made no move to intercept the creature. He merely presented his divine focus, and invoked the power of Dagos.

The goblin froze and fell, paralyzed by a *hold person* spell.

“I would suggest that you secure it quickly; the spell will not hold it long,” Varo said.

Shay and Baraka moved to capture the goblin, but before they could bind it, a dark, nauseating storm of energy engulfed them.

Chapter 167

THE POWER OF DARKNESS

The power of the *unholy blight* seared all of them, and Talen and Shay were both staggered, voiding the contents of their stomachs onto the stone floor as the foul sickness of the spell seeped into their bodies.

Varo was the first to recover, as the *blight* faded. “There, down the side tunnel!” he warned, pointing with his mace.

Dar did not suffer the way that Talen and Shay had, but he still felt a foul, cloying thickness in the back of his throat as he turned back around. A small horde of undead came charging forward into the light, a mix of skeletons and ghouls, all of them only three feet tall. There was over a score of them altogether, and they came on in a full run, rapidly closing the distance between them and the companions.

“Bah, even as undead, they look weak,” Dar said.

Talen reseated his helmet and stepped forward to join Dar. The knight’s sword pulsed with holy flames, as eager as he was to destroy these undead abominations.

But before he could strike, Talen froze, overcome by a *hold person* spell from the still-unseen enemy cleric. Dar, sensing that something was wrong, glanced over at him. He tapped the knight's shoulder with *Valor*, but Talen did not react.

"Wonderful," he said, moving forward to take up a blocking position in front of the paralyzed knight.

Holy power flooded the tunnel as the clerics unleashed their power, the brilliant light of the Father underlaid by the violet pulses of the Dark Creeper. Serah's turning disintegrated half a dozen skeletons in the front rank of the charging enemy force, and a pair of ghouls recoiled, overcome by the power of her god. A moment later four more ghouls suddenly froze, rebuked by Varo. A pair of arrows from Kalend and Baraka struck the next leading ghoul as it charged past its turned companions, the long shafts slamming deep into its chest just a few inches apart. The ghoul let out a hiss and collapsed.

That still left almost a dozen of the undead, a majority of them ghouls, which surged at Dar, claws extended. The fighter lifted his sword, ready to cut down the first wave.

But then Allera stepped forward, and unleashed a powerful surge of positive energy that filled the corridor. Undead, both skeletons and ghouls, just came apart as blue fire surrounded their bodies. Within a heartbeat, the only undead left standing were those that were fleeing, or were cowering under the effects of Varo's rebuke.

"Overkill, I think," Varo said. "But we must stop that enemy cleric, before he can secure aid."

"I'll get him," Shay said, darting quickly down the corridor at a speed none of them could match.

"Shay... no..." Talen said, but his words were barely audible as he struggled against the evil cleric's paralysis. Dar followed after the scout, almost casually decapitating one of the rebuked ghouls as he ran past them. The others followed behind, but Talen, finally able to move again, held up Serah and Kalend, who were bringing up the rear.

"Secure the prisoner, and watch our backs," he said, gesturing to the goblin lying on the ground out in the main corridor. "I don't like this..." Without waiting for a response, he hastened after the others.

Dar heard the sound of swords clanging before he saw the foe. The side tunnel opened onto a much larger cavern after less than a hundred feet, where the light from Varo's spell only barely penetrated. Shay was engaged with three armored hobgoblins, clad in chain shirts and armed with longswords and shields. One of them was wounded, seriously by the way he favored his right side, but they had spread out to flank Shay, and as the fighter watched, she cried out and covered her eyes with her free hand.

“Ah! I cannot see!”

The hobgoblins immediately surged in to take advantage of their foe’s blindness, but Dar drew their attention with a loud battlecry that echoed through the cavern. One of the trio turned to face him, but it barely got its sword up before Dar swept *Valor* up in a stroke that came up under its shield, ripped deep into its body, and kept on going. The hobgoblin didn’t even cry out, it just tumbled to the ground, its spine severed neatly by the blow.

Looking around, he finally saw the cleric, a goblin clad in a black robe, standing a short distance off to the side. It was casting another spell, it looked like, but Dar’s attention was drawn to the two remaining hobgoblins, who left the blinded scout to face the greater threat posed by Dar. They paid for underestimating Shaylara, who used sound alone to guide a wild swing that caught one of the hobgoblins in the back of the leg. The creature, already wounded, staggered forward, right into a powerful swing of *Valor* that sheared its head from its shoulders.

The last hobgoblin hesitated just an instant, but even that slight moment of weakness cost it, as Dar slipped *Valor* past its guard, thrusting a foot of the axiomatic steel into its chest. Blood erupted from the wretched creature’s mouth, but somehow it managed to fight on, attacking Dar with a clumsy swing that he easily caught on the crossbar of his weapon.

But the cleric had put the delay to good use. An arrow from Baraka caught it in the shoulder, but it maintained its concentration, and completed a summoning spell. With a sudden *whoosh* of greasy black smoke and a whiff of brimstone, a howler materialized in front of it. The abyssal creature turned to the corridor entrance, where Allera and Varo had just arrived, the cleric’s light source blazing out to drive back the darkness of the cavern.

The creature let out a howl and immediately charged toward them.

The goblin cleric, clearly not liking the odds, turned and fled.

Varo pushed Allera behind him, taking the howler’s rush. It seized the cleric’s arm in its jaws, trying to wrestle him down, its spines scraping on his breastplate as it thrashed about. But Varo held his ground, and a moment later Talen and Baraka were there, the ranger drawing the monster’s attention with his sickles, just in time for Talen to deliver a devastating critical hit with *Beatus Incendia*, a crushing blow to the back of its neck that drove it to the ground, where it started to dissolve into nothing almost immediately.

The goblin cleric had gotten a good distance away, the darkness of the cavern swallowing it up as it fled. But a fluttering noise ahead of it warned it of another foe, a moment before a gust of sweet-smelling gas puffed into its face. Unfortunately for Snaggletooth, the cleric of Orcus had a very strong will, and it stabbed a hand blindly toward the noise of the little dragon’s wings. The goblin managed to just brush

Snaggletooth's tail as it tried to withdraw, enough of a contact to deliver an *inflict critical wounds* spell. The faerie dragon screeched in pain and flew back up into the dark vaults of the cavern interior.

Back at the tunnel mouth, Allera let out a sharp cry and clutched her head, feeling the pain of her companion through their telepathic link.

A loud clatter drew the cleric's attention around before it could resume its flight. It lifted its morningstar to defend itself, but the armored human moved with deceptive speed, and the blue-tinged sword in its hand flashed in a brilliant and violent arc. They were on the farthest edge of Varo's light, and Dar's stroke was guided more by instinct than by deliberate intent, but it hit the goblin's weapon arm, severing the limb at the elbow.

The goblin did not cry out or beg for mercy. Instead it countered with a touch attack, invoking the power of Orcus to deliver an *inflict serious wounds*. The spell hurt, but Dar barely flinched, lifting his sword in both hands and driving it down through the goblin's skull, cleaving through its helm and finally wedging deep into its breastbone. Blood exploded out from the wound, as the shattered halves of its head flopped down onto its shoulders.

Dar was yanking his sword free from its body when Baraka, Serah, and Varo came up to join him. "I think that's all of them," the fighter said.

"Are you all right?" the priestess asked.

Dar grunted. "This prick got a good lick in, but it will take more than one of those damned touch-of-pain spells to bring me down."

"What the colonel is saying, I believe, is that he would appreciate one of your healing spells, Serah," Varo said. The cleric nodded, and came up to Dar, a bit tentatively.

"I will take a quick look around," Baraka offered.

"I would recommend caution," Varo said. "The two ghouls that Serah drove off may return, once her turning wears off."

The ranger nodded, and trotted off across the cavern.

Varo looked at Dar. "I will attend to those that I rebuked, before they recover."

Now that the battle was over they could see that the place was some sort of gathering area, with trash and other detritus littered all over to hint at the frequent use to which it had been put. Several large circles had been marked on the floor; hints of old blood staining the stone hinted at their use. Dar, who was no stranger to fighting rings, nodded to himself; this he understood.

He let out a breath as a warm glow of healing energy passed into him, easing the pain of his wounds. As it so often happened, he didn't realize how much his injuries had hurt until they were gone. He nodded to Serah in thanks. "Let's go see what the commander wants to do with this mess."

They returned to the tunnel entrance, where Allera was holding Shay, both the healer's hands on the sides of the scout's head, her thumbs pressed gently against her eyelids. Talen was watching intently from a few paces away. Kalend was nearby, the captive goblin lying on the ground beside him, its hands and legs tightly bound.

"Do not move, this will just take a few seconds," the healer was saying. She summoned her power, and her hands began to glow, the divine energies flowing into the scout. Once it was done, Allera drew back, and Shay blinked, letting out a sigh of relief.

"Damn, that is not something I want to repeat any time soon."

"Let's find a quiet place where we can talk to our prisoner," Talen said.

"What about the bodies?" Dar asked.

Talen looked around, at the wreckage of yet another battle. Blood stained the ground in generous quantities around the hobgoblins that Dar had killed, and while the howler had disappeared, it had left a long slick of ugly ichor staining the floor where it had died. The stink of death hung in the air like a thick fog. "Leave them," the knight finally said, his voice tired. "We don't have the time or the means to clean all this up, and it's not like they don't already know we're coming."

Baraka returned, informing them that there was no sign of other threats in the cavern. "It looks like there's a few exits from this place, but it was too dark to see clearly."

Talen looked at Varo. "Our way lies in another direction," the cleric said. "But it may be useful to hear what our guest has to say."

"Back to the main tunnel," the knight said.

Talen pulled aside Shay as the others retraced their steps back to where they had begun the encounter. "Damn it, Shay, you can't just go charging off alone like that!" the knight said, not bothering to conceal his anger.

Shay's voice remained level. "Varo warned of the goblin cleric. Standard protocol is to deal with enemy casters first in a battle, is it not?"

"Varo is not in command here."

The scout lowered her voice. “Just answer me this, commander. If you had not been paralyzed, and you’d gotten the same warning, would *you* have charged down that tunnel to do what I did?”

Talen opened his mouth to speak, but he hesitated; Shay knew that he would have likely acted in exactly the same way, if it had come to risking his own life for the good of the group and the mission.

“I’m sorry, Talen,” she said. “But we’re here, in Rappan Athuk, and we have to face the reality of what that might mean.” She didn’t have to refer to Pella and the legionaries; Talen knew what she meant.

Talen couldn’t quite meet her gaze. The scout let out a sigh, and then headed after the others, leaving Talen alone in the cavern.

After a few seconds, Talen turned and followed her, a pure darkness settling again over the cavern as the light of *Beatus Incendia* disappeared with him back down the tunnel.

Chapter 168

FILCHER’S STORY

“I remember you,” the goblin said.

They were back in the tunnel leading to the market cavern. Varo’s *daylight* spell had expired, leaving them with the weaker, more natural light cast from their various objects imbued with *continual flame*. Talen had set watches in both directions of the tunnel, with Baraka and Kalend close enough to call out if they spotted enemies. He had kept Shay back to translate, but it appeared as if that would be unnecessary, as the goblin spoke the common tongue.

“You were the leader of that group we met in the spider tunnels,” Allera said.

The goblin nodded. “You said then that you were enemies of the demon priests.”

“That is still the case,” Talen said.

“That priest, he was a gobbo too,” Dar said. “You guys have a little falling out?”

The goblin sighed and leaned back against the wall behind him. That was all he could do, with the ropes still wrapped around his legs and torso, and fastening his wrists behind his back.

“We were betrayed by the followers of the Demon. I was on patrol when they attacked. They took a number of patrols, and mining teams. We were taken to one of their temples, where most of my kin were turned into undead, creatures of shadow and darkness.”

The companions exchanged a look. “So that is where they have been getting their army,” Talen said.

“What of Grezneck?” Shay asked.

The goblin looked up at the scout. “I only learned of the fate of the city only after I escaped, and returned to Grezneck. I met up with a few survivors... I think they’re all dead now, but they told me what had happened. It was Tribitz, the high priest of Orcus. A ‘gobbo’, as you said, human. He and his fanatics struck at the height of a market gathering. They had a huge monster of stone, and demons, as well. The warriors tried to fight back, but they were heavily outclassed.”

“Not surprising,” Talen said, “Given what we’ve seen ourselves of the cult’s resources.”

“You said you were brought to one of their temples,” Varo said. “Can you find your way back there again?”

The goblin shuddered, and looked away. “No, never,” he said.

Allera knelt beside him, and cast a minor healing orison on him, easing his injuries. The goblin let out a small sigh. “What is your name?” she said.

“Filcher,” he replied. “Are you going to kill me?”

“Keep telling us what we want to hear, and you might just survive this meeting,” Dar said, looking menacing as he loomed over the creature, *Valor* balanced against his shoulder.

“Are there any more survivors still fighting?” Talen asked.

Filcher nodded. “From what I heard, the leader of the warriors, a powerful hobgoblin named Herzord, has holed up in the barracks with a considerable part of the garrison. I tried to get to him, but the clerics have a large force outside, blocking the only way in.

Dar looked at Talen. “Enemy of my enemy?”

“This is not our mission,” Varo reminded them. “We’re here to take out the temple.”

“We’ve taken losses,” Talen said, “And we’re not certain of what we’re up against. If we can help the goblins, maybe they can help us, in return.”

Dar leaned in closer to the knight. Quietly, he said, "I stand by what I said before. Goblins are not trustworthy, and I wouldn't turn my back on one."

Talen looked at him. "Not long ago, colonel, I would have said the same about you. I understand and agree with your caution, Dar, but we cannot afford to turn away any source of aid."

"All right. It's your call, commander, but I hope we're not pulling our fat from the pan, and dumping it into the fire."

Talen turned to their prisoner. "Filcher, if we cut you free, will you take us to the barracks?"

The goblin nodded. He shifted slightly, and to their surprise, he stood up, the ropes holding him falling away. The companions looked at him in surprise, and then Dar laughed. "I think I'm going to like you, gobbo," he said.

Chapter 169

THE BESEIGERS

"Report," the goblin priest commanded, his voice thick and nasaly.

"Zenek has not reported back yet," the heavily armored hobgoblin replied. The creature was an imposing specimen, standing almost six and a half feet tall, more than double the height of the goblin cleric. He wore a suit of full plate armor and a heavy shield of plate steel, and hilt of the longsword at his hip was worn from frequent use. Bloodstains both old and new decorated his attire.

The cleric viewed the hobgoblin with eyes that narrowed to slits. "I know that. What are you doing to find him, Purbok?"

"I have sent two teams of scouts to search the caves between here and the Great Market, honored Drezned," the hobgoblin said. "As you will recall, my primary orders were to ensure that Herzord and his heretics do not escape from their prison." He met the cleric's gaze squarely, and without fear; he too was favored, and while his command of the powers of the True God were not equal to Drezned's, he had twenty fanatic hobgoblin veterans at his command, dedicated both to Orcus and their leader, while Drezned's companions, which included a lesser priest, two score undead, and a vrock demon, had no such personal loyalty.

As if to remind him of that fact, the demon tittered noisily a few paces away, letting out a low screech that was just short of painful. Drezned shot a nasty look at the creature

and fumed, but he said nothing. He was distracted; Zenek's sudden disappearance might be convenient for him, or it might be a sign that the lesser cleric had joined Jakthur's faction, and was scheming to bring him into disfavor with lord Tribitz.

"Is there any word as to when we will strike against the heretics?" Purbok asked, with a glance at the demon. Drezned suddenly rose; impertence could be tolerated, to a degree, but this was a direct challenge to his authority! "We chosen of the True God will determine the time to strike, hobgoblin, not you!"

Purbok inclined his head in a gesture of deference, but he did not look cowed. Again, Drezned fumed, and in his mind entertained various fantasies of inflicting unpleasant fates upon the hobgoblin.

"Send a messenger to Tribitz with word of Zenek's disappearance," the priest finally said. "Tell them to be wary, Purbok; there may yet be more... heretics... loose in Grezneck."

Without acknowledging the command or the dig, Purbok turned and headed over to his men, who were arranged in a small camp further down the tunnel. Drezned's own forces were closer, near the barricade that sealed off the narrow passage that led off the tunnel into the barracks complex where the heretic forces of Herzord were trapped, isolated from the rest of Rappan Athuk. Unfortunately, the place was also damned near a fortress, its twisting entrance tunnels too narrow for most of the demons that the greater priests had at their call to enter. Under normal circumstances they could have teleported in, but the energies being wrought by the human priests as they meddled with the *Sphere of Souls* were interfering with that magic, even that of the demons that served at the right hand of the True God.

The goblin's musings were interrupted by the vrock, which abruptly straightened and stared off down the tunnel in the direction of Grezneck. "What is it?" the cleric asked.

"Armored men approach," the demon hissed.

Drezned peered down the tunnel, but it twisted and bent along its length, and he could see nothing. "It may be Zenek and his guards, returning at last," he said. But something tickled at the edges of his perceptions, putting the lie to the statement, and the vrock confirmed it, shaking its vulpine head.

"No. I can taste the sweet stench of human flesh upon the air. Enemies." The vrock let out a loud screech that echoed through the tunnel. Invoking its abyssal powers, it infused itself with a flood of fell energy in preparation for battle.

Drezned saw that his followers were stirring, and that Purok was likewise rallying his soldiers. The goblin felt a surge of exultation drive aside his earlier doubts and worries, and he gave himself over to the power of the True God, drawing the strength of his

patron's into his body, as he lifted his morningstar to bring death to the enemies of Orcus.

Chapter 170

THE TUNNEL OF WOE

"Well, they know we're here," Dar said, as the echoes of the screech faded down the long tunnel.

"That cry belonged to a vrock demon," Varo said. "We must destroy it quickly, along with any spellcasters on the other side."

"I'm sure they feel the same way about you," Dar returned, as the eight companions, accompanied by their goblin guide, hastened down the tunnel. Up ahead it bent to the left, and they could hear the sounds of activity from that direction, even as the first undead began to appear. Again the foes were skeletons and ghouls, but this time there were a few of the latter as tall as men, looming over their more diminutive kin. It was almost impossible to discern what race they had been in life, so dramatic was the change wrought upon them in the transition to undeath.

Dar started forward to meet them, but Talen held them up. "Let us not rush blindly in this time," he said. "In addition to the demon, there will likely be more of those clerics about. You don't want to get paralyzed and cut off from the rest of the group."

The others were already launching missile attacks at the oncoming foe. The bend in the tunnel was only about forty feet ahead of them, and the undead closed the distance quickly. There were over a score already in view, and the initial volley of arrows did little harm, scoring several hits on the gray-skinned ghouls without bringing any of them down.

Serah raised her holy symbol and invoked the divine light of the Father. The brilliant rays washed over the front rank of the charging undead, but only a single ghoul fell back, overcome by that power.

"Something is bolstering them!" the priestess warned.

Varo had already seen that, and instead of attempting a rebuke, he began spellcasting.

Dar and Talen met the undead charge, tearing into the onrushing ghouls and skeletons with a devastating surge of violence. Each fighter cut a ghoul in twain with the first readied strike, their magical swords surging with power as they did what they had been created to do. Their fellows in turn leapt upon the pair, clawing and biting, but they were

unable to penetrate the steel skins of the defenders. A moment later the two fighters countered with full attacks that cleared the space around them, leaving undead creatures, skeletons and ghouls alike, lying crushed upon the stone floor.

Three ghouls and a skeleton had rushed past the embattled fighters, and hurled themselves at Baraka and Shay. The scouts dropped their bows and met the foe with melee weapons. Baraka gutted one of the ghouls with his sickles, while Shay caved in the head of a goblin ghoul with her sword before it could touch her. The last ghoul managed to inflict a minor wound on Baraka's leg before he could turn to face it, but the hardy ranger resisted the cloying grip of paralysis that threatened to undo him.

The first surge of undead had been devastated, but more were coming, this time slow-moving zombies that lurched unevenly forward. And behind them, marching with the more nimble movements of the living, came a rank of armored hobgoblins, bearing swords and javelins.

A sudden explosion of smoke in the middle of the tunnel marked the arrival of a summoned ally, a vicious-looking black tiger, its hide covered with slashes of deep crimson. The fiendish beast immediately leapt upon the nearest foe, a goblin-sized zombie, and bore it to the ground, taking its head off with an almost casual snap of its jaws. Several of the hobgoblins behind threw javelins at it, but they glanced off its hide, and it snarled at them in contempt.

Dar and Talen moved forward together, batting aside the few surviving undead from the first rush as they came. The hobgoblins had come together in a disciplined wedge, centered on a tall figure clad in full plate, with a greathelm that bore a half-dozen jutting spires of metal shaped into the fashion of grim horns.

Varo's fiendish tiger essayed that formation, ignoring the shambling zombies around it to leap upon the nearest of the hobgoblins. The hobgoblin brought up its shield, but that proved of little defense as the weight of the tiger landed full upon it. The warrior cried out as the summoned monster dug its hind claws deep into his legs, while it snapped its foreclaws into its shoulders. The hobgoblin staggered and nearly fell, only narrowly avoiding the snapping jaws that sought its neck.

The other hobgoblins fell upon the creature, stabbing with their swords. The creature's fiendish hide turned most of the blows, but then the armored leader stepped forward, its blade a dark wedge of steel in its hand. The tiger sensed the threat and snarled, but that angry cry was cut off as the fighter thrust the length of its blade into the creature's mouth, driving it up through the roof of its mouth into its brain. The tiger immediately fell limp, dissolving into nothing as it slid off the hobgoblin's deadly blade.

Dar drew up, wary of that ordered formation and its commander. The hobgoblin was an obvious veteran, to have put down a powerful creature like that in a single blow. Hobgoblin javelins flew at him and Talen behind him, but they failed to penetrate his magical armor. Zombies lumbered forward, forcing him to pay at least some heed to

defense, hacking the animated corpses apart like rotted timbers. Talen was doing the same; none of the things could stand against *Beatus Incendia*, and the holy blade transformed each ruined corpse into a pyre, the flames that consumed the corpses casting long, dancing shadows upon the walls of the tunnel.

The hobgoblins were holding their position, waiting for the foe to come to them. Dar realized this at the same time that he grasped the reason for their delay. A shriek announced the arrival of the vrock as it poured around the bend, covered in a dizzying mélange of *mirror images*, and accompanied by the foul stench of the Abyss.

At the demon's arrival the hobgoblin leader lifted his sword, and his company surged forward, shrieking with fanatic cries as they descended upon Talen and Dar.

Chapter 171

THE CLASH OF ARMS

The battlecries of the hobgoblins was echoed by a surging roar as a column of liquid fire exploded through the tunnel. Varo's *flame strike* brushed the demon, which veered away with a furious screech, and then slammed down into the center of the hobgoblin formation. The shouts of war became yells of pain, and the majority of the creatures were blasted to the ground, transformed into blackened heaps that bore little resemblance to anything that had lived.

But out of the storm of the fire came the hobgoblin leader, flanked by a pair of surviving veterans, their chainmail cherry red, the links partially melted by the blast of Varo's spell. Dar and Talen met their rush, and the loud clang of swords filled the tunnel, as the hobgoblins met their enemies in battle. Dar struck first, *Valor* cleaving through the shield of one of the lieutenants, smashing its arm and knocking it sprawling to the ground. But the hobgoblin commander descended upon him with a violent fury, its black sword in turn delivering a powerful blow that crunched plate and chain, and pounded the flesh and muscle beneath. For all that the blow had not penetrated his armor, Dar felt as though he'd been kicked in the side by a horse. A few feet away, Talen struck at the other lieutenant, but the hobgoblin deflected the stroke with his shield, and countered with a thrust that pierced the knight's armor at his hip.

Baraka and Shay came rushing forward to aid their companions, but the vrock demon swooped forward and landed in front of them. It lashed out with a claw, striking the ranger across the forehead, staggering him as it opened long gashes in his face with its long claws. Shay thrust at its side, but her sword passed harmlessly through a *mirror image*, disrupting it without harm to the creature.

A hissing noise from around the bend announced the arrival of yet more enemies, a moment before a huge serpent, almost large enough to fill the tunnel with its bulk, came into view. Behind it, almost invisible behind the mass of the snake, came a pair of goblin priests. Both were protected by layered auras of fell power, and the leader was shrouded by the chaotic black energies of a *dispel good* spell.

Dar staggered back as he exchanged another full attack with the hobgoblin leader. The creature had a monstrous stamina, and its blows were incredibly powerful, as he found anew as he absorbed another hit to the side that send hot knives of pain through his torso. His own attacks were no less potent, but the monster's armor and shield gave it protection that was significantly superior to his own.

Talen tried to come to his aid. The knight's foe had gotten in a good hit against him, but the Camarian veteran was a superior fighter, proven as the hobgoblin turned a feint, only to open himself to a thrust that pierced the half-melted mail links covering his heart. The hobgoblin collapsed, but as Talen turned to assist Dar, he felt the sickening surge of another *unholy blight* explode around him. Sickened again by the dread magic, he nevertheless pressed his attack. But as he lifted *Beatus Incendia* to strike, he saw the dagger-shaped head of the huge fiendish viper rising up above Dar's shoulder.

Hoping the fighter could handle the hobgoblin, Talen lifted his sword and charged forward to intercept the snake.

The vrock let out a massive screech, a sonic blast that reverberated incredibly in the confined space of the passage. Baraka, already reeling from the terrible blow he'd taken, fell to the ground, stunned, while further back, both Kalend and Serah were likewise overcome by the powerful fury of that sound. Shay's face contorted with pain, but she kept her equilibrium, although it wasn't clear what she could do against the demon, with both its abyssal resistances and its magical defenses protecting it from harm.

And if that wasn't enough, a cloud of spores erupted from the demon's body, eagerly seeking out the flesh of the scout and the stunned ranger.

Varo had his *dispel magic* ready, but between the fiendish snake and the *blight* that had hit Talen and Dar, he knew that there was at least one powerful cleric amongst their foes. But with the demon rounding on Shay, he acted, hurling the magic at the outsider, shearing away its powers through the force of his will. The *images* vanished, and the demon seemed to deflate slightly, as he likewise dispelled its *heroism*.

Dar dodged back a step as the hobgoblin swept its sword at him in a powerful arc. The blow, had it connected, might have driven its foe down from the sheer force of it, but the veteran fighter had expected such an all-out stroke, and as it slashed past, he followed it in, bringing up *Valor* with both hands and his considerable strength behind it. The sword hit the foe at the base of its breastplate, penetrating the layered chain links and

thrusting deep into the enemy's body. The hobgoblin, for all its stamina, could not shrug off that hurt, and the light faded from its eyes as it slumped to the ground.

Dar looked up to see Talen battling the giant snake, which already bore a deep gash in its neck from the knight's holy sword. His side throbbed with each breath he took, but he yanked *Valor* out from the body of his foe, ready to rejoin the fray. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the demon battling Shay. His jaw tightened; he wasn't sure if that was the same vrock he'd fought in the first temple of Orcus, but if it was, he had a grudge to settle with it.

As he started to turn toward the demon, however, he felt a cold chill fall over him, and even as he tried to marshal his will, was overcome by another *hold person* spell. Too late he saw the two small but dangerous foes behind the long coils of the serpent. Even as he watched, helpless to intervene, one completed a spell, and summoned creatures out of the aether, a trio of small, bloated demons, which lurched forward at once toward the paralyzed fighter.

With her target now clearly revealed, Shay continued to harry the demon. She refused to remain still long enough for it to unleash a full series of attacks upon her, but its spores were burrowing painfully into her skin, and she bled where its claws had caught her on the arm.

She darted in and stabbed it in the side, but again her thrust did almost no damage. Again she tried to leap back, but this time the demon flapped its wings and hurled itself after her, seizing her by the arm with one bony claw. It was far stronger than she, and she found herself bound up in its grip, dragged up to its powerful beak.

But before it could deliver a killing blow, she felt the demon stiffen and shriek. Looking down, she saw Varo, his hand pressed against the vrock's side. A red glow sank from his fingers into its body, and where that power touched, bloody cracks opened in its flesh. The demon hurled its victim away and turned upon the priest, hacking and tearing. It remembered this enemy and his deadly touch, and this time it wasn't going to let him escape with only a missing eye.

Talen staggered back as the huge viper tried to *smite* him, but its dagger-shaped head glanced off his shield. He brought *Beatus Incendia* up in a glittering arc that caught the snake right where its body met its head. The holy steel flashed, and the fiendish creature's head was severed, its long coils gyrating as it began to dissolve into nothing.

Talen took in the rest of the battle at once; the goblin clerics back near the bend in the passage; the small demons that waddled toward the paralyzed Dar, claws outstretched; the demon that was tearing at Varo, ignoring Shay as the scout tried to stab it in the back. Allera had made it around the demon and was running toward Dar; it looked as though she would reach him at the same time as the dretches.

All this chaos the knight absorbed in a second. He lifted his sword, but before his choice became obvious, he was obscured by a burst of noxious vapors, a dense eruption of sick green smoke that spread across the entire breadth of the tunnel in moments. The *stinking cloud*, summoned by one of the dretches, engulfed Talen, Dar, Allera, and those battling the vrock demon, which stood silhouetted on the edge of the swirling bank of mist, huge and terrible.

Varo felt a blazing pain erupt in his side and across his face as the demon laid into him with its claws. Its beak shot down toward his remaining eye, and while he drew back in time to avoid losing it, the hooked end caught on his metal cap, taking it off along with a long strip of flesh just above his left ear. The demon flapped its wings violently, lifting just a few feet off the ground, but enough for its talons to smash into Varo's legs, opening deep wounds in both limbs. The full attack was devastating, and most foes would have been torn to pieces by the fury of the demon's assault.

But not only did Varo not go down, he somehow was able to keep standing. Half-blinded by the blood streaked across his face, he stabbed his arm forward like a dagger thrust, jabbing the demon in the gut. He hit it with another *inflict critical wounds*, punching through its spell resistance and its considerable willpower to unleash a violent fury of negative energy that tore mercilessly through its innards.

But the cleric stood alone; both Shay and Baraka had been overcome by the sick vapors of the *stinking cloud*, and they staggered back, coughing violently.

No, not entirely alone. Two others rushed forward to the cleric's aid. Serah rushed up to Varo, her hands glowing with the reassuring shine of positive energy. The demon saw her coming and shrieked at the challenge to its kill. It lashed out with a claw, but the cleric of the Father ducked under its sweep, its talons tearing long gashes in her cloak, but failing to cut to her flesh. The priestess all but fell forward into Varo, but delivered her spell, infusing the stricken cleric with a *cure critical wounds*.

Kalend came forward as well, the legionary braving his terror to attack this terrible opponent. Wary of the *stinking cloud*, he remained on its outer edge, stabbing at the demon's legs with his sword. The attack did no damage, but it certainly drew the rage of the creature, which let out another loud shriek. Another cloud of spores erupted from its flesh, the burrowing growths seeking out the skin of those facing it. It readied another full attack, its full strength marshaled behind the blows, its intent clear to take out all three of the enemies that faced it.

Dar felt nausea clench his gut as the vapors of the *stinking cloud* obscured all details of the tunnel in front of him, including the dretches that were rapidly approaching. He tried to fight off the *hold person* spell that was holding him paralyzed, but his will was not strong enough to overcome the power of the goblin clerics. Gobbos! The thought filled him with rage, and his limbs trembled.

Then he felt claws tearing at his armor, and knew that the demons were upon him.

He sensed a familiar presence behind him, although he could not feel the touch through his armor. But he did feel Allera's power coursed through him a moment later, sundering the paralysis like a surging wave. One of the dretches hissed and reached around him to claw the healer.

That was the last thing it ever did.

As the vrock lifted its claws to strike, Talen materialized from the mists, his sword a shining beacon in the fog. The blade flashed in his hand, and it tore deep into the vrock's back, unleashing a spray of hissing black ichor that splattered across his shield. The vrock had taken a beating, and as it had several times before, it summoned its magic, and *teleported* away. There was a backblast of energy from the spell, and the companions immediately surrounding it were knocked off their feet, momentarily dazed.

"What... what was that?" Kalend said.

"Some other energy is interfering with the demon's magic," Varo replied. "If we are lucky, it materialized somewhere deep within the planet's crust."

"Luck hasn't exactly been our forte," Shay said, her face twisting in disgust as she pulled at the tendrils sprouting from her arms and neck.

"Leave them until after the battle," Varo said. "Healing them will cause less damage."

"Can you dispel this fog?" Talen asked him, the unholy green mists swirling around his flaming sword.

"No need," Varo said. And indeed, the magic commanded by the dretches was weak, and the *stinking cloud* rapidly began to dissolve only about ten seconds after it had sprung into being.

They saw Dar, Allera at his back, standing over the mangled bodies of the three dretches, already dissolving as the corpses were cast back into the Abyss.

"The clerics!" Talen yelled, pointing with his sword. The goblins were falling back in good order, continuing to cast spells as they went. Dar was likely their target, but the warrior showed no effect this time as he charged forward, ignoring the pain from his multiple wounds.

The goblin priests rounded the bend in the tunnel, Dar close on their heels, the others chasing behind. But even as Dar reached the bend, they could all hear the sounds of metal clashing on metal, accompanied by a loud cry of pain. Dar slowed up, wary of another ambush, giving them a chance to catch up to him. There were a few more loud clatters, and another shout that was abruptly cut off, and then silence.

“Now what?” Dar muttered. Wary of a trap, Talen led them around the tunnel bend.

The tunnel straightened out again on the far side of the curve. They could see, up ahead on the edges of their light, what looked like a ruined barricade next to an opening in the side of the passage. There were signs that this area had served as a camp, with an assorted litter of bedrolls, old bones, and other discarded trash.

The bodies of the two goblin clerics laid on the ground, still oozing blood. A ring of over two dozen goblins and several hobgoblins faced them over the corpses. The newcomers were clad in armor of varying types and quality, but all bore multiple weapons ranging from compact bows to axes, spears, and swords. In the center of the line stood a tall figure clad in plate armor, with a greatsword bare and bloody in its hand. A goblin stood at his side; Filcher, they belatedly realized. None of them had seen the goblin leave their company during the battle back down the tunnel, but it was becoming increasingly clear that there was more to the creature than was apparent at first glance.

Although the surrounding goblinoids did not ease their wary stances or lower their weapons, the leader reached up and removed his helm. The man was a hobgoblin, that much was instantly obvious, but the bestial elements of his features were less pronounced than the others, with smaller jaws and ears, and eyes that were more closely spaced than was common with most of his kin. In the poor light, and at a distance, he might have almost passed as human. There was also a clear glint of canny intelligence in his eyes, accompanied by a calm self-confidence as he scanned each of the companions from Camar.

“So,” he said, finally, his Common only faintly accented. “You have come to challenge the cult of Orcus.”

Talen spoke, his features outlined in stark relief by the flames that continued to pour up and down the length of *Beatus Incendia*. “We have, Herzord.”

The hobgoblin let out a dry chuckle. “Good. Come; there is much to be done.”

Chapter 172

HERZORD'S BARGAIN

The meeting room was compact and crowded, with a large table in the middle of the room, and several cots pushed up against the far wall. A strong smell of unwashed bodies hung in the air. The place had seen combat recently, it seemed; a tapestry that had once hung from one wall now dangled limp, deeply gashed by sword strokes.

“Some wraiths decided to make an unannounced visit,” Herzord said, as they noted the damage.

“It is impressive that you were able to hold off the enemy force,” Talen said. “We’ve tangled with the cult a few times already, and they have hit us with quite a few surprises.”

The hobgoblin gestured for them to file in around the table. Maps that they recognized as showing the tunnels of Grezneck were scattered across its surface. Behind them, a pair of hobgoblin guards took up position unobtrusively near the door, and three goblins, including Filcher, moved quietly to an unoccupied corner. “Yes, I have heard of your exploits against the dark temples,” Herzord said. “I had warned the leaders of Grezneck about Tribitz’s treachery, but they would not listen. It is fortunate that we were not all blind to the threat posed by the cult of the Demon.”

“You had forewarning of the attack?” Baraka asked.

“I was not told directly,” the hobgoblin admitted. “But I had eyes, and ears, and a warrior’s instinct. Perhaps you understand?” he added, nodding to Dar.

“It is likely that the goblins preferred to listen to one of their own, instead of a half-breed,” Varo said.

Anger flashed in Herzord’s eyes, but after a moment, he nodded. “You speak the truth, priest of Dagos. Now the goblins pay for their choice. The human clerics have dragged the goblins of the city off in chains, to serve their dark master as unliving slaves. Already we have battled those who once were our brothers, but now they are just empty shells, weapons to use against us.”

“Weapons can be broken,” Dar said.

“Yes, warrior, but each one we break leaves us weaker. And the human clerics can call upon terrible magic, summoning great beasts and terrible spider demons, against which even our strongest warriors cannot stand.”

Allera stepped forward. “Their plans threaten all lands, not just the citizens of Grezneck,” the healer said. “That is why we are here.”

Herzord nodded. “You have great power and magic, and we know the tunnels of Rappan Athuk well. We fight against a common enemy. If we become allies, then the cult will be at a disadvantage.”

Allera glanced at Talen, who nodded. “We seek the third temple of Orcus, to destroy it as we did the first two.”

Herzord did not seem surprised. "It will be difficult. There is a way to the temple through the slave pits, but powerful human priests, trolls, and other guardians lie along that path."

"Great, more clerics," Dar said. "How many of those bastards does the cult have?"

"There are many who have been swayed by the power offered by the Demon," Herzord said.

"Can you help us get to the slave pits?" Talen asked.

Herzord leaned over the map. He picked up a dagger that was lying on the table, and pointed to a complex of tunnels and chambers on the opposite side of the city from the entrance and the market cavern. "The way lies in this part of the city, which is the province of the priests of the Demon. You will first need to deal with Tribitz, and his followers."

"Filcher mentioned this Tribitz," Shay said. "I take it he's a powerful cleric?"

"Indeed. He commanded the stone colossus, and a powerful spider-demon that slew many warriors. He has been utterly corrupted by his service to the Demon, and eagerly betrayed his own people to the cult."

"Sounds like a guy that needs a few feet of steel shoved into his gut," Dar commented.

"Let us say that we agree to assist you," Talen said. "What help can we count on from you and your forces?"

"My first responsibility is to the hundreds of survivors of Grezneck," the hobgoblin said. "But I will send with you a cadre of my own elite guards, a team of scouts, and the one goblin that has seen the interior of the third temple and lived."

The eyes of everyone in the room turned on Filcher. The goblin swallowed, and looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"And you will have a secure base of operations where you can rest and restore your strength, no small boon in a place such as Rappan Athuk. Well, human soldier?" Herzord said, looking up at Talen.

The knight nodded. "Agreed."

Chapter 173

TO KILL A CLERIC

The newly-enlarged company traveled in silence through the dark and empty tunnels of Grezneck. There was little conversation; few of their new allies spoke Common, and the companions from Camar kept their thoughts to themselves, as they headed forward and deeper into danger.

They took a slightly different route back, presumably to avoid any patrols by the forces of Orcus. Talen whispered to Shay and Baraka to pay heed to their route, in case the goblinoids were leading them astray, but before too long they once again found themselves in familiar tunnels. They made their way back to the room with the fighting circles, where they had battled the goblin cleric and its minions, but instead of returning to the great cavern, their scouts took them down another tunnel that led still deeper into the complex. Talen noted that this was the way that Varo had originally wanted to take them, when he'd been guided by his *find the path* spell. He looked over at the cleric, who nodded back.

The new members of the group moved with the quiet efficiency of ones who knew these tunnels intimately. Herzord had assigned a considerable force to them, more than doubling the size of the group. There were five hobgoblins, clad in armor and bearing both melee and ranged weapons. And in addition to Filcher, they had a full complement of goblin scouts, six in all, with light armor and small weapons that were nevertheless of masterwork quality.

The eleven newcomers brought their total strength up to nineteen. A small army, still, but a determined one, united by their hatred of the followers of Orcus.

They came to another large cavern, this one illuminated by geysers of flame that spurted from vents scattered about the room. The gas emissions were apparently random, erupting from the earth without advance warning, but the goblin scouts were careful to point out the vents, allowing them to avoid the hazard.

As they moved through the cavern, they passed a large heap of rubble off to one side. Talen took a double-take as they moved past; he saw what looked like part of a stone fist, jutting from the mound.

"Stone warrior, one-eye," one of the hobgoblins said, noting his interest. "Kill many goblins before Herzord kill."

"A stone golem of some sort," Varo said. "An impressive feat, to destroy one so large."

There was some blood streaking the stones, but no bodies. It was a reminder that they would likely encounter more undead, and Talen quietly urged Shay and Baraka to keep a close eye out. While their goblin allies with their darkvision would almost certainly see any threats before their own scouts could, Talen was not about to have them let their guard down. Dar's earlier words about trusting the goblins worried at the back of his

mind, and while both sides stood to gain in this arrangement, he doubted that Herzord's motives were entirely altruistic.

There was another tunnel on the far side of the cavern of the gas vents. The air rapidly grew colder as they moved on, and they could hear a familiar sound: rushing water. The goblin scouts slowed, their wariness sharpening to the tone of a dagger's edge; even the hobgoblins grew silent, as if reluctant to let the slightest clink of their mail coats disturb the stillness of the tunnel.

"What is up ahead?" Talen asked.

"A great underground lake," Filcher reported, "Fed by several rivers. A bridge of stones leads across, but be cautious; the way is treacherous when the flow is surging."

"And beyond?"

"Beyond is the province of the dark servants of the Demon," the goblin said.

"And you know where to find this Tribitz?"

The goblin shook his head, but the hobgoblins had heard the exchange, and the one that had spoken to them earlier came forward, accompanied by a companion. "I know the way," the second creature said. It reached under its cloak and drew forth a familiar icon, for it was almost identical to the device that Varo wore on the throng around his neck. The cleric nodded, as if not surprised by this development.

"You are a priest of Dagos?" Talen asked.

The hobgoblin nodded. "I summon once to attend on goblin high priest. Much danger, but I know way."

"Yeah, well, 'much danger' is pretty much a given," Dar said. "Time for you boys to earn your pay."

"We earn pay in blood of servants of Demon," the other hobgoblin said. "Nakrat durkat!" it growled, the words echoed by the other warriors.

"What did it say?" Talen said in a quiet aside to Shay.

"Death to traitors," the scout replied.

The bridge of stepping stones looked as precarious as Filcher had promised. Almost one hundred feet separated the two banks of the underground river. To their left, it opened onto yet another vast cavern, filled with swirling water for as far as they could see. The sounds of water cascading into that lake from waterfalls high above filled the cavern, echoing off the walls and making conversation a bit difficult.

The goblin scouts started across the bridge of stones without hesitation, nimbly leaping from rock to rock. Some of the stones only showed a few square inches of uneven space above the swift-moving water, but the creatures seemed heedless of the danger.

“Let me go first,” Shay said. “I’m the best swimmer in the group, and I will string a guide rope across. It looks like there’s a larger rock formation in the middle that I can use to set a few spikes.”

The hobgoblins stood at the bank, wondering at the delay, but they quickly divined their plan, as Shay uncoiled a rope and headed after the goblin scouts. She reached the midway point of the bridge without difficulty, and hammered in her end of the rope there, while Baraka secured the other end on their side.

Their caution paid off. It took the better part of a half hour to get everyone across the river, but despite a few slips, none of them fell into the lake. The scouts reported that the area on the far side of the river was clear, so they paused for a brief rest while Shay recovered the rope.

“Strange,” Filcher said. The goblin indicated a stone platform, some ten feet high, that jutted out over the lake. Talen could see that it provided a clear vantage over the stepping stones. “Usually there are guards here, all the time.”

“Maybe the clerics figure they don’t have to worry about threats any more,” Allera said. “The leader may not yet have heard about what happened at the barricade.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Dar said. As Shay rejoined them, they moved out again, the goblins darting ahead to scout without having to be told. Their guide, the hobgoblin fighter/cleric that had visited the priests’ quarters before, moved forward to direct them.

“While hobgoblins tend to be fairly organized, I have never seen goblins with such discipline,” Kalend observed, as they made their way ahead along the edge of the lake. The cavern along the lakeshore extended for over a hundred feet ahead of them. To their left, they passed a small stone dock that extended out over the lake; to their right, the cavern wall was just visible in the shadows.

“It’s this place,” Baraka said. “It compels survival, or death.”

“Cheery,” Dar said. But his eyes were sharp as they scanned the surrounding darkness.

Their scouts led them to an opening at the far end of the cavern. The sounds of the lake fell away behind them as they passed through into another huge open space, a broad cavern with a bare stone floor worn smooth with centuries of time and passage. They could just hear the air whistling softly through the cavern ahead of them, suggesting that it continued on for quite some distance ahead.

The goblins started forward, but the others had only just begun to follow when the diminutive scouts suddenly froze.

“What is it?” Talen asked, but before the scouts could respond, they all heard it, a familiar clattering noise from the darkness ahead.

Talen and Dar shared a look. “Skeletons,” the knight said.

“Big ones,” Dar returned, already reaching for his club.

The goblins fell back and spread out, just as the source of the noise entered the radius of their light sources. “*Real* big,” Shay said, lowering her bow.

The creature had been a quadruped in life, a carnivore by the look of its jaws. It was over twelve feet long, and it was almost as tall as a man at the shoulder. Now it was animated in unlife, a monstrous skeleton that stalked forward, its bony claws clicking slightly on the stone floor.

It wasn't alone. Dark forms shifted in the shadows to either side; two more of the creatures, indistinct in the darkness.

For a split-second, the two sides faced off across the empty expanse of the cavern. The the hobgoblins shattered the still, shouting war cries as they hurled javelins at the giant skeletons. The three skeletal cats sprang forward, jaws opening wide in silent roars of challenge.

Chapter 174

NEW ALLIES TESTED

Dar grimaced as he yanked out a jagged piece of claw that had gotten stuck between two of the interlocking plates of his armor. The end of the claw was bright with his own blood. He was reminded that it could have been worse, as one of the hobgoblins let out a cry of pain between clenched teeth. Dar turned to see Allera pull a tooth as long as a shortsword from the creature's chest. The tooth was covered in the hobgoblin's blood, and even fifteen feet away Dar could make out the bubbling gasps that indicated a pierced lung. The injury would have been fatal for most combatants, but the healer closed the vicious wound with her magic, leaving the hobgoblin weak but alive. The other two hobgoblins watched mutely. Both of them bore wounds, but they seemed to accept physical suffering with equanimity. If anything, they appeared to sneer slightly at the noises made by their companion as he was treated.

“We got off light,” Talen said. Dar followed his gaze to the prone figure covered in a bloody cloak, lying a few paces away. The hobgoblin had fallen in the initial rush, as one of the skeletal dire tigers had pounced on him and spread his entrails across the floor with tearing gashes of its claws. A second, the one that Allera was treating, had nearly joined it, but Allera’s *mass cure* spell a few seconds later had drawn it back from the brink of death.

The battle had lasted only a few seconds... not more than twenty, Dar figured. In the fray, it had seemed much longer, of course. One of the dire tigers had gone for Talen, but the knight had lowered his shield and taken the charge, suffering hits but keeping his ground, waiting for an opportunity to strike. His sword had shorn away half of the skeleton’s jaw, but it was Dar, attacking with his magical club, who had crushed its spine. Allera’s *mass cure* had damaged the skeletons even as it healed her allies, and just like that the first foe had been taken out, coming apart as the blue fire enveloped its body.

“They acquitted themselves well enough, I suppose,” Dar said. Allera’s spell had weakened the other two skeletons, but neither had been seriously damaged by that point. The two hobgoblins had not faltered against the foe that had taken down their companion, spreading out and attacking its flanks. Their blows had done little damage, but they’d kept it busy, distracting it from finishing their crippled comrade. The other skeleton, the one that had slain the first hobgoblin outright, came under missile fire from the goblin scouts, but before it could respond it had been attacked by Shay and Baraka. The two had dragged the skeleton’s attention around, forcing it to deal with them. They were careful to dart in and out, making it continue to shift and turn, not letting it get in a full attack that could prove devastating. Shay did take a pair of nasty gashes from its claws, but then Talen arrived with *Beatus Incendia*, and that was that. Dar put a similar decisive end to the one tussling with the hobgoblins, just in time to keep them from joining their companion.

“I wonder why they didn’t heal their own companion,” Talen mused quietly. “They have a cleric, too.” They were waiting while the goblins and their own scouts checked the rest of the cavern, verifying that no more enemies waited in the shadows. Shay and Baraka were visible by the lights that they carried, but the goblins were invisible, disappearing into the darkness without apparent effort. They were tough to see even when one was standing next to you, a fact that Dar had already commented upon earlier.

“Probably waiting to see if we would do it,” Dar said. “This way, they get to save their resources.”

“Or it could be that their own resources are limited,” Varo said, the cleric approaching silently to join them.

“You trust them?” Dar asked.

"I trust them as much as you trust me," the cleric said. He smiled, but it was a cold gesture, and he turned to walk away, joining Kalend and Serah as they checked through the smashed bodies of the skeletons for anything remarkable.

"How in the hells did I get signed onto this mission," Dar grumbled.

"You volunteered, colonel," Talen said. Adjusting his helmet, which hadn't fit well ever since the shadow dragon had nearly crushed it in its jaws, the knight walked over to meet Shay as the scout returned from her reconnoiter.

"You had to remind me, you bastard," Dar muttered. He looked down at the hilt of his sword, and frowned.

The company gathered again around the scouts. "The rest of the cavern looks clean," Shay said. "There's a few smaller chambers to the side that looks like they were barracks, until recently. There's also a long hall, flanked by two rows of pillars, that leads a long way down to somewhere on the far side of the cavern. But there's another smaller, natural tunnel to the left... that's the way Jehtak, our guide, says we're going."

"You could have warned us about the skellys," Dar said to the hobgoblin.

"No here, before," the creature said.

"I think I know what they were," Filcher said. "Grimb, he was a tunnel scout... he kept three dire tigers as pets. Fearsome things, they were."

Dar looked back at the piles of shattered bones. "Not any more."

"Let's move out," Talen said. "Jehtak, let us know if there are any defenses you *do* remember."

The tunnel they chose was a relatively narrow one for Grezneck, tightening until it was barely eight feet across. They passed a small side chamber that was bare of any notable features, and then had to squeeze through a relatively tight space before the passage opened onto another large cavern. Old bones crunched beneath their feet as they entered.

Jehtak said something in his own language.

"He says there's a secret door near the entrance," Shay translated.

The goblins started searching that wall immediately, but before they could locate the hidden portal, each of them felt a sudden cold chill, a terrible feeling that crept up their spine like a premonition of sudden danger.

"There is a dark presence here," Varo said.

“No shit,” Dar said, clenching his jaw to keep his teeth from chattering. “What else you got, cleric...”

He was cut off as a form materialized in the center of the room. As it took on substance, they could see that the figure was that of a robed elf, hovering slightly above the floor. Even fully manifested, it remained insubstantial, their light passing through its hollow form as though its flesh were wisps of cloud floating in the air. Its features, while cast in a noble mold, were warped by a keen malevolence that shone in its eyes.

“A ghost!” Serah warned, even as the full power of its corrupting gaze swept over them. The goblins cried out, and one slumped to the ground, unconscious, as the fell power of that stare overcame it. All of them felt that cold power, sucking at their energy, and only the strongest among them were able to fight off the chill that clenched at their souls.

“Die, abomination!” Talen yelled, *Beatus Incendia* flaring to life as he drew the holy blade from its scabbard. He charged the ghost, which wavered before the power in that weapon. His swing, however, passed harmlessly through the ghost, which fluttered up into the air.

“It flees!” someone yelled. But Varo, recognizing the ghost’s tactic, knew better. He called upon the power of Dagos, already knowing that his power was not enough to faze this adversary. His fears were confirmed as the dark violet tendrils of power swirled around the ghost, not quite touching its insubstantial form.

Nor was it enough to stop the ghost from drifting back down at Talen. The knight recovered and brought his sword up again to strike, but neither he nor the others behind him were quick enough to attack it before it seeped into the body of the living man, disappearing from view.

Shay came to an abrupt stop behind him. “Talen?”

Her only answer was Talen turning around, lifting the holy sword, his menacing smile echoed by the unholy light that burned behind his eyes.

Chapter 175

PHALEN’S FURY

Talen, his body possessed by the spirit of an elven ghost, swung *Beatus Incendia* at Shay. The scout, overwhelmed by the transformation, fell back too late to avoid the stroke. The blow was clumsy, swung without the knight’s usual skill, but the edge still clipped her side, splashing white fire against her torso.

The goblinoids, confused at first by what had transpired, could understand this threat, but as the hobgoblins leapt forward to engage, Shay yelled, "No, don't hurt him!" Even as she fell back, favoring her side, she repeated the command in the goblin language. The hobgoblins hesitated, exchanging a wary look.

"We need to incapacitate the body without killing the commander," Varo said. Serah tried to put his words into action as she cast a *hold person* spell, but the magic faltered against the incredible will of the ghost.

"He's... he's too strong," the priestess said.

Dar did not hesitate, coming forward with *Valor* held at the ready. The possessed knight swung his sword at him, but the veteran warrior easily avoided the clumsy stroke, and stepped inside his reach.

"So, who the fuck are you supposed to be?" Dar said, smashing the hilt of his weapon up into Talen's gut. The blow knocked the air out of the knight despite his armor, and he staggered back a step. "You know, I might actually enjoy this," Dar said, coming forward for another strike.

The knight smiled. "I am named Phelan, human, and it will be the last name you ever hear." The voice was Talen's, but the words were spoken in an archaic style, the Common heavily accented.

"Grab him," Varo said, as the hobgoblins came at him from the left, while Baraka and Kalend came in from the right. Talen held his ground as Dar came at him head-on, bringing up his sword again to hit the knight in the face. Talen did not attempt to defend himself, but instead dropped his sword, and wove his hand in front of him in an obviously arcane gesture.

"He's spellcasting!" Varo warned, driving Serah back behind him. Kalend paused and leapt back, seeking cover. Dar tried to hit Talen before the ghost could complete the spell, but he was just a heartbeat too slow.

Talen laughed, the sound followed by a hissing that exploded into a bright roar of flame. The empowered *fireball* erupted from his hand, blasting Dar with the full force of the spell, knocking him back. The flames spread outward into a globe a full twenty feet across, engulfing almost all of them in their radius. Screams echoed through the room, several of them abruptly cut off as charred bodies slumped to the ground.

Dar surged forward through the dying flames and trailing wisps of smoke, his face blackened under his helmet. He roared defiance as he smashed the hilt of his sword into Talen's face. The knight's helmet absorbed some of the force of the blow, but he was still staggered by the sheer force of the impact. Talen's body had also been heavily damaged by the *fireball*, and he moved sluggishly. Dar hit him again, the blow snapping

Talen's helmet strap again, knocking the protective headgear free. The skin of Talen's face was crinkled and oozing blood, but the evil glow still shone in his eyes, and laughter still trickled from between cracked and bleeding lips.

Shay rushed forward; the scout had been shielded from the *fireball* by Dar's body, and she'd escaped serious damage. Varo, too, was still in the fight, and he came forward as well, placing himself to flank the knight. The hobgoblins were all down, dead or dying. Allera was tending to Serah, who had been caught on the edge of the blast; Varo's push had probably saved her life, but she'd still been seriously burned. The healer's own wounds were considerable, but she characteristically ignored them to tend to another.

Shay lunged forward to grab Talen. The possessed knight tried to block her with his shield, but she yanked it back, pinning his arm. Talen drew his dagger, and the scout shifted to defend herself. But instead of trying to stab her, Talen smiled darkly.

Too late, Shay realized what the ghost intended. "Talen, no!" she yelled. She lunged for the knife, but wasn't quick enough to stop him as he reached up, and drew the blade across his bare throat.

Blood exploded from the wound, and the knight's laughter turned into a wet gurgle as he collapsed.

Chapter 176

THE SPECTRAL GUARDIAN

"Talen!"

Shay tried to hold up Talen as he collapsed. Blood spurted through her fingers as she tried to stop the flow of blood from the self-inflicted wound. It was futile; the cut had been deep, and it had severed the major blood vessels connecting the head to the body.

"Varo, Allera, help!" the scout yelled.

The ghost rose up out of the fading knight, a satisfied expression the dead elf's face. Dar roared and hacked at it with *Valor*. Again the sword cut through the wispy form, but this time, the edge of the blade flared blue as it passed through its insubstantial outline, and something that might have been pain flashed on the ghost's face.

Varo, his expression torn with frustration, had been ready to hit the ghost as it left Talen, but aborted his attack to aid the stricken knight. He knelt beside him, pouring a potent

healing spell into the dying man. The flow of blood eased, and after a desperate second or two Talen drew in a struggling breath. The glint of life returned to his eyes.

An arrow passed harmlessly through the ghost. Kalend had survived the *fireball* and unlimbered his bow, but the non-magical arrow had absolutely no effect. Instead of trying another shot, the thief instead came forward again to help Baraka, who lay unmoving on the ground. He grabbed the ranger by the shoulders and dragged him back out away from the melee. The goblins that had survived the *fireball*, including Filcher, remained back, unwilling to risk a direct confrontation in the crowded melee around the ghost.

Dar lifted his sword to finish the ghost, but the creature drifted forward again, clearly intent on gaining another powerful puppet to control. Dar drew back reflexively, but the ghost was too quick to escape.

“Get off me, you dead prick...” the fighter snarled, as the ghost passed through his armor, its cold touch suffusing his flesh. *Valor* flared in his hands, and the ghost was rebuffed, its lean face twisting in an expression of anger.

Dar swept his sword down in an arc that would have decapitated the floating elf, had he been mortal. But this time *Valor* failed to bite into the incorporeal form, and Dar staggered to the side, thrown off-balance. The ghost began spellcasting once again.

Allera suddenly appeared, lunging past Dar. Burns streaked her head, neck, and slender arms. Snaggletooth was partially visible on her shoulder, the faerie dragon surrounded by a cloud of drifting char that highlighted the outlines of its tiny form. It hissed angrily, but managed only a smoky cough.

The healer surged around Dar and stabbed her fingers into the ghost's lower body. Blue light erupted from her hand, tearing into the fabric of the ghost. The *cure critical wounds* spell ravaged it, and a hollow shriek sounded from the undead entity. The ghost drifted upward toward the ceiling, its spell aborted, focused now on either escape or a tactical retreat.

But before it could get away, Shay leapt up into the air after it. *Beatus Incendia* flared in her hand. Her vertical leap carried her up *through* the ghost, and as she passed through it, the holy sword carved a broad swath through its body. With a final empty cry, the insubstantial elf came apart, dissolving into nothing.

Shay landed on her feet, sagging wearily. Talen's sword fell from her grasp as she knelt beside him; the knight was already trying to get up. He tried to talk, but blood still choked his throat, and he could not speak. Varo pressed him down, and touched his healing wand to the knight's ravaged throat.

Allera and Serah had already turned to aid the other fallen. Two of the hobgoblins were still alive, but the cleric of Dagos did not stir; he was dead. Two goblins had perished

within the *fireball*, but the other four had evaded the blast, and were in good shape. Baraka was alive, and quickly stirred under the touch of Allera's healing wand. Black, ruined flesh crinkled off him as the blue glow spread through him, revealing new pink skin underneath.

"So much for our guide," Dar said, looking down at the corpse of the hobgoblin.

"We've found our own way before," Allera said, snapping at him.

Shay stayed with Talen until a few more charges from Varo's wand had helped him recover enough to stand. He'd coughed up more blood, and it stained his face and the breastplate of his armor in gory trails. "Thanks," he rasped, as Varo stepped away to attend to his own injuries; the *fireball* had not spared him.

"Sorry," the knight said to Shay and Dar.

"There was nothing you could do," Shay said. She brought Talen his helmet, battered even more after the recent encounter. The strap was once again ruined, but there was no time for repairs now; Talen made do with settling it on his head for now, adjusting it as best he could and leaving the bent visor in the up position.

"If only your will was as strong as mine," Dar said. "Still, beating the shit out of you had a certain... satisfaction, commander." He turned and walked away, leaving the pair of them looking after him.

It was Kalend who finally found the secret door, although getting it opened required a crowbar, as they could not locate the hidden latch. The portal, once revealed, opened onto a tunnel that led about eighty feet before ending in another concealed door. From this side the latch was obvious, and they opened it to enter yet another considerable chamber.

The purpose of this place was obvious from the diminutive sarcophagi that lined the walls. The place had a dark, sinister aura to it. For a moment, Varo held them back, not even letting the scouts go ahead into the room.

"What's the matter?" Talen asked.

"Chaos," Varo said. "Evil. It pervades this place."

"I see nothing," Dar said, looking through the open doorway.

"It is not something that can be seen..." Varo said, but was interrupted as Shay said, "Look!"

Tendrils of black fog had appeared, drifting down from the ceiling above. They were insubstantial, like wisps of thread drifting off some garment that had been torn asunder, but even so there was something darkly malevolent about them.

“That doesn’t look promising,” Allera said.

“Let’s send a gobbo in and see what happens,” Dar said.

Talen frowned. “How do we get past?”

Varo looked at Serah. “Priestess, you have the power to repel chaos.”

The cleric of the Father nodded. “I do not know if the protection will be enough to repel... *that*.”

“Let us hope that the spell is stronger than your faith,” Varo snapped. “I believe it is our best option, commander,” he said to Talen. “We will all have to remain close to Serah; the protection of the spell only extends to a few paces distant from the caster.”

“All right,” Talen said. He drew *Beatus Incendia*, while Shay passed on Varo’s instructions to the goblinoids. They crowded around Serah, as she cast the spell. Varo had to suppress a grimace as the casting was completed; the spell made his skin prickle.

“How long does the spell last?” Kalend asked, as they gathered around the entrance to the room. The tendrils of mist had thickened, until they resembled a forest of vines dangling down into the chamber. It looked virtually impossible to avoid them, now.

“A little over an hour,” Varo said before Serah could respond.

“Remember, we’re just looking for the way out of here. Don’t touch anything,” Talen said, looking at Dar as he spoke the last.

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t touch us,” the warrior quipped.

“All right, stay close to Serah,” the knight reminded them. He took the lead himself, the others pressed in close around.

A few tendrils of fog probed toward him as he stepped into the room, but they were diverted aside as they struck the barrier of Serah’s spell. With the thirteen of them forming a tight circle around Serah, they shuffled forward into the room. The fog swirled around them, probing at the edges of the *magic circle* as if alive, but it failed to penetrate the sphere of protection.

They made their way to the far side of the room without incident, but found only an unbroken expanse of cavern wall. "All right, let's check the perimeter, but give those stone coffins a comfortable berth," Talen said.

It took the better part of five minutes, but they finally found the secret door, about halfway across the room on the eastern side. This one, once pried open, accessed a smaller cave, a barren chamber with a single exit that led out into a twisting warren of catacombs. The fog did not follow them through the secret door, and after warily testing the edge of Serah's spell, they spread out again, the goblins cautiously moving ahead to search.

Shay sniffed the air. "Air's moister here, and fresher," the scout reported. "We must be getting near another underground river."

"Let's keep on," Talen said. "We may need to come back this way, and if so we'll need Serah's ward intact against that fog."

They headed out into the next tunnel. A number of small chambers, similar to the one they had just left, exited off the passage. Bending low, shining her *everburning torch* upon the ground, Shay indicated faint traces on the ground.

"It looks like the traffic heads this way," she said, indicating a tunnel that twisted into darkness to the north. Filcher started in that direction, but before the rest of them could get moving, a strangled cry of alarm drew their attention around. One of the goblin scouts emerged from one of the side chambers, his face deathly pale, his steps uncertain.

The source of the creature's discomfiture became obvious a scant second later, as a wraith followed it out of the chamber, a vaporous form that seemed to swell with the life energy it had stolen from the hapless creature. The goblin looked over its shoulder and let out a chirrup of terror as the monster descended upon it, its insubstantial arms extended to enfold the poor goblin in its embrace.

Chapter 177

THE COLD TOUCH OF THE GRAVE

Shay was the first to react, and she shot past the wraith so fast that she seemed almost a blur, her torch bobbing in one hand, her magical elf-forged longsword streaking past in the other. The attack cut through the wraith, but the enchanted steel failed to bite into its insubstantial form. She did not stop, rushing past it before hitting the cavern wall behind, kicking off it and spinning in mid-air to hit the ground running, coming back for another pass.

Dar and Talen followed her by only a few heartbeats. The came at the wraith, which loomed over its victim like smoke over a fire. The goblin, seriously drained by the monster's touch, had fallen to the ground, clutching his hands over his head in a futile gesture of self-protection.

"Hands off our gobbos!" Dar yelled, swiping *Valor* through the wraith's body, followed a second later by Talen with *Beatus Incendia*. Once again, both attacks passed through it harmlessly. "Damn it!" Dar shouted.

"Keep at it, as long as it remains present, we can hurt it!" Talen replied. The wraith turned to confront him, touching the knight with an insubstantial claw. The knight felt the icy touch penetrate the skin of his arm to his bone, but his considerable fortitude enabled him to resist the draining effects of its attack.

The hobgoblin fighters joined the melee, coming around Dar and Talen to attack the wraith with their swords. Their weapons were magical, although certainly not as potent as though wielded by the human warriors. Still, one managed to affect the wraith, slicing through its substance, trailing streamers of roiling black substance from its body with the stroke. The hobgoblin let out an exclamation in its own tongue.

"Yeah, yeah, you got lucky," Dar said.

The clerics had come forward to assist, but they could not make it in close enough to strike, with the warriors forming a ring around it. Varo fired off a pulse of negative energy, but once again the power of Dagos failed to cow the undead monster. The wraith was more potent than most such creatures, and the cleric's rebuke met an almost tangible wall of resistance that absorbed a degree of his power.

But the wraith was still surrounded, and its luck in avoiding the magical attacks of its opponents had to run out at some point. Filcher shot in between Talen's legs, but his goal was not to assault the wraith; rather he grabbed his injured compatriot, and dragged him clear of the battle. The wraith persisted in attacking Talen, perhaps recognizing that the knight's holy sword was the greatest threat to its existence. But as it reached out to attack him again *Valor* flashed through its body, severing the probing limb from its body. The wraith turned on the fighter, but Talen took advantage of the distraction to bring *Beatus Incendia* up in an glittering arc that intersected the sinister red points of the wraith's eyes, and it disintegrated.

"Damn," Dar said, sliding his sword back into its scabbard. "Tough bastard."

Allera was tending to the injured goblin. "How is he?" Talen asked.

"Drained, but he should recover, in time," the healer said. "I will use a *lesser restoration* to return some of the vitality stolen by the wraith."

“So now we’re using up our more potent spells on gobbos,” Dar said.

“They are our allies,” Talen said, nodding to Allera.

Dar turned away and looked at Varo. “Your god hasn’t been that helpful of late against these undead,” he said.

The cleric did not appear to be offended by the statement. “There is a power working against us,” he said. “It is likely that it is a consequence of the ritual being worked by the cult of Orcus. I would surmise that the backlash caused by the vrock demon’s *teleport* power is likewise connected.”

“Is there any way of telling how close they are to completing the ritual?” Talen asked.

“I suspect we will know when they get close,” Varo said.

“All right, we’d better...”

But Talen did not get a chance to finish, for at that moment one of the goblin scouts let out a hiss of warning. The meaning was clear, but Filcher translated anyway.

“Something is coming!”

“Take cover!” Talen whispered, but the goblinoids and his companions were already moving. The warning had been directed to the north, and as they tried to conceal their light sources and the sounds of their movement they could hear what had set off the scout, the sound of footsteps, loud enough to suggest that its origin was someone or something of considerable size.

Shay gestured to Baraka, and the ranger nodded, taking his *everburning torch* and withdrawing back to the room they’d entered via earlier. The others had doused their own lights, causing the ranger’s features to be eerily highlighted in the glow of the unnatural flame in his hand.

They did not have to wait very long. A few seconds after the goblin’s warning, the source of it stepped into view. With Baraka’s light withdrawn into the adjacent chamber, it was just a vague form to the humans, but even they could see that it was a bruising hulk of a thing, an ogre clad in armor and shield, and bearing a huge spear in its meaty fist. It paused, sniffed the air, and let out a loud grumble from somewhere deep within its body.

Then it started forward.

Chapter 178

TRIBITZ'S GUARDS

The barrage was immediate and devastating.

The ogre never knew what was happening, even as the arrows and hurled missiles slammed into its body. In addition to the slab of wood and iron that it carried as a shield, it wore a long tunic of heavy mail links that protected its torso. They failed to protect it, however, from the precision shots unleashed upon it by its concealed foes. A javelin glanced off its shield, but a second pierced the armor covering its hip, the steel head sticking deep into the flesh of the joint. An arrow creased off the left side of its head, and as it twisted reflexively away from the pain, a second lodged deep in its throat. A small axe flipped out of the darkness and embedded itself into its right hand, nearly causing the ogre to drop its spear.

By the time it finally realized it was under attack, it was already too late.

Dar emerged from a tunnel opening, and charged toward the monster. The ogre had him at a disadvantage, with its long spear, but instead of setting to take the charge, the monster turned and began to lumber away, back up the tunnel to the north. Dar quickly closed the distance, but more arrows and javelins continued to fly past him into the back of the giant. Several shots buried deep into the ogre's back and the meat of its thighs, and it began to falter. Finally an arrow snicked hard into the back of its head, just under its right ear, and it stumbled. Falling hard to its knees, the ogre could not defend itself from a stroke from Dar's sword that put it down for good.

The others came up as Dar cleaned his sword on the monster's clothes. "That was unexpectedly easy," Talen said.

"Never underestimate the utility of massed sneak attacks against an unexpecting foe," Shay replied, nodding at the goblinoids as they recovered their weapons from the ogre's body.

"We'd better see if there are any more up ahead," Talen said. Shay turned to translate, but Filcher had already issued directions, and a pair of goblin scouts vanished into the darkness to the north.

"Keep your lights shaded," Talen said. "Maybe we can take them by surprise."

They continued to the north, where another uneven cavern gave way to a tunnel that proceeded more or less to the northwest. Moving as quietly as possible, their lights carefully shrouded to minimize their glow, they pressed on in that direction. A faint noise became audible up ahead, the familiar sound of a swift-moving underground river.

The goblin scouts returned, and spent a few moments in quiet discussion with Filcher. "There's a river up ahead, spanned by a rope bridge," the goblin scout reported. "And there's an ogre keeping watch on the other side."

"Did it see you?" Shay asked, in the goblin language. The two creatures looked almost offended, and they shook their heads.

"The goblins don't need light, but we do," Baraka said. "We won't get close enough to strike without alerting it."

"Perhaps it will not matter," Varo said. "I still have a *silence* spell remaining; I was holding it in reserve for the clerics, but I would not dismiss the value of tactical surprise."

"In any case, I would guess that we're getting close to the clerics' stronghold," Talen said.

"An intuition, commander?" the cleric said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Call it a feeling."

"Well, I've got a feeling that some undead monstrosity's going to come wandering past here if you all don't stop your yapping," Dar said. "If we're going to do this, let's just fucking do it already."

"Shay, could you brief our companions on the plan?" Talen asked. Shay passed on their typical tactic of using a *silenced* arrow, and after a few guttural phrases in the goblinoid tongue both the scouts and the warriors were nodding in understanding.

The ogre never knew what hit it.

The guard was wary, and it was beginning to wonder what had happened to its companion. It caught sight of a faint glow that brightened in the tunnel entrance on the far side of the bridge, but it completely missed the slender shadows that had taken cover by the pylons that anchored the bridge on the other side of the underground river. Its first thought was that the light was its fellow guard returning, nevermind that neither ogre carried a light source. Ogres were typically recruited as guards for their physical strength and stamina, not for their intellectual talents.

It opened its mouth to shout an interrogative, but before it could speak, the shadowy forms shifted slightly, and arrows shot across the river. The ogre heard nothing, only felt a series of sharp stings across its torso. It was well-protected by armor and shield, and it was far tougher than the typical example of its kind, but the first volley of missiles had found vulnerable spots, and blood oozed in plenty down its torso under the chainmail.

The ogre let out a roar of challenge, confused when only silence greeted its yell. The light source had brightened, and now the guard could see enemies, at least a half-dozen, heavily armored humans and hobgoblins that charged out of the tunnel toward the bridge.

Despite the *silence*, the ogre could feel the blood-rage boiling in its chest, the angry pounding of its heart at the prospect of battle. But the ogre also felt something else, a dim but persistent memory of orders that had been blasted into its head by repetition and dire threat. *Report*, came a voice that the ogre had learned to fear, for all that its owner barely came up to its knee.

So the ogre did an uncharacteristic thing, which was to turn and flee from those charging toward it.

More arrows shot over the heads of the charging warriors as they rushed across the bridge. The rope bridge wavered treacherously at the sudden weight, and one of the hobgoblins was forced to abort its rush, grasping desperately at the rail to keep from being tossed over into the swiftly moving river. Dar and Talen made it across, and charged after the wounded ogre, who was rapidly escaping down another tunnel to the north. The ogre was slowed somewhat by its heavy armor, but both of the humans were likewise more than a little encumbered.

A moment later, Shay shot past them like a quarrel fired from a heavy crossbow. Baraka had paused to fire his bow, and the shaft flew true up the tunnel, biting deep into the ogre's muscled right arm. The goblins kept up their own fire, but while they continued to score hits, they failed to inflict as much damage now that the ogre was farther away, and on the run. Their little arrows looked like tiny sticks, jutting from its armored body.

Shadows danced on the walls of the tunnel as the companions chased the ogre, most flaring from *Beatus Incendia* as the sword swept back and forth in Talen's hand. Shay caught up to the ogre and slashed her sword across the back of its left leg, opening a deep, bloody gash in the limb. The ogre staggered and nearly fell. It looked back over its shoulder, its face twisting into a furious rictus of rage. Dropping its spear, it smashed its shield around into the scout's face. Shay ducked but could not avoid being clipped on the shoulder by the impromptu weapon; the impact was enough to send her spinning to the ground. Dar and Talen were coming up fast, and the ogre did not remain to battle them. It turned and lumbered on down the tunnel, where they could now see a set of heavy double doors up ahead at the end of the passage.

As they ran, Dar had slid *Valor* back into its sheath, and drew his heavy longbow out of his *efficient quiver*. Coming to a sudden stop, he fitted the string to the bow and drew an arrow with a single fluid motion. Grimacing with the effort of fully drawing the bow, he sighted and released. The arrow flew down the tunnel, shot past Talen, and buried itself to the feathers in the ogre's left leg. The ogre, already seriously wounded, toppled forward. It crashed head-first into the center of the double doors, which buckled from

the force of eight hundred pounds of giant and gear smashing into them. The companions could feel the force of the impact through the tunnel walls, but with Varo's spell still radiating from one of the arrows stuck in its body, an eerie silence continued to surround the creature. The doors were built to open outward, so they remained closed, with the ogre's head smashed through an opening several feet across in the center of the heavy wooden panels. It struggled weakly to free itself, blood splattering from its body onto the doors and the floor with every movement.

Those struggles ended as Talen drove *Beatus Incendia* through its back, the holy blade sliding between its ribs into its heart. White fire flared from the wound, as blood hissed from the opening. The ogre slumped down, its head still pinned in the opening in the double doors.

With an obvious effort, Talen yanked his weapon free. He looked through the opening in the doors. The light from his sword glinted on metal, somewhere in the chamber beyond.

Then something else was thrust into view, appearing in between the doors and the metal object. A familiar sigil, white bone held up by a small gauntleted hand.

Clerics! Talen tried to yell, but of course no sound came from his lips. He tried to look away as he felt a cold chill sweep over him, but the power of that horned symbol washed over him, overcoming even his considerable fortitude. The unholy symbol grew until it filled his vision, and then everything went black as he was struck blind.

Chapter 179

WHEN YOU NEVER SEE IT COMING

Talen was a skilled blind-fighter, but in the *silence* field still emanating from the dead ogre, his hard-won skills were useless. Forcing himself to tamp down a swelling surge of panic, he stepped backward, slowly, one step at a time.

Sound returned to him at the same time that someone grabbed him; he had to restrain himself from lashing out reflexively. "Talen, are you all right?" Shay asked.

"I've been blinded," he said, surprised at the calm in his own voice. "There's a cleric beyond those doors."

He heard a loud clanking noise move past—that had to be Dar—and then vanish as the fighter entered the *silence* field.

“Allera’s on her way,” Shay said. “Better stay put.” She guided him back to the nearby wall, then turned and hurried off to rejoin the battle.

All Talen could do was grit his teeth and wait.

Dar struck the heavy doors with his club. The portals were durable, but they’d already taken damage from the ogre’s impact, and they had not been designed to stand up to the damage that Dar could dish out. There would be no pulling them open, not with the ogre lying dead before them, so Dar simply smashed them inward, pulverizing heavy planks that had to have been brought into Grezneck from the surface world. It only took him a few powerful strokes to open a path wide enough for him to step through; the ogre, freed at last, slumped to the ground at his feet.

The fighter stepped forward into the room beyond just in time to be attacked by a rabid howler.

The others were arriving to join the fray. The first hobgoblin warrior joined Shay in attacking the second door, trying to widen the opening Dar had made enough for them to join the melee. They were interrupted by an *unholy blight* that exploded through the space before the doors. The goblinoids were not affected by the blast, but Shay sagged forward and voided her stomach upon the corpse of the ogre, sickened by the foul potency of the spell. Baraka came forward to help her, but the scout shook him off, and returned to the door. The second hobgoblin, which had been rescued from the edge of the bridge by Kalend and Varo, joined them, and they were quickly able to smash the door off its moorings.

They found themselves greeted by more summoned creatures, a quartet of monstrous spiders each nearly the size of a man.

The chamber beyond the doors was shaped like an uneven hexagon, and was spacious, a good sixty feet across. Another set of doors even larger than the first looked to be the only exit, on the far wall to the left. The only feature of note in the chamber was a small bronze statue atop a stone pedestal in the center of the room. The statue’s identity was instantly obvious to all of them; they had seen enough representations of Orcus in Rappan Athuk to recognize that unnatural visage.

In addition to the swarm of summoned monsters, the chamber was occupied by a pair of goblin clerics, clad in chainmail and black robes. One glowed with the fell aura of a *dispel good* spell, identifying it as a powerful practitioner of the dark arts. It cast another spell upon itself while its fellow laid a *hold* spell upon Dar. The fighter froze as the magic took effect, and the howler, already seriously injured from Dar’s club, eagerly seized and yanked down the helpless fighter.

Given a chance, the Abyssal monster would have torn the fighter apart, but Baraka Suhn leapt into the fray, forcing the howler back with a pair of violent swings of his sickles. His silver weapon bit deep into the gap where its skull met its neck, and the

creature let out a silent scream of pain as it yanked back, leaving a good half foot strip of bloody flesh dangling from its head. It tried to recover, but a moment later a small arrow bit deep into its neck, and the creature keeled over, dissolving into mist as it returned to the pit where it had been spawned.

Baraka bent to help Dar, but the fighter was still caught in the grip of the paralysis, and could not move. He could not hear, but the veteran ranger sensed the threat coming, and he rose into a ready stance as one of the clerics charged forward. His eyes were on the goblin's morningstar, but the cleric did not swing, instead reaching out with its other hand to touch him lightly on the leg. The *inflict wounds* spell it had cast stabbed through him like a hot knife, and he staggered, barely keeping his feet against this much smaller foe.

The two hobgoblins had laid into the monstrous spiders, hacking their fat bodies apart with powerful blows from their magical swords. Two were killed in the first exchange, and the second pair lasted only a few seconds longer. One of them managed to bite one of the warriors on the shoulder, but the hobgoblin ignored the pain, returning the hurt several times over as he buried his sword to the hilt in the monster's hideous face.

Shay had shot through the spiders, leaving them to her allies, easily avoiding their rapid lunges. Her objective was the enemy high priest. The goblin waited for her, and as she slashed at it with her elvish blade, it too struck, stepping into her stroke to touch her with its stubby fingers. Shay had been expecting that, however, and she darted easily aside, avoiding the touch attack. She shot past it, and as her momentum carried her into the middle of the room, she leapt up and sprang off the bronze statue, kicking it over with a loud clang as she reversed her momentum and came back toward the enemy priest. The follower of Orcus snarled and summoned its power, no doubt readying another sinister spell to deal with this foe once and for all.

But the spell was never finished; abruptly the goblin's lips moved without sound, as a broken piece of arrow skittered to a stop at its feet. Varo had found the arrow he'd enchanted sticking from the dead ogre's back, and he'd broken it off, tossing it into the room to hinder the efforts of the enemy priests.

The battle was quickly starting to turn. Baraka was seriously hurt, but he was joined by Kalend and Filcher, who moved forward to help flank the priest. Even with its protective wards in place, it could not avoid painful blows that pierced its defenses, inflicting serious wounds. It tried to regroup, giving ground as it drew out a vial from its pouch.

It didn't get a chance to consume the draught; Snaggletooth flew up, still *invisible*, and seized the healing potion, yanking it out of the surprised cleric's grasp.

Things went rapidly downhill for the priest from there.

The other cleric held its ground as Shay came back. She had the advantage in melee; she was both larger and faster, and her sword had a superior reach to the goblin's

morningstar. But the goblin dodged aside as she swung at it again, her stroke turned by the shifting energies of its *dispel good* aura. In turn it smashed its morningstar into her right knee as she passed; Shay's face twisted in pain, and she fell forward into a roll that brought her up again a few paces away, favoring the damaged joint.

The goblin looked around for the source of the *silence* aura, but it failed to see the fragment of arrow lying between its feet. It did, however, see the two hobgoblins charging toward it. The goblin seemed almost pathetic against the much larger and more heavily armored foes, but it took the first attack on its shield, turning the stroke before it brought its morningstar up hard into the hobgoblin's gut. The fighter staggered back, gasping for air, blood oozing from the punctures where the weapon's spikes had penetrated through his banded armor.

The rest of the companions had moved into the room, although most of them did not rush forward to join the melee. Allera was helping Talen; the healer's innate ability to purge blindness had not yet returned, and she lacked other magic that could help him. Serah tried to *dispel* the *blindness*, but her spell slipped around the dark nugget of evil power gripping Talen like water sliding down an oilskin cloak. The goblin scouts moved cautiously forward, wary of other threats as they moved around the edges of the room into flanking positions.

Dar grunted as he slowly fought to his feet, his movements awkward as he struggled to fight off the lingering effects of the *hold person* spell. He staggered to the side as he drew *Valor* out of its sheath. "I am going to cut me some fucking clerics," he muttered, as he adjusted his uneasy momentum forward, his mail clanking with each stumbling step.

For a moment, it looked as though he would not get his chance. The lesser priest had fought back against serious odds, giving ground as its foes continued to move to flank it. It was outside of the radius of the *silence* sphere, so it could freely cast spells. It focused on the already-injured ranger, hitting Baraka with another *inflict wounds* spell. The dark energies of the spell staggered him, but he held his position, distracting the goblin with blows from his sickles that failed to penetrate the goblin's armored torso. The attacks allowed Kalend and Filcher to get into position again, and they were more successful, each stabbing the cleric with their short blades, the sneak attacks piercing its body from opposite sides. The cleric cursed them with its last breath, then collapsed, dying.

The other cleric was being similarly pressed. It too was giving ground, trying to escape the sphere of *silence*, but as it retreated it came under heavy attack from Shay and the hobgoblin warriors. The scout, trying to ignore the limp from her injured knee, still moved far more quickly than the heavily armored goblin, and her skirmish attacks forced it to attend to her. The hobgoblins went in for more straightforward assaults, lashing at the goblin with their heavy swords. The cleric staggered as one attack bit deeply into its shoulder, the heavy clang of metal indicating that they had finally left the *silence* behind. The cleric fell to one knee, but as the hobgoblin rushed in, eager to finish it, the servant

of Orcus abruptly countered. Eschewing the morningstar, it reached up and pressed its fist into the hobgoblin's gut, unleashing a powerful *inflict wounds* through the contact into its body. The hobgoblin let out a hollow shriek of pain and collapsed, his body twitching with terrible agonies as the spell wrought its course of destruction. The fighter's kinsman did not falter in his own attack, despite the obvious danger, pressing the cleric with another series of potent attacks. His sword clipped the edge of the cleric's helmet, and the goblin went down, stunned.

And then the massive doors on the far side of the room opened, and through the gap a horde of undead poured into the chamber. Dozens of skeletons and zombies came surging forward, arms extended as they sought the flesh of the living.

A skeleton on the leading edge of that rush leapt at Dar. The fighter had dropped his club, but he smashed the creature with *Valor*, hard enough to reduce a mundane skeleton to shards of bone.

The blow hit the skeleton square in the ribs. It staggered back a step, but instead of coming apart it leapt forward again, digging its claws into Dar's weapon arm.

Behind it, over a hundred more skeletons and zombies charged forward to attack.

Chapter 180

THE SURGE

Varo hurled an *undeath to death* spell into the onrushing horde of undead. The explosion of black energy blasted seven skeletons into fragments of bone, but it barely eased the force of the surging wave.

The wave spread out into the room, cutting off part of the group from the rest. Shay dodged back as a skeleton leapt at her face, its claws extending toward her eyes. She avoided its assault, and tried to get to the last hobgoblin warrior. She managed only one step before she found herself surrounded by skeletons, with at least five zombies right pressing at her in their wake. The creatures hindered each other by their close proximity, but the undead seemed to care only for seizing and tearing apart their living foes.

Serah tried to *turn* some of the attacking undead, but her power had no effect. "There's too many of them... they're too strong!" the cleric shrieked.

"They are augmented," Varo said calmly, stepping back to the broken doors.

“Fall back to the doors!” Talen yelled. He still could not see, but *Beatus Incendia* flared in his hand, as though the blade could itself sense the presence of the undead monsters in the chamber.

Kalend and Baraka tried to get back to the sundered outer doors, but were blocked by a half-dozen charging skeletons. Filcher shot between them, dodging skeletal claws without apparent effort. Kalend tried to do the same, but a skeleton seized his arm. Kalend, his face white with terror, hacked at it with his legion shortsword, but the blow had no effect.

Baraka slammed into the skeleton, dislodging the creature’s grasp on the thief. “Go!” the ranger yelled, his arms spread wide to block off the skeleton charge, his sickles raising a fine cloud of bone dust as he hacked into their bodies. His adamantine weapon smashed a skeleton’s humerus, but as he pulled back the weapon it caught in a rib cage, and was pulled out of his grasp.

Kalend hesitated. “Baraka!”

The ranger tried to pull back from the skeletons trying to seize him, but before he could get fully free a zombie lurched into him, locking its thick arms around the man’s neck, dragging him into its grasp. Kalend took a step toward him, but within an instant found himself confronted by three more skeletons, one of which got a claw on his neck for a second, and drew blood as it raked his flesh.

The things were incredibly strong.

Dar was finding that out, as he stood against the horde, lashing out with *Valor*. He focused on the zombies, which were more vulnerable to the sword, but strokes that would have cut through ordinary zombies merely opened shallow tears in their undead flesh. It was like hacking through leather, and by the time Dar finally brought one down, he was almost completely surrounded. He had a very close call as a skeleton grabbed onto his leg, and he nearly fell into the arms of a zombie hazarding his flank. He was already bruised and bleeding from several hits; these undead seemed to have little difficulty hurting him even through his heavy armor.

“Dar! Dar, get out of there!” Allera shouted.

“Shay’s trapped!” the fighter replied, but he had no choice but to follow Allera’s direction; another second and he would be torn to pieces.

Shay could hear her friends’ yells, but the sound was overlaid by the screams of the hobgoblin as it was taken down. Shay could just see it through the press of undead; three zombies had a solid hold on it, and two others were pulling back the plates covering its torso through sheer strength. She felt something twist in her as she saw bright red entrails lifted into the air, accompanied by a spurt of bright red arterial blood. One of the zombies turned and looked at her, its face splattered in crimson.

The scout was nearly yanked off her feet as a zombie seized her cloak. Twisting her body, she ducked out of the garment, shedding her light pack in the same movement. She felt pain in her side as a pair of skeletons raked her with their claws, but of more immediate worry was the arms of the surrounding zombies probing at her, trying to grab onto her neck and arms. She heard Talen yell, could see the light of his sword, over the press.

If she was going to escape, it had to be now.

The scout sprang into the air, using her magical boots and her own strength and agility to take her six feet straight up. Narrowly avoiding the grasping hands, she landed on a zombie's shoulders. Even as her weight started to buckle the undead monster, she leapt forward, her target another zombie that was caught in the press. The room was almost full of undead, and Shay could see that more were still coming.

All of this she took in in mid-leap. She hit the second zombie and sprang off it as it fell. She was losing height fast; she kicked off a skeleton, trying to ignore the agony of her injured knee as it was wrenched by the impact. Claws tore at her legs. Undead were everywhere, a sea of arms extended up at her as she passed.

Then a fist closed tight around her ankle, and her momentum was instantly erased as a powerful tug yanked her down. She fell into the midst of a knot of undead; as she hit the floor, her injured leg collapsed and she fell hard onto her back. Her other leg was still held by a zombie almost lost in the press.

The creatures swarmed onto her in an instant, blocking out the light in a sea of darkness and pain.

Chapter 181

THE DEAD LEGION

A roar of fury broke over the subtle noises of the undead, the clack of bones from the skeletons and the hissing moans of the zombies. The force of it broke the wall of undead pressing down upon Shay, letting the light back in.

The scout blinked and looked up to see Dar and Talen. Talen, still blind, was swinging *Beatus Incendia* blindly, driving back the closest undead. He could hardly miss in the press, but the advantage was only temporary; already the faster skeletons were rushing at him, tearing at him with their claws, trying to get a hold.

To Shay's eyes at that moment, he was like an avenging angel.

Dar, on the other hand, was a force of nature. The fighter reached down and grabbed her by the front of her chain shirt. He yanked her up; she let out a cry of pain as the zombie still holding onto her ankle jerked her back. She felt rather than saw Dar smash down with *Valor*, and then she was free. Dar continued to lash about him as he retreated, Shay all but slung over his shoulder.

“Get moving, commander, we’re getting out!” he yelled, as hands tore at his back, trying to find purchase.

They fell back to the doors, the undead pressing the attack at every step. Kalend and Varo had set up a temporary perimeter there, and had kept the gap open against the surging undead. Varo had summoned a fiendish ape to aid them, and the animal was doing a good job of helping to keep the left flank clear through its sheer size. But the ape already bore numerous wounds across its torso, and its blows were growing noticeably weaker as a wall of skeletons and zombies hewed at its bulk.

Even with the ape, however, the defenders could not keep all of the surging undead back from the ruined doors. Allera and Serah were in the doorway proper, hitting skeletons that got too close with their maces. One clawed its way into their midst, but Filcher thrust his sword into the gap between its leg bones, tripping it. As it tried to get up, the cleric and healer laid into it, smashing it hard and putting it down for good.

Dar all but hurled Shay into the midst of the women defending the doors, and turned to smite a zombie that had seized onto his armor. A skeleton leapt at him, but he grabbed the monster by the spine, and hurled it into a charging rank of its fellows. Beside him, Talen was hacking into undead with sharp, controlled blows of his sword, wary of accidentally risking his companions due to his damaged vision.

Step by step, the companions fell back. The ape fell to the ground, taking a half-dozen undead with it, the zombies and skeletons still tearing the creature’s flesh until it dissolved into nothing. Varo faced a sudden surge on his flank, but before he could be overwhelmed Dar was there, buying them a few precious seconds. Kalend and Talen fell back, then Varo, and finally Dar, still hacking for all he was worth.

The undead came after them on their heels. The doors had been ruined, one smashed open, the second knocked fully off its hinges, neither really functioning as a real barrier. But as Dar retreated toward the threshold, the wood began to shift and twist, coming together seemingly of its own inertia, coming back together to form a nearly intact obstacle. The new “door” was really just a plate of wood, and it didn’t quite reach the top of the threshold, instead ending about seven feet up.

“What the...” Dar exclaimed in surprise.

“Thank Snaggletooth!” Allera said, looking up from where she was healing Shay’s injured leg.

“Is everyone here?” Talen asked.

“Baraka... he didn’t make it,” Kalend said.

“The hobgoblins... and most of the goblins, they were caught as well,” Shay said, grimacing as Allera straightened out the mangled leg, pouring healing energy into the limb.

“This isn’t going to hold them!” Dar warned, as the wooden barrier began to buckle under the force of the undead attack. A slab of wood broke out from the wall, followed by probing hands both skeletal and of rotten flesh. Dar brought down *Valor*, severing the lot of them. “Damn it, I dropped my club in there!”

More hands appeared over the top of the barrier, seeking purchase; another piece of the barrier shattered, and a skeleton started pushing through.

“Back to the bridge!” Talen shouted. “We can cut it behind us, and use the river as a line of defense!”

They retreated back down the passage, the sounds of cracking wood echoing off the walls behind them. Dar brought up the rear, covering their retreat. “I don’t suppose you’d have another one of those fire blasts handy?” he asked Varo.

“If I did, you could rest assured that I would have used it in the chamber,” the cleric replied.

“I never thought I’d miss that damned elf,” the fighter muttered, glancing back up the tunnel behind them.

It took only a short interval for them to cover the hundred feet or so of passage that led back to the underground river and the bridge. Filcher and Kalend were in the lead, but they came to a halt as they spotted something lying on the ground on the near side of the bridge. Kalend drew out his *everburning torch* from his belt, and shone the light upon it.

It was a goblin, one of their scouts, killed by serious burns to the chest and neck.

A clank announced the arrival of Talen and the others. The armored knight was guided by Allera and Shay; some instinct warned him of the danger that he could not see. “What is it?” he asked.

“A goblin, dead,” Allera said. “One of ours.”

Talen lifted *Beatus Incendia*; light flared out across the river cavern. It shone on the figures standing on the far side of the bridge. The muscled hulk that had once been a

mad barbarian. Just behind him to the side, a warlock who had been a friend, when he'd been alive.

And behind them, a mass of undead, animated corpses standing in silent ranks, awaiting command.

The two sides stared at each other across the bridge in silence for a second, two. Then Dar and Varo came rushing up. There was a look of mutual recognition, a startled gasp of surprise.

"Greetings, friends," the revenant Zafir Navev said, his voice rattling hollow in his chest, but sounding clear across the gap and the noise of the river.

Varo opened his mouth to respond, but he never got the chance. Navev lifted his hand, and a bolt of coruscating black energy erupted from his fingers, coursing across the river in a flash. The eldritch blast hit the cleric solidly in the chest, arcing sideways even as it hit, smashing into Talen and Dar. All three men were hurled backwards, flying a half-dozen paces back down the tunnel, to land hard on their backs, wisps of black smoke rising from their bodies.

Chapter 182

OLD FRIENDS

The entity that had once been Zafir Navev laughed, a cold, dry sound. "My powers have increased since we last met," the undead warlock said. He stepped back, and brought up his other hand. The ghost of the mad barbarian Marthek shot forward across the bridge like a crossbow bolt, followed by a shambling horde of zombies.

Shay stood there, her eyes wide, torn between Talen and defending against the foe. Looking back, she saw her lover stir; alive, at least. She wanted to go to him, but with their two toughest fighters taken out by the warlock's blast, she was the only one left to hold the line.

Dar's reaction was more prosaic. "I'll *kill* that motherfucking wizard!" the fighter roared. It was clear as he pulled himself up, however, that the blast had hurt. Combined with the wounds he'd suffered battling the undead earlier, he was in far from good condition.

Allera did not have time to ponder decisions; the ghost seemed to fixate on her, and an eager light shone in its eyes as it charged across the bridge. It navigated the bobbling planks with ease; apparently the former barbarian retained some of its natural agility even in undeath.

Kalend drew his sword and stepped forward to defend the healer; the weapon shook in his hand. Filcher took a quick look between the undead and his companions, and stepped back into the shadows along the river's edge.

"Back, creature!" Varo yelled. The cleric was still on his back, but he had lifted his head, and held up his divine focus with one hand. Violet waves of energy, only vaguely perceived by those alive, roiled out from him, rushing down the tunnel toward the bridge. That surge of power smashed into the ghastr, which staggered as if struck.

The creature was possessed of a considerable innate strength, further reinforced by the dark powers that suffused Rappan Athuk, gathered by the ritual of the cult of Orcus, and the *Sphere of Souls*. Varo's expression tightened in concentration as he poured the full strength of his will into the rebuke, adding his own power to the will of his shadowed god.

The combination was just enough to overcome the ghastr's resistances, and it let out a sharp shriek as it came to a halt, just shy of the near end of the bridge. It clenched its claws and teeth, ferocious, but unable to come further.

Kalend took an uncertain step forward, but Shay forestalled him. "Let them come to us," the scout said, her eyes not on the zombies, but on the warlock just visible behind them on the far side of the bridge.

"We should cut the bridge!" Serah exclaimed.

"Then the undead behind us will kill us when they get here," Shay said, surprised at how calm her voice was. "We have to get through these."

"Call upon the Father, Serah," Allera said, collecting herself now that she saw that she wasn't about to be torn apart. "Have faith."

The priestess nodded and lifted her holy symbol. Bright light flared from the sigil of the torch, washing over the undead upon the bridge. The ghastr was not affected, but the divine radiance flared as it struck the first ranks of zombies. Unlike the monsters they had faced in the chamber earlier, these were mundane creatures, created by Navev, and while a black aura flickered around them as the holy light touched their flesh, it was not enough to protect them. Five zombies crumpled into ash, which was blown almost at once into the river by the breeze coming down the low tunnel.

There was still over a dozen more of the slow-moving undead. They were not as adept as Marthek had been, and with the sudden shift in weight on the bridge several staggered to the side. A pair hit the rail and went over, vanishing under the water, not to emerge again.

Serah lifted her holy symbol to face the second rank, but before she could try to turn them a second time, Navev struck again.

“Look out!” Shay yelled, turning to push Serah hard on the shoulder. The *eldritch blast* still hit her, but it was a glancing blow rather than a full-on blast with the force that had felled Varo and the fighters. Even so, the force of the warlock’s power knocked the cleric off her feet, to land hard on the stone a few paces away. The bolt split as before, but Shay had faced Navev’s power before, and was ready for it. She yanked her body out of the path of the forking blast an instant before it touched her, and the magical pulse dissolved as it shot out into empty space beyond her. Allera quickly hurried over to the fallen priestess, who clutched her blasted side in pain, but clung to consciousness.

Dar returned to the fray with a violent and angry cry of battle. He saw the ghost, recognized Varo’s rebuke, and headed for it, *Valor* held above his head in both hands. But the zombies were getting across the bridge, and blocked his rush. One was drawn off as Kalend stabbed it, opening a deep gash in its side that trailed blackened and rotting entrails. The zombie pawed at the thief, but failed to injure him.

Dar barely paused as he took the first zombie’s head and one arm off its body with his first swing. Three more zombies lunged at him, but after the souped-up zombies of the last battle, these seemed almost pathetically weak. Dar cleared them all with a single violent sweep of attacks, then lifted his sword to point across the bridge.

“You’re next, wizard!” he shouted.

Navev replied by blasting him solidly in the chest with another *eldritch blast*. The twisting beam of energy knocked Dar back another twenty feet, while the forking side-blasts hit Kalend and Allera, hurting both and knocking them roughly into the walls on either side of the passage. Dar, lay there for a long moment, trying unsuccessfully to get up.

“Fuck...”

Talen was on his feet again, and he’d made his way back to the bridge alone, using the side of the tunnel for guidance. He heard Dar charge back into the fray, and cursed his own blindness; he’d be more of a liability than a boon if he attempted the same. But neither could he just stand there and wait for his companions to resolve the battle. Thankfully he’d kept his grip on his sword; he wouldn’t have been able to find *Beatus Incendia* again easily if he’d dropped it.

He hesitated. He turned back toward the dark tunnel behind them. He couldn’t see, but he could hear, although it was the absence of sound that drew his attention and his worry.

The sound of the wooden barrier being attacked had stopped.

The undead horde was coming.

Chapter 183

DESPERATE TIMES

Dar tried again to get up, and again failed. But then a roaring wave of power exploded through his body, blasting his weakness away with it. It only lasted a second, and in that time it felt like his flesh was being scoured clean from within, but when it was done, he was more or less whole.

He looked up, and was not surprised to see Varo looking down at him. Allera's healing was more gentle, but there was no denying the efficacy of the dark cleric's magic.

"I don't suppose you have a spell that can deal with that damned wizard and his fucking energy bolts?" he asked, as he pulled himself back up to his feet.

"I have no more spells that can harm him directly," Varo replied, "Unless I can get close enough to touch him."

"Swell," Dar said, picking up *Valor* before starting down the tunnel toward the bridge once more.

Shay had taken out her bow, hoping to injure the warlock enough to stop the barrage of *eldritch blasts*. But before she could load and shoot she was forced to defend herself from a trio of zombies that swept forward off the bridge. The first staggered forward and nearly fell as she ducked smoothly aside, but the other two were right on its heels, and she had to give ground, taking her further away from her shot at the warlock.

She was momentarily distracted by a flutter of wings overhead, but could pay it no heed as a fourth zombie appeared and grabbed her leg. She got away before it could get a good grip on her, but its fingers had clutched her hard enough to bruise the flesh.

There was a flare of light, then all four zombies crumbled into ash. Shay turned and nodded in thanks at Serah, who'd been brought back around by Allera, both of them kneeling by the tunnel wall.

Then she turned back to the warlock; she had business with him.

Unfortunately, the warlock, apparently, had spent the last few seconds mustering his power; now his fingers extended toward Shay with a surety that spoke, *This time, I will not miss, woman.*

But even as Shay tensed to take the blast, there was a sudden sharp rumble, the only warning any of them got before a massive chunk of the cavern ceiling over the bridge gave way and collapsed onto the revenant. Shay stood there and stared in surprise through the miasma of dust that hung in the air around the collapse. Most of the earth that had fallen from the ceiling had gone into the river, but the rest formed a rampart several feet high on the far bank.

Snaggletooth became visible as the little dragon floated down and landed on Shay's shoulder. The faerie dragon opened its jaws wide, and issued a derisive hiss toward where the warlock had been standing. Navev had been on the very edge of the river near the far pylon of the bridge. He'd been completely buried, or he'd gone over into the river; either way there was no sign of him now.

Dar came rushing up; he'd seen the whole thing. One of the remaining zombies lunged at him; the fighter almost casually took the thing's head off its shoulders.

"Is he dead? Well, for good?"

"I don't know," Shay said.

"Well, might as well take care of this one again," Dar said, stepping forward to face the still-immobile ghastr. The creature remained where it had been stopped by Varo's rebuke, although the bridge under it sagged until the center of it dipped into the water; the far side was covered in heaped earth that had been dislodged from the ceiling by the dragon's magic.

Dar lifted his sword, but before he could strike the entire bridge gave way under the strain. The ghastr toppled back over into the river, along with the piled earth and the wooden planks; the moorings on their side trailed the remnants of the broken ropes down the current. Forty feet of open river, deep and swift, now separated them from the tunnel on the far side.

The light of *Beatus Incendia* washed over them as Talen staggered up to join them. "The undead, they're right behind me!" he yelled, the words a cold dagger that sent a sinister chill through each of them. Even as they turned, they could see the leading edge of the rush, as dozens of skeletons charged into the radius of the light shed by the knight's sword.

Chapter 184

EVEN MORE DESPERATE TIMES

“Form a line!” Dar yelled, moving up to stand beside Talen. Shay and Kalend came forward to take their flanks, but their formation still looked tenuous in the face of the sheer numbers of undead bearing down upon them. Allera and Serah came up behind them, ready to bolster the defenders with their healing magic.

Varo remained on the far side of the line, staring at the charging undead.

“Varo, what in the hells are you doing?” Dar shouted. “Get back behind the line, man!”

But Varo’s concentration did not waver. The skeletons focused on him, an exposed target, and lifted their claws in anticipation of a strike.

The leading edge of the rush was less than fifteen feet away when Varo raised his divine focus and invoked the power of Dagos.

The pulse of negative energy washed over the undead, and this time it had an immediate and dramatic effect. More than a dozen skeletons suddenly froze, as though they had struck an invisible wall. Those behind pushed forward, past their rebuked fellows, but before they could get to Varo, the cleric stepped back smoothly behind the line of his companions.

“Serah, I believe you will find your turning more effective now,” the cleric said calmly.

The priestess of the Shining Father called upon her own power, flooding the tunnel with a flaring light. True to Varo’s words, another dozen skeletons came apart as the holy blaze touched them, blasting them into dust.

Despite the serious losses, the skeletons kept on coming. The four defenders in the front rank put their blades to use, and despite the difficulties in using edged weapons against the fleshless undead, the skeletons came apart in droves under their powerful impacts. More skeletons pressed forward through the storm of bone shards and flying fragments, but their own attacks were weak, easily dodged or absorbed by armor.

“What the fuck?” Dar exclaimed loudly, smashing a skeleton’s skull into a thousand pieces with a single stroke of *Valor*. “Are these the same skellys? They’re pussies!”

More skeletons were rushing forward, but with a gesture from Varo his rebuked dozen leapt forward, engaging their erstwhile allies in a violent melee. The skeletons could do little damage to each other with their claws, but they kept each other busy, allowing the companions to easily treat with those still pushing at their line. Serah fired off another burst of positive energy, and another dozen collapsed, leaving just a handful that were being decimated by the defenders, especially the powerful, crushing blows from Corath Dar.

“Varo, what’s going on?” Talen asked, cautiously swiping a skeleton that had gotten inside his guard. The blow was not especially strong, but the holy energies of *Beatus*

Incendia flared bright, and the undead construct came apart in a clatter of bones. “Dar’s right, these are far weaker than before.”

The cleric’s brows knitted in concentration, and he closed his eyes for a moment. “The negative energy source that empowered them... I would assume that in our flight we left the radius of its effect. It was like a *desecration* aura, only far more powerful...”

Dar, caught up in his destruction-dealing, finished with the skeletons facing him, and after smashing one that had been troubling Kalend, he started forward toward the melee between those Varo was controlling, and those that were still hostile. He reached the nearest grappling pair and simply hacked through both, driving *Valor* down in an arc that sundered ribs and spines, and sent the rest of the pieces flying every which way.

Serah had her holy symbol at the ready, but it seemed that there was no further need of her power. “What do we...”

She was interrupted as a cold wave of dread swept over them. Serah shivered, her words dying as she became suddenly pale.

“What... what was that...” Talen said.

“It would appear that the source I mentioned is mobile,” Varo said. “I would ready yourselves for another attack, from the zombies.”

“Dar, get back into the line!” Talen yelled. As the dark power they’d sensed had drawn nearer, Varo’s control over the skeletons had waned, and the undead monsters had broken from their internecine struggle to fall upon their real foe. Serah unleashed another *turning*, but the sensation they’d felt clearly interfered with her power, for only a pair of skeletons fell, and the surge of light quickly died, dissolving against a wall of utter black that flared briefly, like a living entity, before fading back into waiting quiescence.

Dar stepped slowly back into position, laying about him with his sword with every step. The skeletons seemed to drink up the invisible waves of negative power that had filled the tunnel, moving faster and attacking with greater strength. But *Valor*, wielded by Dar’s hand, still offered the ultimate counter, and skeletons continued to explode around him as he took calm and easy steps back. A few got around him and came at the other defenders, but they were ready, and more skeletons fell.

“There!” Shay warned, pointing down the tunnel.

They heard them before they saw them coming, the sound of a hundred low, throaty moans drifting up the passage toward them, a deep thrum that they sensed somewhere deep in that part of the brain where terror resided. It grew louder as they approached, now clearly heard even over the sounds of the ongoing battle with the remaining skeletons.

And then the light washed over their ranks, row after row of zombies shuffling forward, fell power radiating from them like a sharp stench. There was still a handful of skeletons among them, moving at the slower pace of the horde, and a number of undead that weren't clearly definable as either, with rotting flesh still covering their bodies, but not enough to keep the pale white bone beneath from showing through. Some trailed ragged lengths of flesh, sinew, or intestine that dangled from open gashes in their bodies. Many were missing body parts, with eye sockets that glistened wetly, jaws absent a lower half, ears torn off, or even a limb that ended in a ragged stump. *Things* that had been parts of living, hale bodies fell from their ravaged forms and were left in their wake as they shambled forward, squishing as those behind trod upon those ghastly remnants.

The companions watched in revulsion as the undead horde drew nearer. "By the gods," Serah breathed, her eyes wide. More rows continued to enter the light; the ranks of the dead seemed to go on forever. Already nearly a hundred were in view.

"What do we do now?" Kalend asked, his voice tight.

Varo drew out his magical dagger, the odd mithral blade with the gemstone hilt. "We fight for our lives," the cleric said simply, stepping forward to take his place in the line.

Chapter 185

THE FIRST FEW SECONDS

Marshal Velan Tiros, in his *Chronicles of the Border Wars*, wrote that the first few seconds of a battle were crucial, for in that moment, when the lines of battle clashed, the true mettle of an army was tested.

For the companions from Camar, the first few seconds of the battle with the zombie horde in that dark passageway in Grezneck nearly resulted in total disaster.

The zombies, for all the damage they had suffered to their bodies, and the shambling, awkward way with which they moved, *looked* weak, even fragile. That was an impression that the companions had already proved false, for not only were these foes incapable of feeling pain, but they were also possessed of an inhuman strength and a single-minded purpose. Arrows and bludgeons did almost nothing to them; they had to literally be hacked apart before the animating force that drove them was overcome.

They did not reason, or comprehend anything but the most basic commands from their master. But that didn't stop Dar from lifting his sword as the first rank of the enemy horde drew close enough to strike, and shouting, "Come on then, you fucking bastards,

come to the chopper!" If anything, the zombies seemed almost eager, extending their arms as they staggered forward to attack.

The fighter met the first with a downward stroke of his sword that clove the first zombie's chest open from throat to pelvis. Despite the gaping wound, the zombie somehow continued to press its attack, wobbling slightly as it tried to pound the fighter with a fist that was missing a few fingers. The blow only managed to smear black ooze on Dar's plate armor, but it did distract him as two more zombies lurched in on the heels of the first. One came high, trying unsuccessfully to grab onto Dar's extended weapon arm, while the second stumbled and seized Dar by the waist, trying to get a grip on his armored torso.

Kalend tried to come to his colonel's aid, but he found himself under attack by another pair that shambled around the engaged warrior toward the thief's flank. The first took a swing at his body that he avoided by darting to the side, but that unfortunately placed him at hazard from the second, which delivered a pulverizing blow to the side of the legionary's face. Kalend was spun around by the force of the impact, which dislodged several teeth and cracked the bone of his lower jaw. He staggered to the side and would have fallen, had it not been for the tunnel wall. He barely had time to turn around before the two monsters were on him again.

On the opposite flank, Talen and Shay were likewise hard pressed by the initial surge. Talen, guided by sound and smell rather than sight, waited until the first zombie was almost on top of him before striking. *Beatus Incedia* flared as it tore into the zombie's shoulder, almost taking its left arm off from its body. But as with Dar's first target, the zombie pressed its attack with its other arm, and it managed a glancing hit to the knight's wrist that almost knocked his sword out of his hand. Another zombie seized his shield, and for a few seconds there was an awkward tug between the two of them for control.

Shay, near the left wall, was warded both by Talen on her right and a protrusion in the corridor that formed a small protected place to stand. Only one zombie at a time could get to her there, but what the scout saw was a sea of extended hands, as several other zombies tried to surge past that single attacker. Pressed in close together, there was no way she could miss, but again the zombie's hide felt like old leather, and it paid no heed to the gash she hacked open in its torso. The zombie just came right on, pushing her up against the wall, and suddenly her advantageous position became a trap, leaving her with no room to retreat. Behind it hands probed at her around its body, just inches short of being able to seize upon her. She thrust at the zombie again, but it was too close for her to get in a decent swing, and her sword glanced off its body with barely a scratch.

"Get... the... fuck... OFF... ME!" Dar yelled, as he drove his hilt down into the skull of the zombie grabbing him. The monster's skull popped like an overripe melon, and his fists came up dripping brains, but the creature continued to doggedly hold on. Dar whipped up a leg, tearing one of its arms free, and drove his armored knee into its jaw, snapping

the head almost full back on its neck. The zombie's arms still tried to claw at him, but they were vague, directionless, now. Dar brought *Valor* down, shearing the zombie's head in twain, and that seemed to finally give the monster the idea that it was destroyed; it flopped back, still twitching.

The entire exchange had only taken a few seconds in total, but when Dar looked up, there were a dozen hands reaching for him. Dar reached out and thrust the first zombie back with a solid punch in the chest, but the hands were everywhere, grabbing onto his arms and his legs.

Cursing loudly, he was pulled roughly into the midst of the swarming zombies.

Talen felt a cold fear as his senses were overloaded; from what his ears were telling him, zombies were everywhere. He'd pulled free of the zombie grabbing his shield, but he had no idea what had happened to it; there were more in front of him, pounding on his armor. He just kept hacking downward with *Beatus Incendia* in sharp, controlled motions, and with every swing he felt the sword bite deep into zombie hides. A stench of roasted flesh filled his nostrils, as the holy flames seared the wounds he caused. He already felt as though he'd been fighting for hours; his arms felt like they were ringed with lead weights. The zombies just kept coming, so he had to keep on swinging, hack, slash.

Then he felt his sword strike deep, the impact shuddering up his arms. He tried to draw the sword back, but *Beatus Incendia* stuck; he'd clove deep into a zombie's sternum, and as the creature fell its weight tugged the sword down. He tried to yank it free, but then hands closed on his arms, and he was pulled down after it.

As the knight went to the ground, several zombies fell on top of him, grabbing at his helmet and armor.

Chapter 186

THE TRUE METTLE

Dar was surrounded. Talen was down. Shay and Kalend had been driven up against the tunnel walls, under heavy attack.

And behind the front ranks of foes, dozens and dozens of zombies continued to push forward.

Dar refused to go down, even with four zombies grappling him, and at least a half-dozen others trying to push around their companions to get to him. But even with his

incredible strength, he could not work enough leverage to pull free. A zombie, knocked over in the struggle, was trying to get hold of his ankles.

Varo stepped forward, and touched one of the zombies holding onto Dar on the shoulder. Blue light flared, and rotten flesh melted away from his touch as the *cure serious wounds* spell coursed through it. With his *hide from undead* dispelled by his attack, the zombie turned away from Dar and lunged at Varo, delivering a powerful blow that clipped him hard on the shoulder. Varo did not retreat, and met the zombie's surge with a pair of clumsy but powerful slashes from his magical dagger. The odd mithral blade sliced through the zombie as though its flesh were parchment, and it crumpled.

Varo started forward to attack another of Dar's foes, but the fighter had taken advantage of the help to finally tear free. Staggering back, avoiding the swipes from the zombie on the ground, he unleashed a full attack into the monsters following him. There were few creatures, living or dead, that could withstand blows from *Valor* when the fighter wielded the weapon with both hands and his full strength behind the blows. The first zombie was hurled aside with a missing leg and an arm dangling by a few tenuous strips of sinew. Dar followed through on the second blow, taking off the next zombie's leg at the knee, toppling it over into a third. The crippled zombie fell onto the ground but kept coming, using its arms to flop forward, even as its companions trod heavily upon its back.

"Thanks," the fighter muttered to Varo, as the two fell back into place in the defensive line.

Talen had likewise been in a very difficult position, although his armor kept him from being torn apart in those first few seconds after he'd fallen. He slipped his arm out of the straps of his shield, and tried with both hands to free his sword from the chest of the zombie that had pulled it away. The zombie holding his shield fell back clumsily, but almost at once another was there, pounding his side with both fists. Another got ahold of his helmet, and with the broken chin strap it was able to yank it off his head, gashing his cheek in the process. Talen could not see, but he could imagine the hands coming down toward his exposed head, ready to tear his flesh from the skull...

A woman's cry drew the knight's attention up, through the press of hands and the chorus of moans that enveloped him. Allera and Serah charged forward to Talen's aid, and they brought the holy magic of their calling with them. Each seized one of the zombies atop Talen, and while their pushes were not strong, positive energy flowed at the contact, and zombie flesh boiled away. The zombies tried to turn to face these new threats, but lying half-upon Talen they lacked leverage, and only managed to roll off the embattled knight.

Several zombies rushed forward to engage the two women, but were distracted as Snaggletooth became visible and darted low overhead, lashing out at a few of them with his hind claws as he passed. The zombies reached up at the faerie dragon as he passed, but he ducked and weaved and avoided their clumsy grabs.

“Get up, Talen!” Allera yelled, grabbing Talen’s arm and helping him to his feet. Two zombies continued to tug on his armor, but with a grunt of effort he tore free. *Beatus Incendia* burned bright in his hand, and as he stood he was finally able to rip it free from the fallen zombie’s chest.

Serah yelled in alarm as a zombie grabbed onto her from behind, locking an arm around her neck. Talen, guided by her cry and the rough moan coming from the zombie, thrust his sword up through its head, impaling a foot of steel through the middle of its skull.

“For Camar!” Talen yelled, taking the hilt of the sword in both hands, and swinging the blade, with the zombie still stuck on it, across the charging rush. The zombie he’d stuck crashed into another two, sending all three to the ground. The first zombie’s head came apart as it fell, freeing the knight’s sword. Another zombie came at his flank before he could recover, but Allera stabbed it with her wand of healing, holding the device like a dagger. A big chunk of the zombie’s torso came apart. It turned and struck Allera hard across the chest, knocking her back, but before it could follow up Talen smashed his sword across its back, driving it to the ground.

Shay found herself back against the wall, with nowhere to go. The zombie reached up toward her face, so she fell into a crouch. The zombie crashed into the wall, but quickly recovered, and bent to grab the scout. Shay sidestepped, but quickly realized that all routes led only into more zombies, as another pair tried to cram into the niche. She deflected a grab at her arm, and leapt straight up, spreading her legs wide at the apogee of her leap to catch on the walls of the alcove. Hanging there, precariously balanced a few inches above the reach of the zombies, she started hewing with her sword.

Kalend had turned from the painful critical hit that had crushed his jaw to see another undead fist coming down to finish the job. The thief resolutely lifted his sword to try and take the foe down with him, but before the zombie’s punch could land, the creature staggered to the side and fell, right into the path of Kalend’s other opponent. The second zombie diverted around its fallen ally, but the distraction gave him a chance to get in a few strokes of his sword. His weapon had once belonged to a legion commander, and bore an edge that never grew dull. The story of its passage into his hands was a long one, but it sufficed that it cut deep into the zombie’s body.

His foe staggered as something cut into it from the side. The goblin Filcher appeared, dodging both the grab of the one he’d tripped, and the attack of this second foe, as he fell back to take up position beside Kalend.

“I thought you’d gotten out of here,” Kalend said—or tried to; his broken jaw made the sounds jumbled and indistinct.

The goblin seemed to understand the gist of what he’d tried to say, however. “I do not swim very well,” he said, lifting his own small sword as the pair of them met the zombie

rush. A head flew past and bounced off the wall near them, rolling to a stop at their feet; Dar was still hewing away not three paces distant.

The zombies just kept on coming, as fast as the companions could kill them. But somehow, despite the constant push, the line held. The companions were driven back, slowly, step by step, toward the river at their backs, leaving a mound of corpses in their wake. Talen and Dar, anchoring the line at its center, formed a blur of steel around them, into which zombies were fed like vegetables to a chef's dicer. The heaps of destroyed corpses were making footing difficult, and zombies were falling to the ground as often as they were able to unleash attacks. Shay was caught behind the zombie lines by the retreat, but she was able to kick off the wall and land next to Allera, spinning and returning to the line just in time to deflect a zombie coming at Talen's flank. Allera and Serah worked up and down the line, using their wands to alternately heal their companions and damage zombies, as the case demanded. Even Snaggletooth got into the fray, flying low over the front ranks of the zombie horde, distracting them, occasionally dropping small sharp stones onto their heads accompanied by little chirruped taunts.

They fell back, leaving a wreckage of bodies in their wake. The zombies paid no heed to their losses; this was an enemy that would not cease its attack short of utter annihilation of either themselves or the foe. Those that stumbled over the bodies of their allies either pulled themselves awkwardly back to their feet or simply crawled forward on their hands and knees, trampled by their fellows in the chaotic rush to get to the living beings ahead.

They were all showing signs of fatigue, especially the two fighters that formed the lynchpin of their line. The zombies did not get tired, and their rush was just as ferocious as it had been in the initial surge. Somehow Dar and Talen kept their stances intact, sweeping their deadly blades around with mechanical precision into the ranks of the foe. Shay kept her position at Talen's left, directing him with subtle cues, staying back enough so as not to step into the reach of his blind swings. She was not idle; zombies continued to press forward along the wall, and she was forced to put her own blade to work keeping the foe from turning their flank.

On the opposite side of the line, Kalend and Filcher kept up their defense, the goblin tripping foes while Kalend hacked at them with his sword. Serah had come to their end of the battle long enough to heal the rogue with her wand, and poke a zombie that had tried to grapple Filcher. The goblin was like quicksilver, slivering out of the grasps of the undead before they could get a solid purchase on him.

They continued to give ground, reforming their defense with every step back, leaving dead zombies in their wake. But then the river was behind them, and there was nowhere left to retreat. As if somehow capable of sensing that the tide was about to turn, the zombies surged forward, putting added pressure on the defenders.

“Tell me you got another trick up your sleeve, priest!” Dar yelled over his shoulder at Varo, as he cut through a zombie’s skull with a two-handed swing from *Valor*. The cleric, standing a few steps back along the edge of the river, did not respond. Dar could not spare him any more attention, as four zombies pressed forward in a tangled mass, threatening to overbear him with sheer weight, and drive him back into the fast-moving water.

And that’s when the *flame strike* hit.

Their only warning was a soft roar, barely audible over the noise of the river, that immediately exploded into a coruscating column of eager yellow fire. The spiraling flames surged down from the tunnel ceiling above them, crashing into the center of their line, enveloping the two fighters. Dar and Talen both screamed as the fire blazed through their armor and mercilessly scored their flesh. The flames did not discriminate friend from foe, and likewise the front ranks of the zombie horde were swept, the holy fire searing the rotting flesh from their bones. But the zombies could afford the losses, and even as a half-dozen crumpled in mangled black heaps, more were staggering forward over the corpses, showing burns that would have left a living foe screaming on the ground in pain.

The flames washed out from the point of impact of the *strike*. Allera covered her face with her arms, the white flesh crinkling and turning black as the blast washed over her. Serah, standing next to Varo, was just a heartbeat slower, and took the force of the spell full in her face. The cleric was knocked over onto her back, her hips bisecting the line between the river and the tunnel, her upper body quickly sinking into the torrent. Varo, less than a pace away from the priestess, did not seem to be affected at all, the flames rushing around him as though he was not even there.

Though the exploding flames filled the breadth of the tunnel, those on the flanks were able to avoid the worst of the spell. Kalend and Filcher were able to step behind the bodies of the zombies they were fighting, letting the undead absorb the force of the blast. On the other side of the battle line Shay just got lucky, as a zombie had leapt onto her seconds before the blast, serving as a impromptu shield for the scout. Both were driven against the adjacent wall, but as the flames died she elbowed the now-limp creature off her, its entire backside a sickening mass of roasted flesh.

Dar glanced back, ignoring the stabbing pains that seemed to pierce through every inch of his upper body. Stinging tears filled his eyes as he tried to blink away the smoke and confusion, but he could still see Serah slipping away into the river, and Varo standing there motionless beside her.

“Help the priestess!” he yelled at the cleric. When Varo did not respond, he took a step toward her himself, but was forced to stop as the next wave of zombies fell upon him. Growling a curse, he reached out to grab Varo and thrust him toward the unconscious woman.

To his surprise, his hand went right through the cleric. It was an illusion; Varo was not there.

“Fucking bastard!” Dar exclaimed. Off balance, he could not recover in time as the four zombies lurched into him from behind, knocking him over. The lot of them passed right through the mocking figment of the cleric, falling with a loud splash into the river.

Chapter 187

THE IDOL

Varo moved through the press of undead. Moving covertly along the right wall of the tunnel, shielded by his *mislead* spell, he moved cautiously but quickly forward.

The way that the undead were packed in the tunnel, it was almost impossible to make it through their ranks without being detected. He'd already bumped into several creatures, and despite his efforts at silence, his armor and other gear clanked softly at his movements. Thus far he'd been fortunate, and none of them had been able to get a hold of the living thing they could sense but not see, but his luck could not last long, he knew. Already his left arm smarted where a zombie had delivered a wild but powerful blow in response to being jostled by the passing cleric.

The moans of the dead were drowned out, to a degree, by the wild chaos of the melee still just a short distance behind him. Varo pressed forward, noting that the ranks of the undead were starting to thin out ahead. Objectively he'd known that they could not be endless, but he'd started to wonder at that, as they had continued to press row upon row against his companions.

He had not been caught completely off guard by the potency of the undead legion. That morning, when they'd prepared to enter Grezneck, he'd cast a *divination* spell, seeking the guidance of Dagos. That casting had cost him one of his summons, but it had given him information—couched in cryptic hints, as always—that might be their only chance to escape this encounter alive.

The *flame strike* caught him off guard for a second, almost long enough to undo him as a pair of zombies, sensing his presence, grabbed at him with outstretched arms. He only narrowly dodged between them. The spell had flooded the tunnel with light for an instant, and he'd seen... there! A glint of metal, within the mass of undead.

Logic had said he would find the goblin priest here, even before the deadly spell had been unleashed. Varo had realized earlier that the effect that was enhancing the undead was mobile, likely something borne by the cleric of Orcus. Guided by his

divination, he'd prepared to deal with it... but the *flame strike* also revealed that this foe was powerful, possibly even more powerful than he.

And, of course, Varo didn't have a hundred enhanced undead on his side, either.

But the hesitation of the priest of Dagos lasted less than a heartbeat; Varo had already committed himself fully to this course, and he was not about to falter in the face of mere death. The cleric reached into his pouch and tossed something out into the tunnel, clattering off undead as it skipped noisily down the floor. It was a silver coin, covered with a *light* spell that blazed out in a glory of bright illumination.

The *light* revealed what Varo had been looking for, if not precisely what he'd expected. The glint he'd seen before came not off the cleric's armor, but off a golden idol, instantly recognizable as the image of the demon god. The thing was almost five feet tall, carried by a pair of zombies that bent heavily with the weight of it. Varo could almost see the waves of power that radiated off from it, and he was so distracted by it that he almost didn't spot the cleric.

Tribitz was off to the side, a small shadow beside the much larger undead. The goblin was clad in heavy armor of blackened plate, and Varo did not need a *detect magic* to recognize the layered wards it wore about itself like a thick cloak. The undead barely responded to his *light*, but the goblin had instantly recognized that an invisible enemy was nearby, and it began spellcasting.

Varo knew he had to act quickly. Summoning his own magic, he cast one of his few remaining higher-order spells, focusing the power of Dagos upon the golden idol. His spell was powerful, and the will of his god flowed through him in response to his call, but the power surrounding the idol was the like the blaze of a black sun, furious and invincible. Almost instantly Varo realized that he could not overcome it through brute force, and he began to feel the potency of his *greater dispel* falter against it.

He made a change born of instinct, and sharpened the power of the spell into a wedge, using his own will as the hammer to drive it not into the power of the idol itself, but into the invisible tendril that fueled it, drawing deep from another, exterior source. That power was like a black slick of pure corruption, and he felt something cold twist in his gut as he touched it, even through the artificial connection of the spell.

A flood of negative energy exploded through the tunnel. Varo felt a cold pressure against his soul, and he staggered forward. For an instant, he thought he would lose consciousness.

But then his mind cleared. Looking up, Varo saw that he was surrounded by zombies. He was visible again; either the backlash from his casting had negated the improved invisibility granted by the *mislead* spell, or the goblin cleric had defeated the magic. He reached for his dagger.

Before he could touch the hilt of the weapon, the undead fell upon him, overcoming him, driving him to the ground.

Chapter 188

THE BONEYARD

Body parts were everywhere. Bones, thousands of bones, many shattered into pieces as small as a thumbnail. Littered among that debris were more substantial hunks of flesh. Small gibbets of foul-smelling gore were everywhere, and among those were dozens of arms, legs, heads, and other part of what had once been living, breathing things.

The detritus of waste covered the corridor floor like a thick carpet for a good forty feet. At several places, the remains formed low mounds, some almost waist high, hills and mountains in a landscape of destruction.

The smell was ferocious.

A bright ring of light shone around the companions, clustered close up against the river, where a purifying breeze flowed over the water. They had made a small space for themselves by the simple expedient of pushing back the corpses of destroyed zombies, or rolling them into the river. The exhausted survivors of the desperate battle doused themselves in the cold water, washing off not only sweat and blood, but the sick feeling of death that covered them like a film.

Blue flares rallied with the light of their *continual flames*. Varo, Allera, and Serah each exhausted one of their healing wands, but none of them stunted on the magic despite their dwindling supply. They reveled in feeling alive, but all of them knew that their respite was temporary.

“Damn, that was...” Dar said. He trailed off, unable to find a word that accurately described the battle.

It had ended fairly quickly, once Varo had destroyed the idol that had so bolstered the undead horde. With the fading of that dread power the undead became mere “common” skeletons and zombies. Dar had torn free from the four trying to drag him into the river, and he truly had become an instrument of destruction, laying a zombie down with every cut of *Valor*. Allera had caught hold of Serah before the current could drag her fully into the river, and had brought her back to consciousness in time to unleash several pulses of positive energy that had blasted rank after rank of zombies into dust. It had been a very, very close call; another few seconds might have pushed them beyond even their considerable mortal strength.

Varo had been caught apart from the others, and dragged down under a wave of zombies. His armor had protected him long enough to call upon his own power, bending those closest zombies to his will. His destroyers became a shield that had kept him safe long enough for Dar and Talen to fight their way to him. The goblin high priest had not remained for that, fleeing back up the tunnel shortly after the destruction of the idol.

“How many do you think we destroyed?” Kalend asked, nodding in thanks as Serah used a healing wand to finish treating his injuries.

Shay, sitting at the water’s edge, glanced down the tunnel. “I would say about a hundred zombies, maybe two thirds as many skeletons. Just a guess, really; I don’t think you’ll have much luck counting bodies.”

“We must stop the high priest before he can seek further aid,” Varo said, as he tucked his empty wand back into his pouch. His store of healing aids was completely depleted, but Allera and Serah each had a wand of *cure light wounds* that was more or less fully charged.

“Go fuck yourself,” Dar said, collapsed on his back on the water’s edge.

“We... we are spent, Varo,” Talen said, leaning against the adjacent wall in a way that suggested only its support was keeping him erect. “We need... to rest.”

“I share your sentiment, commander, but I would suggest that this is not the safest place to camp.”

Talen shifted his sightless gaze over to Shay. “Can we get back across the river?”

The scout looked across the gap. “Not easily. The current is really fast. But I think I can manage it, and can string a rope for the others.”

Allera pulled herself up. “Between Serah, Varo, and myself, I think we can help, Talen. Our *lesser restorations* can ease exhaustion... we have a few castings of the more potent version of the spell, which can completely eliminate all fatigue, but that spell requires us to use up some of our stock of diamond dust.”

Talen nodded, he understood fully the unspoken implication in the healer’s words. *We might need it later.* “All right,” he said. “Treat everyone you can, starting with Dar and Shay.”

“And you,” Shay said. “Blind or not, we will need your sword.”

Dar grunted as he sat up, then rose to his feet. His heavy armor clanked with the movement, and again as he drew *Valor* from its sheath. He started down the tunnel.

“Where are *you* going?” Shay asked.

The fighter’s face was grim as he looked back at her. He hefted his sword, the blue-tinted steel flashing in the artificial torchlight. “I’m going to get my club, and then I’m going to shove this down that fucking cleric’s throat.”

Chapter 189

REMATCH

Despite Dar’s renewed determination to move forward, the companions ended up remaining at the water’s edge for almost half an hour. The *lesser restorations* helped Dar, Talen, Shay, and Kalend, taking the edge off their exhaustion, but leaving them fatigued. All were used to marching on in such a state, however, and they marshaled their will to return to the fray.

Shay took out supplies from her *bag of holding*, preserved foodstuffs that they are cold, and washed down with strong coffee. That latter had almost as potent an effect as the spells, and when they started down the tunnel again, they looked far more dangerous than they had at the end of the battle against the undead horde.

“Why did the priest flee?” Talen said, as they made their way cautiously through the row upon row of ruined bodies. “Even with the augmentations to his undead gone, he still had us at a disadvantage.”

“Who knows what goes through a fucking gobbo’s mind,” Dar grumbled. “No offense,” he added as an aside to Filcher, who paced them silently, a small shadow at the edge of their group. The goblin glanced up at the hulking human fighter, but did not respond.

“The priest will have more surprises in store,” Varo said.

“Priests always do,” Dar said, without looking back.

The going became easier as they left the dense press of smashed bodies behind them. There was no sign of the golden idol; it was likely that the goblin high priest had brought it with him in his retreat.

They made their way all the way back to the doors, now a wreckage of shattered wood and torn metal fittings. Beyond was another mess of debris, the remains of their first confrontation with the undead horde.

That wasn’t all they had left behind.

“Baraka,” Kalend said, staring down at the mess on the floor near the wall to the right. It was not immediately obvious that a man had died here. The undead had torn the ranger to pieces; there was an arm here, a leg there, and a bloody husk a short distance off that was probably his head. One of the ranger’s sickles still glinted from where it lay stuck in the sternum of a zombie, its hilt slick with blood.

The thief stood there, his face white, his legion sword quivering slightly in his hand.

The corpses of their goblinoid allies were in little better shape, and lay scattered around the chamber. The small bronze statue of Orcus that Shay had knocked over earlier was gone, and the large double doors on the far side of the room to their left had been closed again, still and ominous.

Dar kicked through the bones until he found his club. The magical weapon was undamaged, and the fighter took a moment to secure it across his back before taking up *Valor* again, and crossing toward the doors.

“Hold up,” Shay said, checking the perimeter of the room to make sure that there were no more lingering threats. Talen was with Allera, who was helping to guide the blinded knight forward.

Dar shot a dark look back, but he stopped his advance.

“Whatever’s behind that door will still be there when we’re all ready,” Allera said to him.

“I just want to get this done with,” the fighter said, turning back to the door, his hand tightening around the hilt of his sword.

Shay’s search took only a few moments. They recovered what they could of the gear left by Baraka and the goblinoids, and took up positions flanking the far doors. Talen drew *Beatus Incendia*, but he kept the sword low, and did not invoke its holy fire.

Shay had her bow out, and as she fitted an arrow to the string, she nodded at Dar.

“Just make sure he’s pointed in the right direction,” Dar said to Allera. Then he leaned forward and with a heave thrust the heavy doors open.

The chamber beyond was a giant hexagon, easily twice the size of the outer temple they currently occupied. The place was dominated by a massive stone statue of Orcus, a mere shadow at the edge of their light, yet unmistakable in its hulking mass.

The torchlight also revealed the metallic gleam of the smaller representations of the demon god, each smaller than a man, one of shining gold, the other of bronze. The three statues were arranged in a triangle, forming an angle that faced out toward the doors.

Kneeling in the center of that arrangement, warded by a row of zombies, was the goblin priest, Tribitz. The creature seemed oblivious to their intrusion, on his knees facing the stone statue, arms outstretched in supplication.

Serah lifted her holy symbol, but Varo forestalled her. "Do not bother; they have been bolstered."

Shay did not hesitate, lifting her bow and firing. Behind her, Kalend and Filcher did the same. Kalend's arrow hit a zombie and stuck uselessly in the flesh of its arm, but the other two knifed past the undead honor guard and hit the priest, ricocheting off the diminutive goblin's heavy armor.

"It's a trap," Varo said, as Dar started forward.

The fighter glanced back at him. "Obviously," he said, lifting *Valor* and rushing into the room as the zombies turned and began to shuffle toward him.

None of them saw it until it was too late, until the bebilith clinging to the ceiling over the doorway released its grip and plummeted down onto the charging fighter. Dar sensed the huge spider-demon falling directly toward him at the last instant. He flung himself aside, too late to avoid being struck by its bulk, but able at least to keep from being crushed underneath its two tons of weight. He hit the ground hard, barely keeping a grip on his sword as the demon loomed over him like a barely-imagined creature of nightmare. Drawing himself up into a crouch, the fighter barely brought *Valor* up in time to meet the bebilith's rush, stabbing the sword into the side of its head just above the stabbing fangs.

The demon's high-pitched shriek echoed through the temple with the force of a physical blow. It did not draw back or retreat in the face of its injury, however, instead driving forward to thrust its fangs deep into Dar's shoulders. Dar screamed as deadly toxin was pumped directly into his bloodstream. He tried to pull away, but the demon seized him with its claws. Metal groaned as the creature ripped apart his breastplate as though the magical steel was the wrapper of a Harvestday present. Blood poured down Dar's chest from the vicious puncture wounds, accompanied by thick green gobs of venom that spilled out from its long fangs.

The fighter was suddenly in grievous shape, but his companions were quick to rush to his aid. Shay sprang forward, her sword leaping to her hand as she dropped her bow. She targeted one of the demon's spindly legs, aiming for a flexible joint, but its limbs were deceptively tough, a fact proven as her blade glanced off the thick cartilaginous armor covering the joint. Kalend fired an arrow at its body, but he may as well have been trying to sink a war galleon with a slingshot for all of the effect that he had. By all appearances, its body armor was even more durable than that covering its legs.

But Talen had something even stronger than the demon's considerable protections. White fire exploded around *Beatus Incendia*, casting the blind knight's features into stark relief as he stepped forward and smote the demon from the side. The blessed steel clove deep into its body, making the wound it had suffered at Dar's hand seem almost trivial by comparison. Black ichor hissed as it shot from the wound and hit the stone floor, making the surface slick.

Reeling from the critical hit, the demon released Dar, driving him back as it spun to face the knight. Talen lifted his sword to attack again, relying on the terrible noises coming from its mouth to guide his strike, but before he could unleash his swing the demon was on him, stabbing and crushing.

Dar imagined that he could feel the taint of the demon's poison as it coursed through his body. His wounds burned, and his ruined armor jutted from his torso at awkward angles that interfered with his movement. His helmet no longer sat flush, obscuring his vision, so he reached up and yanked it free, grimacing as the motion sent another wave of agony stabbing through him. He coughed, and was not entirely surprised when he spat blood.

Ignoring the zombies that were shuffling forward to engage him, he turned back toward the demon and charged forward to finish what he'd started.

He did not spot the goblin cleric until it was too late. Realization hit him at the same time as the red glow surrounding its hand coursed into his body. Dar realized that the pain he'd felt from the demon's attacks had been nothing against *this*, as the full dark power of a *harm* spell tore through him, breaking things inside him. He tried to scream but only managed a ferocious gurgle as blood exploded in a fountain from his mouth, spraying bright red onto the goblin's armor. Blood also poured from the fighter's ears, and from the corners of his eyes, as the spell took him to the very precipice of death.

The creature laughed, and lifted its morningstar to finish the job.

A few scant paces away, the demon came upon Talen like a whirlwind. The knight could not see the spider-monster's lunge, but some instinct warned him of those darting fangs, and he brought his shield up barely in time to deflect those deadly blades. Screaming now with the fury of the battle, Talen lifted *Beatus Incendia* to strike it down.

But the demon had been waiting for that. Before he could strike, it snapped out a claw, seizing Talen by the shoulder in an immobilizing, crushing grip. Talen's battle cry became a snarl of pain as the bebilith's claw tightened, torturing the joint even through his heavy armor.

Talen tried to tear free, unsuccessfully. Then, before he could attempt anything further, the demon reached out with its other claw, snapping the razored end of it around Talen's swordarm at the elbow.

A sinister satisfaction shone in the demon's multifaceted eyes as it twisted the claw, sending *Beatus Incendia*, and the arm attached to it, flying across the room.

Chapter 190

CHAOS

Shay felt like a bit of flotsam in a drowning wave, as the chaos of the battle raged around her. Thus far, she had not been able to even draw blood from the foe; she could only watch as Dar was grappled and mangled by the spider demon.

The scout caught a hint of movement and saw Allera rush through the doors, heading for Dar. The spider demon saw her too, she realized, as one claw came up to strike the rushing woman down. Shay opened her mouth to scream a warning, but time seemed to slow around her as Talen stepped forward and smote the demon.

That got its attention. Shay tried to assist, to draw the creature's attention enough to widen Talen's opportunity, but her sword slid off its thick body without effect, and it completely ignored her as it laid into the knight. Shay felt something clench inside her gut as the demon seized him, but that was nothing compared to what pierced her when the monster severed his arm. At first she'd thought that it had just knocked away his weapon, her mind denying what it had perceived. But then Talen screamed, and the jet of red blood exploding from the stump of his arm shattered the interlude, bringing reality and the full press of time's passing back in a sudden, dizzying rush.

She could not remember a conscious decision to move, but she was attacking, hewing at the creature's body with a violence that startled her. Her strokes continued to glide off its body, but she kept on hacking, both hands wrapped tight around the hilt of her sword. There was a terrible sound all around her, and with a sudden shock she realized it was her own voice, a raw scream torn from deep within her chest.

Clarity returned just in time for her to see the demon's claw knifing down toward her.

Dar knew what it was like to be dying, so the sensations that wracked his body were known to him. He wasn't sure what the goblin cleric had done to him, but it had made the *inflict wounds* spells he'd absorbed in the past feel like love tickles. He wasn't sure why he was still standing, but he was wise enough to know that the proper course in this situation, with zombies lurching all around him, a deadly foe directly ahead, and a giant motherfucking spider-thing that had torn the living crap out of him standing over his shoulder, was to fall back, and seek help.

So instead he lifted his sword, and charged forward at the goblin. He couldn't manage a full windup, not with his life blood pouring from every orifice in his body, but he felt a

very satisfying thwack that traveled up the lengths of his arms as he brought the sword down in a solid chopping motion across the front of the goblin's head.

Unfortunately for him, the goblin was wearing a full helm. The force of the blow knocked it back, but it quickly straightened. As it turned back toward Dar, the fighter could see that despite the blood trickling out from under the front of the helm, there was an evil smile shining in its eyes.

Eschewing its morningstar, the goblin merely reached out and pressed the palm of its hand against Dar's chest. With his breastplate torn away and his jerkin ruined the creature's fingers found bare flesh. To Dar, it was like being stabbed through the heart with an icicle.

"Fuck... you..." he managed, and then it all started to go black.

Shay knifed back, her body bending almost double over backwards, instinct and reflexes barely kicking in before the claw would have smashed hard into her chest. She could feel the breeze of its passage as it shot past her face. She sprang forward, ready to attack or move, as needed.

She recognized the trap too late.

She tried to jump anyway, but she'd barely cleared the ground before the claw snapped into her back, drawing her up into the monster's grasp. The demon's hideous, alien visage grew huge before her, and there was nothing she could do to escape in time to avoid those long, deadly fangs as they stabbed deep into her torso, just above her stomach.

Pain exploded through her, and she looked down to see the bebilith's fangs stuck into her body like twin daggers.

A warm feeling poured through Dar's body, melting the cold chill that had suffused his body at the evil cleric's touch. He blinked, wondering why he was still alive. The goblin was there, looking ugly and furious, his outstretched hand still pressed up against Dar. Dar thought it might be a good idea to hit him again, but somehow his body refused to obey his commands.

"Your power is weak before the might of the True God, human bitch," the goblin hissed. Realization hit Dar like a slap—Allera! He tried to force his body into obedience, but he was already falling, tumbling to the side into the eager grasp of several zombies. The last thing he heard was the healer crying out in pain, but there was nothing he could do about it as the darkness closed back in upon him once more.

The fighter's companions were at that moment engaged in a desperate but thus far futile struggle against the bebilith. Talen slumped to the ground, bleeding out from the terrible wound in his arm, while the monster turned to deal with Shay. Serah was at his

side at once, her face white as the spreading ring of crimson soaked her boots and cloak. Forcing down her terror, she drew out her last remaining healing wand, even as her face betrayed her doubt at what a *cure light wounds* could do in the face of *that*.

Kalend had kept up their barrage of missiles, to absolutely no effect. He looked over at where Filcher had been a moment ago, and saw only empty space. Apparently the creature had realized before he had that the battle against this foe could end only one way. The thief hesitated for several long seconds, and even went so far as to glance back at the outer temple doors, and the promise of escape. But duty eventually won out, although his hands shook as he dropped his bow and drew out his Legion shortsword. He was too late to help Shay, who was yanked off the ground and impaled by the demon's fangs.

Before it could rend the scout with its deadly claws, however, the demon let out a piercing shriek and spun awkwardly around. One of its legs just *came apart*, ichor jutting from the socket where the limb had been attached. The demon fixed upon the source of its trouble. Licinius Varo did not flinch under that intense, alien stare.

"Come then," the cleric said softly.

The demon obliged, tossing Shay almost casually aside.

Allera screamed as black flames erupted from the goblin cleric's hand as it brushed her skin. She could feel the dark energies that clutched at her soul, but she resisted the full force of the *slay living* spell. The coursing negative energies still hurt her, but she was able to tear away, staggering back.

A pair of zombies pressed forward around the cleric, seeking her flesh. One stumbled on some blood—Dar's blood, she realized—on the floor, but the other managed to connect with a solid blow that send a needle of pain through her shoulder.

"You will all perish," the goblin cleric said, mocking.

Allera ignored both him and the zombies, diving for the leg that jutted out from a knot of sallow-fleshed zombies. Her concentration was total, and she forced herself to ignore the mental screams of danger coming from her left as the enemy cleric came in again, instead focusing what little was left of her powers upon Dar. She grabbed his ankle with both hands, and unleashed all that she had left into him.

The blow, when it came, was not as painful as she'd thought it would have been. She tasted blood in her mouth as she fell.

Varo could not avoid the bebilith's furious lunge, and he made no effort to do so. One claw slid off his magical breastplate, hitting him hard but failing to get a solid grip on him. As he staggered to the side, however, the second claw scooped him up, driving him up into the waiting fangs. One pierced his shoulder inches from the pulsing artery

in his neck; the other caught him under his arm. The demon held him there, tilted awkwardly, pouring its deadly venom into the cleric's body.

Varo grunted and touched the demon between its eyes, and hit it with another *inflict wounds* spell. The demon lurched back, ichor oozing from the opening in the middle of its face, but it did not relent, driving the fangs deeper into its prey.

Thus engaged, it did not see Talen stagger to his feet. The knight, still trailing blood from his jagged stump, released his shield, and drew his second sword with his off-hand. The clatter of iron on the stone floor alerted the spider demon, but it refused to release its current victim, as Varo continued to struggle, and to pour violence into its body. Instead it shot down its extra claw, intending to finish what it had started earlier.

Talen took the hit. Instead of going down, however, he stepped forward, and thrust the sword to the hilt into the demon's head, just behind its jaws.

Zombies went flying as Dar laid about him with his sword. Even lying on his back, the blows were devastating, and each hit severed legs and bodies, the axiomatic blade ripping through the rotted flesh like parchment. Within a few seconds, the area around him was clear.

He looked up to see the goblin cleric and another two zombies standing above the limp form of Allera. Blood covered the spiked end of the goblin's morningstar.

Something ferocious growled deep in the fighter's chest, as he rolled to his feet. He was still not far gone from dead, but the look in his eyes was not that of a man on the brink of annihilation.

The goblin saw it, and smiled again as it called upon its dark powers. But before Tribitz could complete the spell, it staggered, clutching at the end of an arrow that jutted from a tiny gap in its armor under its right arm. The shaft had punched through the leather there deep into the goblin cleric's body, and by the look on the goblin's face, it had hit something important inside.

Tribitz snarled, and turned to look for who had shot it. But there was nothing there, just the golden icon of the True God, now just a hunk of useless metal shorn of its power.

Then the cleric, along with everyone in the room, heard the bebilith scream, as Talen drove two feet of magical steel up into its corrupt brain. The huge spider demon thrashed as it fell over backwards, its legs snapping out like whips around it. Talen, Varo, and Shaylara were all knocked sprawling by the violence of its death throes.

The goblin cleric drew back, damaged but still dangerous. It reached for its pouch and the healing potion it carried there, but was diverted as Dar strode after it, his purpose obvious in the fierce look in his eyes. A zombie shambled forward and reached out for

the fighter, but *Valor* flashed out without him breaking stride. The zombie fell, the upper and lower halves of its body twitching.

The goblin snarled and lifted its divine focus. Dar raised *Valor*, but he hesitated at the sound of a low moan of distress behind him. Glancing back, he saw that a zombie had grabbed hold of Allera, who was still only semiconscious. The undead creature had seized hold of her tunic with one hand, and was yanking her up into its embrace. Blood covered the ground, and Dar could see it falling in long trails from the vicious wound in her back. Allera moaned again, but she was still limp, unable to fight against the zombie's clumsy but powerful grasp. The healer's head lolled to the side, exposing her neck. The zombie opened its jaws wide to sink its yellow teeth deep into the pale flesh.

Dar was already running, coming up on the zombie from behind, his ruined armor clattering loudly with his rush. A spell struck him, but this time the magic coursed off the hardened focus of his will, dissolving without effect. But even as he closed the distance between them, six paces, five, four, too slowly, the zombie lowered its head to rip out the healer's throat.

Snaggletooth materialized in the gap, viciously tearing and snapping with his tiny claws and teeth. The zombie could feel no pain from the gashes that the dragon opened in its face, and it did not release its hold on Allera. But the dragon's efforts caused its bite to close on empty air, missing the tenuous pulse in the healer's neck by a scant inch. The zombie lashed out with one arm, smacking the dragon roughly and knocking it back several feet. With that attended to, it returned its attention to its victim.

Before it could attempt another bite, however, the zombie's head exploded into thousands of fragments as *Valor* tore through it, leaving only a jagged piece of spine that jutted from the ruin of its neck. Dar caught Allera as the zombie fell, and lowered her gently down to the floor. Allera did not respond; she had fallen back into deep unconsciousness. From the front, without seeing the terrible wound in her back, she looked almost peaceful, but Dar's hands came away soaked in crimson as he pulled them out from under her.

Dar turned back toward the goblin high priest, but was not really surprised to see that he was gone. He looked across the oozing hulk of the spider demon at his companions, who looked to be in little better shape than he was.

"Serah, Varo, one of you get over here!" he yelled, standing over Allera, blood smeared across his features. Bright red drops continued to fall from the ruined edges of his armor, forming ugly splotches on the healer's ragged clothes as they struck.

Chapter 191

ANOTHER AFTERMATH

They found no sign of Tribitz.

Even after Serah had brought Allera back to consciousness, and the two of them treated the various wounds they'd suffered in the brief but violent confrontation with the goblin high priest and its minions, they had been in pretty bad shape. Talen was the worst off; in addition to being blind, Talen's right arm was severed at the elbow. He'd basically just remained where Serah had left him, sitting against the threshold of the doorway connecting the two temple chambers, clutching at the stump of his arm, staring into empty space.

"Damn, commander, you look like shit," Dar had observed, when he'd come over to him.

The fighter was in little better shape. Although his wounds were critical, they'd responded to healing, leaving fresh white scars covering his body. His armor, however, had been beyond repair. They'd had to cut it off him, the bebilith's claws leaving nothing but a twisted, mangled wreckage where his chest and torso plates had been. Even the chain links underneath had been savaged, leaving him with little that could be salvaged into any kind of protection at all.

"I might be wanting my breastplate back," Dar had said to Varo, as he dropped the entire mess in a corner. The priest had agreed that the suit was beyond repair.

But the destruction of his armor had not stopped Dar from strapping his swordbelt back on over his waist, and heading for one of the two doors on the far side of the room, where Tribitz had disappeared.

"Where do you think you are going?" Shay had asked him.

"I'm going to finish off that goblin priest."

"Are you serious? Look around... we're in no condition to press on."

"I don't think he's gone far. Look," he said, gesturing to the assorted statues, "I think this is their main temple. I'll bet the gobbo's got quarters nearby, and he's probably gone to ground there. Maybe conjuring up something even nastier than that spider demon to fuck with us. Better to put him down first."

"That's a lot of assumptions. What if he's fled the city?"

Dar had shrugged. "Then I'll be back in a few minutes."

"And if he kills you? As I recall, you are pretty susceptible to a *hold person*, and then all he's got to do is stick a knife through your stubborn guts, and your soul gets to join the Let's Help Bring Orcus to Our World club."

Dar's only response had been to sling his club across his bare back. None of his tunics were much more than shredded cloth at this point, so he had elected to go with bare skin. Fortunately, his breeches had been in better shape. "You can stay here, look after the commander. I will be back shortly."

"You can't... Talen?"

But it had been Allera who had intervened, coming up to join them. Varo and Kalend had shadowed her, drawn by the exchange.

"You cannot go off on your own. It is foolish to split up now," Allera had said, folding her arms across her chest. "Gods, man, how many reasons do you want for why this is stupid?"

Dar had grinned at Allera, causing her expression to darken into the resemblance of a thunderhead. "I'll be back so fast that you won't have a chance to miss me. Besides, what if there's a bunch of monsters behind one of those doors? Better we find out sooner, rather than later."

Allera had looked for support, but Talen had drifted off into unconsciousness, and Varo said nothing, just waiting to see what would develop. In the end, they had agreed that Shay and Kalend would go with the fighter, and at least see what was beyond the doors on the far side of the room. The others would set up camp here, and keep watch for any more threats that might come from the direction of the river.

In this one instance, their caution had proven unfounded. The doors led to small chambers that had obviously served as quarters for the goblin priests. They'd poked around but had not gone too thoroughly into the clerics' possessions, wary of magical traps. They also found a tunnel that led into a large empty cavern that stank strongly of rot and decay. There was a small pool of fresh water here, and a secret door that Shay located in the far wall.

They had opened the door carefully, alert to a trap or enemy beyond. But the door had only led to another narrow, empty tunnel. Shay led them to its termination, a ledge that overlooked a huge open cavern. Part of the ledge was awash in water, an outlet from the underground stream that cascaded over the edge into the dark below.

"This must be the lake we passed before," the scout had said. "I imagine we're on the far side, or near it."

"What about the cleric?" Kalend had asked. "He wasn't in any of the other rooms, so he must have come this way."

"Unless there's another secret door that we missed," Shay had pointed out.

Dar had spit noisily over the edge. "Either way, he's gone," the fighter had said. "Let's get back."

They had moved into one of the defensible rooms used by the goblins as quarters, and after a more thorough search for secret doors they settled down to rest. The spellcasters got first priority on sleep, and within minutes all three were lying under their blankets, dead to the world.

Dar was actually fairly fresh, thanks to Allera's *restoration* spell earlier, so he drew first watch with Kalend. After taking food he adjusted *Valor* in its scabbard and headed across the room to the exit. Talen was sitting there, propped against the wall. His eyes were shut, but his remaining hand was clenched tight around the hilt of *Beatus Incendia*, which sat in its scabbard across his lap.

"You asleep, general?" Dar asked quietly.

For a moment, Talen did not respond, but as Dar started toward the exit, the knight responded, "Just resting my eyes."

Dar turned back around. "Gods, commander, was that a *joke*? You must have taken a few more shots to the head than I thought."

"Losing my vision has actually made me consider a few things differently," the knight said.

"Yeah, well, you should get some sleep. Allera said that she can fix your eyes and your arm when she gets her spells back, and it's not like you can keep watch until then, right?"

"Sleep," Talen said, as though the word was in a foreign language.

"Yeah, you just lie down, your body will do the rest."

"What do you think about Herzord?" Talen asked suddenly.

"You're asking me now? Man, you sure your mind didn't get taken over by a monster in that melee?"

Talen did not respond, and after a moment Dar leaned against the wall. "I don't know. I don't trust him, but in all honesty, in your shoes I'd probably have done the same as you did. He's got men and magic, and we're a bit short on both. Whatever's in those slave pits, I don't think it's going to be easy."

Talen nodded. "It's never easy." He looked up at Dar, an almost unnerving expression with his sightless, unfocused stare. "Dar. If something happens to me... will you see that... the mission, Shay..."

Dar shifted uncomfortably. "You don't need to worry about the chain of command... sir." He looked down at the sword at his waist, and his hand clenched involuntarily. "If it comes to it... I'll see that what needs to be done is done."

He waited for a reply, but Talen was silent. "Talen?" Dar asked silently, but the crippled knight had fallen finally into sleep.

Turning, Dar left the room.

Kalend was outside, in the hallway that connected the priests' rooms. The thief had set one of their everburning torches in a crevice further up the passage, leaving him in a nook deep with shadows. He nodded as Dar appeared.

"All quiet, sir."

"Good."

There was a long pause. "Colonel..." He trailed off, doubt obvious in his voice.

Dar sighed. "Spill it, soldier."

"Sir... why am I here?"

Dar looked up at him. "I would think it would be obvious by now," he said after a moment.

"No, I understand why we're here, I know it's important, but... well, I was wondering why I am here."

"You think you're too good for this mission, soldier?"

"No, no." The thief fidgeted slightly in the dark of his niche. "It's the exact opposite, really. I'm not a warrior, not like Bullo, or Travius. I was a pretty decent thief, for what it's worth, but not enough to keep from getting branded and shipped off into the legions. I'm not really even a soldier; I was always able to escape the worst of the military life by scamming and cutting deals. If anything, the only reason I'm alive is that I've known when to cower in a corner, which is most of the time."

"I'm not a coward... at least, I've never considered myself such. But the things we've fought since coming here... they're like nothing I imagined even in my darkest nightmares. Those dragons? The ghost? The spider demon? Each time, I think it's not possible to be more scared than I was, but each time I'm proven wrong. And it's not that I don't want to help out, it's just... well, I've checked the bodies, after each battle. Looking for my arrows. I think I've scored maybe one or two decent hits at best, of all the things we've fought. Most of them, I don't think they even saw me as a threat."

Dar was looking at him. “Are you done?”

“Yes, sir.”

Dar leaned back against the wall, the scabbard of his sword scraping on the rock. “You know what, Kalend? I don’t want to be here either. If someone told me he did, I’d think he was bat-shit insane. Well, except for Varo, but you’ve probably guessed that he’s already nuts.”

“I don’t want to be here, but that means fuck-all, because I’m here, and that leaves me with exactly two choices: get stomped, or kill every gods-damned monster this shithole throws at me until they’re all fucking *done*.”

“Fuck, this is my *third* trip into this place, which I guess makes me crazy, by my own definition. But fuck me if this isn’t going to be the last.”

“As for you, Kalend, you’re here because I picked you. I wish I could say that it was because I saw the potential for you to be a great fucking hero, but we both know that’d be a crock of shit. You’re here because you fucked up, you got the short end of the stick. Same with Bullo, same with Travius. Fuck, if you want to go that far, it’s the same with me. I was shoved into this mess because I killed some asshole who had it coming, and the late Duke’s boys thought it would be fun to shove me half-naked into the Dungeon of Graves. If I had it to do over again, you’d bet your ass I’d kiss that motherfucker’s cheeks and smile as he fucked me over.”

“But you know what, Kalend? *That means exactly jack shit*. We’re here, and in case you haven’t picked it up, *we are it*. We fail, here, and Camar is *done*. That much, at least, that crazy fuck Varo is right about.”

The fighter pushed off from the wall. “I’m going to keep watch at the outer door. If that bastard gobbo comes poking around again, I want to be the first to stick this,” he tapped the hilt of *Valor*, “into his guts.”

But as he was leaving, he turned back to Kalend. “One thing you’re wrong about, Kalend: you are a soldier. You were a soldier when you put that uniform on and took your oaths, and you were a soldier when you held the right side of the line against that undead horde. You’ll keep firing that bow and wielding that sword, and maybe you’ll die, but you’ll do it as a soldier. You understand me?”

“Yes, colonel.”

Dar nodded, and walked down the tunnel toward the door.

Chapter 192

CONSULTATIONS

Neither Tribitz nor any other threats appeared to disturb their rest, and once the spellcasters had woken from their deep sleep, the companions gathered for a meal prepared from the contents of Shay's *bag of holding*. The foodstuffs that she had left were designed to be compact and long lasting, and included trail biscuits, hard cheese, ground meal that made a bland porridge when heated with water, and coffee. It could hardly be called a feast, but after their grueling experiences of almost constant battle since entering Grezneck, the food was quickly and eagerly consumed.

With the meal finished, the spellcasters turned to the preparations needed to recover their spells, while Shay and Filcher, who had shared the most recent watch, collapsed into an exhausted sleep. None of them were quite willing to fully trust the goblin, but the diminutive creature had at least proven to be competent, nearly equaling the scout in his ability to avoid detection and sense danger.

Once she had fixed her daily allotment of spells in her mind, Allera woke Talen, and purged him of his blindness. Restoring his arm took longer, but he watched with amazement as the *regenerate* spell slowly worked its course, leaving him at last with an undamaged limb that he flexed tentatively.

"I'd say to take it easy for a few days, but..." Allera began.

Talen nodded. "I understand. Thank you." The knight stood and crossed the room, still testing the regrown arm.

Varo had left with Dar and Kalend to scout out the priest quarters again. The cleric returned a short while later, holding a short rod of carved onyx in his hand. He looked around and came over to Allera.

"Where is Serah?" he asked.

"She needed a few minutes alone," the healer explained. "She is in one of the other side-rooms."

Varo frowned. "It is not a good idea for any of us to be apart from the group. Particularly with a foe that makes liberal use of incorporeal undead."

"I asked Snaggletooth to keep an eye on her," Allera said. "And she's only thirty feet away; if anything happens, we'll hear it."

"You presume much upon the incompetence of our enemy."

The healer sighed. “Is there something you want, Licinius?”

The cleric extended the rod. “You may find this useful.”

“Where did you get that?”

“It was in a chest within the high priest’s quarters. Dar was smart, for once, not to trouble with the goblin’s possessions; there was a potent *glyph of warding* upon the container.”

The healer drew back. “I want nothing to do with his foul accoutrements.”

“A remarkably narrow view. Do not fear, healer; the device itself bears no alignment. It is merely a locus of magical energy, no different than your wand. I would keep it myself, but in your hands it may be more effective for the group.”

Allera looked intently at him, then she—warily—extended her hand.

As she grasped the device, her eyes widened slightly. “How many charges does it have?”

Varo shrugged. “I cannot tell for certain. At least a dozen, if I had to guess.”

Allera nodded, and accepted it. “A rod of *restoration*... If I’d been pressed to name one item that we truly needed, this might have been it. I... I apologize for my earlier presumption, Varo.”

The cleric’s mouth twisted into an echo of a smile; it did not look good on him. “You have had reason to doubt my motives, healer. In any case, it will fall upon you and Serah to bear more of the responsibility for providing healing; my wands are depleted and my store of potions and scrolls has been exhausted.”

“Your spells are powerful.”

“True. And some of my reservoir will be committed to *cure wounds* spells. But remember that I cannot spontaneously cast them, as Serah can.”

Allera tucked the rod under her arm and reached into her pouch. “I have one wand of *cure moderate wounds* left, about half-full,” she said. She looked wistful as she drew out the device, painstakingly carved from wood so dark as to be almost black. “This was crafted by Ikarus, a good friend of mine.”

“The healer who came with us from Highbluff,” Varo said.

Allera nodded. "He... he has a talent for crafting. He always makes his devices just a bit stronger than they have to be, even at the additional personal cost. It's just the way he is."

"A noble gesture, if ultimately inefficient," Varo replied.

Allera smiled sadly. "That just about describes him." She wiped her hands on her cloak, and stood. "Was there something else?"

Varo stepped closer. "As the primary custodian of our group's health and well-being, you need to be conscious of the emotional impact of our experiences."

"What do you mean?"

"Just consider this. The natural healing process exists to give our bodies not only the time needed to recover from physical injuries, but also the accompanying emotional trauma as well. Through magical healing, we subvert this, and 'cheat', as it were, removing injuries with a wave of the hand. It was as if they were never there... but the body remembers the pain, and even the most potent healing spell cannot fully restore all that was lost."

Allera colored, slightly; she looked uncomfortable to be in such close proximity to the priest of Dagos, but she did not withdraw. "I know all of this, Licinius. It is part of our task to treat the whole being; I do not know how much you know of the Healer's Code, but..."

"I know it well," the cleric interrupted. "I meant no impugnement of your skills. But since returning to Rappan Athuk, we have suffered considerable abuse. We have all been driven to the brink of death multiple times, only to be brought back to full health by divine magic. In some cases, members of our party have experienced this cycle several times within a single battle. We have been poisoned, enspelled, and energy drained. We have fought desperate battle after desperate battle; between the three of us, we have burned through half a dozen healing wands, not even considering our personal reservoirs of divine power. And there will be more battles to come. The trauma of having one's body thus treated... it can be enough to damage the mind, perhaps even to push it to the brink of insanity."

Varo's voice had dropped low, but it had taken on a particular intensity as he had spoken. Allera had not shifted from his gaze, but she'd grown increasingly pale with each statement. "What do you want me to do?"

Varo shrugged, and broke the connection, turning to the side. "Just be aware, healer." His gaze traveled up, and Allera followed it, until it settled on Talen, who was double-checking the contents of his pack.

"Hey, what's going on here?"

Allera jumped and turned to see Dar standing there. The fighter looked at her, and then Varo, whose expression had faded to its usual neutral inscrutability.

“Nothing. We’re just talking. About our spell selection. Varo found a rod of *restoration*.”

Dar nodded, but he looked doubtful. “Better get your things together,” he said. “It’s time we got moving.” Serah entered the room, and Dar walked over to her, sharing the same message. Varo turned back to Allera briefly, sharing one last significant glance, and then he walked over to collect his own things from the far side of the room.

Chapter 193

THE SLAVE PITS

Guturk was not having a good day.

The creature grimaced as the deep wound in its neck closed, and the flow of blood down its chest stopped. A noise like an earthquake rumbled in the troll’s chest, but it stood its ground.

In most circumstances, the troll would have leapt upon its three brethren, hacking with its massive greatsword, unleashing a storm of pain in response to the insult that had been visited upon it. It had already been humiliated in front of its peers earlier, dressed down by a mere *goblin*. No one would call Guturk bright, but the troll had not been stupid enough to talk back against the Overseer; no one was *that* stupid.

Buruz knew that; it was likely why it had felt bold enough to hit Guturk, carving the other troll’s throat open with a vicious gash when it hadn’t been looking. Given specific orders to keep watch—and, more importantly, to keep quiet—Guturk had not been able to respond in the troll fighter’s customary fashion.

Guturk’s yellow stare remained fixed on Buruz while its regenerative powers healed the wound. That look promised a reckoning, but Buruz only chortled, and the other two trolls joined in, enjoying their comrade’s suffering. The three of them went back to the game that had precipitated the argument, tossing a goblin’s skull that had already seen a fair share of damage against the wall, wagering on where it would land.

Guturk snarled to itself and walked away, across the room.

The troll was a massive specimen of its race, impressive even before one took into account the chain shirt and huge hide-covered shield it bore, or the greatsword that it wore slung across its back. Buruz threw the skull past him as it crossed the room; the

oblong missile missed the troll's left knee and skittered across the room, trailing bone shards as it bounced off the stone floor and walls.

Guturk ignored the further insult; the troll had heard something from across the room, in the direction of the narrow stair that led up to Grezneck. The troll's eyes narrowed as it approached, and as it sniffed the air, it frowned. That smell... *familiar*...

Then, chaos burst into the room.

Goblins... they came out of nowhere, spreading out from the entry to the staircase like water poured onto a flat surface from a jug. Small missiles flooded the air, arrows and javelins, and despite the troll's considerable armor protection several shots from that initial barrage found vulnerable spots where they bit deep. Even with the advantage of sneak attacks, the wounds were not critical for a being as huge and as powerful as the troll, and almost at once they began to regenerate, forcing the weapons from the wounds as the torn flesh grew back.

A half-dozen goblins wearing chainmail hauberks and bearing shortswords rushed forward to engage the troll in melee. They moved nimbly, and spread out to flank the much larger creature. Guturk, becoming annoyed now, smashed one with a claw; it staggered to the side but quickly recovered, darting back in to slash its sword across the back of the troll's hand. The injury was barely a scratch, and the troll smiled as it reached across its back with its other hand, and unlimbered the massive blade it carried there.

The troll guard's companions had been quick to abandon their game in favor of more exciting sport, and the chamber shook as they charged forward in a wedge, drawing their swords as they came. But more combatants continued to emerge from the stair, and these surged forward to meet the troll rush.

Several of these newcomers were larger prey, hobgoblins and humans clad in heavy armor. Herzord, flanked by his lieutenant, met Buruz, the pair of hobgoblins darting to the side to avoid the first downward swing that smashed hard into the ground between them. They flanked the troll, delivering probing strikes with their magical swords to test its defenses. The troll roared and rounded on Herzord, its sword coming around in an arc designed to cut the hobgoblin captain in twain, but the hobgoblin set his feet and turned into the stroke, his own black blade driving forward to meet the other. Metal clashed, and the troll's sword came apart, slabs of rough-forged iron exploding across the chamber as the weapon was sundered.

Buruz merely dropped the now-useless hilt of its weapon, and set upon its foes with claw and tooth.

Dar and Talen were battling another troll just a few steps away. The pair echoed the initial tactics of the hobgoblins, letting the troll come to them, spreading out and stepping forward into flanking positions. Dar took a hit hard across the body from its

sword, but his old breastplate, recovered from Varo, held against the impact, although it suffered a serious dent from the force of the blow. The fighter's breath was blasted out of his lungs by the hit, but before the troll could get in a follow-up Talen savaged it with *Beatus Incendia*, scoring a pair of hits that cut the troll's left leg to the bone. The creature shouted in pain and fury and rounded on the knight, the huge sword coming up to strike.

It never got a chance, as Dar unleashed an all-out full attack upon its back.

The last troll felt a momentary dizziness as a puff of interesting-smelling gas erupted in front of its face. But while the troll was stupid, it was hardly weak-minded, and it shook off the effects of Snaggletooth's breath weapon, and focused on its companions, being hacked to pieces a few steps away.

It started toward Talen, intending to counter-flank the enemy, but before it could engage it was confronted by a slender human woman. At first it hardly considered Shaylara a threat, but that changed when the scout sprang up into the air, right toward its face. Her sword flashed out, slicing a long gash open in the troll's neck, and then she kicked off its chest, flying back.

The troll's leathery flesh had been too thick for the wound to have been critical, and it would have healed quickly in any case. But it was enough to draw its full attention, and it charged at the scout, who fled back into the corner of the room, toward a spiral staircase that led down. Had the troll been in a more contemplative mood, it might have realized that it was being drawn away from the battle, but as it was it charged after the fleeing woman, hacking at her with its sword. Shay took a pair of hits, but both were just glancing blows, and each time she kept dodging back out of its reach, forcing it to keep following after.

Guturk was surrounded by goblins now, and having a tough time of it. The troll had scored a hit with his sword that had knocked a goblin fighter halfway across the room. Allera was there even before it had rolled to a stop, saving its life with a minor healing spell. She could not help, however, the goblin scout that the troll cut in half with its backswing, as the small creature delivered a painful cut with its axe across the huge monster's left ankle. The troll was continuing to regenerate, but it was taking hits faster than its body could adapt, and in close quarters the sneak attacks from the flanking scouts were starting to tell.

Another stabbing pain shot through the troll's thigh, and as it turned to deal with yet another foe, its damaged ankle gave out, and it fell forward. It took some solace in the fact that it fell onto a goblin, crushing it beneath its bulk, but then a blade cut across its eyes, blinding it, and then things got *really* nasty.

Buruz tore violently at Herzord, but while the hobgoblin leader was taking damage, each time the troll was *just* too slow to get a solid grasp on him, enough of a hold to tear and rend his flesh. The hobgoblin, despite his heavy armor and full helm, seemed to

anticipate the troll's attacks an instant before they were launched. His lieutenant continued to hack at the troll from behind, but the creature ignored it, focused on the greater foe. It made another attempt to seize him, but Herzord met that attack with a swing that took off the troll's left arm at the elbow. He stepped under the troll's other swing, and as it staggered forward, off balance, he drove the length of his blade through the troll's chin up into its brain.

The hobgoblins fell back as the troll collapsed. Herzord turned to see Dar standing over the body of his opponent.

"What took you so long?" the fighter said, with a grin.

There wasn't time for a reply, as the battle wasn't quite over yet. Shay had led the troll on a chase around the spiral stair, and now drew it back, grimacing as she held her injured side. Talen was there to meet it, taking everything the troll could put in its swing, deflecting it just enough with his shield to avoid losing his arm. Ignoring the pain from the broken limb, Talen swept *Beatus Incendia* across its belly, opening a fearsome wound that sizzled as the holy fire around the blade seared troll flesh.

The troll's counterattack might have finished off the knight, but it never got the chance, as Dar and the two hobgoblins, joined once more by Shay, charged forward and put an end to it.

Chapter 194

HERZORD'S COMMAND

The aftermath of the battle was handled with grim efficiency. Herzord knew how to command, but even more obvious was the skill and experience of his warriors.

First, they made sure of each of the four trolls, cutting their throats and stabbing their narrow swords through their eyes into their wretched brains. Even before the last troll stopped twitching, the goblin warriors were taking out oil flasks, the contents of which were doused liberally over the corpses. Those were ignited at once, then monitored to make sure that the flames consumed fully each troll, or at least those parts of it that could possibly grow back.

It all took about a minute. With a few gestures Herzord assigned scouts to watch the chamber's exits, a corridor that exited to the west and the spiral stair that descended presumably to another level. Filcher and a pair of goblin escorts vanished down the stairs.

"What's down there?" Talen asked.

“The slave pits,” Herzord replied. “The torture cells and the temple are that way,” he added, indicating the west passage. “But it would be foolish to leave a garrison behind us, and if possible, we should free any captives held down there.”

“It’s not likely that anyone failed to hear us coming,” Dar said. “These bastards made a lot of noise dying.”

Varo came up behind Talen. “What is it, Varo?” the knight asked.

“This place, it is a locus of great power,” the cleric replied. “Evil is bleeding off from the very walls. The aura will hinder our abilities, and bolster the foe. I thought you should know.”

“Always the bringer of bright tidings,” Dar grumbled.

“All right. As soon as the wounded are treated, we’ll move out,” Talen said.

Allera and Serah, along with a goblin priest of Dagos that Herzord had brought with them, were already working on the injured. While several of their group had been critically hurt in the brief but violent battle, only one goblin, the one that the first troll had cut in half, was beyond help. Even the goblin that the troll had fallen onto had been pulled out, albeit with broken bones and internal bleeding. But Allera’s healing wand had taken care of that, and the goblin was soon able to take its place in the line.

“Your power is impressive,” Herzord commented. The hobgoblin eschewed the offered healing, instead downing a curative potion from the pouch at his belt. Serah used her wand to heal the injuries that Dar and Shay had suffered in the battle, while Allera set and restored Talen’s broken arm.

By the time they were ready to go, Filcher had already returned, and came over to deliver a report to Herzord.

“The pits are deserted,” the goblin said, in its own language. “No guards, and no prisoners. It looks like the place was cleared out fairly recently.”

“What’d he say?” Dar asked.

“The pits are empty,” Shay said. She looked at Talen, who nodded; he could make a few guesses about what had happened to the prisoners.

“The priests, then,” the knight said.

“Agreed,” Herzord said. He turned to his troops, but before he could issue any commands, two goblins returned from the west passage.

“Enemies coming!” one of the scouts hissed. The goblin flashed something with its fingers, which presumably indicated something about the numbers and nature of the foe. None of the companions could understand the significance, but they could easily read the alarm on the creature’s face.

“Ready ambush!” the hobgoblin leader ordered. But even as his troops moved into flanking positions around the tunnel entry, there was a sudden gust of chilled air through the chamber, their only warning before an *ice storm* came crashing down upon them.

Hailstones the size of a fist rained down on the company from Camar and their goblinoid allies, accompanied by a bitter surge of cold that cut through clothes and armor to steal the warmth from the flesh beneath. Several of the goblin scouts went down, blue and shivering, and none of them escaped damage from the penetrating barrage.

“Fall back!” Herzord yelled in Common, shouting to be heard over the sound of the ongoing *ice storm*. But Talen saw that the goblins were holding position, flanking the entry, and he understood; Herzord was trying to set up an ambush, to draw the enemy in to be encircled.

Unfortunately, not everyone grasped the plan. “Fuck that, we need to take out the wizard!” Dar shouted. Instead of retreating, he charged across the room, ignoring the hailstones that continued to plink off of his armor, before vanishing into the dark corridor.

“You idiot,” Talen muttered, his words lost within the roar of the magical storm. But faced with the choice of abandoning Dar to his fate or following his lead, the knight was left without much of a decision. Then he saw that Shay was following him, and Kalend, and then he had no choice left at all.

“At them!” the knight cried, lifting *Beatus Incendia* above his head, the holy steel flaring as the *ice storm* died.

He only managed a few steps, however, before a blast of cold flared out from the corridor, blinding him in the swirling energies of a *cone of cold*. Even on the edges of the blast, Talen could feel the heat being sucked out of his body, and he staggered back, raising his arms to protect his face from the swirling gusts of ice lingering in the air.

“Dar!”

Chapter 195

A CHILLING PREDICAMENT

Dar was coming around to the viewpoint that his blind charge into the passageway may have not been such a good idea.

First off, the tunnel was pretty dark; the light from their torches spilled out from the room, but it quickly faded as he ran down the passage. There was *something* there; he could just make out an outline ahead of short figures forming a line across the corridor about forty feet ahead. They were too small to be human, but he couldn't make out any more details than that.

"Gobbos," the fighter said to himself. That assumption, combined with the fact that it wasn't a good idea to stand here and wait to get blasted, was enough for him; he lifted his sword and charged.

The enemy waited for him. For a second Dar thought that maybe he'd been mistaken; the squat shapes remained immobile, like small statues. They were blockier, too, than goblins, although their exact nature remained indistinct in the darkness. A barricade?

But then the two figures in the middle stepped aside, and Dar knew he was in trouble even before the *cone of cold* slammed into him.

There was nowhere to go to avoid it; the full force of the spell blasted into him, blinding him, driving him back several steps, until he found himself pressed up against one of the corridor walls. He had no idea which way he was facing; he had enough to focus on just remaining standing. His lungs burned, and he could not feel his hands or feet. Icicles had formed in his hair and beard, and in the joints of his armor, crackling when he moved.

The blast lasted only a few seconds, but it felt like a lot longer, from his perspective. He turned, blinking as the icy blast dissipated, looking for his targets.

Before he found them, an arrow found him, catching him hard near the joint between his right arm and shoulder. The arrow shot through his breastplate and the chain links underneath like they weren't even there, burying itself deep into the joint. Dar bit off a curse as a sharp pain followed the feeling of impact, which in turn was followed by a numbness that flowed down the length of his arm. Either the shot had clipped a nerve, or...

"Poison, eh? You motherfuckers are going to pay for that..."

But as he pushed off from the wall, he staggered to the side, and had to admit that he might not be in the shape needed to carry out the threat.

Shay had reached the mouth of the passage just as the *cone* was unleashed. She grabbed Kalend and shoved him to the side, twisting her body so that the full force of

the blast hit her oblique rather than head-on. Kalend made it to cover a heartbeat before the spell reached them, and he reached out to drag Shay after him. The scout sagged down along the wall beside the passage, shivering but not seriously hurt.

Talen, on the farthest edge of the enemy wizard's spell, had likewise avoided the kind of suffering that Dar had been hit with, but after the pounding he'd taken from the *ice storm*, he was far from being in good shape. But a moment later he felt some of the chill suffusing him ease, replaced by a soft glow that felt absolutely wonderful.

"Thanks, Allera," he said, but the healer was already running toward the tunnel, no doubt intent on saving Dar from the fate his foolishness had ordained for himself.

Hoping that none of the goblins could see his grimace under his helmet, the knight rushed after her.

As Dar reached the line of enemies, the light from Talen's sword filled the passage, letting him finally make out the true nature of his foes. They were goblins, but it was easy to see the source of his earlier error; these creatures were clad in suits of full plate, with small steel shields that they carried in a locked formation, each sheltering their comrade to the left as well as themselves. They reminded Dar of nothing more than a Legion formation, down to the small stabbing swords that they held in the lee of their armored bodies, poised to strike. There were six of them, not enough to fully block the passage, but the ends of their line were anchored by several other goblins in lighter armor, armed with javelins and longer swords.

Dar noted those details of the defenses, but his attention was focused on the pair of goblins behind the formation, the one with robes that was obviously the wizard, and the one beside him that was reloading its crossbow with another poisoned bolt. After the pair had blasted him, the goblin soldiers in the front had come back together, reforming their line, and blocking his route to the leaders.

A mad thought of leaping over the goblin line and cutting the wizard in half flew through his head, but even as he neared the enemy formation, each of the goblins in the front rank suddenly took a step forward, setting to meet his charge, shields up. He would have laughed, if he hadn't already known how dangerous these little bastards were.

So he attacked. He started toward the center of the line, but his attack was a feint, and at the last instant he shifted to the side, coming up on the right flank, intending to drive through the more lightly armored goblins holding the edge.

If he'd expected to find the more lightly armored goblins easier prey, he was mistaken. His target stepped into his attack, twisting to the side to turn what would have been a deadly blow into a glancing hit that barely penetrated its chain armor. Its own counterattack faltered against Dar's armor, but the line shifted smoothly to pen him in, and he felt pain explode in his side as a goblin thrust its sword deep into his thigh. The

goblin was deceptively strong; a burly human legionary might have managed a hit like that one.

Oh, fuck me, Dar thought. He turned in time to see both the wizard and the crossbowman both looking at him, the latter sighting down the length of its loaded weapon.

Chapter 196

GOBLIN BASH

The goblin necromancer pointed at Dar, and summoned the dark powers of its calling once more.

A black beam of negative energy shot from its finger and stabbed Dar in the chest. Suddenly the fighter felt as though his strength had been drained from him like a tapped keg; his muscles felt weak, and he had to hold onto the passage wall to keep from falling down.

The goblin assassin, standing beside the wizard, smiled evilly, and shot its crossbow into the suffering fighter's chest. Once again the bolt penetrated his armor, and its head bit painfully into his flesh, though not far enough to pierce a vital organ. But he could feel the numbness of the poison again working its way into his body. Groaning, trying in vain to lift his sword, the fighter slumped down to the ground.

The goblin line maintained formation, but stepped forward to finish him off. The flanker he'd struck earlier raised its sword, intending to run him through, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do to stop it.

But then a slight form stepped in front of him, blocking his attacker with her body. Dar tried to grab Allera, to push her behind him, but his strength was that of a kitten. The goblin adjusted smoothly, equally content to strike down an unarmored woman as a crippled fighter, and it lifted the point of its blade toward her heart as it lunged forward.

The attack never landed. As it began its attack motion, a puff of pink smoke appeared directly in front of its face. The goblin drew back in alarm, but too late to avoid getting a good whiff of Snaggletooth's breath weapon. Its eyes grew unfocused as it turned and idled away from the battle, caught up in the distracting euphoria of the faerie dragon's magic.

There were more goblins, however, and as they drew within range, their line pivoted, closing on Dar and Allera. Allera grabbed Dar's outstretched arm and called upon her

healing magic, but even with her mastery of her art, there seemed no way that she could treat him in time to avoid being overrun by that enemy surge.

The bright glow of *Beatus Incendia*, accompanied by a Camaran cry of battle, announced the arrival of Talen Karedes to the melee. The knight forced the goblins to shift to meet him as he attacked the fulcrum of the shifting line, blocking Allera and Dar with his shield even as he poked an armored goblin in the chest with his sword. The attack was barely more than a feint, and did little damage, but it drew the attention of the goblins, who immediately thrust at him with their small blades under the edges of their locked shields. The more lightly armored flankers came up around the ends of that front line, seeking to exploit the weaknesses in the human's defenses.

The corridor was filled with a violent clash of metal on metal as the knight held off the enemy line. The goblins were expert fighters, taking good advantage of their heavy armor and their small size, getting in close to deliver strong attacks at Talen's legs and lower body, their swords darting around his shield to seek out openings. Talen gave as good as he got, but in the first full exchange neither side gave way, not even when one of the flankers got in behind him and thrust its longsword up into the gap between the armor plates covering his torso, penetrating the chain links underneath and drawing blood. The knight grimaced, but held his ground.

The wizard lifted both hands, the sleeves of his robe falling back to reveal arms covered with ritual scars hacked into his limbs from elbow to wrist. "Feel the cold touch of your own deaths!" the creature screeched, following the threat with the words of a powerful necromantic spell. It spread its arms as it spoke the final words of the spell, but instead of magical *fear*, only silence came from it as it worked its lips. At the same moment, the sounds of the battle faded away, leaving an eerie stillness in the corridor.

The effect of the *silence* did not appear to extend to Dar, who yelled out a stream of violent profanity as he pulled himself to his feet and charged back into the fray. Allera had not stunted; her *heal* spell had completely purged his body of his wounds, including the effects of the poison from the assassin's two crossbow bolts. He surged forward beside Talen, targeting another of the skirmishers. The creature lifted its sword to parry, but could not have expected the blow that came down hard onto its blade. The goblin's magical weapon held, but the force of the blow drove its own weapon down into its face, the sharp edge biting through the iron cap it wore, cutting its skin down to the bone of its skull. The goblin staggered back, blood pouring down its face from the vicious wound.

Then Herzord arrived, the other companions close behind. There was not enough room in the confines of the corridor for more combatants, but the big hobgoblin brought his greatsword down into the goblin that had come around Talen's other flank, crashing through its chain armor and biting deep into the flesh beneath. This far back the pair were outside of the *silence* spell, and the sound of the hit echoed disproportionately loudly through the corridor. The goblin should have crumpled, but somehow was able

to turn and stab at its foe, managing to score a flesh wound in the hobgoblin's left leg just above the knee.

The enemy necromancer was falling back, seeking the edges of the *silence* spell. Varo had fixed the effect in space, and it soon withdrew enough for the sounds of its own breathing to become audible again. The orb of magic blocked the tunnel, and through it the battlefield was just a muted dance of soundless movements, its true nature made obvious only by the occasional flutter of bright red droplets in the air from a particularly effective blow.

The goblin had more destructive spells in its arsenal, but upon realizing it faced enemy spellcasters as well as warriors, it paused to surround itself with a *lesser globe of invulnerability*.

The goblins were tough, damned tough, but it was quickly becoming obvious that they were not quite as tough as their current foes. Talen and Dar, side by side, were unleashing powerful attacks against which even the heavy plate and shields of the goblin fighters seemed of little avail. Each hit was devastating, not just from the strength and skill of the pair, but from the unique magical powers invested in their blades. *Beatus Incendia* blazed white each time it connected with a goblin, while *Valor* seemed to sizzle with blue energy each time that Dar struck, its axiomatic steel eagerly tearing into the chaotic bodies of the Orcus-followers.

The assassin had reloaded its bow with another poisoned quarrel, but retreated into the shadows. After failing to take down its first target with two shots, the monstrous little creature known as "the Executioner" to its peers in the slave pits was reconsidering the efficacy of a frontal assault. It was about to cast a spell to cover its retreat when it suddenly froze, caught by a *hold person* spell.

Dar kept hacking at his designated target, adding another pair of serious wounds to his opponent before the creature finally went down in a tangle of bloody arms and legs. "I want the wizard!" he yelled to Talen.

The pair was on the very edge of the *silence* field, so the knight heard him, and responded. "Go, I'll take these!" he shouted back.

The goblin fighters, within the *silence* field, could not have heard the exchange, but they seemed to have a sense of what the fighter had in mind. Closing ranks as another of their number collapsed, they still started to shift their line to block him. But there were not enough of them left to hold the full passage, and Dar shot past, ignoring an attack of opportunity from the rightmost fighter that cut a narrow gash under his breastplate. He shot forward like a catapult stone toward the wizard. Behind him, Shay took his place at Talen's side, striking at the goblin that had wounded him. Three of the five goblins still in place now bore serious wounds, but they refused to retreat, and still managed to get in the occasional hit that added to the tally of wounds born by their foes.

Unfortunately for the goblins, they did not have a healer standing behind them, healing their wounds as soon as they were inflicted.

Dar's face twisted into a snarl as he shot toward the wizard. The necromancer answered with its own vicious expression, and it began casting once more, summoning protective magic. *Mirror images* sprung out of its body, and it took several steps back, letting them shift and twist around it, confounding its location. Within a few seconds, it was impossible to discern its location by sight.

But Dar was no stranger to fighting magic-using foes. Even as the images appeared, the fighter closed his eyes, and drove toward the spot he *sensed* the wizard to be. *Valor* tingled in his fist, and as instinct replaced thought he planted his foot and thrust forward, holding nothing back.

He felt resistance, and then a soft cough, followed by a gurgling noise of bloody death.

Opening his eyes, Dar saw that he'd impaled the wizard through the chest. The creature looked at him, the light already fading from its eyes. It tried to say something, but only managed to cough up blood.

The fighter leaned in. "Tell your god that I'm coming for him," he said. Then he spun, launching the dead wizard from his blade. The little creature flew across the passage, smacked into the wall, and fell in a bloody heap.

Dar turned and returned to the battle, but the outcome had already been decided. Only two goblin fighters were left standing, and Herzord and Talen were making short work of them. As Dar passed the still-paralyzed assassin, he pushed it against the wall, and tore the bolt from its crossbow with his other hand. The goblin trembled, trying to break free of the spell, but could not defend itself as Dar lifted his fist and punched the head of the bolt through its left eye. The goblin collapsed, its limbs quivering for a moment before it slumped into death.

A moment later Talen knocked the last standing goblin to the ground with a blow that cut under the front guard of its helmet. Herzord made sure of a few that were still bleeding, and then the battle was over.

The corridor was awash with blood and thick with the stink of death. Herzord wasted no time, pumping his fist and pointing down the tunnel, where it split into two passages ahead. His scouts had taken heavy casualties from the wizard's *ice storm*, but a half-dozen vanished into the darkness ahead to check for further threats.

"They did not go quietly," Shay observed.

"They are fanatics," Varo said, coming up to join them.

Dar flicked the blood off his sword, and sheathed it. "Fat lot of help you were," the fighter said to the cleric. "Where was the fire blast, the summons?"

Varo's gaze was chilly. "This was just the preliminaries. If you hadn't foolishly rushed in, this battle would have been much less dangerous than you made it."

"Why you son of a..."

"He's right," Talen said, lifting a hand to forestall him. "And you know it. Enough; it's done and over with. They know we're here, and I don't want to wait for the next group of guards to find us. We take the fight to them, and we end this, right here, right now."

Chapter 197

THE RITUAL

The chamber was a great hemisphere, just over sixty feet across, its high dome formed out of a smooth bubble in the rock deep within the darkest recesses of Rappan Athuk. The stone was a dull black, run through with striations of red that looked almost like blood vessels; if one stared, one could imagine them pulsing with a faintly audible heartbeat. The southern half of the room was higher than the rest, a dais some ten feet above the level of the entry. This raised portion was accessed by a set of marble stairs that ran from the arched entry of the chamber up to the top of the dais, facing another statue of Orcus that rose fifteen feet from its stone base to the tips of its horns. The statue, of black stone, dominated the room. The stairs were flanked on both sides by wider, steeper tiers plated with bronze, forming layered metallic platforms that ultimately led up to that summit as well. Censers shaped like claws dangled from chains set along the perimeter of the room, filling the room with thick tendrils of aromatic, narcotic vapor. Braziers of black iron were set up atop the dais, and on the bronze tiers flanking the stairs. The braziers filled the room with a reddish light that gave everything an otherworldly hue.

The place was occupied, and in use. At the top of the dais, their backs to the statue, stood the fell priests Theron and Celleen. Clad in black robes, cowls obscuring their faces, they were like visions out of a nightmare, each surrounded by an insubstantial halo of power. Their brethren, lesser but still potent priests of the demon god, were in place facing them, Tibor and Relnek on the bronze platforms, and Phesor standing near the base of the marble steps. Looking down from above, it was almost as if the five formed the points of a pentagram, their outstretched arms forming angles that linked the formation.

At the focal point of that gathering, at the top of the steps, there was a prisoner, a tightly bound goblin. The creature lay in a puddle of its own blood and bodily wastes, shaking

with a terror beyond mortal fear. The marble steps and the platform at their summit were slick with those noisome fluids, suggesting that this captive was not the first to be brought before the unholy council.

Terrible noises echoed through the chamber, and it was not immediately clear that the source was the priests, who chanted dark syllables that seemed like nothing that could have originated from the mouths of mortal men. Each utterance seemed to batter against the very walls of reality, and there were few who could have listened long to that litany without being driven to the borders of insanity.

The prisoner began to shake, and sinuous black tendrils began to ooze from its body. Tiny strands of that insubstantial power drifted out to the clerics, while most of it trailed away into the floor, drawn down toward a place far below, where the Sphere of Souls pulsed in echo to the grim ritual being conducted here.

The guards who stood near the entry of the chamber had sold their souls utterly to Orcus, but even they looked uncomfortable as the litany continued. The four hobgoblins had heard noises coming from the long corridor outside, sounds that resembled the distinctive chaos of battle even through the distortion caused by the natural echoes of the tunnel. But the guards had strict orders, and even if they had been curious, their minds were held in thrall to the ritual, and their gazes kept being drawn against their will to the prisoner, and to the huge black statue that loomed up behind it.

Then the captive was done; the chant continued, but at a lower pitch. The high priest made a subtle gesture, and two of the guards leapt to obey, taking up another prisoner from the row lined up next to the entrance. On the other side of the archway the shriveled corpses of over a dozen prisoners had been heaped for later, when the lesser priests would convert them into mindless zombies.

The prisoner struggled a bit, but the hobgoblin guards handled the wretched goblin without difficulty. They climbed up the stairs, giving the priest there a wide berth, and laid the captive before the statue, taking the dead one back with them as they hurried back down. They hurled the body into the growing heap of corpses, then returned quickly to their posts.

Almost at once the priests launched back into the ritual, drawing upon the dark power of their god. They had been here for hours, but the stolen life energy of their victims had sustained them, infusing them with potency. It was this very ritual, repeated hundreds of times, that had transformed the five priests from minor functionaries into some of the most powerful clerics in the world, capable of altering the very nature of reality with their divine spells.

The goblin prisoner had lost consciousness. But its body continued to twitch, and as the priests of Orcus resumed their ritual, thin black tendrils of insubstantial mist began to form on its skin like beads of sweat. As the chant continued, those tiny threads began to extend outward, toward the five priests, toward the connection that would

siphon off the life energy of the hapless creature. The minutes passed slowly, those threads drawing outward slowly, like tendrils of ivy growing over a trellis. When they finally touched the priests, there was a subtle but noticeable shift in the aura present in the room, an exultation of power that doomed the fate of the goblin as inexorably as a sword through the vitals.

The hobgoblin guards watched in fascinated horror as the clerics wrought their magic again. By now they were familiar with what was transpiring, and yet each time the initiation of the deadly bond held their attention like a magnet.

But as the dark connection between priests and victim was forged, one of the guards shifted slightly. Had that been another sound? It turned toward the entry, and the long, wide tunnel beyond. Its eyes stung from the thick clouds of incense that the censers were pouring out, and the *everburning torches* in the tunnel beyond provided sparse illumination, leaving much of the passage in shadow.

There... was that something moving in one of those zones of darkness? The uneven lighting played havoc with the creature's darkvision, but some instinct deep within it warned of danger.

And then a figure stepped forward into the middle of the passage, coming into full view.

It was a man, clad in a dark cloak and cowl, superficially not that different from the appearance of the high priests of the True God. But the hobgoblin was more than a fighter; it was also an acolyte of the demon lord. Its gaze fixed on the golden idol that the newcomer wore clearly around his neck, and it clearly sensed the *wrongness* of that sigil, even though the other was too far distant to see clearly.

The hobgoblin opened its mouth to shout a warning, but the sound died before it could emerge. The guard had been given one firm order by Theron, when they had gathered here hours before, a command that burned in its mind above all others.

Do not interrupt the ritual!

The hobgoblin's companions had belatedly realized that something was wrong, and as they turned, the first creature reached for the hilt of the sword at its belt. But before it could draw the weapon, the enemy grasped his divine focus, and unleashed a powerful spell.

Varo's *flame strike* came pouring down from above, impacting right where the hapless captive lay dying. The spell snuffed out its life at once, but as it blasted out from the point of impact it also roared into the ring of clerics, scorching them.

All five clerics were tough and experienced; it would take far more than even Varo's magic to fell them. But the spell also disrupted the ritual, and as the goblin prisoner died the black threads of life energy that extended from it rebounded onto the clerics,

stunning them with the sudden, unexpected surge of raw power. Theron, the leader of the circle, was hit hardest by the backlash, and he fell to the ground. The other four priests staggered back, black smoke rising from their robes where the column of fire had momentarily engulfed them.

The shadows to either side of the priest of Dagos came alive, as his allies surged forward to attack. One group was uncannily quiet; Kalend carried an arrow fitted to his bow that had been empowered with Varo's second *silence* spell just moments before. That warding had allowed their more heavily armored forces to sneak this far forward without alerting the guards, and now the thief took up a position near the archway, looking for a spellcaster to shoot.

With the ritualists temporarily overcome by the disruption of their unholy rite, the companions rushed forward to exploit their advantage. Dar, Talen, and Herzord charged headlong into the ranks of the hobgoblin guards, their magical blades flashing in the red light of the braziers. As Talen's holy sword burst into flames, it seemed to drive back that eerie glow, surrounding him with an aura of wholesome brightness in this sinister place.

The guards, overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events, fell back, but only far enough to give them a chance to draw their weapons and make a stand against the attackers. Several of them attempted to invoke the power of Orcus, but they barely had a chance to focus their minds upon their spells before the enemy rush hit them. The guards wore magical chain armor and bore heavy shields, but that protection offered little succor against the powerful assault from the three veterans at the forefront of the enemy surge. All three scored telling hits in that first rush, and while none of the injuries were critical, they indicated where this battle was headed.

The second rank of combatants followed on the heels of the first, and they rushed past the sudden and violent melee to attack the dazed clerics. Shay was on the marble stairs in an eyeblink, and she leapt into the air to deliver a scissors-kick that knocked the priest standing on the steps flying. Phesor clattered to the ground, his wind knocked from him as he landed hard and rolled to the base of the stairs. Even as she landed in a smooth crouch, others were rushing past her; Herzord's hobgoblin lieutenant to her left, and a pair of goblin fighters to her right. Missiles were flying around them, arrows fired by the goblin scouts as they picked out targets that were vulnerable to sneak attacks.

One of those arrows was Kalend's, as he picked his target and let fly. The arrow struck the priestess Celleen in the side. The cleric was wearing chainmail under her robe, and did not suffer serious injury, but the arrow snagged in the armor, physically connecting the *silence* aura to her. She was recovering quickly from her shock and surprise, and as she shook her head to clear it from the aftereffects of the blast, her expression twisted into a snarl.

Serah shot a beam of *searing light* into the face of one of the clerics on the lower tiers, moments before the hobgoblin lieutenant leapt onto the bronze step, slashing with his longsword. The cleric Tibor screamed and fell over the edge of the raised platform, knocking one of the braziers over with him. The sound of the metal bowl clattering on the stone floor was cacophonous, and hot coals were scattered everywhere around him as Tibor fell hard on his back on the ground six feet below, dazed.

Varo had not moved since casting his *flame strike*, and now he finished another spell. He pointed, and a pair of creatures materialized at the top of the stairs, upon the scorched center of the dais. The *things*—for it was impossible to classify them further—were amorphous blobs of shifting, tenuous matter, their outer flesh a medley of colors, textures, and features that changed from one moment to the next.

Both chaos beasts headed for Celleen, oozing jerkily over the stone toward the cleric. The priestess clearly recognized them, her eyes widening under her cowl as she drew out her heavy mace and retreated. She did not immediately recognize that the *silence* field was fixed on the arrow that still jutted from her armor.

The companions and their allies had gained complete tactical surprise, and the battle was clearly going their way.

That all changed a moment later, as Theron rolled over, propped himself up on one arm, and uttered a word of *blasphemy*.

Chapter 198

BLASPHEMY

The single word of power echoed through the chamber with devastating effect.

The goblinoids were not affected, except perhaps as a momentary twinge of uneasiness felt at the edges of their senses. They were not creatures of Orcus, but that did not mean that they were not evil.

Varo grimaced, and briefly lifted one hand to his head, but likewise recovered swiftly. He was still in the outer corridor, far enough away that word only reached him as an echo of power. Kalend had hesitated in the entryway after taking his shot at Celleen, and that saved him as well from the full force of the spell.

The same could not be said of their companions.

Varo's chaos beasts were blasted out of existence, sent back to the primeval disorder from which he had summoned them. Serah and Allera crumpled, their senses

overloaded by the spell, their muscles locked and useless. Talen, Shay, and Dar were dazed and weakened, the potency of the spell draining strength from their bodies.

There was one other casualty; a flutter in the air as Snaggletooth fell to the ground off to the side of the room, the little dragon becoming visible as it landed in a limp heap. Allera let out a strangled cry, but the healer, paralyzed, could do nothing to intervene.

Energized by the success of their leader's counterattack, the evil clerics rebounded with a vengeance. The one that Shay had knocked down pulled himself to his feet. The dazed scout was unable to hinder him in any way as he turned and dropped a *flame strike* of his own into the arched entryway. The spell incinerated most of the prisoners there and the cleric's own guards, but those had been all but dead anyway, expendable resources that had served their purpose. But the flames also tore through the enemy; a pair of goblin fighters fell, and several scouts that were too slow to get out of the way were roasted as well. Herzord, Dar, and Talen all suffered serious injuries from the spell, and behind them Serah and Allera, paralyzed and helpless, were nearly killed. Varo lifted his hands and staggered back as the backblast of the spell washed over him, but he was just outside of the area of effect and suffered no serious injury. Likewise Kalend retreated back behind the arch of the entry as the flames shot past, the thief's hands trembling as he fought to overcome the terror that clutched at his insides.

Tibor, his robe still covered with smoldering coals, stood to see the hobgoblin lieutenant standing over him atop the bronze platform, ready to finish what he had started. The cleric fell back and raised a hand, summoning his magic in a desperate effort to stop his adversary. The gambit worked, as the hobgoblin veteran froze, caught by the *hold person* spell. The cleric smiled grimly, and grabbed the hobgoblin by one ankle, dragging him over the edge of the platform. Herzord's lieutenant was a tough fighter, but was unable to do anything to stop his fate as the cleric yanked his helm off, and proceeded to crush his skull with a solid blow from his heavy mace.

Relnek, standing on the opposite tier, faced a pair of goblin fighters, which had leapt off the stairs to assail him. The priest looked down at its foes with derision, but that changed a moment later as one of the creatures got in a lucky thrust that punched through the armor protecting his side. Spitting a curse, the cleric reached out and seized the creature's head with his open palm, unleashing a *slay living* spell. The goblin failed to resist the magic, and collapsed, dead. Its companion paled but pressed its attack, only to miss as the cleric turned to face it.

"You are next," he hissed, as a red glow materialized around the fingers of his right hand.

Herzord charged out of the dying flames, his armor blackened, smoke rising from his charred flesh. The hobgoblin roared as he laid into Phesor, smiting him with his greatsword. The cleric's magical armor saved him from being cut in twain, but he fell back, favoring a vicious wound in his side.

Dar and Talen were not far behind. They had a wide choice of enemies, with all five clerics still on their feet and proven deadly, but it seemed clear that the two atop the dais were the biggest threat, if only because they could cast spells at will while they were not directly engaged. Theron had been shielded by the angle of the dais while he'd been prone, but now he came back into view, as he rose and started spellcasting. Celleen, meanwhile, had belatedly realized the source of the *silence*, and managed to yank the arrow out from the links of her armor, tossing it aside. As soon as the arrow passed out of range, she too began casting.

Dar tried to slip past the cleric facing Herzord, but the man turned from the hobgoblin and seized the fighter as he passed, pouring the devastating energies of a *harm* spell into him. A scream was torn from Dar as the familiar agonies of the spell savaged his body, dragging him roughly to the brink of death. Weakened from the aftereffects of the *blasphemy*, Dar could not shake free, and the cleric cackled in mad glee as he summoned more negative energy to finish off the crippled fighter.

Shay was already on the stairs, but like Dar she'd identified the pair behind her as the more immediate threat. She ran up the stairs, her sword feeling like a lead weight in her hand.

"Shay, no!" Talen yelled, recognizing the scout's intent to engage the clerics alone. Avoiding the crowded stairs, the knight leapt up onto the lowest of the bronze tiers on the left. He'd intended to use them as giant steps to make his way up to the top of the dais, but with his reduced strength and heavy armor weighing him down, he was barely able to keep from tumbling over onto his face. He grimaced and rushed toward the second tier, but before he could make it an agonizing pain exploded through his leg, ripping into his body. He staggered and fell to one knee as another *harm* spell savaged him. Through a haze of pain that threatened to pull him under, he was dimly aware of something tugging at the injured leg, trying to drag him down.

He looked down to see Tibor, his robe on fire, covered in the blood and brains of the hobgoblin lieutenant, clutching his ankle, looking up at him with an eager, evil look burning in his eyes.

Allera couldn't see anything; she'd fallen onto her side, facing the wall. Her body shook, and could not even feel the pain of her crispened flesh over the sharp grief that stabbed into her like a knife. She could not move, and the part of her brain that was still capable of reason told her that the paralysis would not ease for minutes, at least.

But a moment later she felt a presence behind her, followed by a sudden sharp twist of spiritual power that shattered the paralysis holding her like a rock hurled through a pane of glass. That power was nothing like the soothing, bolstering healing magic that she commanded, but the *dispel evil* spell got the job done. She looked up and saw Varo.

"Serah, Talen, and Dar are on the brink of death," the cleric said.

Allera stared up at him with wide eyes. She opened her mouth, started to reply, but he'd already risen and rushed back to the battle.

She did not even waste the seconds it would have taken to get up; she closed her eyes, focused, and let the healing power flow through her.

Herzord hacked at Phesor's back like a lumberjack hewing at a tree, but the cleric refused to release his grip on Dar, intent on making certain of the fighter's death. Dar was still unable to tear free of the fanatic priest's hold, but he pulled his arm back and drove *Valor* into the man's gut. Half of the length of the sword slid into Phesor's body, and the cleric grunted. A moment later, he coughed, and blood trickled down his chin from the sides of his mouth. His body sagged, but he still did not relinquish his grip on Dar's armor.

"Tell your Master..." Dar began.

"The True God will have his bounty," the cleric laughed, spitting blood into Dar's face. Phesor's gaze shifted, and Dar could not help but turn to see the cleric Relnek, standing over the broken bodies of two goblin fighters, lift his hands as he chanted the words to summon another *flame strike*.

Shay heard Talen's cry, but she did not turn from her objective. She knew that someone had to take out those priests, before they blanketed the room with more destructive magic. She'd seen Allera and Serah go down, dead or dying, and knew that they would not have healing to pull them back from the brink this time. Fighting her own weakness, she was not certain what she could do to stop two clerics of their obvious power, but she had to try.

She reached the top of the stairs, and skidded to a sudden stop.

Looking up, she found herself confronted with a huge black ape, standing easily eight feet tall, looming over her. The thing had an *extra set of arms*, her mind registered, just before it smashed its fists into its chest, uttered a deafening roar, and surged toward her.

Chapter 199

THE HIGH PRIESTS OF ORCUS

Dar saw what was coming, but there was nothing he could do about it. Herzord brought his sword back down again, hacking into the back of Phesor's neck, almost taking the cleric's head off in the process. Dar finally tore free from the dead cleric and nearly fell,

but managed to stagger in the general direction of Relnek, knowing that he would not reach the cleric in time.

But as the cleric of Orcus finished his spell, he screamed and fell back, clutching at his head. Relnek's *flame strike* blasted down at an angle, smashing into the dome high above them, filling the room with a blast of heat but not harming anyone on the floor below. The cleric staggered back against the shelf formed by the next-highest bronze tier, and as he turned back, Dar could see that an arrow jutted from the left side of his face, buried into the eye socket. The shaft was too big to be a goblin arrow, and while it hadn't come in straight enough to penetrate the brain and kill him, it had done a thorough piece of work on the cleric's eye.

"Nice shot, Kalend!" Dar yelled. He felt stronger, recognizing the life pouring back into him from Allera's *mass cure serious wounds* spell. He leapt at the cleric, intending to take him down quickly.

On the far side of the stairs, Talen had slipped and fallen on his side, as the cleric Tibor continued to pull at his ankle. Twisting onto his back, the knight thrust down with *Beatus Incendia*. He'd intended to drive the blade through the man's skull, but the cleric twisted aside, and Talen only managed to open a deep gash in his shoulder. That was enough to force him to loosen his grip, but it was only a momentary respite, as Tibor came back at him, a red glow forming around his bloody fingers.

Allera's healing spell was very timely, but Talen's foe seemed impervious to wounds. Tibor ignored his burning robe, the blackened flesh from Serah's *searing light* and Varo's *flame strike*, and the injuries that Talen and the hobgoblin lieutenant had inflicted on him, focusing on taking down his still gravely injured foe. Talen did not know that Theron had bolstered his allies with a *mass cure critical wounds* spell moments before; to him, the cleric seemed to have a vitality beyond that of any mortal man. His mouth twisting into a grim frown, Talen drew himself into a crouch and lifted *Beatus Incendia*, waiting for the cleric to close.

But before he could strike, Tibor suddenly came to an abrupt halt. Bright red blood cascaded down his nostrils and out his ears, and an unintelligible cascade of gibberish hissed from his lips, before he collapsed.

Talen rose, and saw Varo standing there. The cleric pointed toward the top of the dais. "Those two are the largest threat; we need to take them out, quickly."

Talen looked up and saw Shay flying backward through the air. His heart clenched in his chest before he realized that she'd jumped, rather than been thrown. Shay had never seen a fiendish girallon before, but she could tell enough from looking at it that there was no way she could stand up to it head on, especially not with her strength drained to that of a child. The scout landed in a crouch at the bottom of the stairs.

The girallon, angered as its claws swept empty air, roared again and charged down the stairs, using its lower set of arms for balance.

Dar laid into Relnek, ripping open the cleric's shoulder from behind. The cleric staggered back, but he reached up and yanked the arrow from his eye, and as he turned back Dar could see that the wound had stopped bleeding, and that the cleric was not quite yet finished.

"You are persistent," the cleric said, echoing Dar's thoughts exactly. A moment later, Varo's *mass inflict serious wounds* spell hit him, however, undoing the benefits of Theron's healing spell. Dar leapt forward, but the cleric recovered quickly, reaching out and stabbing a hand into the fighter's side. Once again Dar screamed as another *harm* spell ripped through him. The cleric chuckled and drew back, but Dar wasn't done; he took the pain, lifted his sword, and impaled *Valor* through the cleric's chest. The fighter, on the brink of death once more, nearly followed the priest down to the ground, and he knelt there on his knees for a few seconds, breathing heavily.

"Fucking clerics..." he wheezed, holding onto the hilt of his sword, jutting from the dead priest's chest, for support.

The high priests atop the dais had not been idle while their companions were being hacked to pieces. After summoning the girallon, Celleen cast *spell resistance*, aware that a high-level priest was among their enemies. That proved a timely choice, as Varo's *mass inflict* bounded off the shield a moment later, fizzing with a mere tingle on her skin. The priestess had taken serious injuries from the *flame strike* that had opened the battle, but as Theron's *mass cure critical wounds* eased the pain of those wounds, she aborted her healing spell and instead protected herself with a *death ward*. Those necessary tasks complete, she started looking for something to kill.

Theron followed his *mass cure* with a summons, reaching across the barrier between worlds and conjuring a trio of fiendish tigers to his will. He felt the sting of Varo's *mass inflict* as he finished the spell, but his concentration held, and he turned to his own defenses, protecting himself with both an *unholy aura* and *spell resistance*.

"Where is the enemy priest?" he shouted to Celleen, over the chaos of the battle. Between the incense floating in the air and the smoke from the multiple *flame strikes*, it was becoming difficult to see.

Celleen did not respond; she had already spotted Varo, and was spellcasting.

Herzord met the summoned girallon's charge on the stairs. The hobgoblin, a veteran of hundreds of battles, let the monster come to him. It had reach, and the high ground, both advantages that the commander took into account as the creature closed, until it was near enough to lash out at him with a single muscled claw. The impact hit, hit hard, but Herzord merely grunted and took it. The monster's other arms lifted to engulf him, but before they could strike the hobgoblin stepped forward, close enough for him to

bring his greatsword down in a vicious arc that split the huge ape's chest wide open. Blood and organs gushed from the terrible wound, and the hobgoblin sidestepped as the huge creature fell past him, dissolving even as it slid to the base of the stairs.

Waves of positive energy continued to surge through the room, as Allera continued bolstering her companions. She did not stir from lying on her side in a fetal position, her eyes tightly closed, her hands moving in the complex gestures of spellcasting in her lap. She could feel the life energies of her friends, waxing and waning under the enemy assault and her own magic, but ebbing ever closer toward death. Her own pain had receded to a dull throb; she just kept casting, healing, channeling *mass cure* after *mass cure* into the room, toward the bright points of light that flickered in the darkness.

A soft moan shook her out of her reverie. Opening her eyes, she lifted her head and saw Serah lying on the ground, shaking, just a few feet away. The priestess was still gripped firmly within the paralysis caused by Theron's earlier *blasphemy*. The sight stirred Allera's instincts enough to shake her out of her grief, and she crept forward, extending her arm to touch the other woman on the ankle.

Dar felt his strength returning as another healing spell took hold. He was beginning to feel like some mongrel's chew toy with the repeated battering his body had taken, but he was all too aware that the battle was not over. As he straightened and yanked his sword free of the cleric's chest, a huge tiger leapt onto him, knocking him over backwards.

Varo *healed* Talen, purging him of the wounds he had suffered thus far, and of the lingering weakness of the *blasphemy*. The knight nodded gratefully and started at once back toward the dais, clambering up the bronze platforms. He made it only up to the second tier before a black tiger padded forward to the edge of the dais, growling before it crouched and leapt at him.

The last tiger bounded down at Herzord, pouncing onto the hobgoblin fighter before he could set to take its charge. Somehow, the hobgoblin kept his footing on the slick steps even with five hundred pounds of fiendish cat tearing and slashing at him. The tiger's claws opened deep gashes in his arms and legs, but then Herzord got his chance, tearing his arms free and bringing down his sword in a decisive blow that severed the cat's spine in one fell chop. The tiger joined the girallon and dissolved as it expired upon the stairs. Herzord, breathing heavily, paused only a few seconds before he started up the stairs once more.

Dar yelled out as he fell onto his back, the tiger lashing out and snapping in what felt like a hundred places at once. His magical breastplate kept him from being torn apart at once, and with a heave he thrust the creature off him, rolling it off the edge of the bronze tier. The cat landed on its feet and came at him again, but Dar got *Valor* up this time, and stabbed the axiomatic sword deep into its shoulder. The cat hissed in pain but kept pressing its attack.

Talen fared better against his tiger, but then again he was at full strength, restored by Varo' intervention of a moment ago. The cat's claws failed to find purchase on the smooth metal plates covering his torso, and *Beatus Incendia* blazed with purpose as he carved deep gashes in its body, ending with a stroke that sliced through half of its skull.

Talen looked up again to see one of the priests, the woman, pointing at him. The knight tried to dodge, but as a green beam shot from her fingertips, it became clear that he was not the target of the attack.

The *disintegrate* struck Varo square in the chest. The priest of Dagos did not move as the green energy of the beam spread across his body, seeping into him. He closed his eyes, drawing all of his focus and determination into a barrier against the spell. Flesh sizzled as the green glow ate away at it, but when it died, he was still there, smoking rising from his chest from where the beam had struck.

"Dagos is my shield, foul bitch of Orcus!" he shouted. But the attack had disrupted his latest summoning spell, and he was rapidly running out of effective counters. He hurled another *mass inflict* spell at the two enemy priests left standing, but the attack faltered against their *spell resistance*.

Dar couldn't see much except for black fur and blood as the tiger leapt up and wrapped its claws around his upper body. It tried to bite him, but the huge jaws snagged on the front of his helmet. He smelled brimstone.

"Get! Off! Me!" he yelled, but weakened as he was, he could not break the tiger's ferocious leverage. Then the cat screamed and suddenly he was free; he immediately took advantage and drove *Valor* to the hilt in the monster's side.

As it fell, he saw Kalend, the thief's sword edged in red, and beside him Serah. The cleric's clothes were an utter mess, charred from the *flame strike*, but she rushed over to him, treating his own wounds with a *cure serious wounds* spell.

"Thanks," he said, grimacing as he tried to get up for yet another time. He felt a cold chill, some instinct warning him as he looked up toward the top of the dais.

Talen and Herzord were converging on that destination, but the two clerics were waiting for them. Behind them the statue of Orcus loomed huge, somehow clearly visible even through the haze of smoke and chaos.

"They're running into a trap," Dar said, forcing his wobbly legs to support his weight. "Stay here," he told Kalend and Serah, turning back to the foe.

But the clerics were ready. Theron raised a hand into the air, the sleeve of his robe falling to reveal the fire-blackened limb beneath. "Lo, and as the *Codex* declares, so shall the fate of all who oppose the True God be sealed in blood!"

The two clerics released their spells spontaneously, Theron's *flame strike* cascading down at the same instant that Celleen's *mass inflict serious wounds* scoured through the companions in its wake.

Chapter 200

THE GRIM FIST OF DEATH

Dar blinked.

His body was numb. Sensation... everything felt distant, as though he was being told about another person's experiences. The stench of roasted flesh. Sounds. Pain. Anger. Violence.

He blinked, and it all came back in a rush. There was still little pain, but he could see his hand, a blackened claw, bright red where the skin had cracked away, revealing the savaged muscle tissue below. There was a spot of white, where a piece of bone was visible.

He tried to get up. It felt like there was a dragon sitting on his back. He saw the hilt of *Valor*, and reached out to grab it. He could not feel the touch of the weapon, but it was reassuring to have it in his hand.

Why was he alive.

Memory, returning in a rush.

He lifted his head slightly. The flesh of his cheek stuck to the hot bronze he was lying on, coming away in a swath. He did not feel it.

His gaze traveled over a blackened forms, on the ground beside the bronze tier. He did not recognize it at first, until it moved... no, there was something *under* it. Kalend, his eyes wild and unfocused as he pushed away the dead hunk of material that had been a vibrant young woman a few seconds before.

Serah...

Realization hit him like a dagger thrust. He took a breath, ignoring the burning in his abused lungs. At least it was... *feeling*, a physical sensation that told him he was alive. The pain started to come back, too, as the *mass cure* that had revived him continued its work, reconnecting the nerves that had been burned away with his flesh.

He stood, *Valor's* tip dragging on the bronze.

He looked up, to witness the battle raging on the edge of the dais.

Talen felt metal crunch as he smashed *Beatus Incendia* across the body of the woman cleric, but she only smiled at him, even as she staggered back. To his right, Shay had rushed in to face the other cleric, the one that had taken down Herzord with a single blow from his flaming mace. The hobgoblin had been the first to reach the platform, emerging from the dying flames with blood trailing down his body from the vicious wounds that had been *inflicted* across his body. The male cleric had just stood there, waiting for him. Talen, clambering up the last tier, was too late to do anything except watch as Theron brought up a mace, its head surrounded by an eager nimbus of fire, and smashed it across Herzord's chest. The hobgoblin had to have been a good forty or fifty pounds heavier than the priest, but the blow had knocked him on his back, tumbling over the edge of the dais to land limp on the first bronze tier below.

Shay had not hesitated, leaping into the gap left by the fallen hobgoblin to engage the cleric. Talen felt sick knowing what could happen to her, but he was far too experienced to turn his attention from his foe, even for an instant.

When the final exchange came, it came quickly and decisively. Both clerics lunged, almost as though they were directed by the same mind. Neither Talen nor Shay were quick enough to avoid being touched, even the briefest of finger-brushes enough for the priests of Orcus to deliver their deadly spells. The *harm* spells undid all of the healing spells that Allera had layered upon them, and both fell to the ground, their bodies convulsing as the evil magic wrought its unholy work upon their bodies.

"Fools," Celleen hissed, "to think that you could stand before the might of the True God."

Licinius Varo stepped up onto the dais.

"Ah, the Creeper's servant finally dares to come before us," Celleen said.

"You seek to destroy the world," Varo said simply. "I will not be the last to defy you."

"Noble, but ultimately too late," Theron said. "Even if we should fall, the power has already been gathered to sunder the barrier between worlds. Before this day is out, the ritual will be complete, and the way will be opened for our Master. Your powers are impressive, but they are not enough to defeat us."

"You underestimate me," Varo said. He gestured, and a huge fiendish centipede appeared behind the statue of Orcus, coiling around the graven monument as it emerged into the light.

Theron raised an eyebrow, and Celleen sneered. "Is that the best you can manage, shadow priest?" the woman asked.

“You have fought well, but this distraction will not save your friends,” Theron said. The cleric extended an arm, and unleashed a *mass inflict serious wounds* spell.

The spell should have been instantly lethal for Talen and Shay. But even as the dark energies of the spell spread out from the cleric, Allera countered it with her last *mass cure* spell. Allera’s spell was of lesser potency than that of the evil cleric, but the power that she commanded was at the same time much stronger. The negative energy was countered by the positive, and the pair even gained some small measure of strength, though both still lingered close on the edge of unconsciousness.

Theron’s eyes widened slightly at being countered, but his voice remained level. “Your powers are weakening, old man.”

It is not my power that you need to be worried about,” Varo replied calmly.

Celleen lifted her hand to fire off her own *inflict wounds*, but was distracted by the charge of Varo’s monstrous centipede. The creature struck the cleric hard in the back, driving its mandibles through the links of her magical chainmail into the flesh beneath. The cleric was far too tough to succumb easily to its venom, but the vermin was too big to ignore. Celleen looked almost annoyed as she reached around and touched it on the head, unleashing a *slay living* spell into it. The centipede spasmed and released her, dissolving almost before its head hit the ground.

Dar slid up onto the top of the dais from the highest bronze tier, lashing out with *Valor* even as he surged to his feet. His blow caught Theron in the back of his left leg, and bit hard even through the man’s platemail. The cleric was clearly limping as he came around to face Dar, but before the fighter could set his feet for a full attack, Theron reached out and placed his palm on Dar’s chest, blasting him with his second *harm*.

Varo helped Talen to his feet, infusing him with a *cure serious wounds* as he did so. “Help Shay,” Talen said, and he started to turn to her before Varo stopped him.

“You must stop her,” Varo said, pointing at the enemy cleric. Leaning in, the cleric said, “If she gets another *mass inflict* off, Shay is dead.” Even as he finished speaking, Celleen took down the centipede, and turned back toward them.

Talen roared and charged at the cleric, before she could unleash another one of those destructive *inflict wounds* spells. He didn’t even try to cut her down with *Beatus Incendia*, sliding the sword back into its scabbard, and leaping forward to bear her down in a grapple.

He hit her hard, and clearly outweighed her, but it was like trying to grapple water. The cleric slid effortlessly from his grasp, and as she twisted out of his way his inertia carried him forward, and he fell hard on his face, his mail clattering around him. He tried to get up, but only managed to turn onto his back before the priestess shoved her boot down onto his neck.

“Pathetic,” she said, before she hit him, hit all of them, with another *mass inflict wounds* spell.

Chapter 201

THE EDGE OF FATE

Celleen’s *mass inflict moderate wounds* spell was easily powerful enough to kill Shay and Dar outright. But as the priestess hurled the negative energies of the spell into the aether, focusing it like knife points on the tenuous lifelines of her foes, the magic wavered and dissolved. She turned with fury and looked at Varo, who held his divine focus in one hand, and had stretched out his other toward the priestess. The cleric of Dagos had called upon one of his last higher-valence spells to fuel his own *mass inflict wounds*, and had used it to counterspell her magic.

Celleen shrieked in frustration, and lifted her mace as though prepared to deal with the cleric in the old-fashioned way. After what her fellow priest had done to Herzord, it seemed unlikely that Varo would fare any better.

Dar’s vision grew clouded, as a red haze descended over his perceptions. He knew that another hit, any hit, hells, even a sharp push would probably end it for him. But deep inside his brain something had snapped, and he refused to go down, demanding that last hit before he would capitulate.

He reached down and grabbed Theron’s wrist. The cleric tried to pull free, but Dar’s fingers were like iron, his stolen strength returning in a rush of blind fury. For a second or two, the pair wrestled for control. Then Theron snarled and lifted his mace with his other hand.

Dar did not relinquish his grip, and lifted the cleric’s arm. He spoke, each word a shout that sprayed a fine mist of red out from his blood-smacked lips.

“NO!”

“MORE!”

“FUCKING!”

“CLERICS!”

With the last word, even as Theron shifted his weight and brought his mace down, Dar drove *Valor* around and down in a violent blur. The axiomatic blade hit the cleric’s arm

at the elbow and kept going, severing the limb and breaking the connection between them. Still holding Theron's arm, Dar staggered back a step, while opposite him the priest missed wildly with his own swing. The burning head of the mace formed a red trail that Dar only barely perceived. Theron, wavering, managed a step forward, bringing the mace back up in a upward arc aimed at the fighter's head. Sheer instinct warned him of the attack, and he brought Theron's forearm up to block, while driving *Valor* up with his other hand. The blow pierced the cleric's armor in the gap between plates under his weapon arm, the blue steel sliding deep into his body.

Theron gasped, and his fingers loosened. The burning mace plummeted to the ground, landing on the stone floor of the dais with a loud clatter.

Dar stood there, holding up the cleric—or perhaps holding himself up against him, the two connected by the foot of steel driven through Theron's body. Blood cascaded from the severed arm of the priest, pouring onto Dar's armor.

Theron stirred, and whispered something into Dar's ear.

Then he fell, and Dar yanked *Valor* out of him as he dropped to the ground.

“NO!” Celleen yelled, a sound of animal fury erupting out of her throat as she charged toward Dar. Her mace came up, and she drew the power of Destruction into her as she crossed the few steps that separated them, poised to put an end to this enemy that had slain her lover.

Unfortunately for the cleric, that path also took her by Shay, who tripped her as she passed.

The cleric landed hard on her face. Her jaw cracked the hard stone floor as she hit, and she spat blood as she tried to get up. It took her a moment to get her bearings, but she quickly recovered, shaking her head to clear it as she got her hands under her and pushed up.

Unfortunately, that brief delay was too much, as Talen came up behind her and drove *Beatus Incendia* down through her neck with enough force to pierce her fully and chip the stone beneath.

Celleen gurgled something, and collapsed.

Talen stood over her, and looked around. Varo was helping Shay to her feet; even with his help she could barely stand. Dar was wavering like a drunken man, but he refused to go down. He was covered with blood, which trailed off of him like raindrops. Looking down from the dais, Talen saw a landscape scattered with bloody corpses. Allera was kneeling over Serah's blackened body, while Kalend sat on one of the bronze tiers, shaking uncontrollably.

Victory.

Chapter 202

VICTORY

Scenes of victory.

Allera knelt in front of a small, multicolored figure. She reached out and smoothed Snaggletooth's gossamer wings, then sobbed and lifted the little dragon into her lap, holding it gently against her body.

Varo stood over Serah's blackened corpse, fists clenched. Shay came up behind him, put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said.

Varo looked up at her, his expression neutral. "We needed a priest of the Shining Father in our company," he said. "Without one, we will not be able to fully sunder the link between the Demon and his three temples in Rappan Athuk."

Shay's expression turned into a look of horrified disgust, and she backed away. Varo watched her, then looked down at Serah's body once more.

As he turned, his right fist opened briefly. In it was a ring, an exact copy of the one that he and several of his companions wore. The cleric thrust the ring back into his pouch, and walked away.

Kalend bent over near the edge of one of the bronze platforms, voiding his stomach. He had not stopped shaking since the end of the battle. As he straightened, he saw Dar coming up behind him.

"There is no shame in it," the fighter said simply.

"I... I cannot stop shaking."

Dar held his eyes for a moment. "You should go back to the goblins. Ensure that our avenue of retreat is kept open."

Kalend wiped a hand across his mouth, then realized that it was covered in blood. He grabbed a rag out of his pouch that was at least partly clean. "You going on, colonel?"

Dar glanced up at Talen, who was standing atop the dais, watching them and staring at nothing at the same time. "I guess we'll figure that one out next."

The thief tucked the rag back into his pouch. He looked to the side, where a bloody arrow lay beside the corpse of one of the enemy priests. "I suppose... I suppose I will stick with you, sir."

Dar nodded. "Help me loot these bodies, then."

As the fighter crossed the room, he met Allera. The healer had wrapped the body of her slain companion in a piece of white cloth; the whole looked barely larger than a folded cloak. She paused as Dar came before her, and did not look up.

"I... I'm sorry about your friend."

Allera finally did look up at him, her eyes full of tears. "You will think I am weak... but would you hold me, just for a minute or two?"

Dar nodded, and she came into his embrace, heedless of the bloodstains that covered his armor. "You're not weak, Allera," he said, his voice husky as he put his arms around her. "You're the strongest person I know."

She did not say anything, just stood there within his arms.

Shay walked up the stairs slowly, toward Talen. The knight had been healed of his physical wounds, but one look at him was enough to show the scars he carried within. He did not seem to recognize her until she was almost upon him, then his gaze shifted and his distant expression softened. She laid a hand on his arm, and his mouth tightened.

That connection did not last long. Varo came up the stairs to join them. As the three faced each other in silence, the others sensed that something was happening, and Dar, Allera, and Kalend moved to join them.

"Well, Varo, let's have it," Talen said finally.

"You heard the high priest, commander. We are out of time."

"And you believe that sack of shit?" Shay asked. "He knew he might die, he would have said anything if he thought it would hurt us."

"He was not lying."

"Oh, and I suppose you know that from your fucking book, or from some whisper from your god that you didn't care to share with us!"

"Shay." Talen's voice was low, but it caused the scout to draw back, if only slightly. She had been shouting almost into Varo's face.

“She’s right about one thing,” Dar said. “You can’t trust those fucking clerics.”

Varo did not turn his gaze from Talen. The knight, met that stare square on, his eyes just slightly vacant. “Allera, how are we for healing?” he finally asked.

The healer lifted her head but didn’t quite meet her gaze. “My wands, potions, and scrolls... all used up. I have... one wand, *cure light*... it was Serah’s. It’s almost empty.”

“Several of the enemy clerics and our goblinoid allies had healing potions that they did not get a chance to use,” Varo said.

“So we’re going on,” Dar said.

“Allera has a rod that can purge physical exhaust...”

Talen cut Varo off with a raised hand. The knight’s eyes looked sunken in his head, and deep black circles lay under them. Shay looked at him with concern.

“Tell me what happens, Varo. The ritual.”

The cleric nodded. “They will have been collecting souls for a while, now. The captives they took from southern Camar were likely insufficient for their needs; that was why they had to assail Grezneck. If what the high priest said was true, then we came along almost at the end of their ritual; remember that the cells below were empty.”

The others stood silent, caught up in Varo’s speech. “The Sphere of Souls is just a storage device, a conduit for gathering up the life energy of Rappan Athuk and focusing it for the cult’s use. This place must be connected to it, somehow.”

“Why not just keep the sphere here?” Dar asked.

“The layout of Rappan Athuk may appear to be random,” Varo replied, “but that is a misleading perception. The three temples of the demon... those are laid out in a precise arrangement, upon invisible but very real lines of power. I cannot be more definitive without deeper study, but I would posit that this location is sited close to one of those ley lines, feeding the Sphere through the ritual that those priests were conducting. The Sphere itself will be in the Third Temple, the deepest and most powerful locus of Orcus’s power on this plane.”

“Once they have gathered enough soul energy, the priests of Orcus will use that power to sunder the barrier that separates the Prime and the Abyss, opening a gateway through which Orcus can enter our world in the flesh.”

“I do not understand,” Allera said. “We have faced demons, many of them. Is not Orcus more powerful? Why can’t it just come here on its own?”

“Therein lies the difficulty, from the perspective of the cult,” Varo said. “The Prime, our world, and Abyss are polar opposites in the very nature of their fundamental realities. They are separated by a boundary that is a necessary prerequisite of their separate existences. Even conjuring a minor demon to our reality takes considerable power, and the more potent the demon, the more power must be invested. To bring a Prince of the Dark into the material realm... that requires enough power to sunder the very boundaries of reality.”

“Why does the Demon want to come here?” Talen asked, quietly. “What does it want with us?”

“Destruction. Power. Chaos. Do not seek to delve too deeply into its motives, commander; its mind is alien to ours. Demons are the embodiment of chaos and evil, and they share none of the empathy and sentiment that sentient beings on our world feel.”

“What about our guide?” Dar asked. “I didn’t see that Filcher among the bodies of our ‘friends’, but then again all gobbos sort of look the same.”

“If he survived, he likely fled back to his kin,” Shay said.

“Well, that makes him the only smart one here,” Dar noted. “It still means we don’t know where we’re going.”

“I can take us there from here,” Varo said.

“More secrets?” Shay asked.

“No. I spoke to the goblin at length, while we recovered from the battle with Tribitz and his minions. And the currents of power linking the temples... they are strong, so strong that I can almost feel them without the aid of a spell. We are close, very close.”

“What can we expect to face, Varo?” Talen asked. “Spare me the usual qualifications; your best guess, based on the evidence available.”

“Let me guess,” Dar said. “More clerics.”

“Likely so,” Varo said. “Undead, almost certainly. Demons, likely.” He hesitated, a subtle shift in expression, but Talen picked it up.

“Speak.”

The cleric nodded. “The demon we faced in the second temple. The one that took the Sphere and *teleported* out.”

“What is it?”

“A greater demon, unique among its kind. Its power was... beyond anything we’ve faced here.”

“How are we supposed to beat a thing like that?” Shay asked.

“We do not have to beat it. We only need to get to the Sphere.”

“And if it costs our lives to accomplish that, I suppose you don’t care.”

“I care about the survival of our world,” Varo said, his voice surprisingly intense. Shay’s jaw tightened, but she did not respond.

Dar looked at Talen. “You’re in charge of this fucking pileup, commander. It’s your call.”

Chapter 203

THE CHAPEL OF ORCUS

As Shay pulled the lever recessed into the leg of the statue of Orcus, a large segment of the rear wall slid slowly open, revealing a dank staircase that led down into darkness. Dar shone a torch into the opening, revealing a small landing that also contained a ladder of ancient bronze rungs that led up a narrow shaft for at least as far as the light extended upward.

“Where does this go?”

“Up,” Varo said. “Our way lies below.”

“Yeah, right,” Dar said. “Shay, you want to do your thing, or you want one of us to go first on this one?”

“I got it,” the scout said, drawing out her own torch as she started down the stairs.

They had not lingered long after Talen had made his decision. They had finished looting the bodies of anything of use. Dar had stripped the magical plate mail off the enemy high priest and donned it, turning his breastplate back over to Varo. The mail was not a perfect fit, but Theron’s build had been similar to Dar’s, and a few adjusted straps had proven sufficient for the moment. Shay had found a ring of thin clear crystal on the body of the high priestess that almost screamed *magic*, and she almost absently slid it onto a finger of her right hand. A number of other items of magical potency made their way into Varo’s *handy haversack*, and he had distributed several magical potions

among the members of the group. Or had tried to; when he'd offered Shay a potion of *bull's strength* that he had found in Herzord's pouch, the scout had been quick to reject him.

"Just stay away from me, Varo," she'd said, turning and walking away. She had found the lever for the secret door a minute later, summoning the others before operating the hidden mechanism.

They descended for an interminable time. It no longer seemed vital just how far they were underground; the feeling of bright sunshine and clean air had receded to a hazy memory. They continued down in single file, with Talen behind Shay, followed by Dar, Allera, Varo, and Kalend. As they made their way further down the stairs, each of them felt a cold, cloying sense of evil descend upon them like a second skin, stronger even than the malevolence they had felt in the slave pits. The temperature in the air alternated between a sticky warmth and bone chilling cold, often within the span of just a few steps. Their boots trod upon sick, squishy things that stank of foulness, and Shay slowed their pace, alert to any threats that might linger in the darkness ahead of them.

Time passed. Finally, they came to a chamber at the foot of the stairs, a square, featureless room with a single doorway offering exit.

"This is not a good idea," Shay said quietly, as Talen joined her at the end of the staircase.

"We have no choice," Talen said, heading for the door. Shay had to hurry to get ahead of him again, giving the door a cursory examination for traps or other dangers. The portal was no real barrier, the wood cracked and rotted, with gaps that allowed her to clearly see what was on the far side.

"Looks clear," she said after a moment, pulling open the door.

The attack came without any warning. Three wraiths emerged from the walls and ceiling of the corridor on the far side of the door, swarming onto Shay. The scout cried out as their insubstantial claws vanished into her body, ripping out vitality from her.

"Shay!" Talen yelled, leaping forward as his sword blazed into brilliant life.

Varo raised his divine focus, and called forth the power of Dagos. The violet flicker of negative energy seemed tentative, weakened by the overwhelming potency of Orcus in this place, but two of the wraiths froze, rebuked. The third followed Shay as the scout stumbled back, deeply drained by the undead creatures' touches. It reached for her again, but before it could strike her a second time both *Valor* and *Beatus Incendia* tore through it. With a soft hiss, the creature dissolved.

The other two wraiths put up no resistance as they were torn apart. "Are you okay?" Talen asked Shay.

The scout nodded. Allera put Tribitz's rod to good use, *restoring* the vitality she had lost. "Sorry... it looked clear."

"There was no way to know that they were there," Talen said. "If they didn't know we were here before, they do now. Let's keep going."

The passage beyond the door led straight for about fifty feet before a slightly narrower side passage branched off to the right. Shay looked in both directions, and indicated that it looked like the passage forward terminated in a room about thirty feet ahead.

"We go right," Varo said.

"How do you know?" Talen asked.

"Do you not sense it? The power... it is immense. I can feel it unassisted; I suspect that a *detect magic* here would result in unconsciousness."

"All right, take us forward, Shay, but keep an eye out, everyone, for another ambush."

The scout nodded, and head them down the tunnel. The passage forked again after another forty feet, and again Varo guided them to the right. The passage straightened and widened, and they found themselves in a vaulted corridor some twenty feet across, which proceeded for about sixty feet more before ending in a pair of double doors. These portals were of black stone, and rose some fifteen feet, to almost brush the ceiling. There had been carvings on the doors at some point, but time and use had worn them down, until only vague but disquieting outlines remained.

"Varo?" Talen asked.

"I do not have any answers, commander. From here on our, we will have to consign ourselves to our gods."

Talen looked at him in surprise; the statement seemed incongruent, coming from him.

"I've had enough of gods, good or ill. I'll trust in this," Dar said, holding up *Valor*.

Shay took a deep breath, and took hold one of the battered handles of black iron that jutted from the front of the doors. The heavy portal opened, although she grimaced at the effort required to move the hulking thing. After a moment, Dar moved to help her, and the two of them drew it open far enough for clear access into the space beyond.

Their light revealed a rough chamber, its far ends barely visible at the very edge of their light. Mounds of debris littered the floor, and the ancient stone was cracked and pitted, with crevices everywhere that swallowed their light and remained deep in shadow.

The companions moved warily into the room. "There aren't any exits," Kalend said.

"Check for secret doors," Talen said. "Stay alert... there's something... *wrong* about this place."

The knight's instincts were proven correct a few heartbeats later, as the shadows around the perimeter of the room began to move. Dark things emerged from the myriad cracks in the walls, gathering at the edges of their light.

"Shadows!" Shay warned.

The undead, dozens of them, hesitated only long enough for their full strength to gather, then they dove at the companions, incorporeal claws extended to siphon the life from these intruders that had dared to penetrate their sanctum.

Chapter 204

SHADOW SURPRISE

Varo cried out, his voice echoing uncannily off the oddly angled walls. "Gather around me, at once!"

His companions needed no encouragement, as they were each all too familiar with the deadly effects of a shadow's touch. There were too many to fight, too many for Varo to turn, so they relied on the cleric's experience and instincts, falling back on a point in the center of the room.

The leading edge of the shadow charge pressed in among them, penetrating armor and flesh alike with ease. Talen was staggered as a pair of shadows siphoned strength from him, and he shouted, "Varo, now!"

But the cleric waited another second, a seeming eternity as the shadows eagerly assaulted the defenders. Dar bisected a shadow with his sword, but the weapon passed harmlessly through it, and it in turn cut through his arm, sucking away a measure of his strength. All of them suffered attacks, and still more shadows were descending, a curtain of black that blocked out their light sources, closing them in within a shrinking bubble of light.

"Varo!" Talen yelled.

The cleric lifted a hand high into the air, thrusting through the body of a shadow to raise a wand crafted of rune-marked bone. The cleric drew upon the power of the device, stolen from the corpse of Theron, and summoned a *flame strike* that descended directly

upon himself and his companions. Shay was the only one to react in time, hurling herself out of their circle and away from the descending column of fire. The rest of them suffered cruel and familiar burns as the spell wrought its deadly effect, but it also burned away all of the shadows.

Or nearly all; two of them had followed Shay on her leap, and as she came to her feet they continued to harry her. One dug its claws through her back, and the scout fell, her strength all but gone. The pair surged in to finish the job, but Dar, Talen, and Allera were there at once to aid her. Once again *Valor* failed to bite, but Talen tore one in two with *Beatus Incendia*, while Allera used a precious healing spell to disrupt the other.

Varo knelt over Kalend, who'd fallen unconscious, his body covered with burns from the *flame strike*. The cleric stabilized him with a trickle of magical healing, then said, "Allera, Kalend requires your aid."

Dar turned angrily on Varo. "What in the hells was that, priest?"

Varo took out a healing potion and drained its contents. "It was either that, or accept casualties. I could not have possibly affected so many shadows at once with a rebuke, and if I had focused the wand's power on one portion of the room, the other shadows would have killed us before I had a chance to fire another."

Talen returned carrying Shay; the scout was too weak to move. Once Allera had returned Kalend to consciousness, she took Tribitz's rod and treated all of them for their lost strength. All save Varo; the cleric used a *lesser restoration* spell to accomplish the same effect.

"I am glad that my instincts warned me not to trust you," Shay said to Varo, once Allera had treated her.

"Your instincts quite nearly cost you your life," Varo said. "Had another shadow followed you out of the blast radius of the *strike*, you would now be undead, like them."

Dar drained a healing draught and hurled the empty bottle across the room. "Let's get on with it," he said.

It took them only a few minutes to find the secret door. Varo closed his eyes and cast out for the source of the pulsing tendrils of energy that they could all feel now, thrumming through the room like the heartbeat of some great machine. He directed them to the proper wall, where Shay uncovered the hidden trigger that allowed a wide segment of the wall to swing open.

The space beyond was surprisingly unremarkable. The dusty, barren chamber was maybe twenty feet square, its only feature of note a crude stone altar set into the center of the wall to their right. Stone etchings were cut into the wall above the altar, but like the doors outside they were worn down to indecipherability.

“Something’s not right here,” Dar muttered under his breath. They moved into the room, but clustered close to the secret panel, wary of another trap.

“The sounds,” Shay said. “This place... it *sounds* bigger than it looks...”

“An illusion,” Varo said. “A veil lies over this place, masking its true extent.”

“Can you *dispel* it?” Talen asked, but before the cleric could respond, a cold chill passed through them, a scant second before a wave of incorporeal undead passed through the far wall. There were over a dozen of them, mostly shadows, but with several wraiths among their number, their glowing eyes shining with hunger for the life energy of the companions.

Varo raised his wand, and called down a *flame strike*. The column of fire filled the room, close enough to singe the edges of their ragged garments as the backblast washed over them. Some of the undead were able to avoid the flames, but they could not escape the divine potency infused within the spell. Perhaps the fact that the wand had been crafted by a follower of Orcus made it more deadly to creatures of undeath, or perhaps it was something in Varo himself as he drew upon its magic. Whatever the source, the spell was devastating, and when the flames cleared, only a pair of wraiths remained, their insubstantial forms riven and wavering. Both creatures pressed their attacks, but Dar and Talen were waiting for them, and cut them apart before they could strike.

Varo raised his wand again, and while the others could hear the rush of flames from somewhere beyond the wall, they could not see it.

Dar faced the wall, *Valor* at the ready, but he held his ground, wary of charging forward into another ambush. Allera, standing in his shadow, looked past him and grew pale, her hands trembling.

“Varo!” Talen yelled.

“Marshal your will, commander,” the cleric said. “See what is there, not what your eyes tell you to see.”

The two fighters, standing side by side, stared at the wall. The illusory barrier shimmered and dissolved, revealing a much larger space beyond. They realized that the room they were standing in was but a foyer, opening onto a broad hall easily sixty feet wide and many times that in length. Two rows of bronze pillars graven with obscene designs supported an arched ceiling high above, its details lost in deep shadow.

Further down the hall, the chamber opened into an even larger space, its full extent vast but difficult to quantify in the face of the bright haze of light that illuminated it. The light

came from a bright globe dozens of paces across, a sphere of wavering and flickering chaos that was all too familiar to most of them; they had seen it once before in the second temple of Orcus high above. The source of the light was a vague point in the center of the globe, but none of them had to see it clearly to know what it was.

The Sphere of Souls.

But while the companions marked their goal, their attention was drawn to the entities that stood silhouetted against the bright chaos of the Sphere. Two were clerics, a man and woman, familiar if dangerous foes. They were clad in the heavy armor and black robes of the high clergy of the demon lord. The light of the Sphere played on their bald skulls, casting eerie reflections off the Abyssal runes etched deep into their flesh. Black energies surrounded them, protective wards that shielded them against the power of good and light.

The clerics flanked a monstrosity, a creature whose demonic nature was instantly evident. The being had a face and torso that were vaguely humanoid and feminine, but those features were attached to a serpentine body that extended for some twenty feet from the top of its head to the end of its tail. Six arms extended from its torso, each holding a slightly curving and viciously sharp sword with blades of black steel. Like the clerics a malevolent nimbus of darkness clung to it like a second skin, the chaotic surges of the *unholy aura* adding to the incredible impression of power and dread it made upon those beholding it.

“Oh, fucking shit,” Dar said under his breath.

The clerics' robes were scorched from Varo's *flame strike*, although the marilith, standing between them, was utterly unharmed. The fell priests had not been idle during the attack, however. As the companions stared in horror at what confronted them, each completed a spell. The male cleric swelled and grew as he drew upon the power of *righteous might*, while the female hurled an *unholy blight* into their midst, weakening them with angry pulses of corrupt energy.

The marilith extended a long, slender arm, holding a heavy sword out without apparent effort. The companions tensed, but the attack they expected came not directly at them, but at the confined space of the exit behind them. The demon's power funneled into that gap, and the vicious blur of a *blade barrier* materialized there. Kalend, hovering in the rear of their group, was standing almost at the edges of the deadly barrier, and as the blades started to clip into his back the thief leapt forward, narrowly avoiding being cut into ribbons. With eyes wide, he stared back at the violent storm of death that now blocked their retreat.

Their only avenue of escape was now cut off.

Chapter 205

THE BATTLE FOR THE THIRD TEMPLE

The floor of the temple of Orcus was crafted of massive stone blocks that had been first set millennia past, but even those shook as the priest Wheraz charged. His *righteous might* spell had augmented his weight to over two thousand pounds, and the marilith's *unholy aura* played about his body as he moved, giving him the look of an avenging spirit.

Talen glanced over at Dar, but the fighter was downing a potion, and was distracted for a critical moment. The knight stepped forward to meet the priest's rush, summoning his will to protect him from whatever deadly trick the foe might attempt. "Stand fast, for Camar!" he yelled, his conviction and dedication to his cause infusing the *rally cry* with power that bolstered him and his companions against the dark energies of this place.

But the cleric eschewed subtlety for a straight out attack. With his physical prowess augmented by a *bull's strength* on top of the effects of the *righteous might*, he struck with the force of a battering ram. Talen brought his shield up to deflect the blow from the cleric's mace, but even so the force of the impact drove him back, and he cried out as his shoulder was dislocated from its socket. He spun around and might have fallen, had not Shay grabbed him and supported him for a critical instant.

"Spread out, flank him!" Talen cried, trying to ignore the white-hot stabbings of agony that radiated out from his savaged shoulder. Shay nodded and leapt forward, tumbling almost effortlessly around the cleric's side to threaten his left side, behind the reach of his shield.

With Talen occupied by the hulking cleric, Dar found himself facing the marilith, which slid forward almost casually, the tips of its swords scraping nastily against the stone of the floor. A little voice that he hadn't often heard whispered in the back of his mind, *I've got to be smart, here.*

The fighter roared and lowered his head as he charged forward. The marilith's affected pose of indifference evaporated, and the six blades it carried came up into ready positions. The demon reared up to its full height, and Dar had to crane his neck to look up at its face; it had to be at least nine feet tall.

The fighter abruptly stopped, still a good twenty feet from the demon. He kept *Valor* down in his right hand while he lifted his right, and beckoned to the creature.

"Come on, bitch."

The demon's expression seemed amused, almost, as it slid forward to meet its foe. It fixed its stare on Dar, and the fighter shook his head, snarling.

“Get out of my mind...”

The attack came with incredible swiftness. One long arm shot out, the black blade darted inside Dar’s guard. He’d been expecting an attack, but as he swung *Valor* up to meet it the marilith twisted its wrist slightly, and it deflected his stroke with almost effortless aplomb. As Dar’s blade was knocked aside the demon followed with a thrust that clipped Dar’s helmet. The fighter staggered a step to the side; his helmet had withstood the blow, but he’d obviously felt the force of the impact regardless.

The demon let out a pleased noise, a hiss of pleasure at the pain experienced by its foe.

Dar felt a touch at his back. “Be strong,” Allera said, as she cast one of her few remaining healing spells into him, easing his wounds and bringing him back to full strength.

“Right,” the fighter said. He lunged forward, stepping into the marilith’s reach to unleash a full attack with both fists clenched tight around the hilt of *Valor*.

The blade flashed blue up its length as it clove into the marilith’s sinuous body. The creature’s earlier delight was banished, replaced by an angry hiss of cold fury as the fighter’s axiomatic blade tore deep gashes in its body. The marilith drew back a step, and Dar moved to follow, bringing his sword, trailing black ichor, up to strike again.

“Dar, no!” Allera cried, recognizing the trap too late as the demon’s six blades came up around its body like a halo.

Talen’s shield dropped as his dislocated shoulder sent waves of agony through his body. But *Beatus Incendia* flared like a small sun in his other hand as he stepped forward and smote the cleric with the holy blade. His first swing crunched through the thick armor plate protecting his left thigh, cutting deep into the leg beneath. The cleric merely grunted and shifted his weight, lifting his mace to strike again, but before he could execute the attack Talen brought his sword up into the man’s gut. Again steel gave way before steel, and a cascade of bright red blood erupted from the gaping wound. The cleric was hurting now, but while a normal man would have likely collapsed already from the pain, the evil priest’s fanatic expression only twisted a shade deeper toward madness, and he pressed his assault.

Shay had taken up position behind the cleric, but she found herself unable to assist her lover. As she came around the enlarged priest, she found herself facing the slight figure of the female cleric. The woman’s mace was at her side, and Shay knew enough to realize that this meant trouble.

“Embrace the touch of the True God!” the woman hissed, darting forward with surprising alacrity despite the heavy metal armor she wore. Shaylara twisted to the side, but before she could extract herself she felt a soft touch on her arm as the cleric’s fingers

brushed her. That light contact was enough for the cleric's *slay living* spell to course into the scout. Shay's jaw clenched tight enough to start it bleeding as she fought the waves of agony that spread up the arm into her body. For a moment her heart skipped a beat, two, three... but then the deadly effects of the spell passed, and she fell back, damaged but alive.

"Your will is strong, but it will not save you," the woman said, following after her. Shay felt a cold chill hammer at her as Talen screamed, and she looked over her shoulder to see Wheraz smash his mace down into Talen again. The knight had brought his shield up, somehow, but the impact was hard enough to drive him down to his knees. The cleric's robes were stained crimson from his waist down as his blood continued to course out of the deep wound in his gut, but he seemed impervious to mere pain, and he lifted his mace again to deliver a final blow.

Shay's foe was quick to exploit the distraction, lunging forward to deliver another touch attack. Gernaldra's fingers began to glow red as she reached for the scout's throat, but before she could strike, Shay leapt to the side. This time the cleric could not adjust in time, and as she darted past Shay shot a booted foot down into the joint of the cleric's right knee. The woman cried out as the knee buckled, and she plummeted forward to fall hard on her face, grunting as the wind was knocked out of her.

Shay landed in a crouch and shot up, driving her sword into the other cleric's side. The keen elvish blade bit through the man's armor, but his spell had augmented his stamina beyond that of a normal man, and while Shay saw blood running down the runnel of her blade, she knew that her hit had not been enough to stop him.

No! she mouthed, as his mace came crashing down.

Dar swept *Valor* up in a rapid sweep, deflecting a sword that would have bisected his neck had it struck. He tried to pivot to meet the marilith's second strike, but the creature's swords were a blur of steel around him, and no mere mortal reflexes could withstand that assault. His armor held as a sword smashed hard into his side, and again as a sword crushed his hip, but both hits were telling even without lethal penetration. He tried to bring up *Valor* for one last thrust, but a sword caught him on the bracer, crushing the bone beneath, and the sword fell clattering out of his hands.

He looked up, and saw the feral look in the demon's eyes, a moment before it brought down another sword, and took his right arm off at the shoulder.

Chapter 206

OUCH

“Dar!”

Allera rushed forward as Dar collapsed, blood pouring in a fountain from the stump where his arm had been. The fighter was already unconscious when Allera reached him, and she did not look up at the demon that loomed over them as she clutched him against her, oblivious to the blood that seeped into her clothes. She just held him, pouring healing into his body to stop the flow of life escaping from the wound. She knew it was futile, knew that the demon would kill both of them, but she could do nothing else.

But the killing blow never came. Allera heard a hissing noise, a furious shriek of protest that died suddenly, and as she looked up she was surprised to see...

Nothing.

Varo grimaced. He had carefully hoarded his *banishment* spell through all of the earlier battles that day, refusing to tap its energy for an *inflict wounds* spell despite the dire circumstances. But his *divination* spell that morning had been clear, at least as he had interpreted it, about a rematch with the powerful greater demon that had taken the Sphere of Souls in their last encounter.

He had held out a hope, foolish and fleeting that it had proven, that Dar could have somehow taken out the marilith. But even as he watched that hope cut asunder by the demon's deadly blades, Varo had summoned his magic, brandishing the items of power that he had collected for this purpose. The sigil of his faith. A small knife of cold iron. Holy water. Serah's divine focus, still smeared with traces of the dead cleric's blood.

Focused by Varo's will, the *banishment* spell had penetrated the demon's spell resistance, and hurled it violently back into the Abyss. He had saved Dar and Allera, but now, at least as far as the greater demon was concerned, he was effectively unarmed.

Talen tried to regain his footing, to meet death on his feet, but his legs failed to obey his commands. It was all he could do to keep from tumbling over onto his back. He saw the heavy mace, its enlarged head the size of a melon, coming down straight toward his head. He could not lift his shield again; the entire left side of his body had gone numb.

But just before the seemingly inevitable impact, the deadly head of the mace jerked to the side. The blow still hit Talen, but it was just a glancing strike, bouncing harmlessly off his breastplate without inflicting further damage. Talen watched in surprise as the cleric staggered a pace to his right. He didn't realize what had happened until the cleric dropped his mace, and lifted his hand to his throat. Only then did he see the feathers of the arrow jutting from just under the lip of the man's gorget.

The cleric crumpled, his body already beginning to return to its original size as his magic fled in company with his life.

Shay screamed as white hot knives of pain exploded through her leg. She looked down to see the woman cleric clutching her ankle, the red glow fading from her fingers as the *inflict wounds* spell dissipated into her body. Already injured from the failed *slay living* spell, the *inflict critical wounds* thrust her closer to the point where the cleric's nasty *death touch* power could push her the rest of the way over the edge.

But Gernaldra had another target in mind. As Wheraz collapsed, the woman cleric's lips drew back in a snarl, and she focused her gaze on Talen as she drew herself up to her feet.

She managed about three steps before Shay slammed into her. The scout and cleric both screamed, feral cries as they grappled violently, the cleric trying to break free, the scout trying to hold onto her. Gernaldra was stronger, even without her *bull's strength* spell, and after just a few moments, she ripped her arm free, and backhanded Shaylara across the face. The blow was backed by the force of another *inflict wounds* spell, and Shay fell, dazed.

Gernaldra turned back toward Talen, only to find the knight right in front of her, his sword blazing in his hand. The priestess lunged at him, but he was ready, and he met her surge with three feet of blessed steel that parted the overlapping plates covering her torso and thrust deep into her body.

The priestess looked down at the holy sword impaling her. She reached out at Talen, who grunted and thrust five more inches of *Beatus Incendia* into her body. Her hand brushed his as it fell, but there was no power there, only a fading warmth that died completely as the woman slid off his blade.

The cleric's death left the chamber quiet once more, the only other presence the globe of shifting colors that surrounded the Sphere of Souls.

Talen walked—or more precisely, hobbled—over to Shay, but the scout was already recovering, and was on her feet by the time that Talen got to her. “Are you all right?” the scout asked him.

“Been better,” the knight said, grimacing. He turned so that his shield arm was facing her. “I need you to pull it back into its socket.”

Shay nodded, and took hold of his arm. “Ready?” At Talen's nod, she pulled, and Talen let out a groan as the limb settled back into its proper location. Shay helped him dig a healing potion out of his pouch, uncorking the tiny vial before handing it back to him to consume.

Allera had brought Dar back to consciousness, but there was nothing she could do for his missing arm, at least not immediately. The fighter looked down at his severed limb,

and then stood, with the healer supporting him. He did not speak, but bent down to recover his sword, a dark look on his face.

“We must destroy the Sphere,” Varo said. Behind him, Kalend stood with an arrow nocked, his eyes darting from shadow to shadow.

Wary, the companions moved forward. As they entered the vast open space of the chamber beyond the entry hall, the shifting globe of light radiating from the Sphere made it difficult to make out details. The chamber contained four huge pillars of bronze that were each a good four or five paces in diameter, rising up into the haze above. There were subtle cracks visible in the stone around the perimeter of the room, a suggestion that the recent earth tremors had affected this place deep under the surface of the world.

“Can’t we just shoot it from here?” Kalend suggested.

“I suspect it will take Talen’s blade,” Varo said, but he seemed distracted, staring at the shifting wall of colors and light.

“Hell, give it a shot,” Dar said. “I don’t know about the rest of you lot, but know I don’t want to go in there.”

Kalend lifted his bow, but before he could aim and fire, a *form* took on substance within the chaos aura, a huge black shadow that took on solidity as it approached them.

Decay hung about it like a cloak. Nine feet of emaciated flesh drawn tight over bone. Broad wings trailing strips of rotting hide spreading out from its back. Glowing eyes deep within a horned skull, a penetrating stare of sheer malevolent power. It was chaos. It was evil. It was power. It was all of those things and more, an embodiment of the dark essence of the Abyss.

Maphistal had arrived.

Chapter 207

THE END OF THE END

“Strike at the—” Varo yelled, but his order was cut short as the demon’s feral gaze shifted upon him, and it smote him with a *power word*. The demon’s power smashed through the mental defenses of the cleric like a brick hurled through a parchment screen, and Varo crumpled, stunned.

Without exchanging words or looks, Dar and Talen moved together as one, lifting their weapons as they charged the demon. Each sword had been crafted to slay creatures such as this, and the blades hummed with magical power. Shay started to swing around Talen's flank, to threaten and distract the monster from its rear, but Talen cut her off. "Get the Sphere!" he yelled, gesturing with the tip of his sword.

Shay hesitated only an instant, but in that blink of a moment a lot happened.

The demon carried a terrible weapon, a huge, nasty war mace with flanges of black steel. The length of the weapon and the demon's own size gave it superior reach, and as Talen rushed forward to assault it with *Beatus Incendia*, it snapped the weapon down into the onrushing knight before he could get close enough to strike.

Talen was caught off guard by the demon's speed. He tried to bring up his shield, but the mace sliced past the upper edge of the barrier, and crushed into Talen's helm. The helmet crumpled like paper, and the unholy mace pulverized the bone and flesh beneath it, crushing Talen's skull like an egg.

Dar roared and laid into Maphistal with *Valor*, swiping the axiomatic blade across the demon's torso. His stroke bit into its flesh, but the rotting flesh of its body was far tougher than it looked, and the wound inflicted was trivial, at best. The demon was possessed of an incredible stamina that belied its unwholesome appearance.

Allera rushed over to Talen, but one look was enough to tell her that there was nothing that could be done for him.

Shay looked down at her chest. Gobs of blood and tiny bits of gray matter were splattered across her armor; the demon's blow had impacted with enough force to squirt out little bits of Talen's brains out from under the edges of his helmet. The scout looked down at the corpse of her beloved, and just... snapped. She hurled herself at the demon, her sword slashing out wildly as she hacked at it. The demon barely acknowledged her, and her attack had no effect upon it at all.

Kalend's hands shook wildly as he lifted his bow, and he could feel a chill trickle down his leg as he voided his bladder. For a moment he pointed his arrow at the demon, but then the sheer insanity of it made him hold his shot. Varo's words echoed through his head, and he shifted his target, trying to pick out the Sphere of Souls from within the globe of chaos.

He fired, but his shot came nowhere close to the scintillating orb.

The demon fixed its gaze upon Varo, still helpless from the *power word*. It stepped forward, ignoring the enemies still attacking. Dar let out a feral growl and lifted *Valor* for an all-out attack.

Before he could strike, the demon spoke another word, a twisted syllable of *blasphemy*.

The demon's power was far stronger than that of the priest Theron, and the impact of Maphistal's utterance was devastating. Dar, Allera, and Shay collapsed, overcome. Kalend was struck dead on the spot, and almost at once the gray substance of his soul seeped out of his body and was drawn into the chaotic surge of power that surrounded the Sphere of Souls. Only Varo was not affected, but his mind was still clouded by the *power word*, and while he was aware of the demon, he could do nothing at all as the demon approached him. It spoke, the words forming deep within its skull, echoing within the minds of those gathered.

"You will be the final key in the Ritual, Licinius Varo. I had hoped for a high priest of the Father, but the Creeper's champion will do... perhaps in conjunction with this one." It reached down, and picked up Allera's limp form in one huge claw. The healer let out a pathetic whimper, but could not otherwise react, her muscles paralyzed by its *blasphemy*.

"You have failed, heroes of this world. The time has come. The hour of the Master's coming has arrived. Know in your last instants of life, that your souls are the mechanism by which your world shall be brought to an end."

The demon laughed, a terrible sound that echoed through the vast confines of the chamber. The light of the Sphere seemed to pulse in tune to that sound, and currents of power flickered through the chamber, hammering at the senses of the Doomed Bastards of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 208

A TENUOUS THREAD

Shay stirred.

The paralysis that had gripped her muscles began to fade, as a warm glow seeped down her arm from the crystal ring around her finger. Celleen's *ring of freedom of movement* counteracted the aftereffects of Maphistal's dread word of power, and she felt her muscles tingle as her control over them was restored.

Her body still screamed in protest; the wounds she had suffered from Gernaldra had not been healed, and her life essence had taken a pounding in the last days that even magical healing could not fully erase. But those hurts were nothing in comparison to the sick feeling in her gut as she raised her head, slightly, just enough to see the ruined form sprawled next to her on the cold stone floor. Talen's hand was extended slightly toward her, as if in sick mockery of a greeting. That hand had held her, touched her...

The feelings crashed over her like a wave, threatening to drag her down into oblivion. Part of her wanted to go, to let them carry her away to a place where she could feel them no longer.

But she heard the demon's words, imprinted on her mind, and as an echo of them, she thought she could hear Talen's voice.

Don't give up, my love... it falls to you to save us all...

The scout sprang to her feet, her hand extended as she dove forward. Her fingers closed on cold metal, and then a flood of warmth rushed down her hand, echoed by a sudden surge of flames.

From where he lay, Varo could clearly see the demon looming over him, and behind it the shifting field of color that surrounded the Sphere of Souls. The haze that clouded his mind was beginning to lift, but he still could not act; it was as if his body and mind were disconnected, and the latter was surrounded by a dense, clinging fog. His brain registered Shay leaping to her feet, but by the time he had consciously discerned the significance of that action, the scout had already taken up *Beatus Incendia* and was charging into the chaos field that emanated from the Sphere.

Varo's heart began to pound faster, especially when he glanced up and saw the demon shift, turning its head to look back at Shay. Varo tried to force his body to act, tried to summon his magic, but neither was within his power. There was nothing he could have done in any case; he now realized that he'd been wrong about the threat posed by Maphistal. Even if he had saved his *banishment*, or *dispel evil*, or one of the other potent spells granted him by Dagos, there was almost no chance that any of them could have harmed this adversary.

They'd been doomed from the start.

So Varo could only watch as Shay disappeared into the roiling chaos, and became just an indistinct point of blazing white light amidst the surrounding waves of color. Somehow she'd shaken off its *blasphemy*, but he knew it could stun her, or blast her, or summon some other dark power of the Abyss to strike her down.

The demon did nothing.

Shaylara's senses were overloaded by the swirling mélange of colors that surrounded the Sphere of Souls. She felt emotions battering at her consciousness, and around her everything started to become indistinct as her awareness shattered under the assault. She focused on the Sphere, a point of light in the center of the chaos, but as the solid foundation around her began to break apart, she knew she would never reach it.

She was flying; there was no sensation of gravity, no floor, only the chaos around her. The only thing that still provided an anchor was the blazing sword in her hand, but even that was starting to fade away, become insubstantial like a distant lantern lost in a fog.

Shay screamed, but the sound was lost in the surging chaos. With the last bit of conscious will she could grasp, she swept her hand across, and hurled *Beatus Incendia* forward, toward that point of light.

A sound startled her through the enfolding chaos, a crash of glass. It was followed by a noise like the breaking of the world, and then blackness.

Varo saw none of this. He could only watch as the scout vanished, and then stare up at the demon, who seemed as paralyzed as he by the changing circumstances. With it turned away, Varo could not see its face clearly, but he saw a subtle shift in its expression, a twist at the edge of its mouth.

A cold feeling washed over him.

He tried to cry out, but his body was still beyond his reach, and he managed only a weak little bleat. The demon heard it and turned back toward him, and now the cleric could see the full magnitude of the truth in its eyes.

And then it all exploded.

The demon partially blocked him from the Sphere, but that offered no shelter from the wave of power that blasted outward. Varo felt his soul, a tenuous thread of life that swayed and danced under that pulse. He looked up at the demon, which had spread its wings and arms wide, a look of exultation on its face. For a split second it was silhouetted against a blazing surge that was both light and darkness and color and nullity all at once. In that instant, what Varo saw was frozen in his memory, burned into his awareness. For it was not the demon Maphistal that stood there, but a different entity, one that had laughed in the shadowy recesses of Varo's mind ever since he'd first found that dusty tome in a forgotten corner of the church archives decades ago.

Orcus shifted his gaze down, and Varo knew that if the Demon deigned to perceive him, he would be utterly obliterated.

But Varo's consciousness had already been blasted beyond the strength of most mortals. The last thing he perceived was the demon's form wavering and dissolving, accompanied by an echo of malevolent laughter. And then the black came, and dragged him down into its welcoming embrace.

Chapter 209

AFTER

The sky was a dirty gray blanket, the air thick with chill. But for the five humans that emerged from the narrow hillside cave into the weak light of afternoon, the relief was palpable.

There was no conversation with their guides. The goblins cared little for parlay, and they faded back into the darkness.

“Mark this place,” Shay said. “In case we need to return.”

There was no reply to the scout’s comment, but it was quite clear what her companions thought of the implication of her statement.

“The goblins said that the ruin is less than a league to the west,” Dar said. They started in that direction, but the going was slow due to the choking brush that covered the hillsides, and gathered in tangled thickets in the low dells between. Shay moved into the lead.

There was little conversation. Talen remained silent, his eyes shadowed by deep hollows. Varo had been able to *resurrect* him, after freeing the knight’s life force from the ring that had protected it following his brutal death at the hands of Maphistal. The spell had exhausted Varo’s hidden cache of diamonds, but even if he had possessed more, there was nothing he could have done for Kalend; the thief’s essence had been consumed by the Sphere of Souls upon his death.

Dar and Allera remained in close proximity. The healer had restored Dar’s arm, but no mere spell could fully erase the memory of what they had experienced. They said almost nothing, but Dar was there to provide a supporting hand whenever they essayed a particularly difficult stretch of terrain, and Allera accepted the help freely, her touch lingering a moment after they’d negotiated each such obstacle.

Varo remained alone. He spoke to no one, and no one tried to speak to him. The cleric had a dark, contemplative look frozen on his features.

He had not shared what he had seen, after Shay had destroyed the Sphere of Souls. Dar had asked him, once, after they’d regained consciousness in the dark and empty temple of Orcus, some time later. What had happened? Had they won? Was it over?

For a long minute, Varo had not replied. Finally, he had said, “I do not know.”

Allera had stopped the bleeding from Dar’s severed arm before they had confronted Maphistal, so the fighter had not bled to death while lying insensate on the stone floor of the temple. When they had all finally stirred, they’d had no idea how long they had been unconscious, only that nothing had crept up to disturb them. The only thing left of

the Sphere was a few shards of broken glass scattered on the floor around the bare steel length of *Beatus Incendia*.

They had packed up Talen's body carefully, placing it in Shay's *bag of holding* for transport until Varo could rest and pray for the spell to restore him to life. Dar had brought Kalend's body himself, despite the lack of his arm.

With the Sphere gone, they had been able to see the massive stone statue of Orcus on the far side of the temple, a huge construct of black onyx caked with the blood and gore of old sacrifices. Before it stood a basin that was filled with hot, bubbling blood.

They hadn't interfered with the altar. Varo had merely walked over to it, taken a look, and then returned to the entry where the others had been preparing to depart.

They had each expected to meet resistance on their way out, and Shay had carried *Beatus Incendia* openly, the holy flames dancing up the length of the blade. But they had not encountered so much as a zombie as they retraced their steps through the third temple level, back up to the slave pits, and then up the stairs to Grezneck. They had finally run into something living there, but it had only been a party of goblin scouts, and some fast talking by Shay had averted conflict.

The goblins had permitted them hospitality of a sort, although it was clear that the "alliance" had died with Herzord. The goblin leadership had devolved to a triumvirate of sorts, with one of the surviving hobgoblin fighters, a goblin cleric of Dagos, and their erstwhile companion, Filcher, jointly calling the shots. With goblins being what they were, it was likely that a strong leader would ultimately rise to the top, but for the moment the creatures seemed content to work together to rebuild their shattered society.

After sealing themselves into a room provided by the goblins, the companions had rested and recovered their spells. The next "morning" Varo and Allera had restored Talen and Dar, and healed Shay. They cremated Kalend, and Dar had taken the thief's ashes with him for burial somewhere where the sun shone and the wind blew.

None of them had wanted to linger a moment longer than was necessary. After meeting with Filcher, they had learned that the goblins had another secret way out of Rappan Athuk, a vertical shaft that connected the deep tunnels near Grezneck with the rough hills above. The goblins had been reluctant to share their secret with outsiders, but Dar and Allera made a potent diplomatic combination, with the healer's conciliation nicely offsetting the fighter's casual statements about putting every single living thing in Rappan Athuk to the sword.

The two groups were happy to be finally rid of each other.

So now they found themselves crossing the rough hills near Rappan Athuk once more. The weak light of the day began to weaken with the promise of night, and they hastened their pace, hoping to come upon the army's camp before night descended on the hills.

"I smell smoke," Dar said, as they made their way up another rugged slope toward yet another crest.

"We must be getting close," Shay said. "They should have patrols out..." She trailed off as another smell reached them over the evening breeze, one that was all too familiar to each of them.

"No... no..." Allera said, hastening her pace toward the crest of the hill. The others hurried after.

"Wait, Allera!" Dar warned, but the healer did not stop, and unburdened by the fighter's heavy armor, she quickly left him behind. Shay, augmented by her magical boots, caught up to her just as she reached the summit, and the two women stopped there, frozen by what they saw.

"What..." Dar began as he reached them, then trailed off as he looked down at the ruins spread out below them.

The site had once been a considerable stronghold. It had not been built on the tallest of the surrounding hills, but the ruin was flanked on three sides by steep cliffs at least fifty feet high, leaving only a rough, steep slope to the west as the only feasible means of access. The only thing left of the ancient structures that had topped the bluff was heaps of tumbled stone that formed the rough outlines of walls around the perimeter, but even that offered considerable benefits for a determined defender.

Not that it had helped the men who had gathered here.

The companions were silent as they made their way down the hill to the base of the bluff, then climbed back up the narrow trail that switchbacked up to the ruin. They started encountering bodies even before they reached the trail, and at least two dozen more littered the path up the bluff. Some of them had been worked over by scavengers, but there was enough left to show that they had been killed by powerful, vicious blows. In some cases, what was left was scattered over a small area, and many of the bodies were... incomplete.

"What... what did this?" Shay asked, pale despite all of the death that she had already seen on this mission.

No one had an answer. Allera continued up the bluff, forcing Shay to hurry to keep up. Dar, bringing up the rear with Talen and Varo due to the weight and bulk of his armor, cursed and followed as quickly as he could.

At the top of the bluff there was a gate of sorts into the camp; the walls had been patched up recently, and what was left of a wooden gate lay scattered about. There were more bodies, another dozen or so. Those whose garments could still be recognized were split roughly equally between the orange and brown of the City Watch and the rougher uniforms of the Border Legion. The flies and the stench hinted at more bodies among the maze of stone blocks further back.

“Ikarus!” Allera yelled, although there was no indication that anything lived in this place. The stench and other clues suggested that what had happened here had taken place days ago, at least.

“Ikarus!” Allera repeated, clambering over the ruined gate to head deeper into the camp.

The wreckage of bodies grew thicker as the healer delved further past the gate. The clinical part of her mind registered the incredible carnage. She recognized the places where soldiers had sought shelter under the stone blocks of fallen walls, only to have been dug out and torn apart.

“What... what could have done this?” Talen said, looking around.

“Whatever it was, it was big,” Dar said, bending to examine a print in the lee of a nearby wall. The claw-shaped print was almost double the length of Dar’s booted foot.

Shay indicated a fragmentary wall that bore deep gouge marks along its top. “Its claws could score solid granite,” the scout said.

Dar pressed forward, “Allera! Damn it, hold up!”

He found her just ahead, in the doorway of a structure that been at least partially rebuilt. The low walls had been hastily mortared with new stone in places, and there were sockets for support beams in anticipation of a new roof. It looks like the work had only just gotten started when the attack had come. There were shattered planks scattered about, reduced to kindling; clearly they hadn’t been enough to stop the attacker.

Dar looked over Allera’s shoulder and froze.

The last stand had taken place here, it seemed. There were over fifty mangled bodies crowded into the wide open interior of the place. Dar recognized the camp chairs and overturned briefing table scattered around the edges of the room; this had been the headquarters of the base. Blood gathered in thick puddles across the floor, and the air was thick with flies. Dar did not recognize any of the men here, but at least half of them wore the familiar if haphazard non-uniform of the Border Legion. His men.

Allera started forward, but Dar held her arms. “Allera, no.”

“Let go of me,” she said, quietly.

He released her, and she walked into the room, her boots leaving sucking prints in the sodden, bloody ground. She walked over to the far side of the chamber, and crouched beside a ruin of a body. There wasn't much left to identify, but as she reached down and carefully lifted a bloody fold of cloak, she saw a human hand, severed at the wrist. It was still clutching a wand, and she did not need to pick it up to know its manufacture.

She started to shake. Dar was there, and the fighter took her in his arms, and brought her back to the doorway. The others were there, their eyes wide as they took it in.

"The entire outpost, destroyed," Shay said. "Six hundred men, just... gone."

"Surely some of them must have fled," Talen said.

Allera was turned away from them, staring at nothing. "It hunted them down," she said, her voice as cold as ice. "It did not stop until they were all gone."

"I didn't see Doran Pravos in there, but he would have gone down fighting," Dar said.

"The question you need to be asking is, where is it now?" Varo said, adding his first words since they'd left Rappan Athuk.

As one, their gazes turned north, toward the line of hills that extended off as far as they could see.

Toward Camar.

THE END OF BOOK 3

The “Doomed Bastards” in the Dungeon of Graves
Book 4

Chapter 210

THE RUINS OF HIGHBLUFF

A light rain fell over the town of Highbluff. The citadel of Bastion loomed over the town like a tired old sentinel, a dark shadow in the rain.

Smoke rose up off the town, even with the rain. About half of the structures of the town were burned-out wrecks, and despite the warning signs and the bad weather cloaked townsfolk could occasionally be seen poking through the wreckage, searching for the remains of their lives. They’d gotten most of the bodies out, and a pair of long mass graves had been appended to the cemetery that adjoined the eastern edge of the bluff, a reminder of the devastation that had been wrought here.

Armed men in the livery of the First Legion stood at attention around the perimeter of a smashed building on the northern edge of the town, near the main gate. The place had been a tavern, but now all that was left was a shell, with wooden beams that jutted into the air like broken fingers. Most of the building had collapsed into the cellar, and some of the wreckage had been carted away. Large tarps had been rigged from the remains of the walls, protecting a part of the interior from the constant rain.

Passersby were quickly sent on their way by the soldiers, who kept everyone a good distance from the building. Some of those were the curious, others driven by anger, grief, or fear. Those who failed to stop at a spoken command were confronted by the point of a broadsword. One look at the eyes of the soldiers was enough to turn even the most persistent back, although there were several groups of people that lingered in the doorways and windows of adjacent buildings, talking in low voices.

Tribune Velan Tiros, Knight Commander Talen Karedes, and General Jared Darius of the First Legion stood in what had been the main entry to the tavern, looking down into the pit. They did not speak, but each clearly was grappling with serious thoughts as they stared at the thing that lay dead in the cellar.

Someone came through the ring of guards, irritably flashing the insignia under his cloak when the legionaries tried to block him. He came forward to join the others, looked down at the pit, and then spit a fat gob down into the cellar.

“Ugly bastard,” Dar said.

“Colonel,” Tiros said in greeting. “What is the status of the infirmiry?”

“Allera’s got things in hand,” Dar said. “But there’s more wounded than she can handle, right now. The clerics of the Father are helping, and I think that most of those who survived... this... will pull through, given time.”

“Shaylara is helping with the search for survivors,” Talen said, almost to himself. He hadn’t turned away from the dead thing before them.

“So what the fuck is it, exactly?” Dar finally said.

“Archmage Honoratius said that he had never seen a creature of its type before,” Tiros replied.

“Well, at least it bled,” Dar said. “Not undead, then.”

Tiros nodded. “Nor was it a demon, or some other outsider. It just... is.”

“Was,” Dar corrected.

“I thought that it flew in here,” Talen said. “It does not have wings... some sort of magic?”

“It... changes...” Darius said. The general’s voice was tense, and scratched with an edge of tightly wound control.

“The creature is capable of changing its form,” Tiros said in confirmation. “It takes time, but in addition to the form you see here, it has a leaner shape equipped with wings, and another, of a longer, thinner “crawler” form, sort of like a big hairless ferret. In that form it can burrow through solid stone.”

“That’s how it got inside the fortress?”

Tiros nodded. “Fortunately that’s when Honoratius and I arrived; we were able to draw the creature back out of the citadel, and defeat it.”

“Yeah, quite a victory,” Dar said, casting a meaningful glance up and down the ruined street.

“We were fortunate that we were able to kill it at all,” Tiros said. “It is almost immune to even magical weapons, and it heals rapidly. If the archmage hadn’t been here, I don’t think we would have been able to stop it.”

“The First lost sixty-seven men,” Darius said. “Casualties among the townsfolk ran into the hundreds.”

“I am sorry that we were not in time to help you fight it,” Talen said quietly.

“From your report, it sounds like you had your own hands full,” Tiros said. “Your *sending* was enough warning for us to get here in time.”

“Yeah, it was like pulling teeth to get Varo to do even that,” Dar said.

“Where is the cleric?” Tiros asked. “He didn’t return with you?”

“He took his leave of us shortly after we departed Rappan Athuk,” Talen said. “He did not say where he was going, but I got the impression that something was bothering him.”

“Yeah, when is that not true?” Dar muttered. “Bastard’s hiding something, as always.”

“You had said before that you overcame the demon and destroyed the Sphere of Souls,” Tiros said. “You smashed the surviving leaders of the cult of Orcus, and left their last temple in a shambles. I know you paid a heavy cost...”

“It’s not that,” Talen said. “I mean, yes, we lost a lot of good people, but there’s something else.”

“You’re letting Varo get to you,” Dar said. “We got our asses kicked a few times, but we did what we went there to do. That fucking orb is smashed, the big bad demon got kicked back into whatever fucking hole it crawled out of, and you guys even managed to put down this fucking monstrosity down without my help. If you ask me, it’s time for a fucking drink.”

Dar turned and departed, and after a moment, General Darius followed him. Talen and Tiros lingered a moment longer. “Do you think it’s over, old friend?” Tiros finally asked.

Talen looked up at him. He did not respond, but his troubled look said all that needed to be said. He continued to stare down at the massive hulk lying in the wreckage of the cellar, its muscled, crimson flesh shining dully in the weak light of the day.

Chapter 211

MORNING IN CAMAR

The latest storm had passed. Sunlight slanted in through the single window set high in the wall, but it wasn’t powerful enough to remove all of the frost that covered the outside of the pane.

The room was small and comfortable. The fire in the tiny hearth had died during the night, but the fearsome cold of the morning air outside did not make it into the chamber.

The furnishings were a bit sparse, with an old armoire next to a small table that supported a few miscellaneous items, including a slightly cracked vase full of winter roses. The room was dominated by the large bed in the center, piled high with blankets.

The mound of coverings shifted, and Dar came into view as he rose, groaning as he stretched out the night's stiffness from his muscles. He looked around for a moment before he saw *Valor* hanging in its scabbard from the bedpost, where he'd left it the night before. His fingers brushed the scabbard; the blade shifted slightly.

"Allera?" he called. He started to get up, but paused at the sudden kiss of cold as he'd drawn back the blankets.

She appeared in the doorway. The healer wore a white robe of soft fleece, the fabric gathering at the crook of her elbows. She carried a mug from which wisps of steam rose. Her hair hadn't grown back fully, but it was long enough now so that it looked merely short, covering the gray scars left from the wounds from her captivity at the hands of the cult of Orcus.

Dar grinned. "That for me?"

She came over to him, and offered him the mug. He took it eagerly, but as he looked into it frowned. "What is this?"

"Herbal tea."

Dar's frown deepened, and with a soft laugh the healer took her other hand out from behind her back; it held another mug, this one full of strong coffee.

"Ah, that's more like it." The fighter drained half of the scalding liquid in the mug in a few swallows, and let out a pleasant sigh as he faded back into the bed. "You are an angel, woman."

She smiled, and sipped her own tea as she sat down on the bed next to him. But after a moment, she turned away, looking out at nothing, toward the window.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded, and turned back to him. "I'm sorry. I just..."

He put his coffee down on the small shelf beside the bed, and touched her arm. "I hope you do not regret last night."

She looked up at him, and smiled. "No. No, not that."

"Good. Because it was pretty gods-damned overdue, if you ask me."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh? Because of my debt?"

"You are never going to let me live that down, are you?"

She took his hand in hers.

"I guess I've changed a lot," he finally said.

"We all have."

"No, this is different, I think." He glanced at the sword, hanging easily within reach.

"It is just a weapon," she said. "You are still what you are, Corath Dar. Maybe a little less selfish. A little less coarse. A little less crude, a little less..."

"Ah, enough compliments, I think," he said, leaning back in the bed. He grimaced slightly and flexed his arm, the new one that Allera had *regenerated* back for him.

"Still a little stiff?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "Well, now that you mention it, yes."

She giggled as he reached for her.

She spilled her tea, but by that point, neither of them really cared.

Chapter 212

AFTERNOON IN CAMAR

The winter sun shone down on the courtyard of the estate at Cattalia. It bore little warmth with it, and the two dozen or so individuals gathered along the portico that faced out into the open center of the court pulled their cloaks close around their bodies for warmth.

The men and women battling in the center of the courtyard did not appear to be cold. They were girded for war, with tunics of chain links and iron skullcaps covering their heads. Each carried a wooden practice sword weighted with lead to simulate the mass of a real weapon, and a small buckler of wood slabs trimmed with a ring of beaten iron.

Talen was armed and appoitioned as the others, save for the fact that his chain shirt was of blacksteel, and his helm featured a protruding iron nose guard. But those

advantages appeared to be more than offset by the fact that he was battling a dozen enemies all on his own.

The men and women attacking him were young, for the most part, and while they all appeared to have at least a modicum of training with their weapons, they clearly were not the veterans that Talen was. Five of them were already lying on the hard ground of the courtyard, groaning as they clutched cracked limbs or bruised heads. One tried to get up, aided by a companion, but he only managed a staggered step before he slumped back down to the ground.

The others had spread out and were coming at Talen from all sides, seeking to take him out through sheer numbers. However, that advantage worked both ways, as they hindered each other, and had to be wary of the wide sweeping strokes that the long blade favored, lest they strike an ally. Thus far attempts to simply overbear the knight commander had failed; three of those lying onto the ground were the result of an initial rush that had tried to grapple and drag him down. Now the clack of wood on metal filled the courtyard, echoing off the adjacent galleries where the observers watched.

A young woman got her weapon inside the crook of Talen's shield arm, and she tried to press that advantage, turning to force his shield away from his body. Two men rushed in to deliver strikes against the suddenly vulnerable flank, while from his front another man and a woman thrust at his head, forcing him to defend himself and split his focus.

That should have been the end of it, even for a veteran fighter. But Talen ducked and stepped into the turn of the woman holding his arm. He took two hits to his back from the men on his flank, but other than a grunt did not acknowledge what had to be painful impacts even through his armor. He continued his spin, now catching the woman off-guard, catching her in her own trap. She tried to drop her sword and get away, but before she could release he pinned her wrist and forced her into the rush of the two attacking him from the front. The distraction delayed them only for an instant, as the pair dodged around the falling woman, but it was long enough for Talen to snap his blade around at the two at his back. He caught one with a blow that came in under his shield, hitting under his arm with enough force to crack a rib. The man cried out in pain and fell, and even before he hit the ground Talen stepped back and snapped the hilt of his weapon into the face of the second attacker. The wooden hilt cracked from the impact, and the man collapsed, spitting blood from his broken jaw.

Talen's weapon was damaged, but he quickly improvised, twisting into another spin that caused a stroke from another attacker to glance harmlessly off the armor of his shoulder, instead of hitting him in the head. As he came around behind her he smashed the edge of his shield into the small of her back. The woman screamed and fell on her face, her legs thrashing. Her movements hindered another attacker, as she inadvertently kicked another of Talen's foes hard on the ankle, knocking him off balance. Talen exploited that distraction as he slammed his sword into the man's knee, and he too crumpled. The impact completed the job on Talen's weapon, as the hilt shivered, and the weighted blade fell away into the dirt.

Talen was down to four foes who could still keep their feet. The woman he'd knocked down earlier got back up, grinding her teeth against the pain in her wrist. The other three, two young men with the fair features of Camar's old blood and a swarthy Emorite from the provinces, circled warily, held at bay by the beating inflicted on their friends.

"Do not hesitate, you fools!" Talen shouted at them. "My weapon has been destroyed!" He lunged at one enemy, but the motion was to disguise his true intent, as he reached down to grab a weapon dropped by one of his fallen foes. He did not manage it, as the woman lunged at him, forcing him to dart to the side to avoid her thrust. The Emorite followed with a blow to his shield, forcing it high. The two noble youths came in to exploit the advantage, sweeping their swords low.

They were just a heartbeat too slow. Talen snapped his shield down, severing one lad's sword just below the hilt. The other one connected with Talen's hip, but Talen seized his wrist, dragging him forward as he smashed his shield up into his face. The young man crumpled back, his nose broken. Talen caught his sword as it fell, and ignoring another pair of hits across his back, he took down the other Camarian youth with a pair of hits to his thigh and gut.

Talen turned to face the woman and the Emorite. He was clearly hurting, now; his breath wheezed in his body, and blood trickled down one side of his jaw. But his eyes burned with an intensity that gave his remaining foes pause.

"Finish it," he told them, lifting his weapon into a ready position.

They came in strong, timing their attacks perfectly. He met one on his shield, and parried the second with his sword. The woman snapped her sword up, hitting him solidly across the bicep. Talen's face twisted in a grimace of pain, but he kept his grip on his sword. The distraction cost him, however, as the Emorite brought his sword up over Talen's guard, striking him hard across the face. Had it not been for his nose-guard, the blow would have broken his nose and probably left him unconscious; even so he staggered back, dazed.

His foes surged forward to finish him, obeying his last command, but Talen roared and unleashed a sudden and violent assault. The woman's eyes widened as Talen's blade whipped out, smashing her wrist, knocking her sword flying across the makeshift arena. She tried to fall back, but Talen's follow up caught her solidly in the gut, knocking the air from her lungs. She crumpled, struggling to breathe.

The Emorite tried to get in another hit, but Talen pivoted smoothly and took the man's legs out from under him. He coughed as he fell hard onto his back. He blinked as he tried to recover, but even as he tried to lift his swordarm to defend himself Talen stepped hard on his wrist, crushing it. The Emorite cried out in pain, and looked up to see Talen standing above him, the point of his sword aimed at his throat.

"I... I yield!"

"Talen!" Shay yelled, rushing forward into the courtyard.

Talen glanced at her, then down at his victim. For another second he held the man with his gaze, then released him.

"Your enemy will not accept your surrender," Talen said, his voice lifted to address all of them. "Nor will he fail to take advantage of your mistakes."

"Make no mistake," he said. "I am not going to take it easy on you. Regardless of what you may have been in a former life," he said, his gaze lingering on the two noble youths, "now you are part of the brotherhood of the Dragon. You are like farm tools delivered to the forge; what you were will be beaten out of you, hardened, weakness burned away until you are suitable for being forged into swords."

"We are the Dragon Knights, and we are the front ranks against those that would destroy Camar."

They watched him, those that were still conscious, at least.

He made a gesture to the observers. "Take them in, have Philokrates see to them. Tell him not to stint on the healing potions; we have another training session in the morning."

There were a lot of groans as the trainees helped their fallen companions to their feet. Two of them were unconscious and had to be carried.

Shay lingered behind as the young men and women passed through the double doors into the estate's main building. Talen walked over and picked up the training sword he'd broken. He ignored the stabbing pains that pierced him at the movements; he'd likely broken a rib or two.

"You disapprove of my training methods," Talen said without turning.

"I thought you were going to kill him," Shay said.

"Some may die during the training," Talen said. "But it will not be by my sword."

She came around him, forced him to look at her. "Talen, what's happened to you?"

"You were there with me, Shay. You know what we face."

"But we defeated the cult, destroyed the Sphere..."

“You don’t believe that was the end of it, any more than I do. Varo was lying when he said he didn’t know what happened with the demon after you destroyed the Sphere... of that I am certain.”

“I don’t know anything for sure, now. I thought I knew *you*, Talen.” She folds her arms tight against her body, but the shiver that she felt was not from the chill. “During that battle... it seemed almost like you enjoyed beating the living shit out of those trainees.”

Talen looked back at her. “I don’t enjoy any of this, Shay. I hate it. I hate Rappan Athuk, what it’s done to Camar, to our friends, to us...”

“Then why—“

“I do not trust Varo, but there is one thing, at least, about which he was honest to us. The very fate of our world is at stake, Shay! We have already lost so much... and now it falls to us to hold back the enemy.”

“But to what end, if we become that which we destroy...”

The words were quiet, mumbled, but he heard her. “I do not have answers for you, Shay. I can only do what I feel is necessary.”

“And us?”

“I love you, Shay. That will not change, no matter what else happens.”

“And I love you. But I don’t want to see Rappan Athuk destroy the man I love.”

“I cannot see the future, Shay.”

“The future wouldn’t scare me, if I knew that the man I fell in love with was going to stand beside me to face it.”

Talen was silent for a long moment. “I’m trying the best I can,” he finally said. He started toward the half-open doors, then paused. “Shay?”

“Yes?”

“Please don’t undermine my authority in front of the recruits again.”

He paused a moment later, as if he wanted to say something more. But then he turned and went inside, leaving the scout alone with the cold wind of the fading afternoon.

Chapter 213

EVENING IN CAMAR

The monastery at Kalliades was situated a little less than a league from the city of Camar, a large, squat square of stone surrounded by a few smaller outbuildings. The whole was perched atop a low hill that was just visible from the main road leading west from the city. Despite, or perhaps because of, its proximity to Camar, the monastery received little attention, and received very little traffic for a site just off one of the main trade arteries of the Duchy.

The place seemed almost deserted, these days, although the low stone wall that circled the complex was kept in good repair, and the gardens that connected the outbuildings were tidy and well tended. Only a few monks were visible, silent shapes in dark cloth that blended into the long shadows of the fading day.

The large building in the center of the complex was in turn dominated by the chapel of the Father on its second level. The prize possessions of the monastery were on display there, a pair of large windows of stained glass high on the eastern wall, designed to let the full glory of the morning sun into the chamber. At this time of day, as night descended upon Camar, the room was deep in shadow. There were ample candles about the perimeter of the place, but all but a small handful were unlit. The chamber's sole occupant, a man in a soft brown robe, seemed to prefer the dark.

A faint creak sounded in the back of the room as one of the tall double doors in the back opened. The noise did not carry far, but it was enough to alert the solitary vigilant, who turned to witness the newcomer. For a moment, he saw only shadows, which suddenly felt malevolent.

"Who is there?" he asked. "Brother Kalvis?"

"No," said the newcomer, the voice resolving into the form of a figure of average height, his features masked in the depths of a dark cowl. His garments were bulky, possibly enough to conceal weapons or armor within them.

Now more obviously alarmed, the priest rose, one hand rising to the silver torch he wore on a chain upon his chest. "Who are you? This is a sacred place... there is no money or precious goods here."

"I seek neither," the stranger said.

"I will ask once more, for you to reveal yourself," the priest said, a hint of steel creeping into his voice, but belied somewhat by the tense grasp of his fingers upon his divine focus.

“You have nothing to fear from me,” the stranger said, drawing back his cowl. “I am Licinius Varo.”

“Varo...” the priest said, his mouth twisting as though it had sampled a foul taste. “I have heard of you, priest of... of the Dark Creeper.”

“You may speak his name, Nelan. The Father will not take offense.”

“What do you want of me?”

Varo came forward, until he was standing near the altar, opposite Nelan. “Do you not recall, our last meeting? It was on the south road, near Aldenford.”

After a moment, Nelan nodded. “I remember. You were there... That is a night I would prefer to forget.”

“There are many things that we would prefer to forget,” Varo replied. “It is the nature of life that sometimes we must confront those things.”

“I have asked several times, what you want from me.”

Varo continued as if the other man had not spoken. “Names, for example. I found a number of people who spoke the name of Nelan with great favor, especially those that you escorted out of the south during the undead attack. But hardly anyone I encountered knew the name of Nelandro Agathon, even though that name had greater renown associated with it.”

“That was long ago. Now there is only Nelan.”

“I do not seek to refresh old wounds, nor speak of your exile,” Varo said. “Those events are in the past. What concerns me is the present, and the future.”

Nelan chuckled slightly. “My future lies in the hands of the Father.”

Varo did not let him off that easily. “And does the Father wish you to hide in the shadows while the people of Camar suffer?”

“I will not be judged by a priest of... of Dagos.”

“I do not seek to be your judge. But it is a doctrine of the faith you profess to serve that the gift of power brings with it a mantle of duty.”

“I will not fence at words at you. I know about duty. I have dedicated my life to the service of others.”

“True. That much was clear in the testimony of those who know Nelan. But Camar needs Nelandro Agathon.”

Nelan angrily swished a hand across his body in negation. “Nelandro Agathon is no more. He died, thirty years ago.”

“The church that censured you, sent you into exile, may likewise soon be no more.”

Nelan’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Varo turned to the altar. He took the candle set in the recess there, and touched it to one of the offering tapers. Nelan watched in silence, although he obviously bristled at the possible blasphemy in the other man’s actions. But there was no mockery in Varo’s motions as he dripped a drop of wax upon the palm of his left hand, and then placed the taper into one of the slots atop the altar.

“You know our rituals.”

“I was once a priest of the Father.”

Nelan betrayed some surprise. “Then... why did you fall from the Light?”

Varo looked at him, and smiled sadly. “Duty,” he said.

Nelan turned back toward the front of the room. “I serve as my conscience commands,” he said.

“You have been given gifts.”

“I no longer seek power. It has been many years since the greater blessings have been granted to me.”

“A *flame strike* was summoned from the skies at Highbluff,” Varo said, “against the monstrosity that sought to destroy the town. And yet none of the priests of the Father known to be capable of such magic were present that day. At least that is what people believe.”

Nelan glanced back up, was caught by Varo’s needle stare. “What do you want of me!”

Varo held his stare for a long moment. Finally, he said one word.

“Resolution.”

Chapter 214

NIGHT OF THE DEAD

A feeling of dread hung over the city of Camar. In addition to the prospects of civil war with Dalemar to the north, there was a constant flow of information—some legitimate, some rumor—about the attacks in the south, and the near-destruction of Highbluff by a monstrosity that became more terrible with each retelling. Uncertainty bred fear, while fear bred panic, and panic bred violence. The Ducal Guard had swollen as the Grand Council had drawn in new recruits, mostly older veterans of the legions. Young men were being impressed into service as well, and a new camp was being constructed a few miles outside of the city, for training of a new Fifth Legion. The survivors of the Border Legion—mostly that handful that hadn't been able to keep up with Dar's march in time to make it to the slaughter at Southwatch—were quietly allotted to other units.

Winter had come in full force, and the citizenry of the capital city of the Grand Duchy huddled together for warmth and protection. Business continued, and lives went on, but the stream of people that typically filled the streets had slowed to a trickle. Men and women went about their business with dispatch, pulling their fur-lined cloaks tightly around their bodies, and avoiding eye contact with strangers. The coffee shops and ale houses were crowded with people, but the din that typically filled such places was muted. Even the brothels and gaming dens were quieter than usual, if no less busy as Camarians sought distraction from weighty matters.

Like any city of substantial size, Camar had a considerable indigent population. There were shelters for the poor scattered through the Docks that were maintained by clean-shaven acolytes of the Shining Father, but despite their efforts there was a large and shifting population of the desperate that drifted beneath the surface of the city's life, like barnacles clinging to the underside of a ship. With winter's coming this human detritus burrowed deeper into the shadows, taking shelter in abandoned buildings, sewer tunnels, and long-forgotten hollows beneath the city. In this gloom-world a different coda of laws and customs held sway, and few of those living in the civilized realm of urban life a world away had little real understanding of how these people survived and lived.

In the deep of one winter night, a small company of such folk held court in a cellar. The building above, once a two-story tenement, had been consumed by fire almost a decade ago. The place was a stone's throw from the notorious neighborhood known as the Pike, and the ruined shell had never been cleared, left to rot in gradual decay. The cellar was mostly intact. The fire-scarred beams supporting the ceiling were hardly safe, but those who took shelter here cared little for such niceties.

The five men huddled around a stone hearth, within which a pathetic fire burned fitfully. One slept, shivering in his layered rags, his body wracked by an occasional cough that spoke of damaged lungs. One fortunate soul wore a new wool blanket across his shoulders, a gift from the church of the Father. Several of his brethren eyed it

enviously, but its owner had been a man of considerable size before his fall, and he was known to have a furious temper; not someone to trifle with.

A sound, distant and faint, reached them through the tangle of beams and rubble above. The ears of the men twitched, and several made signs against evil. It was midnight, the hour of dark things and fell powers that men of all stripes secretly feared.

The man with the blanket took a swig from the bottle in his fist, and passed it to a neighbor. The man eagerly drank. "Dark things abroad this night," he said.

"Bah!" the next said, seizing the bottle. But his hands shook slightly as he downed a swallow of the swill within the flask. He wiped his mouth with the back of a grimy fist.

"Cold," one of the others said.

"It's winter," the man next to him said.

"No," the other replied. "I... I feel a chill... like a tread upon my soul."

"Supertitious fool," the man with the blanket said, recovering the bottle as it made its way back around the circle. But as he drank, his eyes shot around the edges of their shelter, where the shadows had suddenly grown malevolent around them.

"Something's not right," the superstitious man persisted. "I feel..."

"Death," another interjected.

"You are all touched," the man with the blanket said. But his darting eyes betrayed his own fear, and after a moment they settled on the recumbent figure of the sleeping man. After a moment, the others noticed his stare, and they turned to the sleeper as well.

"Rorry's stopped coughing," one said.

The four men shared a look. Theirs was a brotherhood founded upon self-interest, but some lingering shred of humanity still clung to them; a sense of concern for the well-being of another. One of the men reached out to the motionless figure, shook him. "Rorry. Rorry, c'mon now, wake up."

He touched the man's face, turned back to the others. "He's cold."

"Poor bastard," another said.

The four shared a look; none of them wanted to sleep with a corpse, but neither did they want to stir from the warmth of their shelter. Finally, the man with the blanket said, "Well, I suppose we should..."

He was cut off as Rorry leapt up and seized the man who had tried to rouse him. The color had drained from his face, leaving it a sickly gray. His jaws opened wide, revealing yellowed teeth, and a hiss that stank of charnel erupted from deep within his body. Rorry's companion screamed and tried to tear free, but was dragged down in the other's grasp. His cries broke off abruptly as Rorry sank his teeth into the man's neck, crushing his windpipe and opening the artery with a spray of uncannily bright blood.

The ghoul looked up from his victim, grinning through a mask of crimson.

The other three men cried out and tried to flee.

They were not successful.

* * * * *

Camar was an old city, and it had six graveyards, ranging from the haphazard mounds of Pauper's Hill to the sculpted marble monuments of the Quiet Meadow. But beyond that there were hundreds if not thousands of unmarked graves scattered throughout the city, and every canal and trash heap had the potential of holding a collection of remains from some long-forgotten soul.

Screams of horror and pain filled the night, as these repositories of death came alive. Skeletons, burrowing up from old graves, poured out into the streets, seeking the living. Zombies, their bodies covered with caked dirt, followed slowly in their wake. Scattered in desperate places throughout the city, the occasional ghoul rose where someone on the brink of death had been pulled over the boundary by the pulse of negative energy that had enveloped the city. There were even a few wights, here and there.

Pockets of resistance sprang up as houses were fortified, and men and women gathered to fight against the dead. Fire was a favored weapon, but it was a fickle ally, and within an hour after midnight dozens of blazes poured thick streams of black smoke into the sky over the city. Scenes of carnage were everywhere, but densest in the Docks, where the city's poor faced the largest numbers of undead. Ships overflowing with desperate refugees sailed out into the harbor, leaving behind screaming people at the ends of long piers. Their cries attracted knots of skeletons and zombies. Many of the citizens leapt into the river to swim for their lives; many drowned.

The long night dragged slowly onward, as Camar burned, and screamed, and suffered.

Chapter 215

THE MORNING OF THE LIVING

Black char and ash hung heavily in the air as the dawn settled over Camar. Parts of the city still burned, and whole city blocks within the Docks were in ruins. Only the recent poor weather and the soaking that the storms had brought to Camar had kept the entire city from being claimed in a terrible conflagration.

Some of the flames that burned in the city were not accidental. In several squares across the city, great pyres sent clouds of fine ash into the air. Men with drawn faces and dirty uniforms brought steady streams of carts to these bonfires, consigning corpses or parts of corpses into the flames.

In the Docks, a gathering of sorts had come together along the edge of the Waterfront Market along the eastern side of the harbor. Several dozen men and women were gathered there, most of them clad in stained and dirty uniforms, all of them armed.

Corath Dar sat on a low wall of crumbling bricks on the edge of the market. His body was slumped in a pose of utter and complete exhaustion. *Valor* was propped up against his leg, ready to be lifted again at a moment's notice. The fighter's head was bowed.

"I thought I would find you here."

Dar lifted his head to see Shay standing before him. The scout was holding a travel mug of beaten iron, which she handed to him. It contained steaming coffee.

"Thanks." He swallowed the warm liquid.

"Talen thought he'd find you at the palace, at Tiros's headquarters, but I knew you'd be down here, in the thick of it. Where's Allera?"

"She's at the makeshift hospital that they opened over by the Raven's Bridge," the fighter said. "Things were winding down when I last saw her, about..." he looked at the sky, "Maybe an hour ago, I don't know."

"You look like shit."

He chuckled. "Yeah, well I feel like shit."

She sat down next to him on the wall. "Pretty rough night, from what I hear."

"Yeah."

"We came in toward the end of it. Apparently what happened was limited to the immediate environs of the city; at least we haven't heard anything about the dead rising elsewhere. We didn't have any trouble at Cattalia, and that's only about a mile outside of the city walls."

Dar didn't interrupt; Shay seemed to need to talk about it.

"We came in along the causeway. There was an old graveyard outside the city gates there, and there were a lot of skeletons. It took us the better part of two hours to fight through them and get to the Western Gate. Talen destroyed... dozens of them, maybe a hundred. They seemed drawn to him like moths to a flame."

"Sword," Dar said.

Shay nodded. "He... he had been pushing our new recruits pretty hard. I... I didn't like it, but I guess he was right. We only lost a few people last night... they burned their bodies, like all the rest..."

Dar grunted. He knew a lot about losing men under his command.

"Once we got up to the Gold Quarter, things were a lot quieter. The Ducal Guard had established a perimeter, and Tiros was coordinating sorties into the parts of the city where the fighting was most intense. Most of the worst was here, in the Docks."

Dar downed the rest of his coffee. He knew that first-hand. He and Allera had dove right into the worst of it, gathering armsmen and others as they went, helping to solidify defensive outposts where scared and disoriented people could gather in relative safety. They had done that... six, seven times? Finally they had ended up down here, not far from the Pauper's Hill on the eastern edge of the city, where they had found deserted streets overrun with undead. At one point he and six men had come around a bend in a street to come face to face with over two hundred skeletons, which had rushed at them in a wave. They'd fallen back to a grog shop on the corner, where Dar had used *Valor* to crush skeleton after skeleton as they'd surged through the door. It had taken just over ten minutes, and when it was done, only he and two others were left standing. They'd retreated to the top of the stairs leading to the place's second story, and between the landing and the front door there were strewn piles and piles of shattered bones.

The whole night had been like that, scenes of chaos and violence and cowardice and heroism. Allera had twice *restored* him, filling him with a reservoir of new strength that he'd then expended in battle. He'd lost count of how many skeletons and zombies he'd hacked to pieces. At one point he'd faced a small knot of ghouls, a half-dozen of the creatures. Fortunately he'd had Allera at his side during that encounter, as one of the undead monsters had gotten lucky, hitting with a claw that had paralyzed him. She'd destroyed the undead with a wave of positive energy, then released him from the fell grip of their power. A minute later, they had been back in the fray, fighting zombies.

"How many dead?" he said.

Shay did not respond at once. "When I left the command center, Tiros was estimating maybe a quarter of the city's population, maybe a third. We won't know for sure until we

gather all of the survivors. A lot of people escaped the city, fleeing into the countryside, or out into the bay. Skeletons and zombies cannot swim.”

“Nor do they breathe; they can walk on the bottom,” Dar pointed out. “They’re going to be finding those things in unexpected places for quite some time, I think.”

Shay nodded, acknowledging the point.

“While I’m appreciative of the coffee, why aren’t you with Talen?” he asked her.

“He sent me to find you, and Allera,” Shay said, but she had hesitated; that wasn’t the whole reason, but Dar did not press her.

“All right, let’s go find the marshal and the knight commander,” Dar said, forcing himself to his feet. He found one of the officers organizing the people in the market square, letting her know where he was going. Technically, he supposed he was in command here, but he’d been too busy destroying undead most of the night to issue many orders. Mostly he’d just told people what they needed to do to stay alive. For some, it had been enough.

The officer was an older veteran of the Watch; women did not serve in the legions. “Yes sir, colonel. We’ll keep organizing patrols, and sending survivors to the protected gathering points.”

“You do that,” Dar said, and he started walking down the street with the scout, his steps slow and tired.

Chapter 216

ANOTHER REUNION

It was somber and quiet in the still of the morning, with the dawn still a promise on the horizon to the east. Across the city of Camar, guards changed shifts, and tired squads of the Guard returned to their barracks after another exhausting night of patrols. Some bore minor wounds; even now, two nights after the Night of the Dead, the occasional skeleton was still being found in dark corners. Each squad carried a loud horn that could be sounded in general alarm. On the night before, two such alarms had been sounded, as clusters of undead were discovered, flushed out, and destroyed.

This morning, all was quiet. In the private chapel in the rear of the Great Cathedral the stillness was almost sepulchral. This early, there was only one occupant in the chamber, kneeling in prayer at the railing in front of the altar. The room was dim, but candles set in slender sconces of silver around the altar pushed back the darkness.

Gaius Annochus looked haggard. Once hale and intimidating in his sheer physical presence, he now looked his age and more. There were dark bags under his eyes, and his hands trembled as he held them folded before him in supplication. His mouth moved silently as he uttered prayers.

“Does He respond?”

Gaius shot to his feet at the sudden interruption. Squinting into the shadows, his face twisted with fury as he recognized the solitary intruder that walked down the central aisle of the sanctum.

“Varo! You dare!”

“Let us dispense with the usual greetings, Gaius.”

“You mock this holy sanctuary with your presence! How did you pass the wards?”

“With difficulty,” Varo said. “But it seems that I am not the only one ill at ease here.”

Gaius’s mouth drew into a feral snarl. “I should have destroyed you when I had the chance...”

Varo’s smile was mocking. “Perhaps you will again surround yourself with a *holy aura*. Or ward yourselves against spells, or the evil that I no doubt reek with. No? I can wait, if it makes you feel better.”

Gaius seethed, but did not respond. He did not reach for the holy symbol in silver at his throat. “What do you want, deceiver?” he finally hissed.

Varo’s stare sharpened until it was like a dagger. “You have failed Camar, Gaius. And you have failed the church you claim to serve.”

Gaius laughed. “I will not listen to one such as... as *you* casting accusations at me, in my own sanctum!”

“*Your* sanctum? I thought that the cathedral belonged to the people of Camar.”

“You will not twist my words against me. My entire life has been one of service, a concept that I would not expect a fallen priest to grasp.”

“Who are you trying to convince, Gaius?” Varo waved a hand. “A few years ago, I would have believed you. By the gods, even a month ago, when I last visited you, you were in a position to choose to do much good. Camar was at a turning point, when events might have evolved in a very different direction than they did.”

“I stand behind every decision I made,” Gaius said.

“Indeed. Let us catalogue some of the disasters that have befallen Camar since—”

Gaius interrupted him. “I suppose you blame me for the assault of the Shadow upon Camar? That is gall, even from you, Varo.”

Varo shook his head. “I do not blame you for the evils of the followers of the Demon, Gaius. But your continued inaction in the face of an increasingly blatant evil has grown to the point where it cannot be allowed to continue.”

Gaius’s eyes narrowed. “If you think you can threaten me in this place, you are gravely mistaken, Varo.”

Varo continued as though he had not heard. “I could perhaps forgive your inaction during the corrupt rule of the Duke; the church of the Father cannot always afford to be political, although I would have hoped that you would have been able to penetrate the disguise that the devil wore. But my own brethren, who are far less trusting that the clergy of the Father, were also slow in recognizing the threat. But the darkness that has risen in Rappan Athuk was there to see, even before the most recent events, and I hold you responsible, to a degree, for allowing it to fester as it did.”

Gaius glowered at him.

“But even that, I could understand, if you had responded with the full power of the church once the true evil of the cult of Orcus became evident. When the undead legions mustered against Camar, it should have been obvious to a child that we were facing nothing less than the destruction of our world itself.”

“Your words are thick with twists, priest of Dagos, but they insult the memories of those who gave their lives to fight this evil. Valus. Braegan. Meaghan. Serah—”

With the last name, Varo cut him off. “Ah, yes, the champions of the faith. Valus was sent to keep an eye on me, but I will admit that he fought bravely against the foe. But the others...” Varo’s eyes narrowed. “I will forever hold you responsible for sending out those men and women without the resources they needed to survive. They exist; I *know* what is in the temple vaults, Gaius.”

“Now you will tell me how to expend the treasures of the church? Truly, you are mad, Varo.”

“For that matter, I wondered why you did not recall to Camar those with the spiritual power to withstand the powers of the Enemy. If anything, you seemed to be sending away those with the most potential. I know there is precedent; you exiled several very promising young priests when you first came into your station, all those years ago. I am no stranger to the machinations of power, but it still mystified me how you could be so

blind to what was happening. If just a handful of those clerics had been in Camar on that dark night just passed... I wonder, how many lives could have been spared.”

“You will pay for your words, Varo.”

“But then, it occurred to me... perhaps your actions were based on a simple motivation. It makes sense, it all makes sense... if there is something that you are trying to hide, something that you could not allow your brothers in the faith to discern...”

“I will kill you!”

Varo waved a hand. “Go ahead. Smite me with a *holy word*. Summon an angel to your side. Your power in the Light is known to all, Patriarch. I await divine retribution.”

Something in Gaius’s bearing changed; a tenuous line of control snapped. Gaius darted back with surprising speed to the altar. He reached into the wooden nook overhanging the stone slab, and drew out the heavy bronze bowl concealed within.

“Gaius...” Varo cautioned, coming forward.

The Patriarch laughed, and opened a packet of powder from a pocket in his sleeve into the bowl. With his other hand, he took a candle from above the altar, and touched it to the powder, setting it alight with a bright, eager flame.

“Gaius, no!”

But the leader of the most prominent religion in Camar ignored him, chanting words of power that Varo himself had given him. The flames strengthened and grew, and as Gaius completed the incantation, exploded into a pillar of flame some thirty feet high. Arms sprouted from the pillar of fire, and as the flames flared against the high buttressed ceiling above, two glowing points of light formed within its mass.

“Destroy him!” Gaius shrieked.

The eyes of the huge fire elemental fixed upon Varo.

Chapter 217

SCHISM

Black streaks appeared on the ancient supports of the arched ceiling above as the fire elemental surged forward toward Varo. The old weathered pews flanking the altar burst into flame, and the candles surrounding the altar melted from the backblast of heat.

Gaius Annochus lifted a hand to protect his face, and fell back around the perimeter of the chapel.

“BE GONE!” shouted a deep voice that echoed through the sanctum. The elemental flickered and dissolved, leaving a strong smell of brimstone in the air.

Nelan strode into the chapel, accompanied by a pair of older men clad in white robes. All three looked furious. “What in the name of the Light were you *thinking*, Patriarch?” Nelan asked. “You would destroy the cathedral?”

The two men accompanying Nelan *created water*, dousing the flames left behind by the elemental’s passage. Varo had not moved, and he stepped aside to let Nelan pass him down the aisle.

Gaius, cowering along the wall, blinked in surprise. “What? Agathon? You... you *knew* he was here!” He pointed at Varo. “You are working with that... that... *fiend* to discredit me!”

“Oh, shut up,” Nelan said. “You have done quite enough to discredit yourself, Gaius.”

One of the old men in the white robes nodded. “I must admit, I could not believe it, when you first came to me, Nelandro. But a Council of Bishops will be convened at once, and the current Patriarch will be stripped of his power, this very day.” He did not quite look at Gaius Annochus.

“So, Agathon. This is your plan, to gain your revenge over me? Perhaps you wish my title, my power? Well, you can have it.”

“I do not want anything from you,” Nelan said, his voice tinged with sadness.

“You will regret the day you opened dealings with him,” Gaius said, looking at Varo with undisguised hatred shining in his eyes.

The other bishop turned to the door, and gestured; a pair of armored priests entered. “Please escort Gaius Annochus to one of the penitents’ cells, and see that he is sequestered,” he told them. The man who had once been the most powerful cleric in Camar did not look at any of them as he walked between the guards, and exited the room.

Nelan stood facing the altar. Finally, he turned to face Varo, who had remained silent during the other exchange. Nelan’s voice was thick. “Once... once he was a great man.”

Varo did not respond, but his cold eyes did not release Nelan, who finally looked away, toward the fire-blackened altar.

Chapter 218

THE ARCHMAGE

The wrinkled, wizened husk of Decimus Vitus Honoratius sat in a comfortable armchair in a richly apportioned, wood-paneled study situated high atop the Tower of Sorcery in Camar. Bookshelves lined the walls, each packed with ancient tomes bound in faded leather. There was a window of leaded glass that provided a panoramic view of the city set deep in an opening in the curving outer wall, but the archmage did not even glance in that direction. His entire focus was on a crystalline orb the size of an ogre's skull that hovered above a metal stand set in the floor beside his chair.

The door to the study opened, and a young woman entered. She was the same individual who had transported the Fifteen to Aldenford, on that desperate night not so long ago. Her brown hair was cut close against her scalp, and she almost shone with vitality, a stark contrast to the ancient venerability of the elder mage.

She knew better than to interrupt Honoratius at his scrying. She waited in the lee of the door, loosening the neck of her tunic at the heat of the room. Honoratius liked to keep it warm in his private study, a privilege and requirement of his age.

"I summoned you an hour ago, Letellia," the mage finally said, without looking up from his globe.

"My apologies, uncle."

The old man chuckled. He turned away from the globe, and gestured toward the other chair, a weathered old seat that looked about as old as he was. "How are the apprentices doing?"

"Well enough. Jalla injured herself when a fire-summoning cantrip misfired, but she continues her work with great intensity. They all do."

"They sense what we all can," Honoratius said, glancing at the window. He turned back to her. "You acquitted yourself well during the undead attack," he said.

"I regret that we were not able to do more," she said.

The old man nodded. "Yes. The Guild is not what it once was."

"You are concerned about our future."

He shot her a penetrating look. "And would you not be, in my circumstance? With Attius's death, there are no senior mages among the Collegium who have mastered the fifth valence, let alone the higher mysteries." He waved a hand as his expression darkened just a trifle. "I did not mean the comment as a criticism, Letellia. I know that you have been working hard to push your talent to the next level of mastery."

"That was not what I was going to say, uncle. I was going to state that it matters little if the Guild prospers, if all of Camar is destroyed."

The old mage leaned back in his chair. He chuckled. "Well. I have always said, with your wit, it is a shame that you did not become a wizard."

The girl shrugged, but the gesture of levity was clearly forced. "Why spend one's life invested in dusty tomes, when the power flows through your very being?"

Honoratius negated her comment with a slice of a single finger. "You do not fool me, girl. You have spent much time in the archives, of late. I still have my..." he paused, caught by a spasm of coughing. The girl started to rise out of her chair, concern written on her face, but he ordered her back with a sharp look. After a moment, he recovered, pressing a soft cloth from his sleeve to his lips.

"You should let me bring a cleric..."

He waved her off again. "As far as I know, they have not yet devised a cure for old age, girl."

"At the very least, you should delay your plans to summon Zarathakonos."

He raised an eyebrow. "I too have my agents," she said with a faint smile.

He sighed. "I may as well step down now, as you seem to know more of what transpires in the Guild than I."

She grew serious, and leaned forward. "I know that we will soon face a grievous choice," she said. "I have not understood all that is written in the *Codex Thanara*, but I know enough to realize that we will all be called upon to... to sacrifice."

He looked at her with soft eyes. "I know, child. I regret that it must be, with all of my being, but I know."

"May I stand at your side when you conduct your binding?"

He nodded. "And the Web?" she added after a moment's hesitation.

The full force of his gaze fixed upon her, and she realized, even through the love that she felt for this old man, the raw power that resided in him. Somehow she mustered the strength to stand up to that stare, and said, "It is time, uncle."

He nodded, and sank back into his seat, merely an old, frail man once more. He looked past the globe, toward the window through which the night sky over Camar could be seen. The two sat in silence for a time, sharing a quiet moment in a world in tumult.

Chapter 219

BUILD UP

Varo was the last to arrive.

They were expecting him, or at least the guards made no effort to block him as he made his way past the outer doors. One guard made a gesture to ward off evil that Varo caught as he passed; the cleric allowed himself a quick smile that was gone by the time he entered the outer chamber.

There were no guards here, and as the outer doors closed behind him he found himself alone. He spared a glance for the ornate window to his right, fully repaired after the night when he and his companions had taken down the Duke. Through the dense panes of glass, he could just make out the sparkle of the stars above.

He did not allow himself time for idle musing. Crossing to the far doors, he entered the council chamber.

They turned as one as he entered. The space around the table was crowded with people. The Doomed Bastards—odd that the name had stuck, even in his mind—were there, Dar, Allera, Talen, and Shay. Velan Tiros was flanked by Nelan and General Darius. Next to Nelan stood Bishop Jaduran, who would likely be the next Patriarch, once the confusion surrounding Gaius Annochus's removal sorted itself out. Jaduran was an aged figure who had come out of retirement in response to the crisis, but he looked positively hale in contrast to the man next to him.

Decimus Honoratius fixed his eyes on Varo in a way that made the cleric feel as though the man could see into the depths of his soul. Varo, however, was used to such scrutiny, and did not shy from the stare. He acknowledged the archmage with a nod, and continued his scan of the room. There was a young woman next to him, his niece, whom Honoratius had used previously as a vessel for his *magic jar* spell.

Varo shifted his attention to the huge stone table that dominated the room. Spread across its surface was a veritable hoard of items. Weapons, pieces of armor, shields,

leather cases bulging with arrows and bolts, pouches and compact packs, wands, neatly tied scrolls, row after row of potion vials, and miscellaneous other items of both obvious and mysterious purpose. And this bounty was in addition to the personal weapons and other items carried by the notables gathered here. Varo suspected that a *detect magic*, cast in this room, would likely render the caster unconscious.

“Licinius Varo,” Tiros said by way of greeting. “Welcome to our council.”

“Gentlemen,” Varo said, coming fully into the chamber. “Ladies.”

Shay snorted. “You can skip the niceties, Varo. Let’s have it.”

“Very well. Orcus has successfully transitioned from the Abyss. He is ensconced within a demiplane of quasi-reality that is directly contingent upon the Prime Material. His power was depleted greatly by the ritual that allowed him to pass, but he is rapidly gathering strength for a final, ultimate invasion of our world. Soon, very soon, he will be too powerful for anyone to stop him.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Tiros nodded. “Yes, we know. Archmage Honoratius shared a very similar summary with us earlier today.”

For once, Varo looked surprised. But he recovered quickly. He nodded toward the collection upon the table. “Then you are preparing for a final assault upon Rappan Athuk.”

Honoratius spoke. “Yes. We will begin by severing the connection that binds the demon to his three temples in Rappan Athuk, to weaken the foe, and then enter the demiplane where he hides, and put an end to the creature.”

“You are familiar with the *Codex*?” Varo asked.

The ancient mage nodded. “I suspect that my version is not as complete as yours, cleric of Dagos.” He glanced over, just for a second, at the young woman at his side. “But the only course available to us seems reasonably clear.”

“Nelán has agreed to use his powers to reduce the temples,” Tiros said. “The church of the Father has put its full support behind the operation.”

“There must be resolution,” Nelán said, his mouth twitching slightly as he looked at Varo.

The cleric of Dagos nodded. “There is another variable of which you may not be aware. The Ravager...”

“Yes, we have confirmed that the being that attacked Southwatch and Highbluff was not one of the Demon’s creatures,” Tiros said. “Other than that it originated at, or near,

Rappan Athuk, we have not been able to divine more about its nature, or even precisely what matter of being it was. Whatever its source, we must continue with our plans; any additional matters will have to be addressed as they present themselves.”

Varo raised an eyebrow. “That seems a rather... haphazard approach.”

“Perhaps you have an alternative schema to suggest?” the marshal asked, his voice tight.

“Not at all. I am just surprised to hear it, coming from you.”

“We would welcome any additional data, maps, or other intelligence you might have regarding Rappan Athuk,” Tiros said. “From what Talen told me, you have quite the collection of lore regarding the Dungeon of Graves.”

“Indeed,” Varo said, coming forward to the edge of the table. “I also have some items of power to contribute to your cache here.”

“Then leave them,” Talen said. “We will make good use of whatever you provide.”

“Excuse me?”

“I believe you understood my intent, cleric. You will not be coming with us, not this time.”

“That is a foolish attitude. Regardless of your personal feelings toward me, I both know more about Rappan Athuk than any person here, and my spellcasting powers are not some trivial boon you can casually discard. Without my presence, most of you would not be alive today.” Varo spread his gaze across the gathered company, but each time he saw only dark stares. Allera, and to his surprise, Tiros, looked away when he came to them.

“The simple fact of it is that none of us trust you, Varo,” Talen continued. “We tolerated you so far as we needed you to take on the cult of Orcus. But no more.”

“You need me still.”

“That may well be true. But I would not trust you to stand beside me, let alone protect my back in the Dungeon of Graves. This is not an idle sentiment, or a personal decision on my part. We are in agreement.”

Varo looked at them again, saw the truth in the knight’s statement. His shoulders slumped slightly, a subtle gesture of defeat.

“Very well. While I believe that you will come to regret your decision, it is yours to make, and I will not waste my time trying to sway you.” He reached into his *handy*

haversack, and drew out several leather wraps, which he tossed onto the table. “The items within should be self-evident in terms of utility. If you need assistance, he,” he said, gesturing slightly toward Honoratius, “can provide instruction.”

He then drew out the familiar leather folio that contained his collection of maps, charts, and other lore. “I will leave this in your custody as well. Make of it as you will.” He placed the heavy folio on the edge of the table beside the wraps.

The cleric looked up directly at Tiros. “One last time, marshal. This is a mistake; you will need every ally you can muster to survive this challenge.”

This time, Tiros did not shy away. “We will be victorious, or we will fail. But we will be true to what we are, either way.”

Varo nodded, and turned to leave, but paused a moment in the doorway. “I would speak with Corath Dar a moment.”

Everyone looked at Dar, who shrugged and walked over to the priest. The two walked out into the foyer together. A few minutes later, the fighter returned, alone.

“What did he want?” Talen asked.

For a moment, Dar did not reply. Then he shrugged again and lifted a fist, which he opened to reveal a ring set with a black stone. “Another ring, like the ones he gave us before. Said it was for the elf.”

“The elf?” Talen asked.

“That’s what he said. You want I should toss it?”

“The ring he gave you saved your life, Talen,” Shay said, putting a hand on his arm. Talen’s hands tightened into fists. He no longer wore the ring; the jewel each bore was usable only once, and the freeing of the soul to return it to the body destroyed the item in the process.

“But the Sphere, we destroyed it,” Allera said.

“He wouldn’t have given it to you if he didn’t think it was important,” Shay said.

“It is your decision, Talen,” Tiros said. “You are in command of this mission.”

Talen nodded. “Keep it,” he said. “Maybe he knows something we don’t.” He laughed. “Of course he does. What am I saying? But at least this time we won’t be pawns on his gameboard.”

Dar frowned but he put the ring in his pocket.

Tiros turned to his left. “Archmage Honoratius, when Varo entered you were saying that you had another announcement. Please continue.”

The archmage nodded. “My statement is just this; I will be accompanying you on this expedition.”

There was a murmur of surprise around the table. “Master Archmage,” Talen began, “I do not mean any disrespect, but...”

“You think I do not realize that I am a wrinkled husk?” Honoratius said, with a sharp laugh. “You have already seen my channel my power through my niece, Letellia.”

“But she is just a girl—” Talen began, only to take an elbow from Shay. “It’s not that, she is too young...”

“Like my uncle, I am fully cognizant of my age,” Letellia said. “And please do not stress the dangers; I have been present during the entire discussion. And I am a sorceress of no small power in my own right.”

“Archmage, I am not an arcanist, and please clarify if necessary, but I do not believe that the *magic jar* spell will suffice in this instance,” Nelan said.

“I have access to an alternative magic that will enable me to share the consciousness of my niece for a period of time each day,” Honoratius explained. “Through her you will have access to my full powers, which are... not inconsiderable.”

“My uncle is the most powerful mage in Camar, and you know it,” Letellia added.

Dar chuckled, and the attention of the table shifted toward him. “Seems like they’re making the same arguments as Varo did, a moment ago.”

“The difference is that I trust the Archmage,” Talen said. “I have my concerns about the arrangement, but you are right, we will need your aid. I welcome you—both of you—to the expedition.”

“All right,” Tiros said. “The hour is late, and we still have much to discuss.”

Chapter 220

RETURN TO SOUTHWATCH

A flicker of energy, a faint shimmer, and six companions from Camar materialized at the bottom of a barren, rocky dell. It was cold, but the air was preternaturally still, despite the movements of the dense gray clouds high above.

The place seemed denuded of life. Despite the recent rains, the brush that choked the dell was brown and crisp, dead vegetation that crinkled under their feet. Thorns plucked at their garments as they spread out to look around, but they were all wearing durable garments designed for rough travel, and they were not inconvenienced.

“Are we on target?” Talen asked.

Letellia—or rather, Honoratius—turned to face him. “The spell I used has no chance of error,” the archmage said. “We are at the exact spot that you specified.”

Talen nodded. It took some getting used to, perceiving the ancient mage’s presence in the body of the young woman. He’d encountered the strange combination before, when Honoratius had *teleported* their group to Aldenford, but now he, she, *they* were a part of their company proper, companions that would dare Rappan Athuk with them.

“There is death on the air,” Nelan said, frowning as he adjusted his armor. The old priest looked somewhat uncomfortable in his breastplate of shining mithral, but he clutched his mace with determination. He carried numerous magical adjuncts from the vaults of the church of Soleus, including several healing wands, a dozen potent scrolls, and a like number of magical potions.

“We’re only a short distance from Southwatch,” Shay said. “A lot of unburied bodies were left there.”

“Or undead,” Allera said, with a slight shudder.

“I still think we should have brought some more men,” Dar said.

Talen was scanning the hills that surrounded the dell. “This is a reconnaissance in force,” he said. “We are going to help Nelan take out the temples, find out how to access this demiplane that Orcus is hiding in, and report back.”

“Just like that, eh?”

“If you have a better idea, I’d be glad to hear it.”

“Please, gentlemen... the plan has been decided, let’s focus on accomplishing the mission,” Allera said.

“That’s something I can agree with,” Talen said. “Archmage, are you ready?”

Honoratius raised an eyebrow, an incongruous expression on the young woman's face. "I am here, commander. As I noted earlier, I can maintain the *transposition* for several hours."

"All right. Shay, can you find the goblin cave from here?"

"On it." The scout, equipped with her magical boots, easily made her way up the treacherous sides of the dell, and vanished into a gap between two of the far hills. She was only gone for a few moments before she reappeared, waving for them to follow.

The companions moved out in single file, silent and alert. They were very well equipped, each of them carrying several powerful healing potions. Shay's *bag of holding* was loaded with mundane supplies and spare weapons, and they had a quantity of magical arrows for their bows. Allera had a full half-dozen healing wands, three *cure light wounds*, two *cure moderate wounds*, and a last with the *lesser restoration* spell. Her own powers had augmented as well, enhanced with a more powerful *periapt of wisdom*.

They still had mixed feelings on that score. The *periapt* and two of the wands had been in one of the satchels that Varo had provided. The cleric obviously had his own resources, even without an organized church to draw upon. But then again, a great quantity of magical items had vanished into his *handy haversack* during their last assault upon Rappan Athuk, and even in crisis Camar was a place where one could acquire many things if one knew the right sources. Varo was not the only one to have made good use of their loot; Shay had traded a quantity of goblin-sized magical weapons to a merchant from Drasalia in exchange for an improved set of empowered gloves that further enhanced her considerable agility.

"The cave's just a few hills over to the southeast," Shay reported, as they joined her at the lip of the dell. "I didn't see anything moving, anything at all. The hills seem dead."

"The baleful influence of the Demon is spreading," Nelan said. "Even the plants are dying out."

"All the more reason to keep moving," Talen said. Dead grass crunched under his heavy boots.

The unnatural calm prickled at their senses, and sharpened their awareness. They were wary of an ambush, especially so close to the abattoir of Southwatch. But no hostile things emerged from the hills to threaten them, and it took them less than fifteen minutes before they stood before the rocky overhang that concealed the goblins' hidden exit.

"Let us hope that they are still disposed to parlay with intruders," Honoratius said, as they drew out their *everburning torches* and headed inside. The archmage drew out a quantity of powder and sprinkled it on her skin, toughening it with the potency of a

stoneskin spell. There was a faint sparkling in her hair, as their lights glittered on tiny gemstones woven within a weave of platinum threads. This was the *Web of Transposition*, a magical focus that enabled Honoratius to possess the body of his niece over the great distances that separated them. The young woman looked tiny flanked by Dar and Talen in their heavy armor, but she bore a considerable presence about her that was exclusive of the personality of her archmage uncle.

The secret door at the rear of the cave was as they had left it. After disarming the trap there by the simple expedient of tripping it (and narrowly avoiding the scything, poisoned blade), they accessed the familiar staircase beyond and started down.

“By the gods, each time we come back to this place, it smells worse than before,” Shay said, as she led them down the twining stairs carved in the stone.

“There isn’t anything that smells worse than the dung monster,” Dar replied.

“Quiet,” Talen said, and for a time thereafter the only sound was the noise of their boots on the stone.

The staircase continued for an interminable time, dropping them ever lower. Finally it opened onto a larger cavern, through which the stair descended like an iron spike. Careful to remain close to the central spire of the winding stair, away from the sheer drop on the edge, they continued down. Their lights were just bright enough to make out the galleries around the perimeter of the cavern, perfect places for ambushers to assault unwelcome guests coming down the stairs. They saw no enemies, but the further they descended, the more each of them could feel the oppressive weight of invisible eyes fixed upon them from the darkness.

The goblins were waiting for them at the bottom of the staircase.

Allera stepped forward. They had agreed that Allera would be their spokesperson, or despite Shay’s mastery of the goblin language, she lacked the healer’s diplomatic talents. Honoratius had empowered her with the ability to speak and comprehend any spoken language via a spell, to minimize any chance of misunderstanding.

“We come in peace,” she told the deputation waiting for them. There were only a half-dozen goblins in evidence, but none of them would make the mistake of assuming that they represented the entirety of the garrison here. “As we stood together against the evil followers of Orcus that threatened to destroy you before, so to we ask your kind permission to travel through your city once more.”

The others remained a short distance back, ready to move in an instant if things turned ugly. Dar loosened his sword in its scabbard. “Don’t make any threatening moves,” Talen said quietly.

Dar did not look away from Allera. "I am not a raw recruit, commander," he whispered back.

"I dislike trusting such as these," Nelan observed. "While we are taught not to prejudge by the doctrines of the faith, goblins are steeped in selfishness and treachery."

"See, that's what I keep saying, but he won't listen to me," Dar replied, with a jerk of his head at Talen. The knight did not respond.

"The end of the world makes for strange bedfellows," Shay observed.

Allera returned a moment later. "What did they say?" Talen asked.

"It would seem that our way must lead elsewhere. The goblins have collapsed the tunnel leading to the slave pits. There is no longer any access to the temples of Orcus."

"And you believed him?" Dar asked. "I think they just don't want us coming through their city again."

"The goblin was telling the truth," Honoratius said. "At least insofar as he believed it to be true."

"Some sorcery?" Dar asked.

"Indeed. During the interview, I scanned its thoughts. They are suspicious of us, and understandably fearful, but it confirmed that the tunnel you sought has been collapsed."

"Can you *teleport* us through the obstruction?" Talen asked.

The young woman shook her head. "I had only one instance of the spell memorized, but even beyond that, magical transportation without very specific directions in mind can be hazardous. Or in the case of the augmented version of the spell, futile."

"Varo said something about interference, last time," Allera said.

"Perhaps. I have sensed some anomalous currents of power since we entered this complex."

Talen grimaced and snapped his sword an inch in its scabbard. "We must try another approach, then."

Dar looked at him, and divined the significance of his intent in his face. "Ugh, I had to say it."

"What?" Shay asked.

“Let’s just say that you’ll get a chance to do your comparison of stinks,” the fighter said. As the goblins watched them silently from the shadows at the base of the stair, the knight led them back up the way they had come.

Chapter 221

ONCE MORE ON THE EDGE

They emerged from the goblin cave and started cross-country through the hills toward the south. The terrain was rough but navigable, and Shay was able to blaze a trail forward. The day had been full when they’d returned from the hidden entrance, but the sun remained hidden behind a dreary bank of gray above them.

Honoratius departed their company about an hour after they left the cave. Talen called a halt as Letellia quavered and sat down on a protruding rock. She raised a hand to her head, shivered briefly, and then blinked several times.

“Are you all right?” Allera asked.

“I... I’m fine,” the sorceress said. “The disorientation lasts only a few moments.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t happen in the middle of a battle,” Dar said.

“Archmage Honoratius knows the limits of his spell,” Letellia returned. “And I am far from helpless, when he is absent.”

“He cannot return until tomorrow, correct?” Talen asked.

The sorceress nodded. “He will *scry* us, and then initiate the transposition when it is necessary. I have a pair of *sending* spells on scrolls that I can use to contact him, but I recommend their use on for emergencies, as they are a finite resource.”

“Don’t worry,” Dar said. “You’ll find that there’s no shortage of emergencies when you spend time with us.”

“All right then,” Talen said. “Let’s get moving.”

They continued south by southwest for several hours. Eventually the slowly fading light from above indicated the waning of the day, and they began to look for a place to set camp. They settled on a rocky outcrop well-shielded by a ring of large boulders. Letellia unrolled another scroll and cast a spell, conjuring a small, durable-looking cottage of stone upon the clearing at the top of the hill.

“Wow,” Dar said, stepping forward to inspect the building. “Sorceress, I wish we’d had you with us before; this sure beats sleeping on the ground.”

The *secure shelter* proved sufficient to their needs, although they still were careful to set watches. But nothing troubled them during their rest, and they woke early to the faint patter of raindrops upon the surface of the structure.

“Oh, great,” Dar said, muttering as he pulled his blanket up over his head.

The *shelter* vanished even as they were packing up their gear after a sparse breakfast of oatmeal and hot coffee. Fortunately the rain proved light and fleeting, although the clouds continued to darken as they continued south.

“Looks like a doozy of a storm coming,” Shay said.

As if triggered by her words, they all heard a distant rumbling, followed by the faintest hint of a tremor in the ground beneath their feet.

“What was that?” Allera asked.

Shay had crouched to the ground, and laid her head against the rocky soil. She held up a hand for silence, but the disturbance was not repeated.

“We felt a quake like that on an earlier visit to Rappan Athuk,” Talen said. “Varo said it was connected to the ritual that the servants of Orcus were conducting.”

Letellia nodded. “It may just be a natural quake, but it is wise to take precautions.”

“Is Honoratius joining us now?”

She shook her head. “I do not think so; the spell’s duration is limited, so I believe he will wait until we reach the vale.”

They pressed on, with Shay directing them across a landscape that seemed devoid of notable features to the others. But the scout had spent a lot of time tracking in these hills, and they had come through these hills when they had fled Rappan Athuk via the bee tunnels, what seemed like a lifetime past.

It was midafternoon when they reached the crest of another low rise to look down at Rappan Athuk once again.

From their vantage, they could see the full length of the dell, stretched out before them like a fallen corpse. The valley formed the outline of a great cross, and through the omnipresent wisps of fog that were ever present they could just make out the forms of some of the thousands of headstones and monuments that marked the graves of the fallen soldiers that had battled here centuries ago. The mausoleums on the far side of

the valley were just vague outlines from where they stood, but each of those who had experienced the Dungeon of Graves could feel their presence like the shade of a dear friend long dead.

“I wonder if we get to kill the greenies again,” Dar said, loosening *Valor* in his sheath. “Each time we come here, I think they get a bit easier.” He started down the hill, flexing his arms behind his head, getting limber for the inevitable confrontation.

“Does he not feel fear?” Nelan asked. “I feel as though someone has thrust a dagger of ice through my vitals.”

“No, he’s just crazy,” Shay said. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Come,” Talen said, following the fighter down the far slope. The others trailed behind.

Dar waited for them at the valley’s edge. The blackened wreckage of the soldiers’ fort was still visible to their right, halfway around the perimeter of the depression. Nothing lived as far as they could see in every direction.

Dar said, “Well, I guess it’s time for—”

The fighter was interrupted by another thrumming within the ground. The ground trembled faintly but noticeably beneath their feet, and a sound reached them from ahead; a ferocious groan that sounded like a violent spasm of a sick giant. Several voices spoke at once.

“What was *that*—”

“It came from down there—”

“There, I think... the Well—”

“Quiet!” Talen hissed. *Beatus Incendia* had appeared in his fist, the bright light of the sword casting the dull dreariness of the day into stark relief.

The noise came again, louder it seemed, this time. It came from directly ahead of them. The companions readied spells and weapons. Dar drew *Valor* and actually took a few steps forward into the vale, but he glanced back at the others and hesitated.

“Letellia...” Talen said, turning toward the sorceress.

“He’s coming, I think... the casting, it takes time...”

“No time!” Dar said, as he pointed toward the dark outline of the Well. Another noise issued from that direction, different and alien and terrible. As the companions watched, they could *feel* the progress of something up that dark shaft, the noise it made sounding

like the protests of the earth itself at its passage. After an agonizing but sparse passage of seconds, long claws appeared, grasping the upper edge of the Well from within.

The creature that emerged was a horror beyond imagining. It was much bigger than it first appeared, its body swelling outward as it passed through the comparatively narrow neck of the Well. It was huge, its hairless flesh a shockingly bright crimson, its visage resembling that of a weasel, but with monstrous jaws from which teeth the size of shortswords protruded. As more of its body emerged from the Well they could see that it had eight sets of legs, all of them equipped with powerful scoop-shaped claws. Its teeth, claws, and eyes were all utterly black.

As it emerged from the bowels of the earth, the creature let out a roar of utter rage and fury that shook each of them to the core. While it was different in shape than the last instance of its kind they had encountered, Dar and Talen recognized it at once.

Another spawn of the Ravager had emerged to wreak havoc upon the world.

Chapter 222

SPAWN OF THE RAVAGER

Talen shot a look back at Letellia, but the sorceress had taken on a vague look, and as he watched her eyes rolled back into her head. She remained standing, but it was clear that otherwise she was no longer present with them.

“Take that thing out!” the knight yelled. Shay fired an arrow at it, but even the holy missile, blessed by the church of the Father, had no effect, glancing harmlessly off the monster’s shoulder.

Just in case they hadn’t gotten its attention, Nelan hit it with a *flame strike* a moment later.

The ravager lowered its head and charged up the valley slope toward its foes, moving with an impressive speed for its size. Headstones shattered in a puff of pulverized stone as its claws struck them, but none of the obstacles appeared to hinder it in the least.

“Come to daddy, motherfucker,” Dar rumbled, moving down to a position that offered a good, stable stance a short distance ahead. Allera tried to *calm* it, but her spell had no effect upon the creature. If anything, it intensified its rush.

The creature came right for Dar, and it hit him like an avalanche. The fighter roared and swung *Valor* at it as it lunged, but even as the axiomatic blade bit into its dagger-shaped head it snapped the center of its skull up through his body, knocking him flying. Dar flipped end over end and had started a second revolution when he hit the ground ten feet away, landing hard and awkwardly on the rocky earth. *Valor* knifed into the soil a pace away, its hilt quivering back and forth.

“Fuck... me...” the fighter managed to groan.

Talen was on the beast before it could follow up on its charge, slashing at its side with *Beatus Incendia*. The holy blade bit into its shoulder, but the creature’s skin was like steel plate in its thickness and durability, and the blow barely cut the flesh. The monster rounded on Talen in a violent fury, snapping its jaws down onto his shoulder, pinning him as its front four claws tore at him in a storm of violence. Only his armor kept him from being torn to pieces, but even so he suffered vicious wounds that took him from full health to the brink of destruction in the space of a few heartbeats. Even worse, the creature seemed to draw sustenance from the damage it wrought, and the few wounds that Talen and Dar had managed to inflict upon it drew closed, leaving its hide whole once more. Talen somehow remained conscious, and even lifted *Beatus Incendia* to strike again. But held as he was, he could manage only a feeble thrust that again failed to inflict anything more than a trivial wound upon the creature.

Shay let out a terrific shout and abandoned any pretense of stealth as she rushed at its flank, hoping to distract enough to release Talen. Her attack, backed by the momentum of her charge, allowed her to penetrate its skin at the juncture of one of its rear legs. The monster reacted, swinging its head around like a whip, smashing Talen into her like a club, knocking both of them flying.

“Be gone, creature of the darkness!” Nelan cried, as he hurled a *dismissal* spell at the monster. The spell had no effect, but the creature must have detected some threat in the attack, for it immediately spun around and came charging forward, a thousand pounds of unstoppable death.

Nelan started back before that rush; it was no cowardice to flee before such a monstrosity. But then he glanced back to see Letellia standing a few paces behind him, still distant, utterly vulnerable.

Turning back, the cleric lowered the faceplate of his helmet, and lifted his mace in a hopeless gesture of defiance.

Chapter 223

BLOOD ON THE GROUND

Nelan stood his ground, but the creature was implacable. It snapped its armored head down like a dagger thrust, not even bothering to open its jaws as it struck his breastplate just below the right shoulder. The impact knocked the cleric onto his back, stunned. The creature's momentum carried it over him, its rear legs and their scoop-shaped claws clattering over him as it surged ahead.

That left nothing between it and Letellia. The monster opened its jaws wide to seize the helpless sorceress, but before it could strike the fog behind her eyes suddenly vanished, and she looked up in full awareness at the death descending upon her. She held her ground, and as the huge jaws started to snap shut, she spoke a word of magic and vanished. The monster bit down hard on empty air, and snarled in frustration as it looked around for its missing prey.

Dar let out a roar as he barreled forward at the monster from the side. Allera had been at his side within seconds of him hitting the ground. As Talen and Shay went down she aborted her intended spell in favor of a *mass cure serious wounds* that aided all of them. Dar nodded in thanks as she helped him to his feet, and he barely hesitated as he seized *Valor* and ran at the monster's flank.

The ravager had twisted its head around to the other side, intent on finishing Nelan, but it spun back quickly to face Dar's rush. The creature's long neck and considerable reach allowed it to get a bite in before Dar could get within striking distance, but Dar just lowered his body and took the hit, tearing free before it could get a solid grip on his armored body. Dar cried out again as he swept *Valor* down two-handed into its torso, shouting to the cleric still pinned under its body, "Get out of there, Nelan!"

This time Dar's blade dug deep into its flesh, and a jet of blood that hissed in the cold air spurted from the ugly gash three feet long that he cut into its body. The creature turned on him in a mad fury, the front half of its body rising up to allow it to sweep at him with its four front claws. Its movement allowed Nelan to stagger free, although he limped badly on his left leg, where the monster had trodden upon him in its charge, and his helmet had been torn off in the chaos. The old priest's brow bore a long gash that trailed blood down the left side of his face, but he was alive, and he had enough clarity to get out of its reach before he called upon his magic to heal his wounds. He still clung to his weapon, but it wasn't clear what if any use that would be against a foe of this magnitude.

Dar had expected to take a beating, but even he could not have expected the violence of the monster's full attack. By some miracle he avoided the snap of its jaws this time, but his luck evaporated a second later as it dug a shovel-sized claw into his gut. Those claws had the power to dig through solid rock, and it crumpled the band of armor protecting his lower body, carving a swath of terrible pain through him as it knocked him back a step. He barely kept his footing, extending his arms to the ground to help him hold his weight, but the monster wasn't done, slamming down another pair of claws into his back. Something cracked in his left shoulder, and suddenly the ground filled his

visor, and a loud pounding noise echoed in his ears. A little voice whispered that he had to get up, that the creature was certainly about to kill him, but it faded, along with his consciousness.

Talen and Shay had risen to their feet, the knight tugged back from the brink of death by Allera's healing magic. As soon as she saw that he was all right, Shay started up the hill after the creature, but they were still a good ten paces off as Dar was struck down, and as the two rushed forward, they saw that they weren't going to make it to the fighter's aid in time.

Chapter 224

REINFORCEMENTS

The ravager's black eyes blazed with a cold premonition of death as it loomed over Dar and Allera. The healer had fallen to the ground beside the fallen fighter, ignoring the painful scrapes to her legs from the stony ground. Her talent with healing magic was such that she barely needed to focus the thought for the positive energy to flow, but time seemed to slow to a crawl of seconds as the monster's head split open, and a foul gust of death rushed over her. Even as Dar's body responded to the potency of Allera's *heal* spell, the ravager's head stabbed down toward them, its huge jaws lined with rows of teeth like black daggers.

There was a streak through the air; Allera perceived it as a slight whistle over the hiss of air from the creature's jaws. The creature shuddered, its attack aborted and ruined as its head jerked roughly back. One of its claws stabbed the ground a scant foot from her right leg, spattering her and Dar with fragments of shattered rock. Still caught up in the heightened moment as the last of the healing energy from her spell coursed through her, Allera spotted the fletchings of an arrow jutting from the back of the creature's neck, the missile's head buried deep into its skull.

Looking up, beyond the creature, Allera saw three slight, nimble forms dart down from the sky, their cloaks flapping wildly about them from the wind of their passage. One broke away from the formation and dove; one of the others selected another arrow from the quiver at his hip, and the second pointed a wand at the ravager. Whatever spell the caster hurled from the wand had no obvious effect, but the arrow had clearly discomfited it, and it spun around, looking for the source of its pain.

The diving figure was a woman, to all appearances unprotected by armor, and armed only with a slender sword that she kept close against her leg as she streaked down toward the back of the monster. It spotted her and bent back upon itself as it lunged into the air, extending its body out to a surprising length as it snapped its jaws upon the woman. But again its teeth closed only on empty air. Moving with an incredible speed

and grace, the woman spun into a barrel roll, coming up under its jaw as it snapped at where she'd been an instant before. Her arm shot out and back so fast that the sword was just a blur. There was a cacophonous pulse of sound, and as the woman streaked past and free, the ravager jerked back, its head snapping over as it twisted over, unbalanced, and fell hard to the ground. Dar narrowly avoided being crushed, and staggered away, Allera holding his arm for support, or perhaps supporting him.

The ravager was quick to rise, rolling over again to its feet in a violent thrashing blur that sent a cascade of scattered earth and stones out in every direction. Talen weathered that barrage, small fragments of stone pinging loudly off his metal armor. He struck at the creature's flank with *Beatus Incendia*, but once more could manage no more than a slight gash upon its incredibly resistant hide. It was enough to get the creature's attention, though, and as it rolled back onto its feet, it rapidly twisted to face the knight once more.

Before it could strike, however, a lance of pulsating, violent sonic energy slammed with great force into the creature's head. Each of the companions felt the backblast of Honoratius's sonically-substituted *chain lightning* as a piercing vibration that felt like it was going to shake all of the teeth out of their heads, but that was nothing compared to what the monster felt. Its durable inherent nature absorbed some of the force of the bolt, but even so its crimson visage was marred by lines of dark substance that oozed from the slits of its ears and nostrils.

The monster spun to focus upon the source of its agony, but it saw nothing, only empty space. The monster had incredibly keen senses, but surrounded by a chaos of battle, with the aftermath of the sonic blast still clouding its senses, it could not determine the source of the attack.

Instead, it took its frustrations out on those close at hand.

Dar broke away from Allera and rushed back at the creature. As it turned toward Talen, one of its long claws clipped his leg, an accidental impact that nevertheless send a knife's wedge of pain up the limb. Grinding his teeth hard enough to draw blood, he narrowly avoided falling down despite the agony each step on that leg shot through him. He targeted the next leg down as it slammed into the ground, and tore into it with enough force to nearly sever the limb from the creature's body.

The monster had hit seized Talen with another bite, but with Dar's hit it released the knight and twisted back toward the fighter. It brought back the claw that had injured him earlier and now tried to stomp him into the ground with it. Dar narrowly avoided a punishing blow that potentially could have snapped his injured leg entirely, but even the grazing hit along his hip drove the armor plate deep into his flesh, knocking him roughly back a step. As the creature completed its turn another claw smashed into the ground with enough force to sunder a boulder the size of a horse's torso. One fragment caught him on the side of the head. Had he not been wearing his helmet, the impact would

have shattered his skull; as it was, the crimson form of the creature wavered for a moment before him, and he felt the world start to spin precipitously around him.

But then a cool wave of healing surged into him, and clarity returned to replace the fleeting pain of his wounds.

The monster was continuing to draw strength from the wounds it was unleashing, and its regenerative abilities were further closing its wounds and salving the injuries it had suffered in the brief but violent melee. The leg that Dar had nearly severed could still not fully support its weight, but now it was definitely moving, the severed tendons and muscles rejoined. Blood had stopped trailing from the armored slits in its head.

But the creature was taking abuse faster than even it could heal. In quick succession it was hit by a barrage of weapons and spells. Nelan's *searing light* drew a black line across its chest, moments before a barrage of *magic missiles* from the flying spellcaster above blasted pocks across its back. The archer continued his fire, his skill evident in the way he adjusted for the inherent instability of hovering in mid-air. None of his follow-up shots had had the efficacy of his first, but three more arrows jutted from its head and neck. Unfortunately, with its incredibly tough hide, it was not clear if the shots were having any effect at all.

The monster unleashed its fully fury upon Dar, but this time the fighter stood his ground, and gave as good as he got. Allera's magical healing had bolstered him to the point where he could stand up to the creature, taking hits that would have killed an average man, even a veteran fighter with less experience than Dar. But his instincts had been honed by three trips into the Dungeon of Graves, and each time he was able to turn a killing blow into another grim but bearable wound. When the monster's last claw glanced off of his breastplate, and it settled back to the ground, fresh dents covered his armor, and blood trailed down his legs, but he remained standing.

The ravager merely reared again and opened its jaws to start anew.

But now it was Dar's turn to dish out the pain. He lunged forward, drawing his sword across its chest, the two-handed strike cutting deep into its flesh. The monster drew reflexively back, but Dar knew better than to chase after it. Instead he fell into a slight crouch, his blade held back low against his left leg. He watched as the creature roared in pain and thrashed about, dimly aware that his companions were continuing to harry it from its flanks. But none of them were hurting it as much as he had.

Then, inevitably, it focused on him again. It surged back forward and down in a sudden blitz of speed that would have caught most men off guard. But Dar had been waiting for it, expecting it.

Valor came up with speed to match the creature's assault. The ravager opened its jaws so wide that Dar could see deep down its gullet, its throat lined with ugly gray spines that seemed to promise an uncomfortable trip for anyone making the journey down it.

He did not try to dodge as it snapped its jaws shut around his body, but even as the black dagger-teeth seized him, crushing his armor with the sheer power of its bite, he grasped the hilt of his blade tightly in both hands, and drove the enchanted steel through its left eye, deep into its skull, and into the gray mass of its brain.

The ravager collapsed in a paroxysm of thrashing limbs that sent its nearby foes flying back. Dar, still pinned in its death-grasp, was dashed to the ground repeatedly, and when the creature's violent struggles finally ceased, he lay there upon the stones, broken, bleeding, and unmoving.

Chapter 225

NOT QUITE OVER

Not surprisingly, Allera was there first.

"Dar!" she yelled, cradling his head in her lap as she poured another potent healing spell into the fighter's broken body. For a moment her heart froze in her chest, then she let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding as he sucked in a gasp of air, and groaned. He blinked, and after a moment his eyes gained focus as he looked up at her.

"Remind me again why I signed up for this?" he asked.

"Because you're crazy," Allera said, but there was clear relief in her voice.

Talen and Shay appeared through the haze of dust kicked up by the creature's death throes. Above, the three flying individuals descended slowly toward them. They were elves, and as they drew closer, Talen recognized the spellcaster. But before he could hail their unexpected allies, Honoratius appeared nearby, walking briskly toward them.

"I am relieved to see that you all live, commander, but this battle is not quite over," he said.

"What?" Talen asked, but even as the words left his mouth, he felt a faint tremor beneath his feet, and he understood.

He spun to see the ravager stirring with new life. Its wounds, while still dire, were beginning to knit shut. It was still far from being able to get up again, especially with *Valor* still protruding from its eye socket, but it was a lot closer to life than it had been a few seconds ago, and it was clear that the gap was closing.

“Fucking shit,” Dar said, staggering to his feet. Allera tried to stop him, but he reached for the hilt of his sword, only to belatedly realize that his weapon wasn’t there. He reached for his club, but the weapon’s throng had been snapped during his pounding at the hands of the ravager, and was nowhere nearby.

“Nothing’s ever easy,” the fighter said, as he started toward the creature. Talen was already heading toward it, but Honoratius stopped them.

“Your weapons are not capable of putting a final end to it,” he said. He pointed toward Shay, who was hacking at its neck, without much success. Even in death, its hide retained its amazing resistance to wounds.

“How do we kill it, then?” Talen asked. “Quickly... we don’t have much time...” To punctuate his words, the body of the creature shuddered again, and one of its claws twitched. The elves, having recognized what was happening, readied weapons and spells once more, and their wizard fired another spray of *magic missiles* from his wand that peppered its body with black pocks.

The archmage opened a pouch at her waist, and reached inside it. Talen felt a moment of slight vertigo as her hand vanished into the pouch up to her elbow, but he was used to magic and its ability to violate the laws of the physical world. She recovered what she had been looking for and drew it out, offering the hilt to him.

It was a dagger, a wedge of silvery steel—mithral, it appeared—set in a handle of the same material. There was a bright red gem embedded in the hilt, a ruby, perhaps, but larger than any such gem that Talen had ever before seen.

“Tribune Tيروس used this weapon to put a final end to the creature at Highbluff,” Honoratius said. “It inflicts vicious wounds that do not heal.”

Talen reached for it, but Dar shouldered him aside and took the weapon. “I’ll do it,” he said. He walked over to the creature’s head, and saw that *Valor* now jutted about a foot more from its left eyesocket than where he had left it; apparently the creature’s regenerative abilities were enough to drive the impaling weapon from its skull.

As Dar looked down at it, its other eye blinked open.

The fighter drove the dagger, along with his fist, into the monster’s eye. The eye exploded, dousing him with foul fluids, but he kept pushing, until half his arm had vanished into the socket. He felt something hard against his thrust and probed with the dagger until he felt a softer spot, and then drove the blade home.

This time, the creature did not struggle; it just seemed to *deflate*, and lay limp and unmoving once more.

“It is done,” Honoratius said.

Dar drew back, grimacing at the filth covering his arm. “Stuff burns,” he said, taking the towel that Allera offered him with a nod of thanks. Dar cleaned off the dagger and returned it to Honoratius, who nodded and replaced it in her magical pouch.

The companions gathered around the head of the slain monster. The elves drifted down to meet them, the archer and the swordswoman flanking the spellcaster. As they landed, the Camarians could see that their flesh bore the subtle but noticeable grainy texturing that was a product of the *stoneskin* spell.

“Hey, elf,” Dar said. “Welcome back to the show.”

“Malerase,” Talen said, with a nod. The elf wizard seemed unaffected, but the woman to his left bristled at the name. “He is *not* forgotten, human!” The other man, the archer, added, “You address Lord Elegion Alderis, and he is worthy of your respect.”

Talen lifted a hand to placate them, but Dar spoke up before he could speak. “So. You got a new name, eh? I guess it beats, ‘the mad elf.’”

The younger elves’ expressions darkened, but before the exchange could develop further, Alderis stepped in. “Indeed, Corath Dar. My circumstances have changed somewhat since our last meeting.”

“What are you doing here, Mal—Alderis?” Talen asked. “When we last saw you, you vanished on our escape from Rappan Athuk. We did not know if you were alive or dead.”

Alderis nodded. “I apologize for my hasty departure. I felt it necessary, at the time; there were matters I needed to address before I could return.”

Dar finished wiping off his arm, and he tossed the now-ruined rag away. “Why did you come back, elf? And why now? There has been some heavy shit going down, in case you weren’t aware.”

Alderis looked at him. He seemed to have aged decades since they had last seen him, and his eyes were sunken in his head, like the entrances to dark caves. When Dar had first met him, the elf had been like a coiled spring, nervous energy waiting to be unleashed. Now, he looked as though a stiff breeze would snap him in twain. But there was something powerful in his eyes, and Dar felt it like a physical touch as they focused on him.

Talen interrupted the moment. “It is a valid question, Alderis. Varo said you were drawn to Rappan Athuk, before.”

Alderis blinked and shifted his attention to the knight. “Yes. Yes, I am drawn here by the same thing that has drawn you here, humans of Camar.”

“So you are intent on going back inside.”

“I can no more turn away than you can, Talen Karedes.”

“That may be. But if we are to accept your aid, then we must be able to trust you.”

“If Lord Alderis gives his word, that is all the bond you need, human,” the archer said.

“If you’d seen him as a raving lunatic, you’d understand our caution,” Dar said.

“Dar... you’re not helping,” Allera whispered. And indeed the younger elves now looked like they were considering using again the weapons that they had wielded so efficiently in the battle with the ravager. But Alderis forestalled them with a subtle gesture of one hand.

“This is Mehlaraine, my daughter, and Selanthas, her consort,” he said by way of introduction.

“You brought your fucking *daug*—omph!” Dar said, interrupted by Allera stomping on his foot.

Talen introduced each of his party, referencing the archmage simply as “Honoratius,” without elaboration on his unique situation. The two sides simply looked at each other for a long minute, and then Alderis spoke.

“You are right, of course, to question my motives. I have not been entirely forthright with you in the past, although in my defense I hope you will understand the circumstances that constrained me. As Dar so forthrightly noted, my mental state was not... was not ideal, when I was here.” His gaze traveled down toward the depth of the valley before them, and for a moment a twinge of something crossed his face, an old pain that vanished swiftly.

“Our talents are not inconsiderable. I will agree to serve your cause, captain, and aid you and your companions to the best of our ability. We seek the same goal, I believe.”

Talen glanced at Allera, who nodded. He turned back to Alderis. “Very well. I do not doubt that we will have need of your skills.”

“So what’s next, commander?” Dar said.

Talen’s gaze headed past him, down into the valley. “We see where that thing came from.”

Chapter 226

DOWN THE WELL

They descended into the Well.

There had been a brief conversation about how to proceed. They had expended considerable resources, including considerable quantities of their blood, in defeating the ravager. But after speaking quietly with Honoratius, he elected to push forward, and investigate the Well. Although retreat and recovery of spells might have been the more prudent course, each of them felt a sense of urgency in the backs of their minds, a ticking clock that warned of more events like the Night of the Dead in Camar's future, if they lingered overlong.

They made it down to the Well without incident. Talen, Shay, and Allera had come this way once before, when they had sneaked into Rappan Athuk to seek out Velan Tiros. They had been too late, that time.

The dark stone circle of the Well, ten feet across, gaped black and open before them. Shay investigated the perimeter, running her fingers through deep gouges in the stone.

"Thing made quite an entrance," Dar said.

"There were scratches like this before, when we came last time," Shay said. "They were very old." She pointed out a pair that were fairly close, the fresh ones obvious from the sharp edges of the cuts.

"So those creatures have come up to the surface before," Mehlaraine said. "Perhaps there is a lair of them somewhere far below."

"They are not creatures of the Demon," Honoratius reminded them.

"Just one of those monsters nearly destroyed the town of Highbluff," Talen said. "They pose a threat that we cannot simply ignore."

Shay rigged up a couple of ropes, driving pitons into the solid stones at the base of the Well. Even as she tossed the lines down into the Well, however, the elves simply rose up into the air using their still-effective *overland flight* spells, and hovered over the opening. Mehlaraine said something in elvish, and her slender sword began to glow.

"We will investigate," Alderis said. "If there is danger, we can withdraw quickly."

Talen nodded. "Be careful. When we came this way last time, there was only a deep pool at the bottom, and a couple of very narrow tunnels leading into the complex. The creature's movements have likely changed the situation."

The elves descended into the pit, while the others gathered around the perimeter of the Well to watch. They could see the globe of light surrounding Mehlarine, descending deeper and deeper into the black shaft.

“Damn, that’s deep,” Dar said. The fighter had recovered his club, and he was absently working to repair its leather thong as he watched.

“Quiet,” Talen said.

The elves had descended so far that it was difficult to make out details of what they were doing. But at least they were not being attacked. After another minute, they saw the trio ascending rapidly, and within a few more seconds they were hovering before them in the Well’s mouth.

“What did you see?” Talen asked.

“It appears that the creature came up from below,” Alderis reported. “The pool is gone, and the water is draining through a large hole at the bottom. It appears that there was a hatch buried under the mud beneath the pool; the threshold is largely intact, and is made of mithral.”

“What’s below?” Shay asked.

“We did not scout far, but it appears that there is a significant cavern, possibly a larger complex.”

They looked to Talen, who pondered the information for a moment longer. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go check it out.”

The elves led the way, flying down the shaft once more, while the others used the ropes. Honoratius cast a spell, and rose up into the air, descending the shaft alongside the climbers. Getting down was not difficult, although as Dar was quick to point out, the climb back up would involve a lot more effort.

The made it to the bottom without incident, and gathered at the opening. Mud from the pool slicked everything, making footing treacherous, but the water that continued to trickle down through the opening had washed enough clear to reveal the silvery shine of mithral. The opening was eight feet across, and from the depth of the mithral ring, the hatch had likely been four or five feet thick. Only one of the hinges of the missing portal was still intact, and Honoratius bent over it, her boots floating just an inch above the slippery mire.

“I wonder where the door is,” Dar asked.

“Likely buried somewhere below,” Selanthas said. “There is a large pool below, and a great deal of mud.”

“We would have never known that this was here,” Shay said. “When we came down last time, this was all under at least ten feet of water.” She pointed to the narrow tunnel openings up above them.

“Looks like didn’t want those fuckers getting out,” Dar said, examining the inside of the mithral shaft. “Gods, this has to be a ton of mithral here, a fucking fortune.”

“Commander,” Honoratius said.

Talen turned to him. “What is it, archmage?”

Honoratius pointed to the ruined hinge. “The metal is growing back.”

Everyone turned toward him. “What?” Talen asked. “You mean it’s regenerating?”

“Yes. Very slowly. I would guess that the hatch that sealed the opening is reconstituting itself.”

“How long?”

“Assuming a constant rate of growth, I would estimate about three hours.”

Talen looked back down the shaft. “Well?” Dar asked. “We go down and see what’s what, or we head back and wait for the next one of those things to claw its way free?”

“I wouldn’t want to get trapped in there,” Shay warned.

“My magic should be able to defeat the hatch, if it comes to it, but it is possible that there might be wards that would counter my talents, when the barrier is complete,” Honoratius said. “Clearly whoever constructed this anticipated a breach, and placed considerable countermeasures in place.”

“On the other hand, we might not get a chance like this again,” Allera said.

“All right,” Talen said. “We go in, but I want a close check on time. Allera, take one of the backup lanterns from Shay’s bag, and set a slow-burning wick. After two hours, at the most, we cut out. Archmage, how much longer will you be able to remain with us today?”

“Approximately two hours and fifteen minutes.”

“All right. By then, we’re out of here, everyone understand? Shay, we’re going to need more ropes.”

The scout was already drawing out more coils of light silk rope, knotted for easier climbing, from her *bag of holding*. Within a few minutes, they had descended into the cavern below, the elves flying ahead to ward against any threats.

The cavern was large, as the elves had said. The ropes dropped them to a mud-slicked promontory of rock that rose up of the new lake that had formed covering the floor. The rock shelf formed a ramp of sorts that sloped down to an apparent exit to the north. There was no sign of the mithral hatch; likely it had fallen into the pool and been buried, as Selanthas had suggested.

“The stone here, it is odd,” Mehlaraine noted, as she floated across the cavern toward the exit. Honoratius drifted over to join her, and examined the rock. It was a deep gray, but mottled through with striations of yellow, blue, and red crystal, which flickered slightly in their light.

“There is a powerful and ancient magic here,” Honoratius said.

“Wonderful,” Dar said, as he sloshed and slipped through the mud toward the opening, the others trailing behind. Shay had taken out another rope to connect those walking, a caution against the treacherous footing. By the time they made it to the end of the ramp, they were all covered in mud from the waist down. Dar continued to mutter to himself, his comments including references to “fucking elves” and “gods-damned wizards.” Had he known how sharp the ears of the elves floating above were, he might have been more circumspect; on the other hand, being who he was, he might not.

Shay bent down to examine the floor at the end of the ramp. “This plate doesn’t match up exactly with the surrounding floor,” she said, indicating the creases that indicated a roughly twenty-foot square slab of stone.

“Trap?” Talen asked.

“I don’t know. But it’s not right.”

The elves drifted forward. “The space ahead is more regularly defined than the cavern,” Selathas said.

“What in the hells does that mean?” Dar asked.

“Deliberately worked,” Allera said.

“Well, why the fuck doesn’t he just say that?”

They moved ahead, wary of the stone plate, but the ground did not shift under them, nor did any other danger manifest as they passed into a large rectangular chamber. This place’s most prominent feature was row upon row of metal pillars, each about five feet

apart from the others. There was an obvious path through the middle of the room, marked by pillars that had been bent, or in at least one case completely destroyed, the gap in the forest of pillars surrounded by fragments of shattered metal.

“Well, we know it came this way, at least,” Shay said.

Dar walked up to one of the pillars and tapped it with his gauntlet. “Steel,” he said. “Good quality.”

“Not good enough, it would seem,” Nelan commented.

“Who could have built this place?” Mehlaraine said.

“It bears the hallmark of an ordered mind,” Honoratius said, but he did not elaborate.

“Let’s keep moving,” Talen said. “Watch out for traps. Shay?”

The scout started forward, but she had gotten barely three steps forward when Selanthalas shouted a warning. They followed the archer’s pointed finger to the space in the floor where one of the pillars had been destroyed. Rising out of the gap in the floor where the pillar had been was a dark black figure, a cohesive cloud of shadow. As it emerged from the floor it spread broadly, until it was as large as an ogre, and they could see the twin points of malevolent red light that shone within its “head”, staring at them with an undisguised hunger.

More of them were already beginning to seep out from the floor, either around the bases of the damaged pillars or from the cracks in the slab behind them. Within seconds they would be surrounded.

“Dread wraiths!” Nelan cried, and then there was no time for speech, as the undead monsters swarmed upon them.

Chapter 227

DARK GUARDIANS

It appeared that the wraiths could not simply pass through the floor, but that disadvantage seemed minor at best, as the undead creatures swarmed up through the tiny gaps to attack. There were fully nine of the creatures, each far more powerful than a typical wraith, and far more deadly.

The one that had appeared first reacted with incredible speed, attacking even as the last of its substance drifted up out of the opening in the floor. It swept forward and

lunged at Dar, its insubstantial claws tearing through his armor as though it was not even there. The fighter gasped as life was torn from his body, and the wraith seemed to pulse eagerly as it fed. The creature did not linger beside him, and drew back with the same speed with which it had attacked, just far enough to force Dar to give chase if he wanted to harm it.

"There's too many of them!" Shay yelled. She started forward to engage another wraith that was rising up around another pillar, but Honoratius cut her off. "Stand your ground!" the archmage shouted, summoning his magic with a blur of slender fingers and a brief incantation of power.

A *wall of force* appeared across the room ahead of them, materializing scant feet ahead of a surprised Shaylara. The wraith engaging Dar was on their side of the barrier, but the four other wraiths on that side pressed up against it, unable to pass through it. They did not linger for more than a second or two before retreating to the nearest gap in the floor, dissolving back through it.

Behind them, another four had almost fully emerged from the stone plate in the entry. As the two younger elves spun and drew back to protect him, Alderis cast his own spell. A blazing *wall of fire* appeared in the gap, right on the edge of the slab. The wraiths drew back as the heat and light from the barrier washed over them, but such was their hatred and lust for the living that they surged forward through it, the flames burning great rents in their bodies as they passed the wall.

Allera opened her mind and spread her hands, filling the chamber with a surge of positive energy. The *mass cure moderate wounds* spell struck the wraiths with the force of a hammer, and the quartet split, with two flying straight for Alderis, the other pair making a beeline for Allera. The healer blanched, but held her ground, calling for her magic again, knowing that it would not be in time.

Dar had his hands full with his own opponent. The wraith was a canny enemy, dodging away just enough to prevent a full attack, then knifing forward to deliver another devastating swipe of its claws. Dar was tough, and his stamina was considerable, especially augmented by his magical amulet. But each touch drew more of his strength out of him, and thus far his powerful swings with *Valor* had made no impact upon the wretched undead being's substance, passing harmlessly through it. Furthermore the forest of steel pillars made it difficult for him to maneuver, making it almost effortless for the wraith to evade him from one exchange to the next.

For the moment, none of the fighter's companions could come to his aid. The four wraiths that had come through the *wall of fire* had been sorely injured by Alderis's barrier and Allera's healing pulse, but the dark energy that sustained them was potent, very potent indeed. Nelan tried to turn them away, but the light of the Shining Father may as well have been the flicker of a candle for all the effect it had upon the dread wraiths. It certainly did not distract them from their chosen foes.

Mehlaraine and Selanthas tried to shield Alderis from the two coming at them, but their weapons were better suited for fighting living, breathing enemies, rather than the undead. Mehlaraine's rapier passed harmlessly through the first, and while one of Selanthas's shots tore through its substance, the wound was not enough to distract the creature from its target. Both wraiths hit Alderis, and the elf seemed to shrink as they eagerly sucked upon his life force. He started to float back away from them, but his focus on his spell flickered as he lost consciousness. The wraiths pursued, eager to finish off this foe, to bring another ally on to their side.

Allera fared slightly better, but mainly because her foes' charge took them past Talen. The knight lifted *Beatus Incendia* and smote the first wraith, the holy blade flaring as it tore through the dark creature's substance. It came apart, hissing slightly as it expired. The other one continued on and lunged at Allera, but the healer fought off the tug of its claws upon her life force, and thrust her hand into its body, blasting it with a powerful healing spell. The wraith exploded from within as blue light flared from her fingers, dissolving into nothing in less than a second.

Dar staggered against one of the pillars, shaking his head in a vain effort to clear it. His body was shaking, and he felt cold through to his bones. The wraith, on the other hand, seemed stronger than before, and if anything, was getting faster.

"Bastard," Dar hissed between clenched teeth. He wasn't sure if he had the strength to chase after it any more, so he put his back to the pillar, and waited for it to come to him.

He did not have long to wait. The wraith spun through the forest of pillars effortlessly, pouring between them like a waterfall. Dar was ready for it, but once again *Valor* passed harmlessly through the wraith, and a feral hunger blazed in its eyes as it enfolded him in its swath.

Darkness closed around him.

The two wraiths closed on Alderis, claws extended to finish the dying elf. But at the last instant a globe of force appeared around him, forming an impenetrable barrier that kept the frustrated creatures at bay. They swept around their intended victim, and spotted Honoratius hovering a short distance away, having saved the elf's life with his *resilient sphere*. Unfortunately, that now meant that he was the prime target of the wraiths, and they surged forward to take him out.

Meanwhile, the wraiths that Honoratius had foiled earlier with his *wall of force* began to issue from the floor on the far side of the *wall of fire*. Having been denied once, they were not about to be cheated of their prizes a second time, and as soon as they were clear they surged through the barrier, accepting the pain of the raging flames as a price to be paid.

With nothing else standing between them and the vivid sources of life of their victims, the wraiths surged forward to the attack.

Chapter 228

THE MYSTERIES OF THE ARCANES

Honoratius felt the cold touch of the wraiths stealing the life energy of his borrowed body. He loved his niece, and a tide of emotion threatened his equilibrium, but the aged wizard was a creature of intellect, and that maintained a rigid control over his thoughts as the wraiths harried him.

Looking past the dark shadows, he saw the four other wraiths pass through the *wall of fire*, and his mouth twisted into a slight smile.

Opening his mind, Honoratius let the potency of his magic course through him.

Fire exploded through the room. Funneled by the *wall of force* behind him, the flames splashed out in a wave, until they joined with the continuing inferno of Alderis's *wall of fire*.

The companions saw the flames rushing toward them; there was nothing they could do to avoid them. But as the *delayed blast fireball* swept past them, the flames parted, forming hollows within which the fire did not touch. Every living being in the area was spared.

The same could not be said of the wraiths.

The two directly in front of Honoratius dissolved as the fire cut through their insubstantial bodies like a knife. One of the four reinforcements were likewise overcome, but the other three weathered the blast well, their incorporeal natures protecting them from the violence of the spell. They surged forward to attack.

But the companions were ready for them.

An arrow passed through the head of one wraith, punching a hole through its substance that trailed long fibrils of black energy in its wake. The injured wraith screamed and rushed at Selanthas, but was intercepted by Mehlarine. This time, the elvish woman's magical blade bit through it, and as she swept the blade through its "neck", the creature came apart.

Two others came forward, but they were greeted by another wave of positive energy from Allera. One collapsed, and the other found itself faced by Talen. The wraith scored a hit on the knight and managed to draw some of his life energy from him, but in turn was bisected by *Beatus Incendia*, and was ended.

Dar felt the rush of heat from Honoratius's *fireball*, although he could still not see clearly through the mass of the wraith. The creature took some damage from the blast, but it had been partially protected by its proximity to Dar, and it continued to press its attack. Dar felt a tug on his life force as its claws struck, and he knew that if he faltered, he was dead. The fighter screamed as he fought back against that tug with everything he had, although his body shook with the effort of remaining conscious. He felt cold, and could no longer feel his arms or his legs. He only knew that he had to keep on attacking.

Then the wraith shrieked and twisted. Dar could just see the outline of Nelan, but the bright glow of blue light around his hands was clearly visible even through the creature's body. It turned on the cleric—why wouldn't it, given that Dar had not been able to harm it at all? It struck him, but the cleric resisted the life-drain, and the wraith hissed in frustration.

Being ignored as a non-threat pissed off Dar even more than being dragged to the brink of death by what amounted to a floating cloud of black gunk. The fighter roared and brought *Valor* up through its body in a glittering arc. This time, finally, the axiomatic blade bit into semisolid substance, and the dread wraith finally collapsed in upon itself, dissolving into wisps that were gone within a second.

His swing overbalanced him, and Dar fell back against the pillar. For some reason it wasn't enough to keep him balanced, and he slid off it, slumping to the floor, consciousness slipping away like a leaf on the breeze.

Chapter 229

ONWARD

Dar's "rest" was not very long. Nelan brought him back around with a minor healing spell, although it did little to dispel the chill that seemed to pervade his body. Allera helped that with a *restoration* spell that replaced the life force that had been stolen by the dread wraith. She then did the same for Alderis, Honoratius, and Talen, using her wand of *lesser restoration* to supplement her own healing abilities. Nelan assisted, using *cure wounds* spells and one of his own wands to counter the more mundane effects of the wraiths' chilling touch.

In the end, they were brought back to nearly full strength, but it had been another close call. Dar, Honoratius, and Alderis had been brought to the brink of death, and only the archmage's quick thinking and potent magic had saved them.

"Your mastery of spell-shaping is impressive," Alderis said to Honoratius, once he had been revived. "Even when I was... at my best, I could not accomplish that feat."

“With discipline, study, and practice comes mastery,” the archmage said simply. She adjusted the seating of the *Web of Transposition* on her head; some of the strands of her hair had come loose in the brief melee.

Shay and Talen stood close together on the edge of the forest of steel pillars. “Talen, we’re in way over our heads here,” the scout said. “Just *one* of those red bastards up there nearly tore us apart, and we don’t know how many more might be down here.”

“And if they all break out together, and head for Camar?” Talen asked quietly.

“It’s your call. If you say we go on, we go on.”

“Shay...”

But they were interrupted as Dar came over to them. “Nothing like a good old-fashioned ass kicking, eh, commander?” He grimaced and popped his back. “Damn it, I think Allera missed a spot on that last healing.”

“She probably leaves a few wounds to remind you that you’re not indestructible,” Shay said. She drifted back from Talen; the moment between them was broken.

The others came over to join them. “How are you doing for spells?” Talen asked the mages.

“You have witnessed the casting of numerous spells from my higher valences, commander,” Honoratius said. “My more destructive magics have been depleted, but I have adequate means for self-defense left to me, should it come to that.”

“Alderis?”

“I am prepared,” the elf said. He looked no worse off than before, but that was not an ideal indicator, as he looked barely healthy at his best.

Allera came up to them. “I think we need to go on, Talen.”

“Why?”

“I... I don’t know. It’s just a feeling I have. I’ve had it ever since we entered this place. There’s something... *important* here, that we need to see.”

“Those wraiths were nearly the death of us,” Mehlaraine said dubiously. “If they were just the door guards, we could expect further resistance deeper in.”

“Yeah, they certainly punch a hole in the ‘not aligned with Orcus’ theory, eh mage?” Dar said.

“Not necessarily, colonel,” Honoratius replied. “Such creatures, while not mindless, can be bound to a place to serve as defenders. There are other plausible explanations as well.”

“Or maybe Orcus also has an interest in these monsters, and where they came from,” Talen said. “All right, we’ll go a bit farther, but keep an eye on the time,” he said to Allera and Honoratius.

They made their way through the forest of steel pillars, wary of another attack. But they were not molested by more wraiths or by anything else, and soon they found their way to the other side, where another round opening, partially blocked by a mithral door, greeted them.

“Growing back?” Talen asked. Honoratius investigated, and then nodded. The circular portal filled almost half of the space of the opening. It was regenerating too slowly to see with a casual glance, but the knowledge that it was slowly resealing added a certain urgency to their steps.

The space beyond the door was a large, irregular chamber, and it was packed with junk.

The objects that cluttered the room looked as though they might have been valuable at one time, long, long ago. A lot of the clutter was made up of remnants of wood or soft metals, and some were still recognizable, crates and chests and assorted objects of furniture or art. A strong hint of decay filled the place.

“Well, our friend left us a clear trail, at least,” Shay commented.

A swath of destruction passed through the room, the already ruined collection of objects pulverized into small fragments by the passage of the ravager. The creature’s path left an open avenue that they used to cross the room. There was another vault door there, again partially reconstructed, and beyond they could see another room.

“Light, up ahead,” Selanthas warned, fitting an arrow to the string of his bow. The head of the missile began to sparkle, strings of electrical energy flaring around it as the bow imparted its magic to the shot.

They made their way cautiously forward. The space beyond the door was cluttered with bits of debris; apparently some of the contents of the storeroom had fallen or been knocked into this next room when the creature had moved through. But they could not see that far into the new chamber, due to the glowing grid of energy that cut the chamber in two directly ahead.

“What is that?” Dar asked, taking a step forward.

“Careful,” Shay said. “If that’s not a trap, then I am a half-dragon.”

“Who your mother slept with is none of my concern,” Dar said, but he kept his distance from the flickering barrier. The pattern of interlocking lines of force was exceptionally precise, forming perfect squares one inch across through which they could see the room beyond.

“I do not see any exits,” Selanthas said, peering through the barrier.

Shay crouched low for a moment. “Some of the debris from the last room... it’s on the far side.”

“How does it look?” Talen asked.

“Intact,” Shay replied. She ran her fingers across the floor. “Something here... I’m not one hundred percent certain, but I think that the creature made it through here, and the barrier hurt it.”

Dar took a small object from his pouch and tossed it at the barrier. Everyone flinched, but the object—a silver coin—passed through harmlessly, and clattered on the ground beyond.

“That was an unnecessary risk,” Nelan chided him.

“The sands are trailing down, or have you forgotten?” the fighter said. He sidled toward the barrier, and drew out his club.

“Dar,” Talen said.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to try to jump through or anything.” The fighter carefully tapped the shield grid with the end of his club; the head of the weapon passed through it unharmed.

“Maybe it was created to only hurt the monster,” Allera suggested. Dar nodded, and reached out his hand to touch it.

Honoratus had closed her eyes; now she opened them and looked out over the room with a distant stare, seeing more than what was visible to mundane sight. “There is power here,” she said. She fixed her stare on Dar. “Do not touch it.”

Dar paused, his fingers an inch from the glowing lines. The archmage came forward, until she was standing right in front of it. “This barrier is fashioned of *brilliant energy*,” she said. “Unliving items pass through harmlessly, but living flesh would be cut like the edge of the sharpest blade that you could imagine.”

“Nasty,” Mehlaraine said. “How do we pass it?”

“Or do we even want to?” Shay asked. “There doesn’t appear to be anything up ahead, just a dead-end room, with some biers along the edges. It looks like some kind of tomb.”

“That appearance is misleading,” Honoratius replied. “The creature came this way; there is a residual trace of magic upon the floor, where I assume it burrowed up from another place below. The stone walls here are laced with the same regenerative magic that is reconstituting the doors. There is also some sort of shielding around the biers, possibly some kind of *wall of force*.”

“Can we follow its course?” Talen asked.

“I will need to examine the room in more detail,” Honoratius said.

“Well, unless you want to be turned into diced mage, I assume you have some means of getting past this barrier,” Dar said.

Honoratius nodded. “Stand back, if you will.”

The others retreated to the doorway, while the mage spread her arms wide and began an incantation. The spell took only a few seconds, and was answered by a faint rumbling, which grew as a hulking form materialized before her.

The earth elemental was not big for its kind, standing maybe a foot taller than Dar. But it moved with a ponderousness that belied its considerable mass. The creature looked down at Letellia, who spoke to it in a husky, gravelly voice. The creature listened impassively, then turned and walked over to the wall.

As the companions watched, the elemental pressed its fist, and then its entire arm, *into* the wall. The crystal-streaked stone seemed to resist it at first, but then the elemental pushed more insistently, and the surface gave way before it. Within a few seconds it was entirely gone, absorbed into the wall.

“Where’s it going?” Dar asked.

“Just be patient,” Allera said. “I’m sure Honoratius knows what she’s doing.”

Dar nudged her. “I see you’re doing it too.”

“What?”

“Referring to him as a ‘her’. Hard not to, in that body.”

“Oh?” she asked, an eyebrow arching. “What about that body?”

Dar was rescued by a deep rumbling throughout the chamber. Large chunks of rock detached from the ceiling and came crashing down, through the energy field. The cascade continued for almost a minute, descending along first the left wall, and then over to the right. In the midst of the damage, the grid dissolved, leaving the way open.

“Swiftly,” Honoratius said, stepping through the now empty space. They could see that the fallen rock was already starting to dissolve into the floor, and the damaged walls were beginning to reform, much faster than the mithral doors earlier. “I believe that the field will be restored once the damage is done, move quickly!”

“How do we get back across?” Talen asked, even as he hurried the others forward.

“I have other resources that will suffice,” the archmage said. “The field requires the surrounding walls to be intact; mundane damage is enough to make a way through.”

“I don’t like this,” Shay said. “We’re cutting off our retreat. What if we have to come back this way in a hurry?”

No one had an answer; they could only watch as the damage to the walls was slowly but inexorably erased.

“Perhaps this will be of use,” Alderis said. The elf had found a panel in the wall about six feet back from the barrier; the cleverly concealed stone plate swung open on a recessed pivot to reveal a gleaming metal lever behind.

“That makes sense,” Mehlaraine said. “Whoever created this place would likely want a safety in case they needed to exit.”

“That assumes they’re still here,” Dar said. He put his club away again, and drew *Valor*. Honoratius was already searching the center of the room, using her *arcane sight* to probe the magic here. “It burrowed up through the ground here,” she said, indicating a space of floor that looked otherwise unremarkable.

The attention of most of the group was focused there, but Dar walked over to one of the stone biers set in alcoves around the edges of the room. There were three of them, and each supported a skeleton, clad in fragments of ancient garments that had decayed with age. The skeleton on the bier that Dar was looking at was missing its skull.

“I wonder what happened to him,” Dar asked. He reached for it, but his hand was blocked by an invisible *wall of force* that protected the bier. “Doesn’t look like he had anything worth looting anyway,” he said, turning toward Allera.

The healer’s face told him that something was wrong. He spun back toward the entry, *Valor* at the ready.

Another pair of stone panels had opened in the walls. A pair of skulls drifted into the room, suspended in mid-air by some form of magical levitation. Their eyes and teeth had been replaced by huge, multifaceted gemstones, which glimmered with a faint inner light. Their “eyes” fixed upon the companions, and there was a grim power there, accompanied by a deep, ageless malevolence.

“Undead!” Dar yelled, but the others had already sensed the threat, and turned, weapons and spells at the ready. Dar was the first to respond, and he stepped forward to face the first skull, *Valor* already coming down to smash it to bits.

The blow never landed. One of the skull’s eye-gems flared, and a pulsing nimbus of hollow light stabbed from it into the fighter’s body. Dar stiffened, and the light retreated back into the gem, dragging with it a gray outline of diaphanous vapor. As the surge of light faded, Dar collapsed like a broken doll.

Allera screamed.

The other skull unleashed a howl that echoed through the room. The deadly *wail of the banshee* tore through the room like an invisible tsumani. Shay clutched her head and collapsed. A moment later, Talen joined her, falling across her body. Mehlaraine and Selathas both dropped in mid-attack, their weapons clattering from their hands as they fell. Nelan staggered back, calling upon the Father, but he too eventually succumbed, his armor crashing loudly as he hit the floor.

Chapter 230

THE GUARDIANS OF THE PRISON

With their companions apparently slain by the two demiliches, Allera, Honoratius, and Alderis faced the deadly undead entities alone.

Allera sobbed as she fell beside Dar, pulling him over onto his back. One of the skulls loomed over her, but she ignored it, feeling at his neck. She was surprised to feel a fluttering pulse there.

Alderis started casting, but Honoratius lifted a hand to forestall him. “Save your magic; they are but an illusion.”

The elf turned to her, confused. “What?”

“They are not real.”

Alderis blinked, and held his spell, although he flinched as one of the demiliches hurled some power at him, enfolding him in a spray of pulsating energy. But the elf's will was considerable, and he was able to focus it in time to disbelieve the effect before it could fool his mind into accepting it as real.

Allera poured healing energy into Dar, seeking to wipe away whatever fell effect held his mind hostage. The fighter lived, and he bore no wounds that she could see or feel, but he remained limp, comatose. She looked up at the skull, which hovered there, as if mocking her. A light flickered in its left eye, the one that had "absorbed" Dar's life force.

"It is not real," she said to herself, echoing Honoratius's words.

The skull became indistinct, its solidity replaced by a vague outline. She heard Honoratius speaking again, but his words came to her across a great void, and she could not make it out.

Everything became dark. She stood, and Dar vanished at her feet. She looked around, her heart pounding in her chest. Honoratius, Alderis, all the others, they were gone. She could no longer see the walls, or the floor. Her own hands were vague outlines in the murk.

She was not alone.

She clenched her jaw to keep from crying out. The figures that materialized around her were potent, ancient. Dark outlines like men, but *not men*, she knew instinctively.

The darkness withdrew slightly. She could see them now, if not clearly, at least enough to identify them. Wrapped in bandages, the way that the Drusians of old preserved their dead. Mummies, ten of them, clad in bronze breastplates of antique design, armed with huge two-handed swords with curving blades, that they held before them in salute. They did not move, but Allera could sense them watching her.

Then another appeared. She perceived it coming before she could see it; the darkness clung to it like a cloak. When the shadows finally parted to reveal it, she sucked in a surprised breath.

There was just enough lingering humanity to it for her to observe that the being before her had once been human. It was clad in a suit of half-plate armor crafted from what looked like dragon's scales, frayed and faded with age, creaking softly with its movements. It bore a light mace in one skeletal hand. Its face... gods, its face... was a desiccated shroud, wrinkled and leathery flesh stretched tight across a narrow skull. Its eyes were dark orbs deep within its skull that fixed Allera with a stare that was both powerful and intelligent. When it spoke to her, its husk of a jaw only twitched slightly, but she could hear its words echo softly in her mind. To her surprise, its voice was feminine.

I am Amarru, it said.

“Where are my friends?” she asked, with as much force as she could muster.

You are different than they, Allera Hialar. A flame bright and intense burns within your breast. I felt its pulse, the moment you came into this place.

“What do you want with me?”

The creature’s gaze held her, she could not turn away. *You have intruded into a sacred place, healer. My soldiers and I have stood guard over what lies within... for millennia uncounted, we have warded that which cannot be allowed to walk upon the world again, but also cannot be destroyed...*

“The creatures... we battled two of them, in the world above.”

What you fought... were but the spawn of the Ravager. It was not to be... could not be... and yet it has transpired. A dark shadow has fallen over the prison... and within it changes, has changed, will change.

“What have you done to my friends,” she pressed.

The one you love has not been harmed. The others that fell to the spectral guardians are with him. The creature’s gaze shifted slightly, releasing her. She turned, and saw that the darkness had retreated further, and that Honoratius and Alderis were with her. She saw at once that both were held by some invisible force; they were frozen in shadow, and neither appeared to be aware of their surroundings.

“What have you done to them?”

Each of these bears a part of the key, she said. It was taken from here in three parts, sundered throughout the world, against the day that the forebearers knew might come. The day when the Ravager must be sought out in its prison... to be used again... or to be destroyed for once and all time.

“Is this Ravager... a creature of Orcus?”

The ancient lich turned slowly back toward her. *You do not understand. Come then, and see...*

Reality shifted around Allera, and the blackness rushed in, enfolding her. She felt a surge of panic, but within just a few heartbeats it drew back again, revealing a sight that caused her breath to freeze in her chest.

She was in a chamber... *vast* did not begin to describe it, a space so huge that the Great Cathedral of the Father in Camar could have fit comfortably within its expanse.

The place was a vast hemisphere, the curve of the dome above her a perfect sweep of dark stone. The veins of crystal they'd seen in the stone above were prominent here, adding swirls of color that she could clearly distinguish, even though there was no obvious source of light here. It was as if she'd learned an entirely new way to perceive her surroundings, not linked to any one of her mundane senses.

The interior of the dome was dominated by a great pyramid of gray stone. No... no, not stone at all, she saw, as she shifted her perceptions to it. The pyramid was a field of energy, rippling faintly with eldritch power. Hints of color swirled within it as well, red and blue and yellow twisting at the edges of her awareness.

It took her a few minutes to tear her attention away from the incredible barrier. Then she saw that there was a ring of mithral set in the floor, encompassing the entire circle of the chamber, surrounding the pyramid. And above, ordinary in contrast, she could make out a catwalk that ran around the perimeter of the room, dark metal secured somehow to the walls above her head.

Following the line of the catwalk, she saw a breach in the cavern wall, adjacent to the metal walkway. From it came a beam of red light, constant, coherent. It emerged from the wall and penetrated into the barrier, sending ripples of color out through it.

She could not see them from here, but she *knew* that there were two other such beams, blue and yellow, elsewhere in the chamber.

It is here, Amurru said, drawing her attention to the side.

Silent with awe, Allera followed her. Her footsteps made no sound, and some aware part of her mind whispered that she was not really here, that this could not be real.

What was more frightening, however, was that this *was* real. For she was becoming aware of something else, something incredible and unbelievable that twisted and surged in a deep but uncertain sleep behind that barrier...

Here.

Allera stopped and looked. She felt it at once, the black slick that penetrated through the stone wall, like a skein of bubbling tar, only part of the stone. It had seeped across the ground, passing a scant foot from where she now stood, across the room...

To the barrier.

She could feel the corruption in that black mark. She knew it all too well; it was an embodiment of the evil that she had felt in the temples of Orcus, deep within the bowels of Rappan Athuk. She had felt it in Gudmund, in the dark demon Maphistal, in the touch of the incorporeal undead that had eagerly sought her soul.

“What... what is in there?”

The Ravager. It sleeps.

“Not for long,” Allera said, before she could think. She could not look away from the gray pyramid, especially at the point where the black slick touched it. She imagined that she could see the field there weakening, straining...

Or had she imagined it?

No, the lich said, turning to fix her with a cold stare. *Its slumber had grown light indeed.*

Something in the lich’s voice, the sinuous whisper in her head, made her turn back toward it. Amarru was there, right in front of her, looming over her, although the two were of similar stature. The lich extended a bony hand, and seized Allera’s forehead.

Icy cold needles of pain stabbed into her skull, and Allera screamed, as the black rushed in at her once more.

Chapter 231

TRAPPED

Dar felt as though he’d been worked over by one of the back-alley gangs that frequented the dark corners of the Pike in Camar. He groaned, and with an effort managed to roll over.

Where the fuck was he?

He blinked and looked around. He was in a cavern, lit only by the tenuous flickers of one of their *everburning torches*. There was a stale, sterile odor in the air, and a persistent bubbling noise, like a cauldron left too long over the flame.

He felt a momentary pang of panic, then his hand closed on the hilt of *Valor*, in its scabbard once more. He pulled himself up to a seated position, and saw that he wasn’t alone. The others were there, lying unconscious around him... wait. Honoratius was missing, and Alderis.

And Allera.

Something cold and hard clamped down inside his chest, and he dragged himself to his feet. They were on the edge of a small island in the middle of the cavern. They were surrounded by a pool of boiling water, the bubbles rising through it the source of the

sound he'd detected earlier. He frowned... something wasn't quite right about that, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

He moved over to Talen. "Commander!" he hissed. There was no response. "Damn it, get up, you bastard!" he said, poking the prone knight hard with his boot.

Talen groaned; at least he wasn't dead.

Dar took another look around. There were two other figures lying on the far side of the island. At first he thought it might be the mages, but then he saw that they were quite obviously dead. One was a skeleton, still clad in the remains of armor, while the other... well, it wasn't alive, that much was obvious.

"What... what happened?" It was Shay, just coming to, clutching her head. "Talen?"

"He's alive," Dar said. "See if you can bring the cleric around." The fighter's gaze remained on the second dead guy. Dar recognized its tattered garb; he'd certainly seen enough priests of Orcus to know the livery. Again, there was something not quite right there, and his fingers itched on the hilt of his sword.

As a result he wasn't quite surprised when the creature stirred, and started getting to its feet. The smell came on in a wave; Dar was surprised that he hadn't detected it before.

"We got trouble," he told Shay, putting himself between the creature and the others. Talen groaned again, but Nelan and the two elves had not even stirred as of yet.

The monster came to its feet, and Dar could clearly identify it now, a ghoul, or perhaps a ghastr by the stench that rose from its body like a cloud. It was slow at first, like a man rising from a deep sleep; Dar wondered how long it had been here. But it recovered quickly in the presence of living flesh, and after a few tenuous steps it lowered its head and charged, extending claws caked in old dirt.

Dar held his ground, and at the last instant swept *Valor* around in a glittering arc. The axiomatic blade bit deep, and the ghast was flung to the ground. At least most of it; its left arm landed on the edge of the island, and the upper part of its head rolled into the bubbling water, bounced for a moment on the flow, and then dropped out of sight.

Dar went over to check on the other body. No, the skeleton was actually dead. Its clothes had been reduced to scraps, but the other gear was actually in pretty decent shape. There was a long spear, its head dipped slightly into the pool, and a sword in a leather scabbard that had gone to pieces. The skeleton's breastplate was in better shape than it had first appeared, but looked to be fashioned of large scales of faded red hide, rather than metal. When Dar prodded it, he found a steel buckler under the man's body, its straps rotted away but otherwise intact. There was also the remains of a pack, now just a rotted heap.

“Where... where are we?” Talen asked. Shay was helping him to his feet, but the knight was still pretty unsteady.

“We’re in a cell,” Dar growled, looking around the cavern. And indeed, there were no exits as far as they could see. The cavern wasn’t very big, and even their weak lights fully illuminated its extent.

“Where’s Honoratius?” Talen asked, as he shrugged off Shay’s assistance. He didn’t see the scout’s hurt expression, but Dar did, before she turned to help the others. Nelan and the elves were starting to move, but it was clear that the aftereffects of their run-in with the evil skulls were lingering.

“Gone. Along with Allera, and the mad elf,” Dar said.

Talen looked down at the dismembered ghast. “What was that?”

“Undead. Lucky for us it was napping when we arrived.”

“Yeah, lucky,” Talen said, looking around. The knight was still getting his bearings, and he removed his helm, running a grimy hand through his hair.

“Headache?”

“Yeah,” Talen said, but he didn’t elaborate as he replaced the heavy helmet and secured the strap.

“Looks like we might miss our deadline,” Dar said.

“At the moment, we need to focus on getting out of here, and finding the others,” Talen said. “Shay, how are the others?”

“They’ll live,” the scout replied. Nelan was on his feet, but Mehlaraine and Selanthas were still having difficulty. Shay offered a hand to the elven duelist; after a moment’s hesitation, Mehlaraine took it. But as she got to her feet, she hissed a warning, and pushed away from Shay, drawing her rapier from its scabbard in a still-unsteady motion.

The companions turned as one, weapons at the ready, to see a ghost floating above the skeletal remains of the dead warrior.

Chapter 232

A HERO’S GRAVE

The creature hovered a foot above the ground, vague and insubstantial. It was clearly recognizable as the fallen warrior, however, armed and armored in the gear that was now strewn about his remains.

“Hold your attacks!” Talen urged, even as Dar started forward to engage. “It could have struck already...”

“A friendly ghost, that would be a new one,” Dar muttered, but he held his ground, *Valor* at the ready. Talen glanced back and verified that the others were prepared, especially Nelan. The cleric met his gaze and nodded.

The ghost had made no notice of their presence, although the empty hollows of its eyes seemed to be focused in their general direction. Talen stepped forward to address it. “Who are you?”

The ghost shifted, slightly, and a look of vague comprehension crossed its face. “Thou... art real?” It spoke in an archaic form of the Camarian language, but one which they could clearly understand.

“Real enough to blast you into oblivion, spectre,” Dar said. “Where’s Allera? What have you done with the others? What is this place?”

The ghost wavered, and Talen shot Dar a cautionary look. “Spirit... We are from Camar, come to do battle with a great evil. Who were you, in life?”

The ghost seemed to become slightly more distinct as it focused on the knight’s words. “Camar... Camar... be that one of the kingdoms beyond the sea?”

“Great, it’s crazy to boot,” Dar muttered.

“We do not know how long it has been here,” Nelan said, coming forward to join them. “This place, it may have been here for thousands of years.”

“Is there a way out of this vault?” Talen asked.

A look of grief crossed the spirit’s face. “No... no escape... I... I starved to death, here.”

“Ah, fuck,” Dar said.

“Why did you come here?” Talen asked.

“I... the memories, so... distant... I came... with my companions... to seek the origins of a terrible beast... it decimated the lands, laid waste to Ravalsber...”

“Let me guess. Big red bastard with black eyes?” Dar said.

Something flashed in the spirit's eyes. "Yes! Yes! We slew the monstrosity, tracked it here, to this place... Celedros deduced a way to open the vault, and we progressed inside, in the traces of the creature..."

"Apparently you had about as much luck as we did," Dar said.

"Traps... guardians... misdirections... we overcame them all, but the final guardians... the undead servitors of this place, they defeated us, decimated mine brethren... I alone survived... I sought to flee, but *she* caught me, banished me to this place... where I drew my last breath..."

"Who caught you?" Talen asked.

"Amurru," the ghost replied. "Ancient... so powerful... devoid of mercy..."

"My father..." Mehlaraine said, the words heavy with dread. Selathas placed a hand on her shoulder, his own face grim.

"We'll find a way out of here," Shay said. "There's air to breathe; there must be a vent or some other access." She bent down at the edge of the pool that surrounded the island. "This water, it's not hot. The bubbles must be trapped air coming up from below."

"There would also have to be an egress point, for the air to escape," Mehlaraine noted. "Else the pressure would build up, and the bubbles would have stopped."

"Who are you?" Talen asked the spirit again.

The spirit paused a moment, as if searching its memory for a nugget of long-lost data. "In life, I was Mailliw Catspar," he said at last. "I was a soldier of the Order of the Dragon, adventurer, traveler of the seven-fold paths. Many were the foes I battled and defeated in the name of the Light, and the creatures of the under-realms had reason to fear my spear."

"You served the Shining Father?" Nelan asked. "The god, Soleus?"

"Yes..." The ghost shifted its gaze from Talen, registering the cleric for the first time. "Yes, holy one... but to my people he was Arad-Uhn, Bringer of the Dawn." The ghost drifted closer to them, oblivious to the not-so-subtle shift in Dar and Talen as they brought their weapons up in readiness. But its entire attention was focused upon Nelan now. "Please... I beg of you, grant me release from this place. Take my bones from this prison, see that I am buried with the rites of passage..."

"Yeah, small problem there," Dar said.

"If we escape, I give you my word that it shall be done," Nelan said.

The ghost nodded, and disappeared.

“Wait, we have more questions!” Talen asked.

“Your questions will be answered,” came a familiar voice from behind them.

They turned, and saw Allera standing there, flanked by Honoratius and Alderis. The healer stood there with an oddly distant expression.

“Allera!” Dar said. He hurried toward her, but something in her stare stopped him before he could take her in his arms. His fist tightened around the hilt of his sword, and growled deep in his throat. Behind her, Alderis moved over to join his daughter and her consort, but Honoratius did not move at all, watching them with intent eyes that missed nothing.

For a moment, Dar and Allera shared a deep stare.

“What’s wrong?” Shay asked. She started to move around him, but Dar lowered *Valor*, blocking her.

“Release her,” he said.

“What?” Shay asked, but Dar wasn’t looking at her. His stare had not shifted from Allera.

“Dar?” Talen asked.

“I mean no harm to your beloved,” Allera said, in that same voice that was both hers, and not at the same time.

“Amurru, I presume,” Nelan said.

Chapter 233

AMURRU

“RELEASE HER!” Dar shouted, his voice echoing off the confined walls of the cavern. He shifted forward, menacingly, his sword coming up.

“You would strike her down to save her?” Amurru said to him, the faintest hint of amusement in her voice. Allera’s voice; but now that it had been pointed out to them all of them could detect the shift in mannerism, the way that the ancient lich carried herself

in the familiar body of their companion. Allera had always had a considerable force of presence inherent in her will and dedication to her calling, but that paled in comparison to that of the undead guardian.

“What do you want with us?” Talen asked, coming forward. The others remained behind, but ready for any action. Only Honoratius had not moved; the archmage seemed content to observe the developing exchange, her own thoughts hidden behind her usual inscrutable expression.

“It was you who intruded into this place,” Amurru said. “We who were set as guardians were entrusted with ensuring that this complex remain hidden from the eyes of the world, and that what is ensconced herein remain forever secure. Any who threaten that mandate must be destroyed, for the good of the world.”

“We came here because of terrible creatures that have been unleashed upon our people, from this place.” Talen said. “The seals and vaults were breached from within; we did not break them.”

“I know. That is why you yet live.”

“If you have hurt her in any way,” Dar growled, “I swear to you...”

“Allera Hialar will be returned to you unharmed. You have her to thank for your lives. I have shown her what is at stake, and she has agreed to see that what we protect remains secure.”

“We have our own quest,” Talen said.

“Yes. And they are linked, Talen Karedes. For it is the taint of your foe that is responsible for the escape of the spawn of the Ravager, and the destruction thus caused to your civilization.”

The companions shared a look. “*Spawn?*” Shay asked.

“I am limited in the aid that I can grant to your enterprise,” Amurru said. “I have given what I can to Allera. You may take the weapons left by the warrior here; they are of considerable power. There is one other gift that I can provide... a power placed within my keeping, when my service began.”

She stepped forward, and lifted one hand, opening it so the palm faced upward. Within her hand there blazed a brilliant blue light, a self-contained orb of shining energy. It cast the healer’s features into stark relief, and even those of them who had no experience with spellcasting could sense the power radiating from it.

Dar frowned, but she went past him, and stopped before Talen. “Extend your blade, sworn soldier of the Light.”

Talen hesitated. "Do not refuse this offering, knight," Honoratius said, the first words he'd contributed since their reappearance. Talen looked at him, and then thrust out *Beatus Incendia*, their light glimmering off the perfect steel length of the holy blade.

Amurru seized the blade with her left hand, tightly enough to break the flesh of Allera's fingers. Talen started to jerk the sword back, but she held it with surprising strength, keeping it fixed between them. The lich extended her other hand, and pressed the globe of energy *into* the sword.

There was a flare of energy and light, potent enough so that those nearest had to shield their eyes. When they could see clearly again, they saw the blue light of the orb rushing up the length of the sword, flaring from the edges of the blade. The sword's white flames had appeared unbidden, and as they watched the blue light infused itself into the flames, forming an azure corona within the holy fire. The blue glow reached the hilt and seeped into Talen's hand. The knight flinched, but did not release the weapon. The azure glow persisted a few seconds longer, and then faded... leaving just the faint blue tinge in the sword's fire.

"What... what did you do to me?" he asked.

"Your weapon has been augmented," Amurru said, releasing the weapon and stepping back. She looked weary, but ignored the blood that dripped from her left hand. Her right hand was scorched black across the palm, where it had struck the sword.

Talen opened his mouth to speak further, but the lich had already turned to face Honoratius and Alderis. "I should take the keys from you, but the elders decreed that they should remain in the world of man, against a day where they might need to recover what was left here. Should you find the third, you could return to this place... but mark my words; should you seek to enter the inner sanctums of this shrine, it would fall upon me to destroy you."

Honoratius nodded. Mehlaraine said, "I have no desire to return to this place."

"You have an incredible amount of power and knowledge," Nelan said. "Can you give us more information... about our enemy? You said that the two quests were connected.."

"I am sorry, priest of the Father," the lich replied. "Once my knowledge passed far and wide across the planes, but when I accepted my duty here, my ability to see beyond the walls of this place was circumscribed. I cannot aid you further."

"Fine, then take us out of here, and get out of Allera," Dar said. He tromped across the island, and grabbed the remains of Mailliw Catspar by the front of his armor. Bones scattered, and Selanthes helped him, collecting the scattered pieces. Dar reached

down and grabbed the ancient warrior's longspears, while Mehlaraine recovered his sword and shield.

Amurru waited until they were ready. "How will we know that we were successful in helping you?" Talen asked.

"Your world will survive," the lich said. Then she spoke a word of power, and everything around them became indistinct, and reality shifted as they were transported away from the confines of the chamber.

Chapter 234

THE LAST CAMP

In the blink of an eye, they found themselves standing once more at the lip of the vale that held the entrance to Rappan Athuk. They were not far from where they had battled the spawn of the Ravager, but the creature was gone, as though the earth had swallowed it up into its embrace. It was late in the day, and the light coming through the dense gray clouds above was fitful, weak.

Allera sighed and collapsed; Shay only just caught her before she hit the ground. "Is she all right?" Talen asked; behind him Dar stood looking like a thunderhead. Nelan crouched beside her, and examined her wrists and eyes, carefully pulling back the lids to examine the pupils beneath.

"I think she's just dazed," the cleric said. "She needs to rest."

Talen looked around. "We should retreat into the hills a ways. Honoratius, can you summon another *secure shelter*?"

The archmage nodded. She looked as tired as any of them; clearly the strain of maintaining the long-distance connection was wearying both caster and host. "Letellia carries one more copy of the spell upon a scroll; I will leave it to her to conjure the dwelling. My time is nearly depleted; if you have no further immediate need of my aid, I will take my leave of you."

"All right. Thank you, archmage. We will return in the morning."

"I will be prepared." He sat down, and vacated Letellia's body. The process took about a minute, and when it was done the sorceress blinked, and slowly got her bearings.

"Do you actually perceive what happens when he's... in your body?" Shay asked her.

“No. The spell allows Honoratius’s mind to overlay my own awareness, but during that time I am not conscious of my surroundings. I only dimly sense the passage of time; it’s almost like falling asleep.” She stood, and grimaced, rubbing her back. “I assume that there was trouble?”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Shay said. “Right now, we need to find a good place for your *secure shelter*.” The sorceress nodded, and they headed out toward the hills.

“I will carry her,” Dar said to Nelan, handing Catspar’s spear and armor to Talen, and taking up Allera in his arms. The healer groaned and shifted, but did not wake. The nine companions retreated from the edge of the dell, retracing their steps back into the hills to the north.

An hour’s passage found them ensconced within Letellia’s *secure shelter*, resting in a sheltered gap between two adjoining hills. Shay and Selanthas went out to gather fuel for the hearth, after being enjoined to remain close enough to call out if they encountered any trouble. Dar laid Allera gently in one of the beds, and Letellia likewise retired early, drifting off to sleep almost at once. Mehlaraine attended upon her father, assisting him as he removed his boots and pack and slumped into one of the far bunks. On the far side of the cottage, seated on stools around the long table near the hearth, Talen and Nelan watched them. After covering Allera in a blanket, Dar joined them.

“What kind of crazy bastard brings his daughter to a place like this?” the fighter muttered.

“The aelfinn address familial relationships differently than we humans,” Nelan said. “They place a great deal of emphasis on personal autonomy and responsibility for one’s own choices and actions. I do not doubt that Lord Alderis would prefer not to see his daughter here, but he would not consider it his place to tell her not to come.”

“They’re nuts, whole damned race,” Dar muttered. He grabbed a hunk of trailbread from the plate in front of Talen, and bit into it. “Might as well eat the rocks outside,” he said, dropping the bread back onto the plate.

“Shay will make us something hot when she returns,” Talen said absently. He looked at Nelan. “What is your story, priest? From what the others said back in Camar, I gathered that you were somebody pretty important. Why did you end up way out on the frontier?”

Nelan sighed. “I do not like to speak of it.”

“C’mon, we’re your brothers, now,” Dar said. “I don’t like clerics keeping secrets. Spill it.” He reached for the bread again, and scowled at it before taking another bite.

“Very well. I was exiled... for writing a pamphlet.”

“What?” Talen asked.

“Yeah, what’d you do, let slip the name of the doxy that the Patriarch was screwing?” Dar asked through another mouthful of bread.

“Nothing quite so dramatic. What I wrote was a brief critique on the political leanings of the church. I argued that secular concerns were undermining the spiritual mission of the order.”

Dar laughed. “Yeah, I bet they loved that.”

“I was young, and naïve. In the aftermath, I was given my choice of postings, as long as they were far away from Camar.”

“Well, you got the last laugh,” Dar said. “That prick Gaius is gone, you’re back in the inner circle, and I don’t know the new guy, but he seems holy enough.”

“Bishop... ah, Patriarch... Jaduran is a good man,” Nelan said.

“Old,” Talen commented. He is what, seventy-odd?”

“Closer to eighty,” Nelan admitted.

“Well, look at it this way,” Dar said. “You get to go to Rappan Athuk.” He chuckled to himself, and stood. “I’ll go see if Shay needs help with the wood.”

They ate their meal quietly. Allera, Letellia, and Alderis did not stir, and the others let them sleep. Afterwards Selanthas took out a small silver flute, and played softly. The device seemed too compact for the complex melody that the elf coaxed out of it, and as the gentle notes drifted through the cabin, they each felt themselves relaxing, the hard fights of the day fading in their memories. Dar and Mehlaraine settled down to the first watch, while the others retired to their beds.

The night passed without incident. As the spellcasters refreshed their spells in the morning, Shay and Selanthas conducted a quick reconnoiter of the area. They reported that nothing stirred in the vicinity of Rappan Athuk, although the dense gray clouds that hung over that fell place had not broken, drifting low over the site like a cloak. Mehlaraine made everyone green tea, which nearly sparked a revolt by Dar, but the fighter subsided when Shay tossed a bag of ground coffee at him with concise instructions about the specific locale where he could insert it. This might have developed further but for the intervention of Allera. The healer had woken wan but fully aware, although she was a bit murky on the details of what had transpired after their capture by Amurru. They had slept a bit late, and Letellia had to usher them out of the cottage before it expired, but Allera invoked her power to conjure a remarkable *heroes’ feast*, complete with table, chairs, and silverware, right there in the gap between the two hills. For a moment the companions just stared at the bounty.

“Now, *this* is more like it!” Dar finally exclaimed, hastening forward to the table. He didn’t even sit down as he started shoving food into his mouth. He turned back to Allera and grinned. “Mruf mus mufuct, ergel,” he said through a mouthful of food.

“The feast will provide protection against toxins and fear,” Allera said, smiling as she came forward and sat down next to Dar. The fighter kicked out a chair and sank into it, without slackening the pace with which he ate. He grabbed a pitcher of amber liquid and downed half of it in several deep swallows, ignoring the mug set beside his place. “Damn... this stuff is good!”

“We’d better join in before it is all gone,” Talen said. The companions all partook in the feast, which took the better part of an hour to consume. The good night’s sleep and the fine meal buoyed their spirits, and by the end there was even some laughter around the table. However, the upbeat mood did not long survive the disappearance of the table and the remains of the meal. The reality of what they would confront again today weighed heavily on each of them.

“I will try to prepare one of those each day for us, if we get the opportunity to use it,” Allera said.

“Are you all right?” Talen said. “After... yesterday.”

“I am well. She did not mistreat me, Talen; she believes deeply in what she does, enough to dedicate millennia of servitude to protecting what she guards.”

“I just cannot easily accept the idea of an undead creature as an ally,” Talen said.

“Well, better that than the opposite,” Shay said. “She could have easily left us there to expire, like Catspar.”

They delayed for another hour to attend to their promise to the dead warrior. Talen had initially suggested that they wait to return to Camar, to bury the ancient fighter with full estate and ritual, but Nelan gloomily noted that they might not return from Rappan Athuk to keep their promise. So they built a cairn in the dell, and laid the bones of Mailliw Catspar to rest right there. Nelan spoke the Ritual of Passing, and invoked the power of the Father to guide the spirit of the fallen man to his rest. There was a faint flicker above the grave, faint enough so that each of them could not be sure that they had seen it. Then it faded, leaving only the cold stillness of the winter morning.

“All right, let’s get going,” Talen said.

They had divided Catspar’s possessions among the group. Dar had taken the man’s breastplate, crafted from dragon scales, remarkably intact. The suit fit him surprisingly well, in contrast to the heavy plate armor he’d taken from the high priest in Rappan

Athuk. That suit they wrapped in oilcloth and buried near the cairn, against possible future need.

Shay took the warrior's longspear, while Selanthas took his sword. The small shield they restored with some spare leather throngs that Shay carried in her *bag of holding*, and gave it to Nelan, for now. The cleric looked somewhat awkward carrying the shield, but Letellia remarked that the device carried a potent dweomer, and they could not afford to reject anything that might enhance their defenses.

Thus fortified, they returned to Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 235

ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

The valley was quiet, muted in the fog that never fully burned away. For a moment, they stood there, watching.

"I wonder that we haven't encountered more resistance," Shay commented. "It has to know we're coming."

"Don't poke the sleeping lion," Dar said. "Besides, I'm sure there's a nice welcome committee waiting for us inside."

"All right, move out," Talen said. They started down, old bones crunching under their boots as they made their way through the ruin of ancient graves. Many of them had been recently uncovered, their contents now strewn across southern Camar in the aftermath of the undead invasion. Patrols from Highbluff were still coming across stragglers in the hills and forests of the region, weeks after the battle of Aldenford.

They passed the Well, giving the wide stone opening a generous berth.

"Don't forget about the green gargoyles," Dar said, as the first of the hulking mausoleums rose up out of the mists ahead, off to their left. The main tomb, the one that concealed the entrance to the dungeon, was still lost in the haze ahead. Talen called a halt next to the warrior statue in the center of the valley, where they had found the key to the tomb doors on their first expedition here, what seemed like so long ago.

"Letellia?" Talen asked. "The archmage?"

The sorceress shook her head. "I have not felt his presence yet this morning. The transition is extremely draining for him, and he takes a considerable risk each time he casts the spell. He is not a young man."

Dar snorted, but said nothing. "Do we wait for him?" Allera asked.

Talen looked at them, and then at the elves, standing a short distance away. "No," he said. "It's going to take quite some time to get to the first temple; the mage can join us when he is ready. Let's get moving."

They pressed on, as the hoking outline of the mausoleum rising up out of the fog ahead. They tensed, expecting resistance, but the green gargoyle guardians did not make an appearance. The form of the building looked... odd, without them.

Wary of a trap, they continued forward. Shay found that the doors were ajar. The interior of the place was as they had left it, scattered with bones and bits of debris. The entire mausoleum was one huge trap, designed to crush intruders inside as the floor rose up to smash against the ceiling.

This time, nothing stirred. On their last visit, Varo had *stone shaped* the plug that concealed the shaft leading down to the dungeon; it gaped open still, inviting.

"I don't like this," Shay said. "Too easy."

"Keep an eye out, but keep moving," Talen said. Nothing stirred, even when fragments of bone crunched noisily under their feet. Talen, Shay, and Dar gathered around the dark hole in the floor; the rungs of the shaft were just visible against the shadowed walls. The smell that rose up from below was familiar and overpowering.

"Gods, I'd almost forgotten," Shay said, grimacing.

"I don't think I'll ever forget that," Dar said. He looked up at Talen. "So, once more into the breach, commander?"

"One of us can scout ahead, using my magic to empower flight," Alderis said. The elf looked pale, but whether it was just mundane exhaustion or the memories of his last visit to this place was uncertain.

"Save your spell," Talen said. "We might need it." Shay began to bend to enter the shaft, but the knight beat her to it, taking Dar's offered hand for help as he lowered himself to the first rung.

Trying to ignore the stench, the companions made their way down. There was only one moment of trouble, as Letellia froze on the ladder halfway down the shaft. Selanthas, who was bringing up the rear, saw that something was wrong, and he called a warning to the others. But after a minute, the sorceress took a deep breath, and was able to finish the descent.

"Are you all right?" Talen asked, when she made it down.

"I am sorry for the disruption," she said. "And for the delay in my joining you this morning."

"Ah, archmage, glad you could join us," Dar said.

"I imagine it could be a bit... disorienting, finding yourself hanging from a rung in a dark shaft, surrounded by the foul reek of a sewer," Shay said.

"Quite. But one grows used to such things, when one is accustomed to travel by magical means."

"Okay, if you're all right to continue?" Talen asked. The archmage nodded. "Shay, take us forward."

They made their way down the tunnel, familiar to most of them from their repeated visits. Nelan, Mehlaraine, and Selanthas, who had never been here before, covered their faces in a vain effort to keep out the stench.

"It gets worse," Dar pointed out.

"That reminds me, we'd better get the contingency plan ready," Talen said. "Shay."

The scout paused, and dug into her *bag of holding*. She found what she was looking for, and handed it to Dar, who sheathed *Valor* and tucked it under one arm. "Gods, what a waste," he muttered.

"If we're lucky, we won't need it," Talen said. "We got past it last time without any trouble."

"I don't know if Zosimos would agree with you," Dar returned.

"I know that I would greatly prefer not to meet the monster that you described," Nelan said, adjusting the straps on his new shield.

They made it to the pit at the end of the passage, and Shay quickly set a rope to ease their descent. Talen helped Dar with his burden, holding it for him as the fighter descended, and then carefully dropping it down to him before taking up the rope himself. Shay had started working on the secret door at the bottom of the shaft, but the stone panel was jammed, and it took Dar's help for her to work it free. The scout paled a bit as a fresh wave of stench greeted her, but she swallowed, recovered, and probed the tunnel beyond with her torch before stepping through. The others followed behind. Alderis slipped on the rope coming down into the pit, but Mehlaraine was quick to arrest his fall, and no injuries were suffered.

The tunnel widened slightly ahead, and they could see the wrecked doorway that gave access into the first level of the dungeon. To their left lay the dead end where they had twice dodged the dung monster, while the right fork led to their ultimate destination, several levels below them.

Mehlaraine, pale, voided her stomach. The others waited for her to recover; none of them offered any recrimination; each of them knew exactly how she felt.

Scanning carefully for threats, Shay moved through the empty doorway. She had barely cleared it when the dung monster, clinging to the stone ceiling on the far side of the opening, dropped down onto her.

Chapter 236

ONCE MORE INTO THE DUNG MONSTER

Some instinct, a subtle warning from the shift of mass above her, triggered Shay's body into motion. The scout leapt to the side, but while she was able to keep from being crushed under the entirety of the dung monster's mass, she could not escape it completely. She cried out as a heavy slick of noisome material splashed across her back and stuck hard. As the entirety of the monster dropped to the floor, its weight dragged her down, its caustic substance already burning at her back, legs, and hair.

"Shay!" Talen yelled, rushing forward to assist. But Dar was ahead of him, and the fighter moved even quicker. A dagger had appeared in his hand, and as he charged he used it to stave in one end of the small cask he carried. Clear liquid splashed up around his hand as the wooden planks collapsed, but most of the two gallons or so remained inside until he upended it over the monster.

The nearly pure grain alcohol splashed over the body of the creature, forming a clinging slick that trailed down its body, dissolving the sticky secretions that oozed from its body. Dar had tried to focus the discharge toward Shay, but in doing so, he had gotten almost on top of the creature, and it was quick to counter. A massive pseudopod formed out of its body and smashed into the fighter's chest, driving him back against the empty threshold of the ruined door. The alcoholic dousing had weakened the adhesive properties of the creature's skin, so it did not get a grip on him with the attack, but it had still struck him with the force of a battering ram striking a castle gate.

Unfortunately for the creature, Corath Dar was a bit tougher than your typical castle gate.

Talen rushed past him through the doorway, *Beatus Incendia* flaring in his hand as he rushed to Shay's aid. He clove into the creature, opening a big gash in its foul

substance, but the flames spilling from the blade appeared to have no effect, and the wound, if it could be considered such, quickly vanished as the monster's bulk twisted and roiled in the face of the knight's assault. Flames flared up from around the impact, as the sword's fire ignited some of the alcohol spilled upon the creature, but that too seemed to have no effect save to add a new smell to the fearsome stench radiating from the monster.

Shay was still struggling to get free, but even the alcohol had not been enough to fully loosen the monster's grasp. But she was on her feet again, trying to rise against the weight of the creature splayed across her back.

Dar took his club into both hands, and strode forward at the creature. His boots smacked into its bulbous slime, hissing as the creature's substance swelled and engulfed his legs almost to the knee. Dar smashed his club down into a pseudopod as it formed, driving it back into the mass of the creature. The blow opened a tear in the creature's body, from which a gout of utter foulness rose, splattering upon his armor. Vomit exploded from his mouth as his stomach roiled, but he did not stop raining blows upon the monster, two-handed strikes that sent quivering pulses through its entire hulking body. Each time he hit the head of the club clung to its outer hide, but not enough to prevent Dar from yanking it free and striking again.

Beside him, Talen staggered and nearly fell as the creature surged, but Nelan was there at his back, and steadied him with a ready hand. The knight hacked at the part of the monster that was holding Shay, careful not to strike her with his blade. His first attack cut a long swath in its body, but on the second hit *Beatus Incendia* stuck in its body as its substance swelled around the blade, and he nearly went down again as the monster tried to pull the weapon from his grasp.

The others were attempting to aid in the melee, but the crowded space of the doorway was limiting their effectiveness. Selanthas had fired a few arrows into its body, aiming for the densest portion between Dar and Talen. A wave of heat accompanied a series of *scorching rays* that knifed past the melee combatants and blasted its body, but the spell's potency dissolved without affecting it. The same thing happened to a series of *magic missiles* that peppered it a moment later. Talen had warned them about the creature's resistances, which apparently were proof against even an archmage's magical talents. And with them so closely entangled with it, a *wall of force* could offer no protection against its attacks.

But they were hurting it. Its regenerative powers put those of a troll to shame, and the wounds that the companions tore in its hide oozed back together with each shifting of its amorphous "body". But even the dung monster could not absorb the punishment that the companions, and in particular Dar, were inflicting upon it.

Mehlaraine appeared in the doorway, and leapt out over the creature's body, narrowly avoiding another pseudopod that was forming in front of Dar. The nimble elf landed just clear of it, and hurried to Shay's assistance. The scout, unable to bring her longspear to

bear, had dropped it and drawn her elf-forged blade, trying to hew away at what was left of the vile substance clinging to her back. Blood was running down her shoulders now, coming from the mangled flesh at the base of her skull where the creature's vile substance had struck her. The duelist struck with *Avelis*, her flashing blade, finishing the cut that Shay had begun. The scout fell away from the monster, stifling a cry as its acids continued their terrible work upon her skin.

Talen held onto the hilt of *Beatus Incendia*, shaking the blade through the creature's insides like a maid churning butter. He could still not get the weapon fully free of its substance, but the sharp edges of the sword continued to tear into it, countering its regenerative powers.

The monster heaved and surged forward, but toward Dar, not Talen. The fighter was driven back against the threshold of the doorway, threatening to overbear him completely. Dar lifted his club in both hands and plunged it hard into the creature's body, thrusting it down and off him. It refused to relinquish him entirely; a wide splatter of its substance clung to the stone, completely enveloping the fighter from the waist down. Dar was beyond conscious thought now, and he roared something incoherent as he thrust the club's head down, again and again, into whatever part of the creature seemed densest. He was covered now in sprays unleashed from his impacts, and he looked like nothing human.

The others were doing the best to aid him. Nelan was smashing the monster with his mace, but he was too far back to do much damage, and he was striking the floor as much as the creature's substance. Behind him, Allera channeled positive energy through the doorway into her companions, countering the damage that they were taking from the monster's caustic secretions. Selanthas only had a small opening between them, but was using it to put precisely aimed arrows into the monster's body, one after another. Alderis, realizing that his spells could not harm it, instead cast a *grease* spell on Dar's armor, causing the creature's grip on him to loosen. It was still trying to flow up onto him, the simply envelop the struggling fighter, but Dar's furious assault was hindering that attempt. Honoratius likewise aided the fighters with a *haste* spell that added speed to their attacks.

And then the monster just started to come apart. The dense core of its body slumped, and a spread of foul gunk splashed outward, covering the floor in every direction for a good twenty feet. It still sizzled somewhat as it reached their boots, but it no longer held the deadly effect of the creature's secretions when it had been fully intact.

Dar collapsed and heaved again, spewing what little remained in his stomach. He was coated in the monster's gory innards, and despite Allera's healing his flesh burned where it had been most exposed to the monster's touch. Allera, ignoring the filth, came to him and helped him up, offering him a clean towel for his face. He nodded gratefully, too overcome to speak.

"Is everyone all right?" Talen asked. He supported Shay, who looked worse than she was. The scout held another rag against the back of her head, where there was a wide patch where all of her hair had been destroyed. Looking around, he saw that everyone was intact, although he, Shay, and Dar would need new clothes, and likely some repair work on their armor as well.

"Let's get to the river, and get this fucking gunk cleaned off," the knight said wearily. Shay pulled away from him, somewhat reluctantly, and took up her long spear, moving once again into her position at the head of their column. Honoratius lingered behind a moment, and knelt over the center of the creature's remains, where the puddle of filth was densest.

"What are you doing?" Nelan asked him.

"I am taking a sample," the archmage said. She efficiently scraped a portion of the sludge into a small glass container, and tightly stoppered it. "A truly unique creature; it would be interesting to study its properties, and possibly determine its origin." The container disappeared into one of her magical pouches.

"I have never fought anything like that before," Mehlaraine said, her expression tight as she struggled to retain her equilibrium against the lingering stench.

As they were leaving, Dar glanced back. "I can't believe we killed it," he said. He spat back at it. "That's for Ukas," he muttered, and turned back to join Allera as they moved ahead once more, deeper into Rappan Athuk.

As the light of their *everburning torches* faded, darkness surged back into the tunnel. The slick covering the floor glistened as the last lingering glow shone in its repellant surface.

A bubble appeared in the mess, and then, a few seconds later, another.

Chapter 237

RETURN TO THE FIRST TEMPLE

Dar drew a rag along the length of *Valor*, cleaning off bits of gore that hadn't sloughed off the magical blue steel. "How many, do you think, Selanthas?"

The elf scanned the room. "Thirty seven. By the stench, I would estimate that approximately three-quarters were ghastrs."

“Not a bad day’s work,” Dar said, sheathing the blade. He looked over at Talen, who was returning from the far side of the room. “Any more signs of that wraith-mage?”

“Nelán said it was a spectre,” the knight said.

“Whatever. You think it’ll come back?”

“I won’t assume either way. Help get these bodies clear; we’re going to be here for a while. Nelán says it will take a full day, twenty-four hours, to *hallow* the temple.”

Dar grimaced; the undead that were scattered across the floor were even more repulsive now than they had been when they’d been alive. Smoke still rose from some of them, where the mage’s spells had seared them.

“Well, it was much easier than the last time we were here, no?”

Talen nodded absently, and looked around. Objectively, there wasn’t much apparent change in the first temple of Orcus since their last visit. The place was dominated now, as before, by the tall platform in the center, suspended above a pit of glowing lava atop four slender and treacherous stone staircases. In the back of the room there was a large statue of Orcus, but it seemed less malevolent now, especially since Dar had stolen the gemstones it had had for eyes last time. The fact that they were all more or less intact this time might have also had something to do with it; on their last trip here several of them had been on the brink of death after they’d only just barely overcome the mixed human and demonic defenders of the temple.

Alderis stood quietly, staring up at the platform. Mehlaraine and Selanthas shared a look as they dragged a roasted ghoul over to the side of the room, but they did not approach him. Perhaps they sensed that he needed a moment’s space, as he confronted a particularly traumatic memory, reduced to a haze through magic and time, but not fully forgotten.

Allera and Shay were talking to Nelán, who was standing near the edge of the lava pit, gesturing with his hands. Probably working out the details of his spell. Dar knew that their ultimate success depended on destroying these temples, in sundering whatever foul magic gave the demon lord his power on this plane. He didn’t understand the details, and he didn’t want to know. But he also realized that the light resistance they’d had thus far would only grow stronger as the demon rallied its forces against this latest intrusion into its lair.

Orcus was not going to go down without a fight.

“We have been fortunate, thus far.”

Dar turned and saw Letellia, putting his thoughts into words. For a moment he wondered if the sorceress had been reading his mind, but then realized that they all had to be thinking the same thing.

“It’ll get harder,” he said. He reached down and grabbed a pair of ghosts by the ankles, dragging them over to the small heap gathering on the side of the chamber. Dar had suggested just tossing the undead into the lava, but Talen had vetoed that idea, concerned that the fumes from the burning creatures might foul the air in the chamber. Already the pit was putting off a considerable plume of ash and fumes, enough so that it made the head swim to stand too near to it for more than a few moments. Fortunately there were cracks and crevices in the rough ceiling above them, allowing most of the toxic gases to depart. Even so, they had set up their camp as far from the pit as they could, without leaving the room.

Letellia was watching him. “You fight... with great conviction.”

Dar cracked a grin. He wondered what she’d been about to say before she’d caught herself. “You did pretty well yourself. The archmage... well, he’s got some pretty impressive magic, but you can make with the fire and lightning on your own.”

“My powers are trivial in comparison to his,” the sorceress demurred. But she seemed to take pleasure in the compliment.

Despite Talen’s pushing them, it had taken them several hours to get here, well beyond the time that Honoratius could remain in possession of Letellia’s body. They had lingered a bit over the river, eager to cleanse away the worst of the blood and filth from their latest encounter with the dung monster. There had been no sign of the wererats that had populated the tunnels in the river cavern on their first visit, and no other creatures had taken up occupancy in the space since then. Given the proximity of the dung monster, that was perhaps understandable.

On their last expedition through that first level of the dungeon, they had traveled along the river to the second temple of Rappan Athuk, on a mission to rescue Allera from the clutches of the cult of Orcus. This time, they took the stairs down to the second level. They had been alert for new guardians, but the level was quiet, closed off from the rest of the dungeon complex by a series of collapses. Some of those disruptions had been precipitated by the Doomed Bastards on earlier visits. But this level remained the best route to the first temple, and so they had devised a plan to reopen one of the exits. It was Honoratius who had actually completed the deed, using her magic to transform herself into an umber hulk. It had been more than a little bizarre to watch the slender form of Letellia shift and reform into the alien visage of the hulk, and even more astounding to watch the creature dig into the packed earth and stone of the collapse, burrowing through it with the same felicity with which a dog might tunnel into loose dirt to recover a bone.

It took the better part of an hour, especially since they had to be wary of causing another collapse when they used the newly excavated tunnel. Honoratius greeted them in her own form at the bottom of the shaft, the spell having expired well before they finally were able to join her. The archmage had not been alone when they had finally reunited, although there hadn't been much more than ugly black smears left of the three trolls that had been drawn to investigate by the noise.

Honoratius had been forced to depart again shortly thereafter. But Letellia proved her mettle in the encounters that followed. On their last visit, they had made their way to the first temple by means of an elaborate detour, along another underground river, through a cavern populated by trolls and giant spiders, and then through a complex of tunnels claimed by a band of ogres and a relatively good-natured otyugh. However, Varo's annotated maps indicated that there was a more direct route connecting the third level and the fourth. They did not have the details of that connection, but Nelan had resolved that through the use of a *find the path* spell, cast from one of the scrolls taken from the vaults of the Great Cathedral of Soleus in Camar.

Their route down to the Temple had been fairly easy from that point, and almost entirely unopposed. They'd battled a small horde of giant rats, but a *lightning bolt* from Letellia had incinerated at least a score of the creatures, and the remainder managed barely a few seconds against Talen and Dar before the survivors fled. A wight leapt from the shadows to attack Shay a bit later, but Selanthas had two arrows in it before the creature even lifted its claws, and Shay got her spear in time around to impale it before it could strike.

They had grown more cautious when they entered the outskirts of the temple precinct, familiar chambers that had once held alert clerics of Orcus. Now the rooms were empty of all but old bloodstains and the occasional fragment of bone; even the wrecked furnishings of that former garrison had vanished.

They'd been ready for a fight when they got to the temple proper, and the large pack of ghouls and ghosts that they'd found there had been poised to give it to them. But numbers alone had been little proof against the devastating firepower that Letellia and Alderis could muster. There had been a moment of worry when the incorporeal wizard, hovering in the shadows near the ceiling above the platform, had hit them with a *confusion* spell. The minds of Dar, Talen, and Mehlaraine had been clouded by the hostile magic, but it ultimately didn't matter; Letellia drove the spectre off with another *lightning bolt*, and Nelan had been able to dispel the *confusion* before their befuddled companions could threaten their own allies. Those few ghosts that had gotten close enough to melee had found that lightly armed and armored women with pale hair were nothing to be trifled with, at least not when said women were capable of unleashing multiple *mass cure* spells with devastating effect.

Dar tugged off his helmet and wiped his forehead. Behind him, a considerable pile of dead ghouls and ghosts formed a macabre mound against the wall of the chamber. The stench rising from them would make the chamber unpleasant, but the place was big

enough so that the companions could deal with it. In any case, they had no choice, not if they wanted to give Nelan the time needed to conduct his ritual.

The cleric had staked out a small space midway between the lava pit and the statue of Orcus. The *hallow* spell had considerable accompaniments, including herbs, oils, and candles that had been specially prepared and consecrated in the sanctum of the Shining Father in Camar. Some of those items were over two hundred years old. Nelan had also spread out an antique scroll, which contained the actual incantation that he would use for the ritual. The cleric was now taking his rest, preparing for the long and grueling casting of the spell. He would begin by *consecrating* the area, weakening the dark power of the temple, and would conclude with another casting of that spell, locking the *hallow* in place and sundering utterly the dark energies that flowed through this chamber.

That was the plan, anyway.

Talen organized their defense around protecting the cleric. They wedged both doors shut with iron spikes, and kept a double watch, with one of the sharp-eyed elves pairing with a human for each shift. The spellcasters were given priority on sleep, so they could recover their spells; that left Talen, Dar, Shay, Mehlaraine, and Selanthas pulling shifts on guard.

The first shift passed without incident, and Talen woke Dar for the second shift. He was partnered with Mehlaraine, who rose without a word at Selanthas's touch, and began walking the perimeter of the chamber, moving with the smooth grace of a hunting cat.

After about an hour, Dar walked over to her.

"Would you stop that pacing? You're driving me batty."

The elven woman looked up at him quizzically. She lowered her voice to match his. "How can you be alert to threats if you do not remain vigilant?"

"Look, if they're going to come, they're going to... what?"

She had raised a hand to forestall him, her fingers impossibly slender, belying her not inconsiderable physical strength. Dar already knew that the aelfinn were not as frail as they looked. Well, most of them anyway.

For a moment, she said nothing. He looked around, but there was nothing to be seen, nothing moving save the swirling columns of smoke coming up off the lava pit. "Well?" he asked, his hand stealing to the hilt of *Valor*.

"Do you not hear that?"

He strained, and after a few fruitless moments his gaze drifted toward the south door, the one that led down to the next deeper level of the dungeon. His memories of that level were not pleasant; that was where they had battled Banth.

He started in that direction, the elven woman close on his heels. He moved quickly, his armor clattering slightly with each step.

There. He stopped, and listened again. It was clearer now, a faint scratching, like a cat begging to be let in. Except that this door was a slab of solid stone, secured with iron spikes, and Dar strongly doubted that a benign housecat waited on the far side.

He drew *Valor*, letting his own instincts blend with the familiar and reassuring feel of the hilt in his hand. "Wake the others," he told the elf.

She skipped off in a flash, her soft boots barely seeming to touch the ground as she ran. Nelan was the only other one of them still awake, and the cleric paid her no heed as she darted past him, lost as he was within the depths of his ritual.

Dar focused on the doorway. The scratching noises had disappeared, but the tickling sensation he felt on the back of his neck hadn't gone with it. He had learned long ago to trust his instincts.

Valor gleamed blue in his hand, shining in the reflected glow coming off the lava pit.

The door was silent, but Dar felt a preternatural sense of urgency, punctuated by the pulses of his heart beating in his chest. Seconds passed. He could hear the noises of his companions, as they stirred. Talen was issuing orders. Too slowly...

He was expecting it, but he still jumped when a loud crash sounded directly ahead of him; something heavy striking the door. His iron wedges held, but the attack on the door continued; a second heavy blow, then a third. The stone slab moved incrementally. The fourth impact was followed by a metallic clatter as one of the spikes was knocked free, and fell hard onto the stone floor.

"Come on, you bastards," Dar hissed, lifting his sword into a ready position.

And then the door blasted open, and a horde of slaving wights poured into the room.

Chapter 238

THE WIGHT ANSWER

The wights surged through the opening as the heavy door was flung wide open. The object they had used to batter down the door—a stone tomb-lid, by the look of it—fell to the ground, the undead creatures leaping over the now-unnecessary tool.

An iron spike, knocked free from the door as it was battered open, skittered past Dar's foot. The fighter held his ground, fifteen paces in front of the door, silhouetted against the glow of the lava pit at his back.

A streak of light flashed past the fighter. The small orb shot over the heads of the first few ranks of surging undead, vanishing into the dark opening of the staircase beyond the gaping doorway. The result was immediate; the brilliant blossoming of a *fireball* exploded out of the opening, the flames savaging the wights. But it was not enough to stop the rush. More of them, their flesh blackened with char, continued to essay from the dark tunnel. There were already over a dozen in the room.

The leading edge of the wight rush focused on Dar, as the sole obvious threat. The first died messily, cut down by a single powerful two-handed stroke from *Valor*. The undead flopped to the ground, its chest cavity ripped wide open by the powerful blow. Another four leapt over the carcass, assailing the fighter with slams of their filthy fists. Against the fighter's magical armor, they may as well have been hammering against a fortress's shield wall. As the wights swarmed around him Dar went to work with his blade, tearing limbs from undead bodies, cleaving open torsos, in one case even taking a wight's head from its shoulders, sending the decapitated knob bouncing across the room. The wight's body was slow to realize the fact of its demise, its claw still scratching against Dar's armor as it slumped slowly to the ground.

Dar had withstood the first rush, but more wights were still coming, and the charge split around him, forming two prongs that swept forward into the chamber. For a moment, Dar was swallowed up in that onrushing surge.

But then his allies came to his aid. Mehlaraine and Shay met the two wings of the wight rush, both women charging with blinding speed back into the fray. Ten paces from the leading wight on the left, the elven woman sprang into the air and came down in the midst of a small knot of undead. Her slender sword, *Avelis*, flashed in her hand, biting deep into the body of one of the wights. For a moment, the creatures were caught off guard by the audacity of her attack, but then they were attacking her from every direction, pounding at her with their claws. Mehlaraine was fast, and avoided most of the strikes, but even she could not escape the attacks unleashed upon her from all sides. For a moment, she was obscured within a snarling, furious ring of undeath, and her leaping attack looked like suicide.

But then the wights fell back, caught up in a blur of motion. Mehlaraine spun in a nimble dance that somehow filled the constrained space in the midst of the wights. *Avelis* flashed out as she turned, and every wight within her reach felt the bite of that blade. The wights, most of them already seriously injured by Alderis's *fireball*, could not withstand that assault, and when Mehlaraine finished her spin, five of them collapsed to

the ground, gashed and ruined. The duelist stepped out of the circle, back toward the lava pit, and saluted with her sword as she fell into a ready position.

The next rank of wights surged forward to meet her.

On the opposite flank, Shay had joined battle with equal speed and grace. She lined up her charge with precision, driving her new longspear right through the body of the first wight, its head catching the shoulder of a second behind it. Both wights fell in a thrashing heap as she dropped the spear and whipped out her sword. More wights were on her in a flash, but Shay was almost as fast as Mehlaraine, and none of the first cluster to reach her laid a hand on her. She gave ground to avoid being surrounded, drawing them after her, taking one down with a feint that turned into a low cut that took the wight's left leg off at the knee.

The two women held the line, with Dar anchoring its center between them. But there was a fresh surge of wights already coming forward to replace the fallen, and it was clear that even a trio such as they could not hold them off for long.

But their companions were already moving to help them. Talen had sprung up at Mehlaraine's first warning, *Beatus Incendia* bare in his hand, ready to fight. But when he saw no foe immediately at hand he had started to put on his armor, assisted by Allera. That cost him a few seconds when the wights busted down the door; he cursed as he hastily tossed his greaves back down to the floor, and hastily fumbled with the last fastener on his breastplate. Some armor was better than none at all, but a breastplate hanging loosely off his body would be worse than nothing in the chaos of a violent melee.

Like Talen, Alderis had risen with a weapon at hand, and it had been his *fireball* that had weakened the first charge of wights. Letellia, less accustomed to the rigors of taking sleep in a hostile environment, was a bit more sluggish, pulling her cloak around her as she looked around wide-eyed for the danger. She did not associate the pounding noise with the south door until it was already open, and wights were surging out toward Dar. She drew out a wand of her own as she started across the room toward the battle. Selanthas, having strung his bow, started after her, but Talen forestalled him.

"Watch out for an ambush!" the knight warned. "This may be only part of the attack!"

The elf nodded, and even as he drew his first arrow, he scanned the perimeter of the room. He almost missed the dark figures that had emerged from the far wall of the cavern to the east, beyond the huge stone statue of Orcus, but the hint of movement drew his eye back, and as they entered the radius of the glow from the lava pit, he could clearly identify them.

Spectres, four of them, the last surrounded by both a protective *shield* and a bevy of shifting *mirror images*. They were heading straight for Nelan; the cleric, still focused on his ritual, seemed oblivious to their presence.

“Incorporeal undead!” he yelled in warning, lifting his bow, letting its familiar magic empower his arrow with electrical energy as he aimed and let fly.

Chapter 239

SAVE THE CLERIC, SAVE THE WORLD

“Protect Nelan!” Talen yelled, breaking away from his charge toward the battle with the wights to engage the spectres. He made barely two steps, however, before a burst of sticky magical *webs* exploded around him. The dense webbing was anchored between the statue of Orcus and the base of the nearest stair over the lava pit, and it quite neatly engulfed him, Nelan, Letellia, Allera, and Selanthas in their clinging grasp. Only Alderis and the three battling the wights had been outside of the burst radius of the spell.

The spectres, of course, were not hindered by the webs in the least. Three of them drifted forward over them like dark clouds on a starry night, their objective obvious. Nelan was finally coming around, stirring from the depths of his ritual, but with the *webs* covering his body he could barely stand, let alone fight.

Talen looked at the sword in his hands. The *webs* had flared away from the burning blade, but he knew that if he used it to cut himself free, then fire would rage through the web, burning his friends.

To the hells with it, the knight thought, sweeping his blade across his path. The webs disintegrated, flaring with white flames, but Talen could see that he would not reach Nelan in time; the spectres were moving too quickly.

But before they could strike, the spectres halted in mid-air, spasming as flashes of blue energy tore through their bodies. Talen felt the effects of Allera’s *mass cure* as a gentle, soothing warmth, but he was not injured, and felt no other benefit.

She certainly had gotten the attention of the spectres, however, which turned and dove at her, their insubstantial claws extended toward her body.

Dar, Mehlaraine, and Shay continued to struggle against the surging wight horde. Over a dozen of the creatures were now lying shattered on the stone floor of the chamber, but there were still at least that many still up and fighting. Dar cleared a space around him with *Valor*, a dead zone within which no wight could stand for more than a few seconds. One of them had gotten in a lucky hit that had pierced his defenses, but even

with the drain upon his life force he was still virtually unstoppable against such mundane foes. A few wights remained near him, hissing in frustrated fury but wary of entering his reach.

Mehlaraine and Shay were rather worse off. The elven woman, in particular, was beginning to flag, having suffered another pair of draining hits that had left her pale and somewhat unsteady. She continued to fight, however, darting in and around the four wights that were still harrying her, stabbing with *Avellis*. These wights, however, among the last to emerge from the doorway, were not as burned as the others had been, and they could take considerably more damage before falling. Shay was having the same problem as she led three wights away from the battle, using her superior mobility to keep them from ganging up on her. She had not escaped their life-draining touch either, although she had suffered far less than Mehlaraine on that score.

None of the three observed the final creature that emerged from the dark staircase, hovering there in the deep shadows of the doorway.

The first spectre that lunged at Allera dissolved as Selanthas's arrow bisected the dark substance between the twin pinpoints of its glowing eyes. The other two surged in in its wake, eager to feed upon the healer's life energy. The first came apart in the face of a barrage of *magic missiles* from Alderis, but the second drew its claws through her body, siphoning off her life. The trailing rents torn in its body by Allera's spell were restored somewhat by that stolen energy, and it seemed revitalized as it swept around and came at her again, eager for more. Unfortunately for it the undead monstrosity never got a chance, as Talen caught up to it and carved a brilliant swath through its body with *Beatus Incendia*.

The last spectre, the spellcaster, left with one parting shot, a pair of *scorching rays* that struck Talen and Allera, burning both of them. Letellia hit it with a *lightning bolt* that ripped through all five of its *mirror images*, the bright tendrils of electrical energy scorching the dark stone of the Orcus statue as it blasted past. The spell was not enough to destroy the undead wizard, but the destruction of its allies was apparently enough to convince it not to linger. It drifted back into the alcove behind the statue, chased by several of Selanthas's arrows, which punctured *mirror images* but did no harm to the creature. Within a few moments it was gone.

The companions turned at once to aid their companions against the lingering remnants of the wight army, but it looked as though that battle would be over before they could join the fray. There were only about a half-dozen wights still standing, and that number was depleted further as Dar stepped forward and clove a reluctant creature in twain before it could back out of his reach.

But then, as so often happened in the chaos of melee, the tide of battle abruptly changed.

The shadowed creature that had remained in the open doorway following the charge of the wight horde now stepped forward, into the light. It was a wight, clad in a suit of plate armor in an archaic style, apparently crafted from bronze rather than steel. Even a glance told that it was in a distinct class from its brethren lying sundered upon the floor; it stood taller even than Dar, and its sunken eyes blazed with an unholy malevolence as they scanned the room.

It let out a keening cry as it came forward into the light. Dar glanced up, and met the creature's dark stare.

There was a madness in that gaze, and in that brief moment of connection it invaded Dar's mind, driving him insane.

Mehlaraine, turning at the noise, was affected as well by the grim power of that stare. Her body tensed, and she started screaming, even as the two wights still hazarding her leapt eagerly onto her, tearing her body with their claws.

Shay looked at the creature as well, but as the grim terror of that stare washed over her, some instinct allowed her to tear her eyes free before the full force of its gaze could infect her. She staggered back, disoriented for just a moment, a vulnerability that allowed the two wights chasing her to seize her. One held her, trying to drag her down to the floor, while the second delivered a powerful blow across her back, using its gnarled fists as a hammer. The scout cried out as life energy was ripped from her body, and the wights cackled in glee.

Talen watched with horror at the sudden turn, although he did not fully comprehend what he had seen. He and the others were far enough away that the barrowwight's sweeping gaze had passed through them with merely a cold chill. Alderis, however, had comprehended at once the significance of what had happened. "Its gaze is madness, do not meet its stare!" he shouted in warning, even as he drew out a wand and leveled it at the sinister creature.

But before the elf could unleash an attack, he was distracted by a rumbling noise that emitted from the lava pit. The companions turned as one just to witness a sudden explosion of boiling magma, as a skeleton rose up out of the lava. The newcomer was a massive creature, standing easily twelve feet tall. Its bones were blackened but apparently otherwise undamaged by the molten rock it had been immersed in, and which trickled down its body in glowing gobs as it stepped forward, and grabbing onto one of the stone staircases pulled itself up out of the pit.

Chapter 240

THE FURY OF THE MAD

The skeleton, whether by accident or design, emerged from the pit closest to Nelan, and it lunged forward toward the cleric. The priest's arms and legs were scorched where the webs, ignited by Talen's sword, had burned him. He lifted his divine focus and called upon the power of the Father. The silver torch blazed with light, but in this place of darkness its glow was fitful, the holy energies sapped by the sinister powers of evil that suffused the temple. The skeletal fire giant was not affected, and it strode forward to smite the cleric, the ground trembling slightly with its coming.

Talen met it with a furious battle cry, drawing its attention by the simple means of bringing *Beatus Incendia* down upon one massive thighbone. The skeleton was not harmed by the blade's fire, but the holy energies of the weapon seared it deeper, and it turned with a vengeance upon him. Bits of lava, still glowing red-hot, splashed onto Talen's armor as it smashed him with a bony claw. As it finished its turn it reached down with its other hand and seized his shield, lifting the struggling fighter up into the air.

Dar stood facing the barrowwight, his body trembling with mad fury. But with his mind befuddled by the creature's piercing stare, he just stood there, his sword hanging limp at his side. Another wight sought to take advantage of his insanity by leaping upon his back, clawing and biting in a violent frenzy. The fighter roared and counterattacked with equal vehemence, reaching up and grabbing the wight by the arm, and ripping it off him. He did not even bother with *Valor*, dropping the blade as he started pounding the creature with his mailed fists. The wight tried to scramble away, but shrieked as a punch shattered its left leg, followed by another that crumpled its jaw. He kept punching, ignoring the greater threat that closed upon him, until the barrowwight's long arms seized him, and dragged him off the damaged monster. He struggled to break free, but the barrowwight held him, digging its claws into his neck as it fed upon his life energy.

The other companions had not been idle, and added their own talents to the two raging battles. Letellia, on the edges of the spectre's *web*, had been unsuccessful at tearing herself from the clinging strands, even with freedom just a few paces away. She'd forced the spectre to retreat with her *lightning bolt*, and now paused to *dimension door* out of the web moments before the swift flames tearing through them reached her. She rematerialized on the far side of the lava pit, not far from Alderis.

The elf mage fired a spray of *magic missiles* from his wand, the cerulean shafts of energy blasting unerringly around Dar and into the barrowwight. When the second such barrage hit the creature snarled and tossed its captive violently aside, and charged toward the two arcanists. It would have quickly brought them within the range of its gaze attack, but Letellia summoned her innate magic, and conjured a hemisphere of ice around the charging creature. The translucent surface of the globe began to run almost at once with its proximity to the lava pit, but the creature was held within, at least for the moment.

Selanthas, having won free of the webs, was sending arrows one after the other into the wights assaulting Mehlaraine. The diminished elf staggered free as the one holding her collapsed, three arrows buried almost to the feathers in her back. The second one tentatively sought to attack her, but it heard a soft whistle through the air, and turned in time to just see the blurring arrow that caromed hard off its skull, tearing a long gauge in the clammy flesh of its head. The wight was smart enough to know when a battle was untenable, and it skittered away, vanishing into the dark entrance of the staircase to the south.

Mehlaraine looked after it in confusion, dazed. She looked down at the blood covering her arms, trickling down from the slashes torn by the wights' claws. A violent rage filled her at the sight, and she turned, looking for something to destroy.

Unfortunately, the first foe she spotted was Dar, who was just staggering to his feet from where the barrowwight had hurled him.

Talen grimaced as the skeleton spun him about, his shoulder screaming in pain from the weight of his body and gear. He tried to tear free from the straps holding his arm to the shield, but they had fouled, and he could not get the leverage needed to escape. He still held *Beatus Incendia* with his other hand, but neither could he get in an effective strike, not with the long reach of the skeleton holding him.

A blinding streak of white energy struck the skeleton in the skull, blasting away a swatch of blackened bone. Nelan's *searing light* gave Talen the opening he'd needed, and he drew himself up on his damaged arm enough to hack at the monster's wrist. *Beatus Incendia* struck true, and the joint collapsed under the force of the blow. The drop was only a few feet, and Talen surged forward, coming in under the inevitable swing from its other claw and then delivering a perfect strike to the monster's torso. The holy sword smashed its spine, and the skeleton stumbled ponderously aside, almost recovering before it finally just snapped in two, collapsing in a pile of charred bones.

"Are you all right?" Nelan asked him, as Talen slumped to his knees, breathing heavily. His arm felt like a hot needle stabbed into his body, and he could smell the stench of his own burned flesh from where the lava had gotten into his armor.

"Fine," he said, dragging himself to his feet. "Help the others!"

"Dar!"

The fighter turned as Allera ran at him. He raised a hand in warning, and with the other tore off his helmet. "Don't come closer!" he yelled, his face twisted with the effort of keeping his thoughts together. "I can't... I can't control..."

The healer stopped five paces away, but she saw what was coming up behind him, and she shouted a warning. "Look out!"

But Dar could not react in time, as Mehlaraine leapt into him, slashing with *Avelis*. The rapier cut a deep gash in the side of his head. The fighter cried out and staggered back, but even as he did Allera could sense the rage that swelled inside him, driving any vestige of control from him. He drew his punching dagger and leapt to meet the elf woman, who seemed just as eager to destroy him.

Allera hit them both with a *calm emotions* spell. The effect was instantly obvious, as Dar stumbled to a halt, lowering his weapon.

Unfortunately, the healer's magic failed to pierce the veil of rage clouding the duelist's mind, and she unleashed a full attack, tearing viciously into Dar's armored frame. The fighter got an arm up in time to protect his face, but even catching the sharp steel point of the rapier on his bracer he still suffered a deep gash in the flesh above his left eye, only narrowly avoiding losing the organ. Mehlaraine adjusted smoothly, stabbing the weapon into his side, penetrating the armor there at a gap between the plates. There was a thunderous retort, and Dar was driven a step back, blood cascading out from the wound.

The attack also broke the *calm emotions* spell, but before the fighter could rally Allera was at his back, pressing her slender fingers into the muscled flesh at the base of his skull. Her power flowed almost effortlessly at her command, pouring into the fighter's body. This was the strongest of the innate magic at her command, the true font of power available only to the strongest of healers. It burned away the insanity that clouded Dar's mind, and restored to him the energy stolen by the wraiths. He shook as Allera's power surged through him, but he was still hurt, and badly.

And Mehlaraine rushed in again, her rapier already slick with his blood.

A crack appeared in the white globe of ice. Talen and Nelan had started toward Dar and the others, but Alderis's shout of warning drew them toward the prison of the still-dangerous barrowwight. "It will be free in moments!" the elf warned. "If it is able to freely unleash its gaze, we may all end up destroying each other!"

"Get back!" the knight shouted. "Don't look at it directly, but when it breaches the wall, hit it hard with everything you have!"

Letellia and Alderis nodded, and each readied their magic, taking up flanking positions facing the widening crack. Talen moved behind it, where he could strike at the wight if and when it broke free, without putting him in the line of attack from the mages. He caught sight of Shay, who was still on her feet, if a bit unsteady after taking down the last of the wights threatening her. The scout nodded and moved around the far side of the ice globe, her spear at the ready. Talen tried to spot Selanthas, but the other elf had hurried over to assist his consort.

Mehlaraine's blade snapped out in a blur. Dar pivoted barely in time to avoid having a foot of narrow steel thrust through his throat, but could not avoid a fearsome gash along

the side of his neck that spurted a new flow of gaudy red. But as the duelist started to draw back, he seized her wrist in an iron grip, pinning her weapon and dragging her up against him. The insane elf struggled madly, twisting in his grasp, but unable to break free. She slammed a knee into his groin, drawing an obvious response even through his armor. But Dar did not loosen his grip.

“Allera... fix her... quickly, please!” She snapped her other hand around, clawing at his eyes, and he let out a snarl of pain as her nails drew bright red lines down his cheek. “Damn it, hold still, bitch!” Dar cursed. Selanthas ran up, but for a moment he was taken aback by the intensity of Mehlaraine’s struggles.

No so Allera. The healer lunged in, seizing the mad woman’s head in her hands. Mehlaraine tried to kick her, but Allera was faster, purging her with a *heal* spell that hit her like a hammer made of ice. The duelist shivered and fell limp, and would have collapsed to the floor had not Dar kept his grip on her wrist.

“Here, take her,” he said, all but throwing her at Selanthas. Dar looked around for his sword, and hurried to recover it. Allera, preparing another spell to heal his wounds, was forced to hurry to keep up.

But even as Dar’s fingers closed around the hilt of his weapon, a loud screech pierced the chamber. There was a massive explosion, followed by a hiss of steam that exploded away from the *wall of ice*. Alderis and Letellia had both hit the wight as it had fought its way through the prisoning hemisphere, the elf with a *fireball*, the sorceress with a *lightning bolt*. Somehow, the wight had survived those blasts, and staggered forward through the cloud of swirling steam, seeking to inflict some damage on these foes that had so troubled it. A shadow began to take form ahead, but before the creature could strike, a clatter of metal warned it of another foe coming up from behind it.

It turned to face its enemy, its eyes blazing deep within the recesses of their sockets. But Talen had been expecting the corrupting assault of its gaze, and he kept his eyes low. That allowed the wight to get in the first strike, but the creature’s blow glanced off his armor, inflicting neither physical damage nor the life-draining effects of its touch.

Talen’s counterattack was not quite so feeble.

Bronze plates crunched, and the monster staggered back. The wound would have killed a mortal man, but somehow the barrowwight clung still to its undead existence, despite the blackened skin where Alderis and Letellia’s spells had scorched it. It tried to recover as Talen stepped forward, but again its desperate swipe was feeble, and Talen did not need to look up as he swept *Beatus Incendia* around in a glittering arc that did not stop until the wight’s head was sundered from its shoulders. The unholy creature clattered to the floor, and silence returned again to the chamber.

Talen sheathed his sword, and reached down and grabbed the creature's head in his fist. He rose and walked a few steps, the others coming up behind him as the clouds of steam began to thin. When he reached the edge of the lava pit, he stopped.

"Tell your boss that we're not leaving until this place is fucking ruins," the knight said, and he dropped the head into the molten lava.

Chapter 241

ONE DOWN

A subtle change, a twist of power that each of them felt deep in their gut. That was all that there was, no flashy burst of spell effects or a raging cry torn from the very stones of the chamber. The light from their magical torches did not brighten, and the shadows that clung to the walls seemed just as malevolent as before. But there was *something*, an incremental weakening of the oppressiveness of the place, that each of them could feel.

"It is done," Nelan said, unnecessarily. The cleric sagged back on his haunches, and sucked in a tired breath.

"Good work, Nelan," Talen said.

The cleric nodded, and started to get up, but Allera forestalled him. "The ritual drained you, you need to rest." The healer looked up at Talen, who—after a moment's hesitation—nodded.

"No, I will be all right," Nelan said. The cleric looked at Talen, saw the truth there in his eyes. "We cannot linger here. Now that we have been at least partially successful, our enemy will not lie complacent." He patted Allera's arm. "Do not worry about me, child. I am not *that* old. And I have prepared a *restoration* spell to ease my physical weariness." Both knew that the spell would do little to ease the spiritual strain wrought by their time in Rappan Athuk, but for that Nelan's own internal strength would have to suffice.

Talen rubbed his chin, where the stubble of a new beard had risen. They had already spent nearly two full days in the temple. After the wight attack, Nelan had been forced to begin his *hallow* spell again from the beginning, after a short rest. He only had one more scroll with the spell, but he was powerful enough to pray for it himself, and they had brought additional quantities of the rare and valuable ancillaries required for the casting, against just such a circumstance. "How much longer with the effects of your last *heroes' feast* last, Allera?"

"It is difficult to be certain of time, down here," the healer replied. "A few hours, at least... I think. If we rested, I could prepare a fresh one..."

"No, Nelan has the right of it." His gaze strayed to where Letellia was folding her blankets for return to one of her magical pouches. "The archmage has not rejoined us since we came here, and it's been more than long enough for him to rest and return."

"Do you think something's happened to him?" Allera asked.

"Perhaps. Or perhaps it's this place," Talen said, looking around.

"It is logical that they would shield their temples from prying eyes," Nelan said.

Talen nodded. "Are you ready to guide us forward?"

"Yes. I prepared the *find the path* spell after our last rest." With the information provided by your erstwhile companion, and the key he gave us, the spell should guide us true to the route down. I just need a small amount of time, about ten minutes, to spend in communion with the Father, before we leave."

"All right," Talen said. "Take the time you need to collect yourself, then we'll move out."

Talen left Nelan to Allera, who supervised the casting of his *restoration* spell, as though their roles were reversed, and she was the old veteran and he the youthful neophyte. Although no one who knew the healer well would use the latter term, for in fact her power had now grown to the point where she was one of the strongest divine casters in the world.

The knight waved to Dar, who was working with Shay to inventory their remaining supplies. Between the scout's *bag of holding* and their ability to create magical food, what they had would be good for weeks yet. Their cache of healing supplies was still considerable, and they had more than enough spare weapons.

That last issue drew the knight's attention, as he looked down at the weapons spread out on a spare cloak on the floor.

"Have you decided which one you want yet, commander?" Dar asked.

Talen looked at the weapons. The most remarkable was an elaborate greatsword, its quillions fashioned into the shape of small, perfect cubes. It lay adjacent to a longsword with a blade so black it was nearly lost in the fabric of the dark cloak. Adamantine, and almost unbelievably sharp after what had to be centuries of lying hidden. There had been a third sword, another longsword that burned with magical fire, but Shay had claimed that one already, slinging her old blade across her back.

They had found the weapons, along with several other items, in a crypt hidden behind a secret door behind the statue of Orcus. Unsurprisingly it had been one of the elves that had found the door, but they would not have thought to look had it not been for the surprise appearance of the spectres from that direction. Talen had been wary of splitting the group while Nelan worked his ritual, but he had also been reluctant to leave a possible threat unexplored. It turned out that his concern was unnecessary; there had been only one small chamber beyond the secret portal, a long-abandoned crypt. The skeletons buried within the four tombs had not animated to assail them, and the party had returned bearing the magical weapons and other potent treasures hidden within. Selanthas now wore an amulet that offered protection against death attacks, while Allera carried the most powerful and surprising boon; a *rod of resurrection*.

Talen knelt to examine the blades again. He looked up at Dar. "Well, do you want the greatsword? Alderis said that it is an axiomatic weapon, like your sword. The way that you hack about with both hands, it may be useful."

Dar frowned, and his hand dropped to the hilt of *Valor*. "I already have a sword," he said, turning and walking away.

Talen and Shay shared a look; the scout shrugged. "Well, it looks like I'm carrying this slab of iron," Talen said, taking the greatsword. The sword was heavy, and would feel even heavier after a few hours with it on his back, but he knew that they had a long haul ahead of them, and was extremely reluctant to leave a powerful weapon behind them. "See if Mehlaraine is willing to take the adamantite sword," he told Shay.

The elves had kept to themselves for most of their stay here, joining the group only to partake in Allera's daily *heroes' feast*. But as Dar walked across the room, Mehlaraine came up to him. The elf had avoided him since Allera had healed her, perhaps for obvious reasons.

"We are departing again?"

"Looks like it."

She paused, but something in her stance and eyes held him, and he stopped. "Look," he said. "You don't have to..."

"I wish to apologize for my actions," she said.

"There is no need. I got my head fried by that bastard too, remember? You were not in control of your actions, that's the end of it as far as I am concerned."

"I concur. It is not that, specifically, that troubles me. If anything, I feel that the experience has given me insight into how my father has suffered." Her gaze drifted to the side, and settled briefly on the older elf, shrugging his back and bow across his back with the patience assistance of Selanthas. To Dar's eyes, there was little now

connecting Elegion Alderis to the Mad Elf he had first met on their first, involuntary, expedition into Rappan Athuk.

“What, then?”

She turned back to him. “In my madness, I was consumed by rage. But it was not just the insanity of the barrowwight’s gaze that drove me.” She took a breath. “I will be frank with you, human. I do not like your kind. Humans... they are loud, boorish, aggressive. Their grasp of the subtleties of culture and art are... crude, at best. They venerate order, but mainly as a means of subjugating all around them to their own conceptualization of a structured ideal. They are exceptional when it comes to violence, but they use it to destroy far more often than they do to defend.”

“This has got to be the weirdest apology I have ever heard,” he said.

She managed a faint smile. “I blamed you, in no small part, for what happened to my father. It was your people who damned him to this place.”

“Hey, it wasn’t *my* people,” Dar corrected. “Don’t forget, they shoved me into this shithole too. And I have to say, your dad was pretty freaking nuts at the time.”

“That is true. I saw the madness claim him, although it drove him away before it could fully manifest. Before it could fully tear down the magnificent edifice of his mind. Do you know what that did to him, fighter?”

She leaned in closer, and lowered her voice. “My father was once among the foremost minds of a people known for their depth of insight. I have watched him closely since his return, and while he is better, he is still not close to what he was. He is almost like a...”

“Human?”

Her smile froze, and something sharp appeared in her eyes. “You do not make it simple, but I wish to make you understand. I know that my father does what must be done, and that is why Selanthas and I have chosen to stand with him. I was suspicious of you and your companions at first. I questioned your motives, and I argued with my father against joining your company.”

“And now?”

“Now I have gained... insight, into what fruit the seed of anger spawns. I have seen things I would have preferred to have never witnessed, since I came to this place. From what you and the others have said, I expect fully to see worse before our journey here is complete. And so, I apologize to you, Corath Dar. I would not call you friend, but from this point forward, I will call you ally. Thank you, I will take the sword.”

He blinked, and only belatedly realized that the last statement was directed at Shay, who was standing behind them. Mehlaraire took the adamantine sword, which looked overly large in her hands. She slung it across her back, and turned to rejoin her father and consort. Shay looked slightly bemused.

“You have a way with people.”

“Yeah, I’m beating them off with a stick,” he growled. “Excuse me, I need to get my pack.”

There was a bustling minute or two as everyone checked and double-checked their gear. Weapons clicked into scabbards, and bowstrings twanged in readiness. Finally Talen came before them, his helm cradled in the crook of his swordarm.

“All right, people. One down, two to go. Nelan?”

The priest nodded, and lifted his divine focus. The silver torch flared slightly as he faced south, and he started them toward the door to the staircase down, Shay moving forward to take the lead.

Chapter 242

RETURN TO THE THIRD TEMPLE

None of them could even see the keyhole, but Nelan, guided by the magic of his spell, slid the slender bronze key into a seemingly solid section of the stone wall. The head of the key vanished into the stone, and a soft click followed. The cleric’s companions watched warily as a crack appeared in the wall below the keyhole, and a solid panel of thick stone slid down into the floor.

The darkness beyond the door was almost tangible, and it seemed to retreat only reluctantly from the light of their torches. There was a faint odor of rot that rose up from below, sending chills running up and down the lengths of their spines.

“All right, let’s get moving,” Talen said. He nodded to Shay, who carefully moved forward. She carried her new flaming sword in lieu of a brand. The flames flared brightly around the sigil of the burning torch that was etched into the steel; like *Beatus Incendia*, the weapon was infused with the holy power of the Shining Father. How it had journeyed here, long forgotten in a crypt deep within Rappan Athuk, none of them could surmise.

The tunnel beyond the secret door was short and ended in a black shaft that descended straight down into darkness. A ladder of ancient bronze rungs offered a tenuous route of descent.

“You will forgive me, I hope, if I rely upon an alternative means for descent,” Honoratius said.

The archmage had rejoined them shortly after their departure from the first temple of Orcus. The aged wizard had reported, after he'd settled back into Letellia's body, that the actual precincts of the shrine were opaque to him; he'd actually attempted to return sooner, during the long hours of Nelan's *hallowing* of the place, but he explained that while he could sense the presence of his niece through the link forged by the *Web of Transposition*, his attempts to scry her location had resulted only in viewings of a pale, misty globe of neutral gray.

“That could be a problem,” Talen had said, once they'd digested the news. There were still two more temples left ahead, and they expected fiercer resistance as they got closer to their goal. But there was nothing to be done for it; they had no choice but to press on.

Shay rigged up a safety line, hammering one of her spikes into a crack in the wall before playing out a length of the rope down the shaft. But she did not immediately descend; they'd already agreed that Selanthas would scout out the descent first in this situation. Empowered with *darkvision* and *overland flight* spells by Alderis, and a blessing from Nelan, the elven archer slipped silently down the shaft, vanishing from their view within seconds.

The sum time that he was gone was barely longer than a minute, although it seemed interminable to those gathered around the top of the shaft. When he finally returned, the elf looked pale.

“It is clear all of the way to a small landing at the bottom,” Selanthas explained. “There is another secret door there, and a staircase descending yet further.”

“The secret door leads to another smaller side-temple, and the slave pits,” Talen explained. “But our destination lies down the stairs.”

“You look like you've seen a shade,” Dar said to Selanthas. The elf shook his head.

“Nothing... but there's a dark feeling there. It suffuses the walls, the very air.”

“Yeah, wait until you get to the temple,” Dar said. “It makes the first seem like a sunny fucking meadow.”

“I'll go down first,” Shay said, giving the rope a quick test before starting down on the ladder. Selanthas drifted back down, covering her descent, and after a few seconds the

others started down after her. Talen had them stagger their descent, to avoid putting too much weight on the rope if the ladder gave way. The wizards could get them all down quickly with a *feather fall* if it came to that, but the knight commander wished to conserve their magical resources whenever possible.

Ultimately, Honoratius used the spell anyway, drifting slowly down the shaft to join them at the bottom. Nothing emerged to threaten them, but they were still wary as they started down the staircase.

The gloom deepened around them like a cloying mist, and the shadows around them seemed to shift and dance at the corners of their vision. When one turned, and focused a light on the darkened corners, only plain, ancient stone was revealed, but the mocking hints of movement returned as soon as the eye began to turn away.

Finally, Nelan grew impatient and summoned a *daylight* spell, but even that wholesome radiance only managed to create the impression that they were in a bubble, surrounded on all sides by a lurking darkness that pressed in at the very edges of the light.

“This place is... foul,” Mehlaraine said, her soft boots squishing slightly on the dank stairs.

“Yeah, welcome to the fucking pit,” Dar said. “At least we killed the fucking bastards that were down here last time.”

“But who knows what they have waiting for us here now,” Allera returned. The healer’s comment sobered them, and they continued on in silence. The stairs finally ended in a familiar chamber, with a single door for egress. On their last visit, Shay had been ambushed by wraiths upon touching the portal, and they approached warily, alert for another ambush. But nothing greeted them either at the door or in the corridor beyond, and they continued forward, retracing their steps to the temple of Orcus.

“Where do those other passages lead?” Nelan asked at one branch in the tunnel.

“Evil,” Dar said.

“We go in, we hit the temple, and we get out,” Talen said. “No distractions.”

Nelan nodded softly to himself, but his gaze lingered on the other tunnel branch as they continued onward.

The passage broadened into a broad hall, lined with faint but still unsettling carvings etched into the stone. The huge black doors at the end were likewise familiar to them, but this time they stood open, frozen. Shay approached warily, probing the chamber beyond with the light of her sword. But nothing stirred in the darkness, which retreated before the power of Nelan’s summoned light.

“This is far too quiet,” Selanthas said. He held an arrow against his bowstring, slightly drawn; flickers of electrical energy periodically pulsed around the steel head.

“I would image that whatever foe lies in wait for us has situated at the temple,” Honoratius said. “No doubt the fell auras of those sites bolster adherents of evil, at our expense.”

“It is very close,” Talen said quietly. Shay had already moved to the wall to their right, where the secret door to the temple was hidden. It took her only a few moments to relocate the portal, and with Mehlaraine’s help she was able to pull it open. As the invisible aura of the temple washed over them, they all shuddered, but Honoratius drew back, nearly stumbling.

“It is interfering with your spell?” Allera asked.

The archmage rubbed his head with his slender, borrowed hands. “I can feel the aura even out here. If you intend to proceed, I am afraid that I must accelerate my departure.”

Talen turned to her. “All right. We’ll be out as soon as Nelan can *hallow* this temple, and you can rejoin us then.”

Honoratius nodded, and closed her eyes; after a few long moments Letellia’s shoulders slumped and she blinked. After spending time with the sorceress and her uncanny guest, they were able to recognize the subtle shift when the woman’s own personality returned, and the archmage disappeared for another day.

She looked around, getting her bearings. “We’re about to enter the third temple,” Allera said, placing her hand on the sorceress’s arm in a gesture of support.

Letellia nodded. “I am ready.” She checked to verify that her magical wands and other magical components were close at hand, and then moved forward to take her place in the order.

Once she saw that everyone was ready, Shay led them through the secret door into the temple. The illusory wall that had separated the small foyer from the cavernous chamber was gone now, its power source disrupted or depleted by the destruction of the *Sphere of Souls* on their last visit. But Nelan’s *daylight* revealed a bare fraction of the massive chamber. The companions knew that the back wall of the temple was nearly two hundred feet from where they stood, and that four massive pillars of bronze supported a domed ceiling that rose high above the dark dais where the image of Orcus stood carved in black stone.

The anteroom gave onto a long, broad hall, flanked by more modest pillars of bronze that formed an aisle down the center of the temple. Those pillars had once held graven depictions of unholy scenes in faded relief, but now they were distorted, the surface of

the pillars slightly melted like a candle left too close to the hearth. There were no other signs of a fire, or any other apparent cause for the damage.

Nelan paused to invoke a *magic circle against evil*, but the spell seemed to do little to drive back the clinging malevolence that seeped through the very fabric of this place.

Slowly, Shay led them deeper into the temple. The ancient tiles beneath their feet were faded and cracked, and occasionally one would crunch loudly beneath their feet, the sound echoing eerily through the place.

“Hold,” Talen said, as they approached the great pillars. Each almost a full ten feet in thickness, these too showed the damage they had seen on the smaller ones earlier. They could see the huge statue of Orcus now, a vague shape against the far wall, an imposing shadow at the edge of their light. A great basin of hollowed stone lay before the statue, filled to the brim with blood kept perpetually hot through some unknown magic.

At Talen’s command, they stopped, staring around them into the darkness.

“We are not alone,” Alderis said.

Then the *daylight* went out.

The darkness descended upon them like a charging army, even as the companions thrust forward their magical brands against its press. Talen thrust *Beatus Incendia* into the air, invoking its power as a bright surge of white flames—underlaid with a soft glow of blue—rushed up the length of the steel.

The light cast by the sword revealed the truth of the elf arcanist’s statement, for the darkness around them was now alive with movement. Or rather, not *alive*, for the dark forms that filled the air under the dome, and which billowed out from the walls, were undead, shadows and wraiths and spectres, along with an entity or two yet more sinister.

There were hundreds of them.

A terrible shriek rent the interior of the temple, as the incorporeal legion descended upon the companions.

Chapter 243

THE LEGACY OF BANTH

“Circle formation... casters in the center!” Talen yelled, but with the undead able to fly, and nearly all of them coming from above, it was not clear what tactical benefit that would provide.

And then Alderis cast his *repulsion* spell. The spell was the last and most powerful from Banth’s spellbooks that the elf had mastered. Now he put the power of the late Transmuter of Rappan Athuk to a good use, spreading his arms wide as he channeled the potency of the spell through him.

The undead army suddenly froze in mid-attack, as if they’d struck a stone wall.

Or at least most of them; some of the undead were able to overcome the power of the spell, and dove shrieking at the elf mage keeping their kindred in check. But the first cohort of those attackers were abruptly vaporized as blue fire exploded through their insubstantial bodies. Allera’s potent *mass cure* took out most of the diving undead; two wraiths were able to resist the full effects of the blast of positive energy, but one was struck almost immediately by an enchanted arrow from Selanthas’s bow, destroying it. The other continued toward its prey, driven by its lust to taste the life energy of its enemies, but before it could get close enough to Alderis to strike, Shay thrust her enchanted spear through its body, catching hold of its substance and tearing it apart.

A few more undead continued to force their way through the invisible barrier of Alderis’s spell, but the vast majority remained just outside it, forming a roiling, shifting cloak of blackness around them.

“Missile weapons!” Talen yelled. “If you don’t have magical arrows, form up around the casters, kill any that get through!”

The knight sheathed *Beatus Incendia* and reached for his own magical bow. But even as he started to set the weapon’s string, he felt a dark cloud fall over his senses.

He was not the only one affected, as another *confusion* spell erupted through their ranks. Bolstered by Nelan’s *magic circle*, most of them were able to shrug off the corrupting effects of the spell, but even with that aid, Dar, Talen, Mehlaraine, and Selanthas were all affected. Selanthas dropped his bow and started screaming, while Mehlaraine started spinning around, uttering a string of vulgar profanities in elvish. Talen lifted his bow, still unstrung, and smashed it across Shay’s shoulders, staggering the surprised scout.

Dar, however, experienced his *confusion* in a different way; he ran, lumbering at full speed away from the embattled defenders.

Right toward the edge of the *repulsion* field, where a horde of undead waited eagerly for his arrival.

Chapter 244

RUN, DAR, RUN!

Dar, his mind clouded by magical *confusion*, sprinted toward certain death at the hands of dozens of incorporeal undead.

Allera was right behind him. The healer had not hesitated; she had recognized immediately what had happened, and before Dar had gotten a few steps she was rushing to catch him. She yelled his name, but the fighter did not respond, caught up in the temporary madness of the unseen enemy wizard's magic.

With the fighter burdened by his heavy armor, Allera was faster, but the small lead he had was telling, and she realized that she would not reach him before he got to the edge of the *repulsion* field. The undead, recognizing the same thing, crowded around the spot where Dar was heading.

“No!”

With a sudden flash of white and a surge of cold air a *wall of ice* materialized directly in front of the fighter's path. Dar hit it at a full run, smashing hard into the barrier and rebounding from it, falling hard onto his rear. He looked up at the wall, dazed. Above the top of the wall, ten feet up, several undead hovered above the curve of the *repulsion* field, hissing in frustration at their inability to get to their prey, so close and yet so far away.

Allera rushed at Dar, who snarled as he detected her presence. He lifted *Valor*, still clutched tightly in his grip, but before he could attack her, she poured a flood of restorative power into his mind, clearing away the mental cobwebs lingering from the spell.

The fighter blinked. “Allera?”

Mehlaraine's clouded mind finally drew her attention back to her immediate environment. Her companions had drawn back from her, wary of her slashing rapier as she spun about, but there was one foe standing close by, and her attention was further drawn by the screams coming from him. Her mind failed to perceive her consort, instead fixing upon the deranged elf as a deadly foe. She lunged at Selanthas, cutting with *Alderis*. In turn, Selanthas countered with his ready bow, firing arrows into his beloved at point-blank range.

Fortunately both were protected by *stoneskin*, and the attacks did little damage, at least in the initial exchange.

Shay had her hands full just keeping Talen busy. She was fortunate that her lover had not had *Beatus Incendia* out when he'd been *confused*, but even so her left wrist throbbed where he'd snapped it with his bow. The bow was ruined as a weapon now, cracked from the force of his swings, but it was still intact enough to deliver painful hits when backed by Talen's magically augmented strength.

She was just trying to keep him occupied until the casters could intervene, when she saw another threat descending upon them. Another wraith, arriving late to the party, had forced itself through the *repulsion*, and now it took advantage of the confused melee to drop upon Talen, its claws effortlessly penetrating his armor and raking his flesh. Talen screamed and turned upon the wraith, battering with his ruined bow, but of course the weapon passed harmlessly through it, doing no damage to its insubstantial form. The wraith seemed to swell as the knight's life energy seeped into it, and a hollow cackle sounded from the dark points of light that formed its eyes.

Alderis drew back from the violent battle between his daughter and her consort; he moved just a few steps, but the undead swarming around the edge of his *repulsion* sphere moved with him, and those he approached were able to draw just that much nearer to him. He almost *dispelled* the *confusion* that gripped the other elves, before he realized that an area-effect casting of the spell would likely bring down the *repulsion* field as well. Likewise, an *antimagic shell* would break the effect, but it would also let the undead in, as the *repulsion* originated from himself, and moved with him.

He was about to cast the *dispel* on his daughter, when he felt a tremor pass into him through the active *repulsion* spell. For a moment he felt a cold fear in his gut as the invisible sphere trembled, but it held. He recognized the feeling as an attack on his magic; his own spell had come within a hairsbreadth of being *dispelled*.

The elf looked up at the swarming mass above; there was still no sign of where the enemy spells were originating. But then Letellia drew his attention with a shout.

The sorceress had remained in the background during the initial exchanges with the undead horde. Once Alderis had established his perimeter, she'd carefully scanned the domed ceiling, looking for the enemy she had expected to be there. Even so, the *confusion* had caught her off guard, forcing her to use her magic to save Dar from running blindly out of the protected area. But once she'd conjured the *wall of ice*, she resumed her search, and when the enemy made its failed attempt to *dispel* the *repulsion* field, she saw it.

"Alderis! I need a *dispel*!" she shouted, pointing once she'd gotten his attention.

The spectre wizard was there, difficult to see near the shadowed apex of the dome. *Mirror images* and a *shield* protected it, again, and its position gave it a commanding access to the entire battlefield. The creature saw that it was observed, and it immediately began spellcasting again, its shifting images echoing the subtle movements of its transparent hands.

Alderis made his decision at once. Turning from his afflicted daughter, he released his spell at the spectre before it could finish. He was careful to focus the effect directly upon the creature, so that the backlash would not threaten the *repulsion* field. The *mirror images* and *shield* vanished, and the real form of the spectre shifted slightly to the side as a *displacement* was likewise sundered.

Letellia immediately fired off her readied *lightning bolt*. The electrical blast caught the spectre squarely in the center of its chest, ripping through its unholy substance. The undead wizard once again sought to withdraw, floating up toward the ceiling and the promise of escape, just a few feet away. But before it could find sanctuary within the cold stone, it was hit again. Nelan too had heard Letellia's warning, and as the spectre reached its goal a beam of *searing light* cut through its body. With a screech that rapidly trailed off into nothing, the undead spellcaster dissolved and was no more.

But the defeat of one threat only highlighted the precariousness of their position. Shay was trying to keep the wraith off of Talen, whose violent swings grew weaker as the undead monster continued to siphon life from his body. The scout thrust her spear up at the creature, but this time the weapon failed to gain purchase in its insubstantial form, and it almost mockingly moved behind Talen, putting the confused knight between it and her.

"Can you help him?" Dar asked, as he and Allera rushed back into the fray.

"Yes," she said, "But I only have two *heals*, and there's three..." She trailed off as a loud boom reverberated through the temple. Selanthas, hit with a heavy blow from Mehlaraine's thundering rapier, was blasted back a full step, and slumped to one knee, the arrow he'd been loading falling away to skitter across the floor.

Allera instinctively started in that direction, but Dar forestalled her. "First things first! Get Talen, I'll deal with the wraith."

The undead monster either heard him, or sensed him coming. It obviously also sensed the potency in *Valor*, for it drew back from its victim, pulsing with the life energy it had stolen. Dar followed it, and before it could get high enough to escape his reach he leapt and slashed his magical sword through its body. The sword met resistance, but the wraith was not vulnerable to the axiomatic properties of the blade, and it wheeled away, trailing bits of vaporous substance behind it.

Mehlaraine lunged forward at Selanthas, intent upon finishing off her consort, but she froze in mid-swing as Nelan hit her with his *hold person* spell. Selanthas, staggering back to his feet, fumbled at his bow for a moment before dropping it and reaching for his sword. He got half of the blade out of its scabbard before he paused, and blinked. "What..." he said, looking up at Mehlaraine, standing there trembling with her rapier poised to thrust into his heart. He shook his head, trying to clear it of the chaos that still pounded at him from the spectre's spell.

“Hold your ground!” Alderis warned the archer. “The spell still fogs your mind, and you may lose control once more at any moment.” He looked at Nelan. “Cleric, can you hold my daughter?”

“She is fighting the spell with the full force of her will,” Nelan said. “She may escape its grasp at any moment.”

Alderis nodded, and cast his second *dispel* on Selanthalas. The spell burned through the *confusion*, and the archer nodded in thanks, pressing his hand against his side where Mehlarine’s critical hit and injured him through his *stoneskin*.

Allera rushed over, with Talen, Shay, and Dar trailing behind. The wraith, critically injured, had withdrawn out of reach above them, and it lingered there, waiting. Allera rushed over in front of Mehlarine, and grasped her head with her hands. Nelan’s spell held, and the afflicted elf did not move as the healer worked her magic.

Talen glanced back over his shoulder at the wraith. He knew what it was waiting for. “How much longer?” he asked Alderis.

The elf shook his head. “Thirty, maybe forty seconds.”

The companions, save for Allera and Mehlarine, looked up as one, at the swirling wave of darkness above them.

Chapter 245

THE BLASTING

“Let them have it!” Talen yelled.

Explosions rocked the interior of the temple. Letellia and Alderis, using their wands of *fireballs*, laid down a pattern of exploding spheres along the edges of the *repulsion* field. The incorporeal undead swarmed around that invisible barrier, seeking to avoid the bursts. The more clever of them, the wraiths and spectres, sought sanctuary from the barrage by vanishing into the floor. But most of the shadows lingered too long at the edge of the barrier to escape, and when they did break at last, they simply tried to get away any way they could, in some cases blundering into another *fireball* as they fled.

The other companions unleashed their own hail of destruction upon the undead. Nelan hit them with *order’s wrath*, and followed that with a *flame strike* that blasted a half-dozen shadows into oblivion. Allera’s *mass cures* tore more of the monsters to pieces,

while Selanthas's magically enhanced arrows punched through others, blasting them with discharges of electrical energy.

The warriors had nothing to do but watch the powerful display of raw magical power. The air in the temple grew noticeably warmer as the blasts of magical fire roared through the place, and several of the bronze pillars began to glow as they absorbed the heat. When the arcanists lowered their wands, the place was still once more.

"The *repulsion* aura is fading," Alderis said. The elf spoke words of magic, and rose up into the air, replacing his wand of *fireballs* with another, the wand of *magic missiles* he'd taken from Theodorus Zosimos, slain in Rappan Athuk in another temple not so far from here.

"All right, everyone, watch the floor!" Talen warned, taking up a ready position.

As if summoned by his words, the misty outlines of spectres and wraiths rose up to attack, their insubstantial claws digging at the legs of the companions. Their initial attacks scored several hits, and a majority of the defenders suffered drains to their life energies in that first surge. But the companions had been ready, and in turn they unleashed a devastating counterattack upon the undead as they rose up into view. Allera blasted them with her last *mass cure*. While her most potent spells had been used earlier in the battle, even her *mass cure light wounds* was powerful enough to blast devastating rents in the bodies of the undead. Nelan did not bother to attempt to turn the malevolent creatures; the cleric could feel the evil pervading this place, and knew that he could not channel enough of the power of the Father to overcome the negative potency of the temple. But his spells worked well enough, as he blasted a wraith with his second *searing light*. Two other wraiths swept in at him from the flanks, but their claws had no effect; the cleric had taken advantage of the earlier lull to protect himself with a *death ward*.

Talen had likewise been protected by Allera, and as a half-dozen undead swarmed around him, clawing uselessly at his armored frame, he tore into them with *Beatus Incendia*. The blessed blade found purchase in their incorporeal bodies more often than not, and within seconds three wraiths, already weakened by Allera's *mass cure*, were torn to pieces. The survivors drew off, seeking other targets, but the knight harried them mercilessly, surging white fire leaving glowing trails through the air as he swung the holy sword back and forth.

Streaking *magic missiles* filled the air, as Letellia and Alderis unleashed their magic. Mehlaraine and Selanthas stood back to back, defending themselves against several wraiths at point-blank range. Their *stoneskins* were of no use against the wraiths, but both elves were possessed of superhuman agility, and Mehlaraine was further bolstered by Alderis's *mage armor*. Surrounded on all sides, they could not avoid all of the wraiths' attacks. But while they lacked the fortitude of their human companions, the wraiths could not stand up to their attacks, bolstered as it was by the firepower raining

down from the wizard floating above. Within ten seconds the elves outnumbered the attackers, and the outcome appeared to be inevitable.

But the undead, driven by a force beyond themselves, continued to press their attack with an almost desperate intensity. Letellia blasted a pair of spectres that assaulted her at point-blank range; the first faltered against her layered *shield* and *mage armor*, but the second pushed around her flank, digging its claws through her body. The sorceress cried out as life was ripped from her, but before the monsters could exploit their advantage she straightened and fired off another series of blasts into the spectre she'd damaged. The monster was not destroyed, but a moment later it came apart as Shay thrust her spear through its head, severing the last tendrils of unlife that gave it existence. Letellia spun and shifted her *shield* around just in time to meet the next attack from the other spectre, which hissed in frustration as its claws were turned away from her flesh.

Dar found himself hazarded by another several wraiths, but they were finding it difficult to affect him with their draining touch, given his incredible fortitude. In turn, he was not having much luck with *Valor*, as the axiomatic blade passed harmlessly through the creatures in his initial series of attacks.

The fighter suddenly felt an icy chill stab into his body from behind. He turned to see a black form hovering there. A shadow, but this creature was bigger than the ones they'd blasted into oblivion before, a hoary ancient thing, full of negative power. It seemed flush with the strength it had stolen from Dar, and it eagerly surged forward again to feed upon him once more.

"I've already got a shadow," the fighter spat, slashing at it with *Valor*. But once again the sword cut through empty air, and he could not help but pale as the terrible thing reared up over him, claws diving toward his chest.

But then the monster reared back, its grim outline contorting as it felt pain. The source of its suffering was just visible through its dark form: Allera, pouring a *cure critical wounds* into the creature. The healer grimaced as she touched it; she had not taken the time to ward herself from its negative energy, instead using the precious seconds to help her companions. The shadow, sensing this, turned upon her. It swiped a claw across her face, and she screamed, staggering back.

The sight drove Dar to a fury of violence. He drove *Valor* through it, through, back, and through again, his strokes as agile as though the heavy longsword was a wooden switch. The first attack passed through it harmlessly, but on the second and third strikes the magic of the sword, perhaps augmented by the will of its owner, found purchase in something substantial, and the shadow let out a shrieking hiss as it came apart.

Several wraiths continued to claw ineffectively at his back, and he spun to face them. "WHAT? Do you want some of this?"

As the individual battles raging around the circle began to resolve themselves in favor of the living, the last knots of undead came under heavy attack. Finally, belatedly, their instinct for survival overcame the drive to destroy, but for the remaining undead it was too late. The last spectre was vaporized by a barrage of nine *magic missiles*, while the one wraith that got away from Dar was hit by several magical arrows from Selanthas's bow, and long trails of dissolving gray mist swirled in its wake as it passed back into the floor.

"Is that it? Is that all of them?" Talen asked.

The companions stood there in the pale circle of light from their magical torches, weakened and pale, but alive.

Chapter 246

SHADES OF THE DARK

Dar was in a dark, malevolent place. The fighter circled warily, alert to danger. Despite the absence of light, he was generally aware of his surroundings, his other senses compensating somehow for his blinded vision. But the details of his location were indistinct, hazy. Only *Valor*, the blue steel blade naked in his right fist, was clear. The pressure of the hilt, the weight of the sword, were something reassuring in this realm of uncertainty.

After a time, he spoke. "I am dreaming," he said. His voice filled the gloom, but that too sounded unreal, muffled as though in a heavy fog.

The darkness shifted; what was just *changed*, and Dar saw a figure ahead of him.

He raised *Valor* as he recognized the man; the high priest that he'd killed in the slave pits under Rappan Athuk. But the figure was a shade, not a living foe. His left arm was severed at the elbow. Dar had taken the limb, moments before he'd impaled the bastard on his sword.

"I killed you," he said to the shade.

The priest looked at him, and Dar felt an involuntary shudder as the shade's empty orbs fixed on him. That feeling intensified as the dead priest repeated what he had whispered to Dar during the battle, just before his death.

"Your choice will decide her fate," he said.

“Fuck you and your god,” Dar said. He stepped forward toward the cleric, *Valor* coming up despite himself, but the shade dissolved into nothing, and the darkness returned.

He sensed the presence of the others a moment later, and turned. The darkness had retreated, partially, enough for him to make out the forms of row upon row of armed men. He knew these, too, for they were his men, the slain soldiers of the Border Legion. Their faces were vague, indistinct, save for the three in the front rank. Bullo, Travius, and Kalend fixed their empty stares upon him, in quiet indictment.

“I suppose you’re going to bitch about getting killed,” he said to them.

The formation of shades watched him in silence. Dar met that stare with equanimity, waiting for something to happen, but the only thing that he felt was the cold weight of those intent looks.

Finally, he spoke. “Well? What do you want from me?”

Still, the shades waited in silence.

“Fine, you lot stay here, you belong here, more than I. I’m getting out of this fucking place.” He turned and started walking, but he remained aware of the soldiers behind him. He could not hear the sound of their tread, but when he suddenly stopped and turned they were there, right behind him, keeping pace.

“I didn’t ask for this command,” he said to them. “I didn’t ask for any of this. I’m just a selfish gods-damned bastard of a mercenary, not some fucking general.”

Valor flared in his hand. Still the soldiers did not stir, but nevertheless Dar heard words, whispered as from the mouths of many men, the faded voices of every man who had ever died in service to Camar.

Duty. Honor. Sacrifice. The code of the legions. The words weren’t spoken often in the Border Legion, but even in his short time with them, Dar had learned that they were still there, beneath the surface.

“Go fuck yourselves,” Dar said. He spun and walked away, briskly, not quite running. This time he did not look back, but he could *feel* them there, following.

He kept walking. The darkness around him seemed to extend for an interminable distance in every direction; there were no landmarks or distinctive features that he could see. There was nothing to do but keep walking, or to stop.

Dar’s jaw tightened, and he kept going.

There was no way to measure time in this place, but he was not yet tired when something appeared ahead. He slowed his approach, wary. He held *Valor* at the

ready, although he doubted that a mundane blade would be of any use in this place. Still, the hard feeling of the hilt in his hand offered some comfort.

The figure resolved into the form of another shade. This one remained indistinct, and he could not identify it, except that it seemed vague humanoid. Dar watched it and waited for a moment, but the ghostly form did not do anything further, so he spoke to it.

“Well, ghost? Are you going to give me some shit, or what?”

The ghost quavered, like a cloak blowing in the wind. There was a voice, but it did not seem to come from the ghost. Dar did not recognize the voice at first, although it was very familiar, echoing with sepulchral intonations through this entire place, and in his mind.

“To confront the demon... the the apostate, the general, and the elflord... must sacrifice that which they hold most dear... and only thus... may the world of man be spared...”

The ghost hovered there as the words passed through him and faded. “So what does that have to do with me?” he asked. The ghost did not reply.

“Look, I’m tired of all these fucking games,” he said after a moment. He lifted *Valor*. “All I need, is a place to put *this*, and I’ll do for that fucker and his servants.”

But the ghost remained uncommunicative. Dar turned around, and saw that the fallen soldiers of the legion were gone. As he completed his spin, he realized that the latest shade, too, had disappeared; he was alone.

“Dar.”

With a start, he woke. Shay was kneeling above him. “Are you all right?”

The fighter blinked and looked around. They were in camp, in the temple of Orcus. He looked over and saw Nelan, surrounded by candles, still engrossed in his ritual. The spellcasters were still asleep, but he saw Talen standing near the cleric, and a slender shadow pacing the perimeter, that had to be Melharaine.

“What... what do you want?”

“It’s your watch.” The scout looked tired; Talen had insisted on keeping most of the fighters awake while the spellcasters rested and recovered their spells. Dar felt anything but refreshed. “Are you all right?” Shay asked.

Dar shook his head to clear it and levered himself up into a sitting position. He reached over and grabbed his armor, carefully stacked within easy reach.

“I’m fine. Get some sleep... if you can.”

Chapter 247

TWO DOWN

After the desperate battle against the legion of incorporeal undead, the actual destruction of the temple was rather anti-climactic.

Almost all of them had suffered from the life-draining effects of the undead creatures' touches, but Allera had been able to restore all of them using her wand and rod. They had brought with them a considerable cache of diamond dust this time, but it was not unlimited, and at the rate that they were using their store of magic items and rare components it was likely that they would again be reliant solely upon their own spell reservoirs before too long. Still, they did not stint the charges, knowing that an enemy counterattack was very likely.

And yet the expected assault did not come. The spellcasters rested and recovered their magic, while Nelan initiated the ritual that would *hallow* the temple. Varo's notes and the cleric's own divinations had given him guidance on how to proceed, and so as he completed the day-long ritual he approached the dark altar, and using the power of the Shining Father he *purified* the unholy font of hot blood. White light shone around the cleric as the divine grace of his patron filled him, and the liquid in the basin became clear as the taint was siphoned off. A moment later the basin, as well as the hulking black statue behind it, cracked with a massive sound of rumbling stone, and the transmuted water splashed down the steps of the dais, washing away the layered blood and gore of generations of corrupted sacrifices and terrible rites of worship.

They had agreed before starting that they would spend a bit more time before moving out again, to give Nelan a chance to rest and recover his spells after the demanding effects of the ritual. Each of them felt the pressure of time, and knew that Orcus would not quietly wait while they destroyed his temples, but they had learned the hard way that rushing forward unprepared was a recipe for disaster. Before the priest retired to his bedroll, Talen approached him and Allera.

"What is it, knight commander?" the weary priest asked. Allera started to excuse herself, but Talen gestured for her to stay.

"Wait, Allera, this affects you as well. I need to know if you can protect the entire group against the draining effects of the undead attacks, and the mental attacks that affected us this time."

The two casters exchanged a look. “Between the two of us, we can prepare enough *death wards* to protect everyone,” Nelan said. “At the cost of much of our higher-order reservoirs.”

“The spell is potent, but the difficulty is the duration,” Allera said. “At best, a *death ward* will last less than fifteen minutes, while Nelan will need a full twenty-four hours to *hallow* the final temple.”

“It is the first few minutes that I am worried about,” Talen said.

“You expect another ambush?” the healer asked.

“If what Varo and Honoratius said is true, the destruction of these temples greatly weakens Orcus’s power on this plane,” Talen said. “We might have gained a small advantage of surprise by bypassing the second temple in our initial attack, and coming straight here, but I expect that the demon will gather a strong force to challenge us there.”

“That assumes that the demon does not know exactly what you are doing,” Nelan said. “I have felt... a darkness, a presence, throughout Rappan Athuk. It is strongest here... or it was, before I *hallowed* the place.”

Talen nodded. “We can only act on what we know. Prepare the wards, then; we’ll use them when we arrive at the second temple. You can do nothing against the mind spells?”

Nelan thought for a moment. “I can grant *spell resistance* to a number of persons for a few minutes, but only at the cost of my most powerful spells.”

“Allera?”

“I cannot protect against all spells, but my *heroes’ feast* will provide protection against fear for twelve hours, and some marginal added resistance to attacks against the mind.”

“All right. Nelan, please protect yourself, and if you can, also Allera, when we get to the temple. Allera, once Nelan has rested, prepare your *feast*. We’re going to want to move quickly, once we’re done.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if Nelan granted you and Dar the *spell resistance*?” Allera asked. Nelan and I are fairly resistant to mental attacks...” She trailed off, not willing to insult the knight with the implication of her statement.

Talen grimaced; he understood what she meant. “If something happens to either of us, you two can do something about it... but it doesn’t work the other way around.” Allera bit her lip, but did not challenge him.

“Very well, commander,” the cleric replied. Talen turned and left them, heading over to where the elves were speaking quietly nearby. “That man carries a heavy burden,” Nelan commented.

“We all do,” Allera said, touching the priest on the shoulder.

The cleric nodded, and sighed. “Since you are all waiting for me, I suppose I should get some rest,” he said. Allera helped him with his armor, and then he wrapped himself in his bedroll, and lay down upon the cold stone floor of the temple. Within seconds, he was fast asleep.

Shay watched from the shadows as Talen spoke first to Allera and Nelan, and then to the elves. He moved with confidence, having overcome his doubts about command. But Shay would have preferred the man who felt those doubts, who agonized about the responsibility he held for the lives of those who followed him, to the cold figure who had replaced him.

As Talen left the elves and headed toward the corner where he’d left his gear Shay intercepted him. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

“As well as can be expected. You should get some rest.”

“I will. Talen... there is something I wanted to talk to you about.”

For a moment, a flash of uncertainty passed through Talen’s face, but it was quickly mastered. “Look, Shay, perhaps this isn’t the best time...”

“No, this is related to the mission.” She lifted her hand; in it was a ring of clear crystal. “I want you to wear this.”

“That’s the ring you got off the priestess, right? You should keep it. It came in very handy when we faced that demon.”

“No, I think you should wear it. Face it, I’m a bit faster than you, Talen. I can avoid many situations where I would get tangled up, grappled, or otherwise restrained. You, on the other hand...”

“Fat and slow?” he smiled at her, and for a moment there was a hint of the old Talen in him. Shay’s heart leapt, but she forced herself to keep the feelings hidden; she had to convince him that she was in the right here, and an appeal to the love they shared would only hinder her argument now.

“Well, I could provide a list of situations we’ve been in where you may have needed the ring’s power, but I think we both know it’s the best use of our resources.”

He looked at the ring, then at her. “No. Maybe you’re right, Shay, but I won’t take a protection from you. Keep the—”

“Something’s going to happen to you,” she blurted out.

“What?”

“Something is coming. Something bad. I... I saw it.”

“Look, Shay, I can’t blame you for having bad dreams, not in this place, but...”

“I don’t... please, Talen, I can’t explain it, but something terrible is going to happen, very soon. In the last temple, maybe. I have had this recurring vision... you are bound, held tight, unable to escape. If you have the ring, then maybe you can avoid whatever it is. I don’t know.”

She did break down then, just a little, coming forward into his embrace. He wrapped his arms around her, tentatively at first, and then finally tightened his grasp.

“Please, maybe it’s silly, but just do this for me... please?”

He nodded, and released her. He took the ring. “All right.” He removed the gauntlet from his right hand, and removed the ring there. “You have to take my *ring of protection* in exchange, however.”

She nodded, and took it, sliding it onto her finger. The magic of the ring was such that it adjusted to fit her perfectly, despite the different sizes of their hands. Talen put on the crystal ring, and replaced his glove.

“I had hoped we would be trading other rings, sometime soon,” he said to her.

She looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears. “Just... just be careful,” she said.

She turned, and walked away.

Chapter 248

THE FINAL TEMPLE

“All right,” Talen whispered. “This is it.”

Allera, Nelan, and Alderis began casting their spells, setting various protective wards over themselves and the other members of the party. Honoratius had already left them, but Letellia refreshed her *mage armor*, and then layered a *shield* upon it.

Dar crept up to the graven double doors. Talen shot him a warning glance, but the fighter merely took up a ready position near the portals, *Valor* gleaming blue off the light of their torches. Shay had already listened at the stone doors, but they already knew that they were very thick, and in any case, undead tended to be silent.

“Think they know we’re coming?” Dar whispered across to her.

Shay did not respond, but her hands tightened around the haft of her spear.

Getting here had been easy, almost too easy. They’d had to retrace their steps back up to the upper levels, but the dungeon had been oddly empty. Even the usual background fauna of dire rats and vermin had been absent. It was as if the entire place had been cleansed of life.

That was not entirely true, of course. They did encounter an umber hulk in the cavern of the purple worms, but the creature died before it could even get close enough to use its confusing gaze attack. Their long-distance firepower had been greatly augmented by the two arcanists in the group, and given warning, there were few creatures that could stand up against them. Perhaps the other mundane denizens of the dungeon recognized that this group was in no mood to trifle with wandering monsters, and remained hidden until they passed.

They had returned to the first level, and once more used divine magic to enable them to walk upon the river that gave access to the level housing the second temple. The last time they had come that way they had been driven to rescue Allera from the hands of the cult of Orcus. They had fought their way through ambushes laid by displacer beasts and minotaurs, but the battle in the temple had cost them the lives of the cleric Marcus Cornelius Valus and the arcanist Theodorus Vitus Zosimos.

Each of them felt a sudden surge of magical power, a tingle that accompanied a sense of speed and vitality. That was the signal for their attack, Alderis’s *haste* spell. They were all heavily protected by multiple magical effects, warded against death magic and surrounded by a *magic circle against evil* that emanated from Nelan. “All right, move out!” Talen hissed, drawing *Beatus Incendia* and invoking its flame.

Dar and Shay seized the doors and pulled, drawing the heavy stone slabs slowly open. A stale odor of decay greeted them, but other than that, the cavernous temple complex appeared to be empty. Nelan’s *daylight* drove back the darkness beyond, revealing the interior of the temple all of the way to the massive pentagram etched into the floor in the center of the chamber. They could just see the hazy outline of the stone statue and altar on a raised dais in the center of that unholy design.

“Forward,” Talen said. “Watch for another ambush.”

The companions moved slowly ahead, checking and double-checking every shadowy corner. Nelan’s brilliant magical light continued to reveal more of the room as they pushed ahead. They could see the scorch marks that still marked spots on the floor and walls where their *fireballs* had struck, on earlier visits. One corner on the edge of the pentagram still showed the damage where a glabrezu’s claws had clipped it; bits of stone were still scattered about under the deep gauges in the stone. Shay’s eyes lingered on that bit of destruction, and she shuddered, remembering how close they had come to disaster on that day.

As they approached the pentagram, they could start to see into the side-wings that extended out to either side of the central altar-space. Great stone pools, almost thirty feet across, were situated in each of those adjacent chambers. They held blood, kept hot and bubbling through some dark magic inherent in this place. Each was ringed by a low stone barrier, crusted with a thick layer of dried crimson. The temple as a whole was shaped like a huge cross, and while it lacked the incredible sense of vastness of the third temple, the second was actually a bit longer, almost three hundred feet from the entrance to the far wall.

They had almost reached the outer edge of the unholy circle when the each heard a faint but familiar-sounding clatter. Shay held up her hand in warning, and they all stopped.

“Here we go,” Dar muttered.

“Show yourselves, servants of the Demon!” Talen yelled. His voice echoed off the walls of the temple.

“There!” Mehlaraine said, gesturing with her rapier. The others saw the movement where the elven duelist indicated, as dark figures materialized in the shadows from the far side of the temple, beyond the stone altar and statue of Orcus. The lumbering forms became distinct as they entered the radius of their light. They were skeletons, but it was instantly obvious that their ancestry was not human. Each stood over seven feet tall, and while their bodies were humanoid, their skulls were huge and broad, and mounted with a pair of long, outstretched horns that tapered to sharp points. Their bones were a dull black, like iron, and the ground trembled at their coming.

Those among the companions who were veterans of Rappan Athuk recognized the creatures at once. “Black skeletons,” Allera said, her expression one of dismay. The monsters formed two long rows that stretched across the full width of the temple, fifteen of them in all.

Talen stepped forward, *Beatus Incendia* held high above his head, its light reflecting brilliantly off the exposed metal plates of his armor and his magical shield. “Hit them

with everything you have!” the knight shouted, his stentorian rally cry echoing through the chamber, bolstering the morale of his companions.

Those companions complied with his command, unleashing a barrage of spells and weapons at the closing skeletons. A *flame strike* blasted down from Nelan, catching three of the skeletons in the burning column. A moment later a pair of explosions rocked the enemy line, as Alderis and Letellia hit them with *fireballs* from their wands. But the skeletons were widely spaced, their lines stretching across the entire ninety-foot width of the temple, and there was a limit to how many each could engulf in the forty-foot spread of each *fireball*. The two arcanists spaced their blasts expertly, bracketing the point of impact of Nelan’s *flame strike*. The ones in the center of the line were hit with a lot of flame, and as the smoke cleared several of the creatures staggered into view, their bones melting from the intense heat. But only one had fallen in that initial barrage, and those at the ends of the lines, approaching along the walls, were not affected at all.

Their archers fired several shafts into the enemy ranks, but the skeletons were virtually immune to even magical arrows, and the shots from Selanthas and Shay had little effect. Dar slid *Valor* into its scabbard and unlimbered his huge greatclub. The fighter would have charged to meet the enemy rush, but Talen forestalled him, indicating Alderis. The elf was casting again, preparing his *repulsion* spell, to kill the enemy charge before the skeletons could reach them. The undead lines were drawing nearer, but they had been over a hundred feet away when Nelan’s *daylight* had revealed them, and they were too far yet to get to them before Alderis could finish his spell.

It was at that moment that the pincers of the ambush snapped shut around them.

Shay was the only one to spot the slight shimmer in the air to their left, beyond one of the huge stone fonts in the deep side-chamber that flanked the great altar. But the scout did not have time to shout a warning as a bolt of twisting black energy flared from beyond the font, arcing across the chamber. It caught Letellia in the side, striking just behind the leading edge of her shield, and forked to hit both Nelan and Alderis. All three of them were caught up like rag dolls and hurled bodily back across the room, bouncing hard on the cold stone floor and rolling to a rough stop some twenty feet from where they had been standing.

The attack parted the cloak of invisibility that had concealed Zafir Navev, and the undead warlock stood there with a look of grim satisfaction on his features, tendrils of black energy rising from his fingers.

The *eldritch blast* had one saving grace for its victims; they were spared the second part of the ambush a moment later as the goblin cleric Tribitz stepped out from behind the pool on the opposite side of the chamber, in the other foyer. The goblin cleric looked gaunt and shriveled within his armor; clearly the days since it had last confronted the party in its sanctum had not been kind to the creature. But the monster that had betrayed its own people to gruesome deaths upon the altars of Orcus clearly had not

lost any of its terrible power. It croaked an invocation to its dread god, and a *flame strike* came crashing down, blasting Dar, Talen, and Allera. Only Shay was able to escape the full power of the spell, diving aside as the deadly column poured down upon her friends. The others, caught unawares, were scoured mercilessly by the hungry flames and the unholy energies that infused them.

The cleric, heaving with a swell of religious ecstasy, pointed and uttered a command. A hezrou demon, brought to the Prime by Tribtiz's *planar ally* spell, materialized on cue, its huge jaws slaving with anticipation as it loomed over the three prone spellcasters, the first course at the buffet.

Meanwhile, with nothing left to oppose them, the fourteen black minotaur skeletons charged forward, sweeping around the huge statue of Orcus to descend upon the burned and battered line, now in disarray, that faced them.

Chapter 249

CARNAGE

Talen shouted commands to his troops, but his companions were veterans all, and they were already moving to face the new and deadly threats that confronted them.

Shay split off to the left, her magical boots augmenting her own considerable speed as she charged toward Navev. She was tensed, ready to avoid another *eldritch blast*, but the warlock seemed unconcerned, his expression almost bemused as she approached the far edge of the pool.

That smug expression did betray some surprise, however, as instead of heading around the font, she fell into a crouch and sprang over it. The basin was almost thirty feet across, but Shay's leap carried her high over it, and the point of her spear was aimed directly at the dead warlock's heart as she reached the apogee of her leap and came diving down toward him.

Mehlaraine and Selanthas went the other way, rushing to protect their fallen companions from the hezrou demon. The elf archer fired off a barrage of shots at the goblin cleric, scoring two direct hits despite the cover provided by the stone basin. Tribtiz snarled but ignored the missiles that blasted him with electrical energy; it suffered, but its heavy armor protected it from serious damage.

Mehlaraine, meanwhile, charged forward to block the hezrou, the lithe elf completely dominated by the huge, hulking figure of the toad-demon.

Dar and Talen exchanged a look and formed a rough line to face the black skeleton charge. There was no way that the two of them could stop all of the creatures, and several simply lumbered past them, turning their unprotected flanks and heading for the others behind. But the two fighters made their presence felt, as a violent exchange of blows sounded loudly through the chamber. Talen smashed *Beatus Incendia* across the body of a fire-damaged skeleton, crushing a half-dozen ribs and driving the undead monster back through the sheer ferocity of his assault. The knight was immediately swarmed by another four skeletons, but his heavy armor, bolstered by the protective power of his magical amulet, protected him from the worst of it, and the only injury he suffered was from a goring attack that hit him on the side and dented his armor, but failed to penetrate. Still, he knew that a bruise was likely going to be far from the worst he was going to suffer in this engagement.

On the other hand, Dar, just ten paces away, was getting his ass kicked. He stepped under the first two-handed swing of a charging skeleton, its axe slicing the air so hard that he could feel the breeze as it passed. He drove his club down into the skeleton's leg hard enough to shiver its massive thighbone, but the skeleton refused to go down, clinging to its unlife through sheer persistence. Several other skeletons came at him around it. He dodged back from the first swing, turning what would have been a terrible hit into a graze that still managed to open up a line of pain across his gut. That moment's distraction cost him, however, as the other skeleton brought its axe down hard across his back. His new armor saved his life, but he could feel the hot blood splash out from the wound as the edge cut deep into his flesh. He felt an agony stab through his left side; something important inside had been savaged by that critical hit.

"Gaarrgh!" he yelled, spinning around to deliver a full attack upon his tormenter. He laid two powerful blows into the skeleton's body, sundering bones, and then as it started to topple he smote it across the pelvis, hitting it hard enough to detach both legs and knock them flying across the room. The skeleton collapsed into a pile of ebon bones, but there was another one right behind it, and before Dar could recover from his attack it lunged forward and smashed its skull directly into the fighter's head. Stunned, Dar staggered back and spun around in a full circle, trying desperately to regain his bearings.

Allera had gotten a moment's forbearance by the fighters' stand. She hesitated for just a single heartbeat; she was needed everywhere, and there were deadly adversaries in every direction. But that moment of doubt passed quickly, and the calm cool that came from training and conviction took over. Even as a black skeleton came around the melee surrounding Talen and lumbered toward her she opened her mind and drew in a surge of positive energy. That flood of holy power she cast out from her, directing it into both her companions and her foes. The skeleton coming at her absorbed the full force of her *mass cure critical wounds* and was blasted into black shards of bone. She healed Dar and Talen, and struck down several of the skeletal minotaurs, taking down four more and seriously damaging another three. Finally, without even turning she directed the last vestige of the spell behind her, channeling it into the battered bodies of

Nelan, Letellia, and Alderis, healing them of the damage they'd suffered from Navev's *eldritch blast*.

Dar's mind was cleared by the healing spell, as he turned to the two remaining skeletons facing him, he lifted his club with renewed vigor. "Good work, angel!" he shouted, ducking back to avoid another powerfully swung axe.

Mehlaraine lunged at the hezrou, distracting its attention from the vulnerable spellcasters lying sprawled out on the floor. Her stroke barely harmed it, but it focused its attention on her, a dark amusement flashing in its eyes. Alderis, recovering more swiftly than Nelan and Letellia, rolled to his feet. The abjurer used another of Banth's transmutations, trying to petrify the demon. The elf penetrated the hezrou's spell resistance, but the creature's innate fortitude enabled it to resist the spell.

Nelan and Letellia were just getting to their feet when the demon opened its jaws wide, and uttered a word of *blasphemy*. At once Mehlaraine, Selanthas, and Letellia stiffened and fell to the ground, overcome by paralysis.

On the other side of the battlefield, Shay thrust her spear forward, snarling a challenge at Navev as she dropped toward the warlock. The revenant did not try to evade, and a moment of doubt entered the scout's mind, just a heartbeat before her momentum and arc would have resulted in a powerful impact. But in mid-leap, there was nothing she could do except follow her attack through to the end.

Blood exploded from the pool beneath her, followed by a snarling, vicious form. The thing struck her on the left leg, interrupting her jump and knocking her flying. Dirty claws tore long cuts in her thigh, and the spear went flying as she spun in midair, coming head over heels before she hit, hard. She screamed as her right shoulder exploded in pain, as she caromed off the stone lip of the pool.

Dazed, she looked up to see the ghastr Marthek leap at her, its garish visage soaked in blood, its long claws extended toward her throat.

Chapter 250

FRYING PANS AND FIRES

Nelan staggered slightly and tried to regain his equilibrium as events raged out of control around him. The echoes of the hezrou demon's *blasphemy* roared in his ears, but his *spell resistance* had protected him, and he remained capable of action. He saw Mehlaraine fall, and saw the demon reach eagerly for the paralyzed elf. Even as the confused haze around his senses continued to clear he stepped forward and boldly

presented his holy symbol, calling upon the power of the Father. The demon shrieked as his *banishment* spell sent it back to the Abyss.

He looked around for the goblin cleric, but was distracted by movement out of the corner of his eye. He turned to see two of the black skeletons, which had bypassed both the *fireballs* and the melee in the center of the room.

They were coming straight for him, and picking up speed. The cleric looked around, and saw that most of his companions, at least those nearby, were on the ground, paralyzed and helpless.

Gritting his teeth, the aged priest stepped forward to meet the charging undead.

Tribitz had not been idle while its ally was stripped from his service. The priest, all too aware of the magical potency of its foes, hurled a well-placed *greater dispel* into the ranks of the enemy. The spell's burst was not wide enough to affect all of its adversaries, especially with them scattered about by the warlock's blasts, and the wards placed by Nelan and Allera were potent, difficult to dispel. But Tribitz's magic was far from weak, and its casting successfully stripped away a number of the spells protecting their foes.

Including the *death wards* protecting Dar and Talen.

Talen heard Shay scream, and glanced over in time to see her taken out of the air by the ghast. The knight felt an icy dagger of fear stab into his chest at the sight, a sensation that was accompanied by a very real stab of pain as one of the remaining black skeletons smashed its axe hard across his breastplate. He'd let his guard down for only an instant, but the three skeletons still facing him were ready to take advantage.

Talen hesitated, torn between love and duty.

"GO!" Dar yelled. The fighter hurled himself at Talen's foes, ignoring what had to be a painful slash to his right hip from one of his own adversaries as he broke away from them. The two damaged skeletons he'd left behind lumbered after him as he hit the one nearest Talen, crushing its spine into black powder and sending it hard to the ground. The other two turned on him, allowing the knight to disengage and rush to Shay's aid. The two he'd been fighting before closed the square behind him, leaving him surrounded by four of the creatures.

"Maybe not the best plan," the fighter muttered to himself, hitting another skeleton with a blow that cracked its right humerus, sending its axe and the attached arm flying away. The skeleton was not unduly inconvenienced by the loss of its weapon, slashing at him with its other clawed hand, and going with its long horns. Dar avoided both, but felt a fresh pain explode in his side as one of the skeletons behind him scored another hit. He was rapidly losing the benefit of Allera's earlier *mass cure*, and was finding it hard to breathe against the stabbing pains that shot through his torso at each movement.

“Allera!” he cried, unable to see the healer for all the chaos surrounding him.

The healer had her own problems. Dazed for a few moments by the *blasphemy*, she recovered to find herself hazarded by yet another black skeleton, one of the last stragglers from the initial charge. She dodged back from its reaching claws. One dug into her arm, leaving bloody red tracks where it scratched her, but she escaped its reach and opened her mind to the power of her healing magic once more.

Unfortunately for her, that was exactly what Zafir Navev had been waiting for. The warlock fired off another *eldritch blast* that slammed unerringly into the healer’s chest, knocking her off her feet from the force of the impact. She flew back and hit something hard. Her momentum was erased by the impact and she fell forward, breaking her nose as it smashed against the cold stone of the floor. Blood poured down her face and she felt dizzy, but she clung to consciousness with an iron grip born of sheer willpower.

Groaning, she turned and looked up to see the black skeleton she’d struck looming over her, its axe already coming down to finish her off.

Chapter 251

SWALLOWED IN BLOOD

Shay felt a cold chill seeping into her body from the painful cuts in her leg, even as the hot blood seared her exposed skin. Without her magical ring, she was vulnerable to the paralyzing effects of the undead monster’s touch. She fought off the spreading numbness with a desperate fury, but she still found herself fighting for her life against an implacable foe.

The ghast had been on her before she could recover enough to pull herself out of the pool of blood. The monster dragged her down, smothering her screams before a surging froth of salty crimson. Death had not stolen any of the barbarian’s insane strength, and its weight felt like a wagon had fallen upon her. Unable to escape, she tried to draw a weapon to attack it, but her small axe fumbled out of her grip, and her attempt to push the creature off of her was as futile as a mouse trying to outwrestle a cat.

Its claws closed around her neck, and as its nails dug into her skin, she felt the chilling numbness return, this time too strong to resist. The last thing she saw was the creature’s terrible face as it looked down at her in triumph, and then she was thrust under the surface of the pool, and everything drowned in a flood of red.

“Shay!”

Talen felt a surge of rage that choked off the fear he felt. He charged toward the pool and the ghastron killing his lover, *Beatus Incendia* flaring in his hand like a beacon. He saw Navev gesture and tensed to accept the blast he knew was coming. But the bolt missed him, shooting wide to his left. Talen did not realize that Allera was the target of the *eldritch blast*, nor did he see it fork after it had impacted the healer, flaring back to hit Dar before it arced back to smash into the base of his spine. The blast knocked the knight off his feet, and he found himself twisting full around in mid-air before he hit the floor hard enough to knock the air from his lungs.

Gasping, he looked up to see the rim of the pool, suddenly close, blood trailing down the stone as it continued to slosh out from inside. He could not see Shay, but he could hear a sick splashing noise from within the basin, sounds of struggle that were growing rapidly weaker.

Nelan staggered back as the black skeleton struck him a solid blow with its axe. Somehow the small shield of Mailliw Catspar withstood the impact, although he felt as though his arm had been run over by a fully loaded cart. The priest lifted his hand. His mace was still at his side, but faith proved a more effective weapon as he hit the monster with a beam of *searing light*. The skeleton's considerable resistances were of no proof against the holy power of the spell, and large swaths of bone matter simply dissolved as the light passed over it. Unfortunately for Nelan it was not enough to destroy the skeleton outright.

And as he looked beyond it, he caught sight of another danger that froze his blood; the goblin cleric was coming forward, cloaked in the full power of its dread master. Nelan did not need his *detect magic* spell to sense the dark energies that surrounded the enemy priest. Nor did he need any special insight to realize that this foe was more powerful than he.

But his fear was replaced by surprise as a wall of bright flames suddenly rose up before him, engulfing the skeleton and blocking his view of the cleric.

Allera opened her mouth to cry out, but no sound came out. She didn't need to hear the swoosh of the axe coming down toward her to know it was deadly, however. The sight cut through the daze of her earlier impact, and she rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the blade that smashed into the floor hard enough to strike sparks. She felt something hard cut her arm, and felt a fresh flow of blood to add to her tally of wounds. She had plenty of healing spells left, but without the ability to speak, she could not draw upon the power of her magic.

First things first, then. Correctly surmising that the *silence* aura was centered on the skeleton, she continued her roll and came up into a crouch. The skeleton swept its head low, intending to impale her on its horns, but she leapt forward, diving between its legs. Something hard crashed across her back, and she nearly collapsed. But the healer drew upon a reserve of stern stuff, and rolled again to her feet, coming up into an

awkward run. Behind her, she could feel the skeleton coming after her through the vibrations in the floor, even if she could not hear it. Letting out a silent yell, she put on a desperate burst of speed.

Not far away, Dar had no idea what was going on. The same *eldritch blast* that had taken down Allera had arced back to hit him in the back, knocking him hard into one of the skeletons in front of him. The blow had been oblique rather than head-on, and he'd shot off its knee like an armored missile, knocking both of them to the floor. The other skeletons were on him in an instant, and agony flared through his right leg as an axe hit it just above the knee. His greave kept him from losing the limb, but the metal buckled, and somehow through all the noise and chaos of battle he could clearly hear the bone snapping deep within the limb.

Well, he wouldn't be going jogging anytime soon.

Knowing that getting up would be a futile endeavor, the fighter swung his club around in a wide arc around his prone form. He hit the skeleton that had struck him solidly in the ankle, shattering the joint there and breaking several bones. The skeleton staggered to the side and toppled when it landed on the broken stump; its skull exploded into a hundred pieces when it struck the floor. But that still left three facing him, and while all were damaged, they didn't feel pain the way that their human adversary did. And with a broken leg keeping him on the ground, they had him at a great disadvantage.

The black skeleton that Nelan had been battling continued to attack, oblivious to the *wall of fire* that continued to damage it. But the skeleton was already coming apart, its bones melting before the incredible heat of the *wall*. Alderis had conjured the barrier so that most of its heat radiated in the opposite direction, so all Nelan felt was a slight surge of warmth.

A cloud of dark power exploded around him. The cleric staggered back, fighting off the worst of the *unholy blight*, but nevertheless feeling tingles of pain as the energies of the spell scoured his spirit. The evil spell lasted only a few heartbeats, and as it faded Nelan saw a small, dark form appear in the surging wall of flames. The goblin cleric strode through the barrier, unharmed by the fire.

"My Master will savor the sweet flavor of your soul, human priest," it said, its voice rattling in its chest like a pebble trapped in a bottle. The goblin looked as though it might collapse at any moment, but the apparent frailty of its body was belied by the insane fire that burned in its eyes. The goblin came forward, an evil red glow forming around its right hand as it came.

Talen roared and sprang to his feet, his rage granting him the strength to overcome the weight of his armor and weapons. The knight rushed forward and leapt, not at Navev, but into the vile mess of blood within the stone basin. The ghast, covered in bright crimson, immersed to its waist in blood, turned to meet his charge. It extended its claws

as it sprang toward Talen, but the knight had the advantage of reach this time, and the sword blazed down into the ghaſt's ſhoulder, cutting deep into its body.

The blow would have killed a living man, but the ghaſt was a monſtroſity beyond mortal ken. It ſurged at Talen with ſurpriſing ſpeed, nearly knocking him over as it bowled into him. The ſudden attack actually helped him in one way; as Talen fought to keep his footing in the viſcous meſs of the bowl an *eldritch blaſt* ſtreaked paſt him, miſſing his head by ſcant inches. The ghaſt gave him no chance to recover, lunging at him with claw and bite. Talen felt the creature's claws dig into his arm as it tore at the looſened edge of one of his greaves, but with Shay's *ring of freedom of movement* he was immune to the cloying paralysis of its touch. He drove his ſhield hard into the ghaſt's cheſt, giving him enough clearance to ſtrike with *Beatus Incendia*. The firſt ſtroke ripped a foot-long tear in the ghaſt's ſide, and as it roared and ſurged forward again, he brought the blade up in a powerful and deadly arc, ſhearing its ſkull in twain from jaw to ear. The ghaſt expired immediately, collapsing into the blood with hardly a ſplash.

Talen was already moving, probing in the blood for Shay. The blood in the pool only came up to his waſt, but the baſin was ſo broad that there was ample ſpace to hide a body. His ſhin bumped againſt ſomething hard, and red ſteam hisſed from the blood as he dropped *Beatus Incendia* into it and pulled at the limp form beneath him.

“Your brave ſacrifice only delays the inevitable, fooliſh knight.”

Talen looked up to ſee Navev ſtaring directly at him, a hand extended toward his cheſt. Then everything turned to black.

Chapter 252

THE TURNING

Dar managed to roll juſt enough to avoid the axe blade that came crashing down into the ſtone where his head had been an inſtant before. The ſound was deafening. He tried to ſmaſh the ſkeleton's knee with his club, but his ſtroke was ruined as ſomething grabbed onto his left ankle and pulled, *hard*. He looked down to ſee the one-armed ſkeleton, dragging him up into reach of its horns. But before he could react to that alarming development, another ſkeleton came at him with an axe, and he was forced to brace his club to block. The club caught the haft of the axe juſt below the blade, ſtopping it ſcant inches from his face.

Then the ſkeleton holding his leg heaved again, and he found himſelf upſide down, dangling a few feet above the ſtone floor.

“Oh, for the love of...”

The fighter didn't get a chance to finish his statement, as something hard crashed into his back, knocking the air from his lungs. His club went flying from his grasp, clattering on the floor, just out of his reach.

Talen was flung back by the force of Navev's *eldritch blast*, a wave of blood forming ahead of his body as he shot through the pool. Somehow, through some instinct or reflex born of desperate strength, he kept his grip on Shay, holding the paralyzed scout even as his legs hit the stone rim on the far side of the pool, and he was flipped over its edge to fall battered and bloody to the ground on the edge.

His body shaking with pain and effort, he looked up to see Shay hanging limply over the edge of the pool, face down in a spreading mess of blood. It had gotten darker; he'd lost *Beatus Incendia* somewhere along the way. He would not have been able to hold both her and the sword, he realized; he'd made his choice instinctively.

With the low stone barrier blocking his view again, he could not see Navev.

He reached out toward Shay; realized that there was nothing he could do for her. No, there was one thing. He grabbed onto her, dragging her motionless form to him, behind the shelter of the stone rim of the pool. He could not tell if she was breathing, and there was no time to check. The barrier offered scant protection, he knew. Navev would only need to walk a short distance before they would be revealed, and he could hit them with another of those deadly *eldritch blasts*. From what the others had said of the warlock, there was no limit to the number of times that he could hurl those invocations.

Or rather, only one limit that Talen could see.

The knight grabbed onto the stone rim of the pool and dragged himself to his feet. He reached down and grabbed the hilt of the sword at Shay's hip, drawing her holy sword, the twin of *Beatus Incendia*, from its scabbard. Blood covered him from head to toe, dripping down his armor to form a growing pool at his feet.

Navev had not moved; the warlock stood there at the far edge of the pool, waiting for him.

"Let's finish this, warlock," Talen said.

The revenant nodded. "Yes, let's," he said. His hands came up, and another globe of dark energy formed between them.

Nelan recognized the red glow surrounding the goblin cleric's hands as a *harm* spell. He tried to cast his *heal* spell to counter, but Tribitz was faster, lunging forward to touch the cleric's armored leg. Nelan flinched, expecting the deluge of negative energy to devastate him.

Nothing happened. Nelan had forgotten his *death ward*; it protected him against any negative energy attacks. “The Father protects me,” he said, almost to himself.

“Your Father is a pathetic wretch, who has lingered beyond his time,” the cleric said, lifting its morningstar. Despite the small size of the weapon, it looked wicked, its head covered with jagged black spikes that radiated a cold malevolence.

Nelan cast his second and last *searing light*, but once more the goblin’s *spell resistance* protected it from harm, and the beam dissipated as it struck Tribitz’s chest. “You cannot harm me, while I am sheltered by my Master’s touch,” the goblin said, cackling as it smashed its mace into Nelan’s side. The cleric of the Father grunted in surprise and staggered several steps away from the blow; for all its apparent frailty, the goblin hit *hard*. And the weapon it was using was *unholy*, created to kill beings such as Nelan.

Nelan knew that he could not take many more of those hits. The goblin followed him, calmly, as he fell back, trying not to fall. “Yes. Now, you understand,” it said.

A ring of blue fire erupted around Dar. The fighter raised his arms to protect himself from the new attack, but all he felt was a soft healing glow that eased his hurts and poured new life into his battered body. And then he was falling; not far, but hard enough to remind him of the pain he’d just had healed as his shoulder was jammed into the hard floor.

Grimacing against the pain from his still-tender leg, the fighter pulled himself to his feet. The skeletons that had surrounded him were all destroyed, lying all about in heaps of shattered black bones. He didn’t need to look far to know the source of his salvation; Allera was not far away. She’d stopped running to cast her *mass cure*, but that gave the skeleton chasing her a chance to catch up.

“Allera, look out!” Dar yelled, already running—or the best he could do on his damaged leg—toward her. The healer turned even as the skeleton seized her up in its arms, yanking her up off her feet and crushing her against its body. There was no sound; the *silence* spell that Tribitz had put on the creature earlier was still in effect. But Dar could see Allera’s mouth open in a soundless scream, and he growled as he drew *Valor* from its scabbard.

Talen knew that he would never get to Navev before the undead warlock could blast him again. And with the power to knock him back with each discharge, how could he possibly get close enough to do any damage?

But there was nothing to be done for it except to try.

Navev waited just a few seconds, firing his *eldritch blast* as Talen rounded the circumference of the pool. The knight knew it was coming, and did not even bother lifting his shield, just lowered his head and charged forward into the attack.

The blast missed.

It was hard to say who was more surprised, the knight or the warlock. The streaking black bolt passed close enough to Talen to vaporize the tiny droplets of blood that streaked his helmet, but then it was past, almost before he could realize what had happened.

Talen's momentum carried him forward, and before the warlock could react, he laid into him with his sword. The blade bit deep into the revenant's body, the weapon's holy fire searing its flesh, but its unnatural toughness protected it, and no blood spurted from the deep gash that the stroke opened in its side. Navev merely glanced up from a hit that would have punctured the lung of a living man, a dark malevolence shining in its eyes.

Talen lifted his weapon to strike again.

Navev stepped forward, and lifted its rod. The device was heavy, the black skull at its head giving it the shape and mass of a mace, but the warlock did not use it as a weapon. Instead it merely pressed the face of the skull against the front of Talen's helmet, and invoked the dread power of its Master.

Talen stiffened, and with a soft groan he collapsed to the ground, his life force snuffed out in an instant.

Chapter 253

FALLEN AND LOST

Nelan continued to give ground before the goblin cleric's assault. Allera's last burst of healing had helped him, but his side still throbbed where the evil little monster's mace had struck him, and his shield hung limply at his side, the arm broken just below the elbow.

The goblin followed, giving him no respite. Nelan's own counterattacks had been feeble; the goblin's armor was of exceptional quality, and magical to boot. Furthermore, it appeared to be *protected from good*, a product of either its own magic or the dark nature of this place, Nelan was unsure which.

He was able to get his shield off his arm, grimacing as a knife of pain shot up from the damaged limb. But he had no choice; it wasn't doing him any good now, and without both hands free he could not both cast and attack. Not that either seemed to be of any use against this foe.

The goblin merely came in again and swept his morningstar around toward the cleric's knee. Nelan tried to get away, but his bruised limbs moved slowly, and he braced himself for a boneshattering impact.

The blow hit, but the force of it was surprisingly light, and the weapon's spikes failed to penetrate even the light armor covering the joint. Nelan looked up in surprise. The goblin, too, seemed to be caught off guard, and it looked around, snarling.

Alderis stood behind him, several paces back. To a casual look, he wasn't doing anything, and he made no move toward the wands or spell component pouches attached to his belt.

Tribitz, however, recognized what he could not see. The goblin's wards had suddenly all vanished, and it could feel the abrupt loss as its *divine power* and *bull's strength* faded. The goblin had never encountered an *antimagic field* before, but it was quick to discern the nature of the enemy's spell, and likewise learned that it did not like it one bit.

Nelan had no idea what was happening, but he was quick to take advantage. He struck with his mace, smashing the metal head across the goblin's back. To his surprise, the blow had a noticeable impact, and the goblin cleric staggered forward.

That was enough for Tribitz; the goblin turned and headed away from the mage, seeking to escape the radius of the field. But Alderis had been expecting flight, and he followed the goblin, outpacing him within a few steps, and throwing himself at the creature. The two struggled for a moment, and then with a snarl the goblin pushed the larger and heavier elf away. The two got tangled together, however, and both fell to the ground, the goblin's heavy armor clanking loudly as it hit the floor.

Dar had to strike carefully, to avoid hitting the struggling woman held aloft in the skeleton's dangerous clutches. But the skeleton, already damaged, was certainly not ready to handle *Valor*. The first blow took off the creature's left leg at the knee, and as it fell he came around behind it, and drove the pommel of the weapon through the creature's skull. It came apart in an instant, and Dar rushed to help Allera as she fell amidst the clatter of heavy bones.

"Are you all right?" he asked her. The *silence* spell had ended with the monster's existence, and Allera quickly took advantage, casting another *mass cure* that infused her allies with new strength. Dar let out a deep breath as the spell coursed through him; he'd taken a heavy beating, but the combined effects of the three healing spells he'd gotten from Allera had brought him almost back to full strength. He started looking around for something else to kill, but then Allera drew him back around with a shout of alarm.

"Shay, Talen... by the gods!" And then she was running, and Dar had to hurry to keep up with her.

The goblin cleric struggled to its feet. Without its magical enhancements, it looked truly pathetic, a wretched little creature clad in armor too big for its shriveled frame. Nelan came up behind it as it picked up its weapon, smashing it again with his mace. Once again the blow was telling, but the goblin priest had no interest in engaging him now. Instead it tried to run again, to escape the bubble of magical nullity surrounding Alderis, to once again seek the power that came from communion with its master. The elf, just coming to his feet, could not keep up with its sudden burst of speed.

But as it reached the edge of the *antimagic field*, it found another elf blocking its path. Seeing that this one was a slight female, it tried to simply push its way past.

For Tribitz, underestimating Mehlaraine was the last mistake it would ever make. The nimble woman easily sidestepped the goblin's rush, tripping it with an outstretched leg, diverting it back toward Alderis as it fell with a subtle twist of her body. She then stepped forward to loom over the evil cleric, *Avelis* shining in her hand. Within the *antimagic field* its magic was nullified, but the slender sword was no less deadly for it.

What Dar saw as he ran filled him with rage. Shay lay against the edge of the pool, covered in blood. Talen... yes, that was him, lying in a heap at the warlock's feet. His sword had fallen to the ground nearby. Of more immediate concern was Allera; she was running straight for Navev, heedless of the danger posed by the undead warlock's magic blasts.

Dar put on an added burst of speed, his fingers tightening around the hilt of *Valor*.

Navev could have blasted them without difficulty, but instead the warlock reached down and grasped the front of Talen's armor. It took some effort, but the revenant lifted the slain knight onto its back, bowing beneath the heavy weight.

"Release him!" Allera shouted, her own voice thick with anger. The warlock lifted a hand, and Dar tensed, expecting an attack on both of them. He was only a few steps behind her, now, as she slowed near the edge of the pool.

But Navev only smiled, and saluted mockingly. There was a flash, and then Talen was gone; just the warlock stood there, waiting.

Allera, confused, stopped, but Dar charged past her, rushing around the edge of the pool. The warlock did not react, and as Dar reached it he swept *Valor* through it... literally, as the weapon passed harmlessly through the illusory body of the revenant. Dar only barely recovered in time to avoid pitching headlong into the pool of blood. He looked up to see the warlock's *major image* already fading. It spoke to him, the words vanishing along with its body.

"He is ours, now..."

Then it was gone, leaving only a faint hint of laughter hanging in the air.

Chapter 254

WITHOUT A LEADER

“Talen! Tal...”

“Careful,” Allera said. “You came very close to dying, let the healing work...”

But Shay continued to struggle, trying to get up. Allera was forced to restrain her. Blood already covered the healer’s robe from her brief contact with the wounded scout. Most of it came from the pool, and not the injured woman, but Shay hadn’t been breathing when Allera had gotten to her, and she still lingered on the brink of oblivion.

“Damn it, woman, hold still! You won’t be of any use to him if you die before I can treat you!”

The unexpected surge of anger from Allera seemed to break through to Shay, who fell back, gasping for air. Every time she coughed, a spew of red blood poured down the sides of her face. Allera held her as she cleared her airways enough to breathe.

“Talen... Where’s Talen?” she pressed, when she could speak again.

“That fucking wizard took him,” Dar said. The fighter stood behind Allera, a grim look on his face.

Shay nodded, and once again tried to get up. Again Allera protested. “Shay, your body has suffered an incredible strain, you need to—”

“Am I still in danger of dying?”

Allera shook her head.

“Then help me up. Now.”

Dar turned as Alderis walked up to them. “How are the others?” he asked.

“Selanthas and Letellia are still paralyzed,” the elf reported. “Mehlaraine and Nelan are keeping watch over them. The knight-commander?”

“Navev took him. Used some kind of illusion to cover his escape.”

“They may still be nearby,” Shay said. She faltered as she tried to step away from Allera’s support, and would likely have fallen if the healer hadn’t rushed in to steady her.

“We’ll search, but we need to get everyone healed, and wait for Selanthas and Letellia to recover,” Dar said.

Shay pushed away again, and this time remained standing on her own power. “Every second may count,” she said. “We need to—”

“If we split up, we won’t stand a chance,” Dar said. “I understand how you feel, Shay, but what would Talen say in this same situation, were he here?”

“He’d say to focus on the mission,” Shay said, meeting his gaze squarely, and not flinching from it. “But I’m not going to stay here while that.... that... *thing* takes him away.”

“Fuck the mission,” Dar said. “We’re going after him, but we’re going to do it smart. Allera, can you fix Selanthas and Letellia?”

The healer nodded. “I just need a minute or two.”

Shay started walking away. “Where are you going?” Dar asked.

“I am going to look for tracks; see if I can find out which way they went.”

Dar made a subtle gesture to Alderis. “I will accompany you; perhaps I can detect some magical traces,” the elf said. The two moved off toward the last spot where they’d seen the warlock, on the far side of the blood-pool.

As they left, Allera came up close to Dar. A garish streak of crimson covered her cheek where Shay had inadvertently brushed her during her struggles. “I got a good look at Talen before Navev vanished,” she said in a whisper. “I don’t... I don’t think he was alive.”

Dar nodded. “Yeah, I saw that too. See what you can do for the others.”

She pressed a vial into his hand. “Drink this. It will help. I’ll be right back.”

Dar looked down at the tiny glass bottle. “If only it was so simple,” he muttered. But he uncorked the vial and downed its contents. Once it was empty, he tossed it aside. The healing energy of the potion burned away the last remnants of his physical injuries, but his expression remained grim as he watched Shay and Alderis conduct their search.

A GRIM FIND

They stood there, looking down at the bits and pieces of metal and leather that were scattered across the floor.

Shay had been the first to find them. She'd driven them in their scouting mission, darting into rooms before they could even see what lay within them, searching quickly but methodically through the complex. They had found nothing in the two rooms that had directly adjoined the temple, so they'd retreated back to the outer part of the level, and continued looking. They'd found a foyer that had led to three staircases, two leading down and one leading up. But there hadn't been any tracks or traces of magic that they could detect, and with the odds of a blind charge against them, they had continued their exploration of the level.

They had made their way back toward the caves where the displacer beasts had laired, and the river that led back to the first level of the dungeon. There was a complex of rooms near the entry to the caves; they had rested there once before, on an earlier visit to the dungeon. Shay led them quickly through several rooms, and in a small, dank chamber at the end of a twisting weave of corridors and rooms they had found the remains of Talen's gear.

The pile included his armor, hastily cut from his body, his dagger and bow, and his backpack. It looked like Navev had taken the rest of the knight's magic items with him.

"We have to find him," Shay said, turning. She had taken a step toward the room's single door before Dar stopped her. "Don't get in my way, Dar."

"Where are you going to go?" he asked her.

"I will find him."

"How? I know you can track almost anything, but Alderis has already told us that he used a form of magical teleportation to escape the temple. We found no tracks on the way here, which suggests that he used the same means to leave this room."

Shay was silent, but the frustration was obvious in her eyes.

"We will find him, Shay," Allera said. "We need to use magic. Letellia said that Honoratius had a spell that can detect the location of any person or thing, anywhere, no matter where it is."

The sorceress nodded. "The spell is called *discern location*, and it is very powerful. When the archmage rejoins us, we can ask him to prepare the spell."

“And I will prepare a *commune* spell, to seek out the guidance of the Father,” Nelan said.

Shay nodded, reluctantly. “I just can’t... I...” She trailed off, and Allera came to her, embracing her. Sobs rocked the scout’s body.

“We will find him,” Allera repeated. She looked up at Dar.

The fighter’s expression was a thunderhead.

* * * * *

“I can cast the spell,” Honoratius said. “But I will have to rest, and prepare the incantation from my books before it will be possible.”

They were camped in one of the small rooms not far from the river caves. While Nelan had been prepared to begin the ritual to *hallow* the last temple of Orcus, they had decided to rest first, and recover their strength. The fact that Honoratius could not join them as long as they were within the actual temple precincts had also been a factor in the decision.

The archmage had joined them about an hour after they’d found the remains of Talen’s gear. Shay had been watching the sorceress intently, and she had barely recovered from the merging process when the scout had begun updating the archmage on their situation. Now Honoratius sat with his chin propped against his knees, his borrowed eyes shining in the light of their torches. Even in Letellia’s body, they could tell that he was tired.

“There is something else going on,” Allera said.

The archmage nodded. “The Council wishes to speak to you. I have prepared a spell that should allow for two-way communication from here to Camar.”

“Interesting. A more potent version of the *sending* spell?” Alderis asked.

“Yes, combined with elements from the *scrying* spell, all tied together through the power of my *orb of visions*, back in the Guild tower.”

“What valence does the incantation req—“

“We can chat about the details later,” Dar said. “How long does the spell take to cast, archmage?”

“Just one minute.”

“Then you’d better do it. I have a feeling we’re not going to like what the marshal has to say.”

Chapter 256

A NEW COMMAND

Dar’s guess had been all too correct.

“Talen’s loss is a great blow to our cause,” Velan Tiros said, his voice distorted slightly as it passed through the magical sensor that hung in the air before them. The glowing orb was a direct conduit to the tower of the Guild of Sorcery in Camar, but it only allowed them to see and hear through it; it was not an actual gateway between the two locations. Tiros’s form shimmered and shifted slightly as he spoke, like a reflection viewed in a pond. “But events have made our situation more grim, colonel. The town of Albrith has been completely destroyed. The quake was just the latest of several that have hit the region, but it was the most damaging, focused almost directly on the town. The chasm that swallowed Albrith is now over a hundred feet across and almost a mile long. Honoratius confirmed that the quake was not natural in origin.”

“I scried the site,” the archmage said, “and the lingering auras there were extremely... potent.”

“How many people were killed?” Nelan asked, his face pale.

The new Patriarch, Decius Jaduran, looked almost shrunken in the heavy white robe of his office. The aged priest replied, “Our latest estimates are just under four hundred dead. But many are still missing, or otherwise unaccounted for.”

“It would seem that the demon prince is testing its power,” Selanthas said.

“Why wouldn’t it just attack Camar?” Dar asked.

“Honoratius?” Tiros said.

“I am not certain, but I believe that the demon’s touch upon our world is still tenuous,” the archmage said. “These impacts may not even be deliberate, but merely side effects of its efforts to gain a firm presence upon this Prime. As it grows stronger, the effects will grow more pronounced.”

“We’ve destroyed two temples,” Allera said. “Shouldn’t its power be growing weaker, not stronger?”

“The completion of the ritual and the sundering of the Sphere of Souls brought Orcus almost fully into our world,” Honoratius said. “We can weaken the demon by destroying the temples, but it will ultimately pass fully into the Prime, unless it is confronted and destroyed. Once it is fully here, it will rapidly grow in power, as it feeds upon the life energies of our rich world.”

“You had said it was hiding in some plane thing,” Dar said.

“A demiplane,” Honoratius explained. “An artificial reality halfway between the Prime Material and the Abyss. The demon had to expend a considerable amount of power to make the transition from the Abyss. It will gather its strength, and then make the final passage into our world.”

“And when it gets here?” Allera asked.

There was no reply. On the other side of the sensor, Tiros looked grave.

“Have there been any more undead attacks, marshal?” Dar asked.

“Only a few scattered incidents. But there has been a rash of disasters since you left Camar, and the people are increasingly fearful. Midwinter has passed, but winter keeps an iron clutch over the land. We have done what we can, but hunger is becoming a problem in the cities. Pestilence has ravaged both the human and animal populations. In some areas as many as half of all domesticated animals have died, badly, covered in oozing boils, their carcasses suitable only for the fire. A plague broke out in Dalemar; a not uncommon occurrence in a city under siege, but I have never seen nor heard of such an occurrence in the depths of winter. There have been reports of thousands dead, with corpses lying frozen in the streets. Despite this, Livius has refused to sue for peace, and if anything his raids have grown more aggressive. Conditions in our legion camps outside the city are... grim, even with the bulk of our forces redeployed further south.”

“Damn that stubborn bastard,” Dar said.

“Do you believe that these events are connected to what is happening in Rappan Athuk?” Nelan asked.

“I can grant credit to the occasional coincidence, ser priest, but there are just too many troubles coming at once,” Tiros replied. “The orcs are stirring in the Galerrs; there have been at least a dozen attacks since the Border Legion was pulled out, and the tribes seem to have united around the patronage of a new “blood god.”

“Yeah, three guesses who *that* is,” Dar muttered.

“There have also been reports of a new death cult that has become active in Drusia. And in the last few weeks, there have been surges of random violence throughout

Camar. There have been over a hundred murders in the capital alone, despite the additions to the ranks of the Guard...”

“The bad winter, tempers fraying,” Allera said, but she trailed off, not really believing her own statement.

“Marshal,” Dar said. “What do you want us to do?”

“You must continue with your mission,” Tiros said. “The very fate of Camar may depend upon your success.”

“What about Talen?” Shay asked, the first words she’d spoken since Honoratius had established the connection.

“I share your feelings, Shaylara,” Tiros said. “But we must consider the good of Camar, and all its people. Talen would say the same, if he was there.”

The scout turned away, and did not respond, but her hands tightened into fists.

“We’re going to need to deal with Navev sooner or later,” Dar said. “He’s grown in power with each time we’ve faced him, and he seems to be particularly favored by old Blood and Horns.”

“The spell’s duration is nearly up,” Honoratius said, her face showing some strain as she focused her attention upon the sensor. The magical field shivered a bit before it grew steady and distinct once more.

Tiros fixed Dar with a hard stare through the sensor. “I am placing you in command of this mission, Dar. As of this moment, you have the effective rank of general.”

“Marshal, I don’t want—”

Tiros cut him off. “What we want or don’t want is pretty fucking immaterial at this point, general.” The marshal rubbed his face, and his expression softened fractionally. “I am sorry. But we have very few choices left to us.”

“Sir, I don’t exactly have an army here,” Dar said, looking around at his companions.

“I am sending you what aid I can, but I cannot promise anything. Our grip on the situation here becomes more tenuous by the day.”

Dar faced the sensor with a grim look. Allera stepped up to him, and placed her hand on his arm. He looked down at her, and seemed to draw strength from her eyes. After a moment, he turned back to face the older man.

“Marshal, one last question.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Have you heard anything from Varo?”

After a brief pause, the marshal shook his head. “Nothing. And I cannot say I am displeased by that fact.”

The sensor destabilized again. Honoratius almost lost it, but after a moment Tiros and Jaduran reappeared. Tiros’s voice came through to them again.

“—know that you understand what is at stake. What we ask of you is... great, it is unfair. But you are the best hope that Camar has of surviving this crisis. You must—”

The sensor abruptly vanished, cutting off the marshal’s final words.

The elves shared a long look, but said nothing.

“It would appear that the road ahead of us remains long,” Nelan said, sagging against the wall. In that moment, he looked far older than his years.

“I am going after Talen,” Shay said. “Alone, if I must.”

Dar negated her with a chop of his hand. “Damn it, Shay, we’re all going. But we can’t do squat until we find out where he is.”

“The temple...” Nelan said.

“Yeah, get your stuff, priest. We’ll camp there while you complete the ritual. Honoratius, be ready with that spell, when we get out of there.”

“Twenty-four hours,” Shay began, but Dar wheeled on her before she could complete the thought.

“If you want to go off by yourself, then I won’t stop you. But getting yourself killed won’t bring him back. And if you’re lying dead in some fucking tunnel somewhere when we need your skills, then maybe we won’t find him, either. So it’s your choice, scout.” Biting back an angry curse, the fighter grabbed his pack, and led Nelan out of the room. “Get your stuff, we’re moving,” his voice came back to them.

“We’ll find him, Shay,” Allera said. But the mood was somber as the companions gathered their possessions, and filed wordlessly after Dar and Nelan, back to the second temple of Orcus.

Chapter 257

A NEW CHAMPION

As Dar took over the leadership of the Doomed Bastards, the most powerful surviving cleric of Orcus in Rappan Athuk was lying in a plush bed in a fit of delirium.

His name was Hesperix. It was clear that the man was far from well. His naked body was covered with the marks of torture, and while most of the wounds had faded to ugly scars, they were fresh enough to indicate that the experience had been relatively recent. His right hand was just a fleshy knob, the fingers having been removed. Symbols had been cut into his flesh, and those marks seemed unwilling to fully heal, leaving garish red marks upon his body.

But the torment suffered by the cleric was more spiritual than physical, and terrible noises came from the bed as he clawed at the sheets in the midst of his feverish slumber. The bed, like the rest of the chamber, had once been opulently furnished, but now old blood and filth marred the linens. Hesperix's hair and beard were likewise matted with dirt, and his once powerful body showed clear evidence of ongoing neglect and decay.

A large part of the man's suffering came from reliving the events that had led to his fall.

Hesperix had once been a rising star in the hierarchy of the cult of Orcus. Gifted with considerable personal talents that were married to both a considerable creativity and a suave ruthlessness, he had risen to the rank of priest after a remarkably short time as an acolyte. Unfortunately for him, that very success had made his superiors uncomfortable, and it took only a very minor political gaffe to draw the ire of Zehn, who had banished him to the Talon.

Technically, it had been an important assignment, and had given Hesperix charge of his own temple. The Talon of Orcus warded the Bloodways, and its proximity to both Grezneck and an exit to the surface gave the temple a certain strategic importance. The place had its own complement of priests and acolytes, several potent guardians, and its own fully-stocked torture chamber. But the Talon was likewise isolated, far from the main temples that were linked to the Master. Hesperix had been sent to take charge of the Talon, and had been quickly forgotten by most of the followers of Orcus.

Forgotten by most, but not all.

He'd never liked Theron. The man had served as an acolyte with him, but Hesperix had never been impressed with the other's abilities. Their rivalry had also included a romantic angle, as both men had competed for the affections of Celleen, and in the end the woman had (inexplicably, to Hesperix's thinking) chosen the other. He'd always

suspected that Theron had been the one who'd reported on his private negotiations with Aldeth's minions, the indiscretion that had focused Zehn's ire upon him.

So Hesperix had not responded favorably when Theron's embassy, a hobgoblin fighter-priest accompanied by two guards, had suddenly arrived unannounced at the Talon. His ire had grown to astonishment when he had been presented with the other cleric's demands. Not only was he to turn over all of his prisoners, captives he had personally broken over long and tedious weeks in the torture chamber, but he was also supposed to just give Theron command of all eight of his senior priests!

He'd responded in what he'd judged to be a measured fashion, sending a polite response engraved on the flayed hide of the hobgoblin, in the custody of the two guards. Between the two of them, he'd left a pair of eyes and an ear, surely enough for them to find their way back to the slave pits to deliver his reply.

He'd expected a response, but when it had come it had taken him completely by surprise. Theron himself had come, with Celleen and his side, and accompanied by those sycophantic wretches he surrounded himself with, Tibor, Relnek, and Phesor. They hadn't even brought any guards with them.

As it happened, they'd had no need for them.

Hesperix had been astonished by the power wielded by his rival and his followers. Theron had commanded a power that dwarfed even what Gudmund could muster. And Orcus had clearly favored him; Hesperix's undead guards had refused his commands to attack, and even the blood golems had retreated before the might of the dark priest. Hesperix's own clerics had obeyed his orders and had attacked, perhaps realizing that they would share in the culpability of their leader. Their spells and weapons had worked, but they had been utterly outclassed, and had been quickly overcome. And the Seer, of course, had been worse than useless, retreating to his private sanctum as soon as the intruders had arrived.

Theron was grimly thorough in his chastisement of the Talon's defiant leader. He'd been forced to watch while his acolytes were violated, put to death in his own torture chamber, and raised as zombies. His priests were led away in irons to a no doubt unpleasant fate in the Pits, along with all of his hard-won prisoners. He'd been left one servant, the priest Calaxes, but it was doubtful how much utility the man would possess with his fingers, tongue, and manhood removed.

Hesperix himself had been left mostly intact. Theron had taken the fingers of his right hand personally. He'd taken *Dacris*, either not knowing or not caring about the weapon's special property. But Hesperix hadn't even bothered to call it back. The raid had broken him, as neatly and effectively as he had broken the prisoners formerly in his charge. Theron hadn't even bothered trying to extract the location of his hidden vault from him, and likewise he hadn't troubled the Seer. The clerics had taken their prizes and just left him lying there on the floor of the temple, naked and bleeding.

Since the raid on the Talon, Hesperix had lost track of the passage of time. On a few occasions he'd become aware of loud noises out in the temple; most likely incursions from the Bloodways that had made it past the wards. Either the golems had handled them, or not; he'd ceased caring. He occasionally went out into the temple, but neglected the rites and any of the other duties of the place. Calaxes, if he even still lived, avoided him; the Seer appeared before him once, but had given him nothing but a mocking stare.

He had felt the surges of power that had shaken Rappan Athuk to its core. But while he had wondered at them, his curiosity had not been enough to shake his apathy. He had not even prayed for spells since the attack; there seemed to be no point, as he lacked the power to restore his hand.

At some point he stirred. He pulled himself out of his bed, and almost absently grabbed a soiled cloak to cover himself. The fallen priest made his way out into the temple.

The place was quiet and empty. The unchanging permanence of the place was reassuring. Hesperix shuffled forward, but when he came to the open space in front of the altar and the massive statue behind it, he came to a stop.

He stared up at the statue for several minutes. The black stone was highlighted by a red glow that shone down from the ceiling, as it always had. Nothing stirred.

Finally, Hesperix fell to his knees. His cloak fell away, forgotten. A deep croaking sound issued from his body. The noises only gradually became comprehensible words.

"Yes... yes... yes, Master... I serve!"

The cleric looked down at the stump of his right hand. As his face glowed with a paroxysm of ecstasy, he spoke words of power, and the fingers of the limb regrew, the entire hand becoming intact again within seconds.

Hesperix spoke another word, and *Dacris* appeared in his hand. The power of the unholy scythe flowed through him, tendrils of black vapor twisting around the semi-substantial blade of inky darkness.

Behind him, the outer doors of the temple swung open. Hesperix rose, using the long haft of the scythe to help support himself. He slowly turned to face the creature that entered the place. Within the basin before the entry, the blood golems stirred, but they did not attack; they recognized the newcomer as one of theirs.

The intruder moved around the pool. It was carrying something bulky; as it moved deeper into the temple Hesperix recognized it as the corpse of a man. The body was in fairly good shape; Hesperix had a good eye for such details, and he could tell that it hadn't been dead long. The cleric waited until the creature came before him.

Zafir Navev dropped the body it carried to the floor. "The Master has sent me here," he said.

Hesperix let out an exultant breath that he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "I know," the cleric said, his soul and his will restored to what they had been... and more.

Chapter 258

REFLECTION

The soft chanting from Nelan sounded unnaturally loud in the stillness of the temple of Orcus. The oddly-shaped chamber created unusual acoustics, and a footfall in one place could come back amplified tenfold by echoes, a feature that led to some tense moments for those on watch. Even Mehlaraine eschewed her usual walking pattern while on her watch, instead taking a seat on the dais near the altar, scanning the darkness for any signs of threats.

The quarters for the priests that had formerly served this temple were in a room just off the central chamber, and contained sufficient beds for all of them. That room had no exits, but Dar did not want any of them out of sight of the cleric, no matter how secure the area appeared. So they dragged the beds out into the temple, to give those not on watch a chance to sleep.

Not that any of them felt much like sleeping. Allera came over to Shay, who sat on one of the beds, her head lying against the wall at her back. The scout's hand idly rubbed the hilt of *Beatus Incendia*, which she'd recovered from the blood pool through the assistance of a *detect magic* spell from Elegion Alderis. She had crafted a temporary scabbard for the weapon from some leather straps and a blanket taken from the priest quarters.

"You should try to get some sleep," Allera told her. She sat down next to Shay on the bed. For a long moment, the scout did not respond.

"Would you be able to sleep?"

"Part of the training to become a healer involves acknowledging the needs of the body, even when they conflict with the demands of the mind."

"A nice trick, that."

"Your body will not be able to function, without rest. I could give you an infusion, something to help you rest."

Shay shook her head. "If we're attacked, I can't be in a drugged stupor."

"I wouldn't give you something that strong. And it would be better than being in a fog because of exhaustion."

"I'll sleep, I promise. I... I just need some time."

"There wasn't anything you could have done, Shay."

There was another long silence. Allera, alert to the feelings of others, waited it out. "I could have not given Talen my ring," she said, finally. "I thought I was protecting him, but instead I only caused his death." She looked over at the healer. "Yes, I know he's dead. Just because I didn't want to admit it doesn't mean I couldn't see it in your eyes."

"Shay." Allera put her hand on Shay's. "It wasn't your fault. You would have done the same, if Talen had been in danger, and you could have come to his aid."

"Yes, but I *couldn't*. Because I got myself into trouble, and I was helpless to do anything to stop it." She leaned back against the wall. "If I'd kept my ring, that ghaist wouldn't have been able to touch me, and Talen wouldn't have needed to rescue me."

"And the warlock would have just let you destroy him? Shay, we were almost overwhelmed in that battle. It was a miracle that more of us weren't killed. Talen did what he had to do, and his sacrifice probably saved the lives of several others. If the warlock had been able to hit the rest of the group with a few more of those blasts..."

"Thank you, Allera. I appreciate what you're trying to do. If you'll excuse me, I think I'll get that sleep now."

The healer rose as Shay laid out on the bed, and closed her eyes.

Allera looked down at her, biting her lip in frustration. Finally, she turned and walked quietly away.

They were ready for an attack at any moment, but the hours passed without event, the only noise the constant drone of Nelan's chanting, and the quiet movements as those on watch were relieved.

They were all awake and together for the end. Nelan's voice rasped as he focused the power of the Father upon this dread place, sundering the link between the temple and the demon lord. There was a faint flicker of blackness around the edges of their lights that was gone before it could be fully perceived. That was followed by a loud crack that echoed through the temple, as the huge altar stone was sundered into a dozen pieces.

Nelan slumped back. "It is finished," he said.

Shay stepped forward. "Let's get moving."

The others had already prepared their gear. Allera helped Nelan gather his things, using her wand of *lesser restoration* to ease his exhaustion. Nodding gratefully to her, the cleric carefully folded his ceremonial vestments and placed them in his pack. Shay waited impatiently for him to finish.

"A few more minutes is not going to matter," Dar told her.

She fixed him with a cold stare. "I seem to remember being a few minutes late, the last time we came to this temple. Ask Allera how important those minutes were."

The fighter's jaw tightened, but he did not reply. Seeing that Nelan had put on his pack, Shay turned and headed toward the temple exit.

"All right, let's move out," Dar said, following the scout as she led them out of the sundered temple of Orcus.

Chapter 259

A RITE OF BLOOD

Hesperix reveled as raw, pure power flowed through his body. The flows of energy that permeated the main temple of the Talon of Orcus were visible to his altered sight as pulsating flows of black and red. The flows passed through the walls all around him, but tended to focus on the statue of Orcus against the back wall. The headiest part of the sensations that rushed through him was the realization that he, a mere man, controlled such power through his mastery of the rite of blood.

The ritual sharpened his awareness of his surroundings. He could taste the blood in the air, both from the font behind him, and the stale tracings on the body of the man before him. He imagined he could even smell the fear of the slain warrior, an afterimage of his emotions when he had died.

The dead warrior—and he was clearly that; the scars of dozens of battles were evident on his pale skin—was bound to an X-shaped framework of wooden beams that stood upright directly in front of the altar and statue of Orcus. From where Hesperix stood, the dark form of the statue loomed over the man, its hollow eyes staring down as if in contempt of this latest victim to the demon's ambitions. The red light that diffused down from the ceiling above the statue cast the man's features in garish relief, and gave his naked flesh an obscene tint reminiscent of blood.

The Seer had not made an appearance. The arcanist could not have failed to detect what Hesperix was doing here, and the cleric regretted that the enigmatic figure had not stirred from his lair. He would have enjoyed confronting the man with his new power behind him. The cleric nearly laughed. Plenty of time to attend to the settling of old scores. He had learned of the death of Theron and his entourage from his new ally; a pity, that. But there had also been a warning of other powerful enemies of the Master, former companions of the corpse here. They would be coming, no doubt, to recover their slain comrade.

Hesperix's mouth twisted into a grim mockery of a smile.

The dark cleric's attention occasionally shifted to the side. He did not have to turn to know that the revenant was there; he could feel the presence of the other. The undead being was favored by Orcus, clearly; Hesperix could still remember the stark surprise he'd felt when he'd realized the nature of the rod that the revenant carried. The thing had a strong power of its own, as well, a raw potency that Hesperix could sense even without the augmented perception granted by the ritual. The cleric coveted that rod, but knew that it had been freely given, and was as far beyond his reach as if it were located on the surface of the moon.

Still, if something were to happen to the revenant...

A sharp, stabbing pain in his gut drew Hesperix's full attention back to the ritual. They were getting close, he knew. He still did not fully understand the Master's will in bringing this dead man here, but with his hand and his mind fully restored, he was not going to pause at meaningless questions. The spell he was casting was one that had been beyond his abilities until just a few short hours ago, and the ritual was both amplifying and changing it. The cleric had to focus his full will upon the flows of power, drawing more and more of the negative energy through his spell into the temple, directing them into the body of the man.

And then, finally, it was done. The flows winked out so suddenly that Hesperix felt disoriented for a moment, as his perceptions were reduced to what they had been before. He felt keenly the absence of the greater commune with the power of the Master, but he focused more upon his subject, the limp form crucified upon the wooden frame.

"The Master calls you to his service," the cleric said to the body.

The dead man stirred.

Talen Karedes lifted his head and opened his eyes. He stared at Hesperix and Navev. There was no life in his eyes, but nevertheless something burned in those cold orbs.

The former knight's limbs clenched; the ropes holding his arms and legs strained, and the wooden frame tensed against the pressure. Hesperix and Navev just watched as

the wood groaned, and then with a loud crack gave way. Talen leaned forward, scraps of timber still clinging to his wrists, and tore away the bonds still holding his feet.

He stepped forward, awkwardly at first, shrugging out of the remains of his bindings. Navev shifted slightly, a faint nimbus appearing around his left hand. Hesperix did not move at all, until Talen was only two steps in front of him. Then he lifted his hand, which bore his silver sigil; the horned skull of Orcus.

“Kneel, slave,” the cleric said.

Talen froze. For a moment, he trembled with the enormity of his effort. One leg shifted slightly, as he took a half-step forward; at that movement Navev’s hand came up, just a bit.

But finally, Talen slumped forward, falling to his knees.

Hesperix walked around him. “You are strong,” he said. “So full of anger... and hate. You will use that, to serve the Master. Now, you are His... His down to the depths of your soul.”

The cleric laughed, and he stopped as he came around to the back of the submissive Talen.

“This is a dangerous move,” Navev said. “He will resist you... especially when his friends come to reclaim him.”

“It is the Master’s will,” Hesperix said. He made a subtle gesture of command.

The figure that shambled forward had been a man, once. Now, the priest Calxes was just an echo of vitality. The robes he wore could not conceal the emaciated state of his body. The priest was silent; his tongue had been removed by Theron’s servants, and his arms were kept huddled against his body, concealing the fact that all ten of his fingers had been amputated. More had been taken as well, and it was the promise of the restoration of those missing pieces that had bound Calxes anew to Hesperix’s service.

Now the ruined man came forward, to stand before the new High Priest of Orcus. The former priest paid no attention to Talen or Navev. Hesperix drew out a knife from his belt, but he kept his eyes on Talen.

“You feel the need, I know. The hunger. Do not try to deny it; it is a part of you, now.”

Hesperix turned and reached for Calxes. The man did not flinch as Hesperix grabbed a fold of his robe and hacked it away with his knife. The man’s hide was tight around the bones of his shoulder, and his neck was pale, almost white. The high priest then drew the knife along the edge of his neck, opening a shallow gash that spurted a thin

stream of bright red down his chest. Calaxes closed his eyes and uttered a quiet sound, but did not otherwise protest.

Talen stared at the red flow.

“Drink,” Hesperix commanded. “Taste the bounty of your Master, and revel in it.”

Talen trembled; he could not look away.

“Take it! I command you!”

Hesperix’s shout echoed through the temple, and Talen stood, slowly. He did not move for several long seconds. Hesperix came to him. He wiped the bloody knife across Talen’s cheek, leaving a red trail across his face.

“You can smell it, I know. It is as good as you think, a thousand times better. You need only take it.”

A low moan rose from Talen’s chest as he moved forward in small, hesitant steps. The wounded man was starting to waver a bit, now, his breath rattling in his throat, standing there like a wounded animal frozen before a predator.

With a final sound of release, Talen leapt forward and seized the man. He sank his fangs into the man’s throat, opening a fresh geyser of blood that he swallowed eagerly.

Hesperix and Navev watched him feed. “His will, his intelligence, his awareness of what he is, and what he has lost... it will give him strength,” Hesperix said.

Navev did not respond. He too, knew what he had lost.

Chapter 260

MISSION OF REDEMPTION

“Father, are you all right? Father?”

Alderis stirred out his reverie, and turned to see his daughter standing next to him, a concerned look on her face. Selanthas stood a short distance removed, respecting their privacy but close enough to provide support. “I am sorry, dear. I was... pondering matters.”

They stood on a rocky outcrop, a cold wind tugging at their cloaks and causing them to flare up around their bodies as it shifted direction. It was midday, or some time close to

it; it was impossible to tell for sure, with the sky an uninterrupted expanse of deep gray above them. The colors around them were muted, dominated by the gray stones and the mixed browns of the dead winter brush that choked the hillside around them. Other than the members of their party, there were no living things in view as far as they could see around them. To the east, one could just see the faint blue of the sea between a gap in the hills. In every other direction, the rough hills continued unabated in every direction. And to the south, although they could no longer see it, lay Rappan Athuk.

Alderis had to force himself to tear his gaze from that unseen locale. Despite it being out of view, he knew that he could close his eyes and point to its exact direction. He glanced over at where Dar, Allera, Nelan, and Honoratius were engaged in quiet conversation on the far side of the crest. Shaylara was not visible; likely she was out scouting the approach to the hidden tunnel. Dar apparently was no longer worried about her going off on her own; she needed Nelan's *find the path* spell to guide her.

"Father," Mehlaraine said, her voice quiet but earnest. "Father, we do not need to stay here. Now that you have regained the use of your *teleportation* magic, we can return home. You have done enough for the humans... you helped them to destroy the temples, to defeat the followers of the Demon. Let us return to Aelvenmarr, live our lives in peace."

Alderis turned back to her. Despite the love that he felt for his daughter, he felt cold inside. Ever since they had returned here, to this accursed place, he had felt the emotion draining from him like a punctured wineskin. Even now, with the presence of that dark pit lingering on the edges of his awareness, he could not muster any anger or sadness, only a deep hollow within his soul. Against that, even Mehlaraine's warmth was only a flickering candle's flame.

"No, daughter," he said. "My fate is bound to that of those men." *There is only one way I can find peace*, he thought, but did not say aloud. Instead he said, "You and Selanthas should return home, however. I can empower you both with flight... you can be back amidst the bowers of the deep wood by the next dawn."

She shook her head. She did not speak, but her intent was clear in her eyes. He reached out, and touched her cheek briefly. He looked up as Allera drew near them, hesitating to avoid interrupting them. He gestured for her to approach.

"We are moving out," the healer said. "Dar and Honoratius agree that we need to make haste, to reach our destination before Nelan's spell, and Honoratius's time with us, both expire."

"How far is it?" Selanthas asked.

"They are not sure," Allera said.

"All the more reason to make haste," Alderis said. Trying to hide the weariness that clung to him like a cloak, he walked over to where the other humans waited. Mehlaraine, not fooled in the least, shadowed him, with her consort following behind. Her expression might have seemed placid to the humans, but in her eyes the depths of her concern were clear.

The last hour had passed incredibly swiftly. Honoratius had rejoined them shortly after they'd left the temple of Orcus. He had brought the news that had set them upon this path, to stand together beneath the open sky on the cusp of another deadly incursion into Rappan Athuk.

Alderis thought back over that conversation, which had taken place in the river cavern not far from the second temple. By now they had all learned to recognize the signs of the archmage's appearance, and were ready when Letellia's tremors had ceased, and she lifted her eyes, subtly different, to face them.

"Talen Karedes is located in the Talon of Orcus, on the third sublevel of the tenth dungeon level of Rappan Athuk," Honoratius said.

"Is he alive?" Shay asked.

"I do not know. I attempted to *scry* both him and Zafir Navev, but the spell failed to provide any result. The former attempt could have failed because Talen is dead, but the failure of the second suggests that both are in a shielded location."

"What is this, 'Talon'?" Selanthas asked.

"I do not know. It could be another temple, shielded like the others."

"But Varo's notes only referred to three temples," Allera said.

"This could be an ancillary site, or of newer construction. Or of another purpose entirely; it is impossible to be certain given our current information."

"Can you *teleport* us there?" Shay asked.

"No. Not without more specific coordinates... and even if I had such, if it is protected against scrying, it is likely shielded against magical transportation as well."

"Will you be able to enter that place? In Letellia's body, I mean," Nelan asked.

"I do not know."

Alderis watched as Nelan knelt in a clear space on the edge of the bluff, partially protected from the wind by several large boulders. The priest drew out his divine focus, and began praying.

After the conversation in the dungeon, they'd had a destination, but not a means to get there. Honoratius's research had given them information, but not enough to act upon. Nelan had his *find the path* spell, but the spell was of limited duration, and if they did not reach the Talon in that time, they would be compelled to wait to rest and recover spells, a delay of another day in all likelihood.

Nelan had not had a *commune* memorized, but he'd had a *divination* ready, and he'd cast it there, on the banks of the underground river, to request guidance from his patron. The message granted in his reverie had been surprisingly clear. The fastest route to the Talon would take them back up to the surface world, and back underground using the hidden goblin entrance near Grezneck.

"That is a long ways off," Dar had said. "It will take hours, at least, to cover that ground."

Alderis had spoken up at that point. His words replayed themselves in his thoughts now. He wondered why he'd spoken them; his own mission was focused on the master of this place, and by Dar's own admission, the recovery of Talen—or his body—was likely to take them off that course.

"Perhaps not," he had said. "I have mastered the art of magical transportation myself. Between Honoratius and myself, I believe that we can take the entire group directly to the goblin entrance, and from there Nelan can guide us with his spell."

Alderis mused on the painful history that had lurked behind his statement. The opening of the seventh valence had technically been a "rediscovery" of spells he had counted in his repertoire before his descent into madness. His friend Sultheros had been able to recover only one of his books, one that contained just a few higher-order spells. Since then he had spent hundreds of hours studying the book. It was incredibly frustrating to read the fine text, in his own hand, over and over and yet fail to grasp the meaning there, just beyond his reach. It had only been after the battle in the second temple of Orcus, while they had waited for the priest of the Father to complete his ritual to *hallow* the place, that he had finally broken through, and recovered some pieces of his magic. But there were still more spells, the majority, that still escaped him. For now, he would have to be satisfied with just a handful of new spells, and continue to draw the bulk of his daily memorizations from the books of the madman Banth.

Well, if nothing else, the elf thought wryly, I am becoming a quite passable transmuter.

Alderis drew his cloak close around himself, a mostly futile gesture against the swirling and persistent wind. Nelan had finished his spell, and walked with a purpose that Alderis recognized as guided by an outside force. The cleric led them down the slope on the far side of the ridge. They had picked this spot to begin, as they'd lingered here a bit on their last visit to the goblin city, on their way back to Rappan Athuk. Alderis and the other elves had not been with them at the time, but Shay had been able to describe

the area in sufficient precision for the elf's *greater teleport* to deliver them on target within six paces of the archmage's group. Now they were headed back underground, to yet another stronghold of their foe. Alderis had no doubt that the enemy knew they were coming, and would have another ambush prepared in anticipation of their arrival.

The elf paused at the edge of the trail and looked around one last time. It was a harsh country, one that bore the touch of the Demon heavily upon it. It reminded him too well of his dreams, and the visions of a scoured world that were contained within.

He shuddered, and followed the others down the slope toward the concealed cave.

Chapter 261

DESCENT

The stairs seemed to go on for longer this time, perhaps because each step drew them closer to a confrontation that they were not looking forward to.

Not for most of them, at least.

"I am going to cut that fucking wizard's head off," Dar muttered, his fist tight around the hilt of *Valor*. "When I get done with him, there's no fucking way he's coming back again."

The darkness of the shaft remained close around them, despite the multiple magical lights that they carried. Nelan had not had the opportunity to recover his *daylight* spell, so they had to accept the gloom, which seemed to intensify as they penetrated deeper under the ground.

They passed the warding galleries near the bottom of the shaft. There was no sign of the goblin defenders, but that did not mean that they were not there, watching.

When they reached the bottom, however, they quickly found the reason for the quiet in the shaft.

"Damn... it looks like the gobbos have given up on the outside world altogether," Dar said.

The eight of them stood facing a wall of rubble, a complete collapse of the tunnel that led in the direction of Grezneck. It was impossible to know how far the collapse extended, but from what they'd encountered of the mining talents of the goblins of Rappan Athuk, it was likely that they'd been as thorough with this as with all of their endeavors.

"This way," Nelan said, drawing their attention to the tunnel that was still intact, heading in the opposite direction of the collapse.

"Did the goblins ever say what lay down this way?" Allera asked.

"No," Shay said, moving ahead to the lead. She drew *Beatus Incendia*, the light of the holy sword flaring out around her. The tunnel ahead was a rough but straight passage that extended without break or interruption as far as they could see ahead. "Let's go."

"It would appear that the scout has decided to eschew stealth, at least for the moment," Selanthas observed quietly.

"She knows that they know that we are coming," Alderis said, feeling something tug at him as he witnessed the passion of the woman, all of her loss and fear and anger poured into a single-minded intensity to recover her lover.

Honoratius leaned against the wall of the passage. "Are you all right, archmage?" Allera asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am fine. It is just... the strain... it is not easy."

"Just hold on a little bit longer, magus," Dar said, his voice almost gentle. Adjusting the straps of his pack, he started down the tunnel after Shay.

They walked onward for a goodly time, the minutes blending together without count in the dark eternity of the tunnel. Other than slight variations in the walls of the passage, their route remained unchanged. With each step they took their lights revealed more corridor ahead, and the darkness behind swallowed up an equal amount behind them. They were focused not on counting steps, but on the ambush that could come at any moment. The walls were sufficiently uneven that secret doors could have been concealed almost anywhere, and their pace did not leave even the elves time to give even a cursory search along their route. So they watched, and they waited.

Finally, a pair of doors materialized out of the darkness ahead. They were of plain, unadorned stone, their hinges recessed into the thick lintels. As they drew closer, they could see markings upon the door, sigils marked in what looked like dried blood.

"It looks like this is the place," Nelan said. "The spell indicates that the way is forward."

Shay moved forward and bent her ear to the narrow crack where the two doors met. After a few long seconds, she drew back. "I hear creaking metal, like chains," she said.

"We need a minute to ready spells," Allera said.

"Go ahead," Dar said.

The healer began moving among the companions, laying *death wards* upon each of them. Nelan had not had the opportunity to recover his spells, and without his reservoir to draw upon, she could not protect all of them. Selanthas had his amulet, which offered similar protection, and they had agreed earlier that Honoratius and Alderis would rely on their own arcane magic to protect them. The two mages quietly completed their protections, and waited for Allera to finish.

“It is done,” she said finally. Dar nodded, and took up position opposite Shay at one of the doors. “Be ready,” he told them. There was no need to give further instructions; they had already made their plans on how best to strike.

As the pair thrust the doors open, their light spilled into a long hallway, maybe sixty feet long and twenty feet wide. The sound of clanking chains greeted them, accompanied by a low moaning sound that drew their attention upward.

The ceiling of the hall was a good twenty feet above them. Dangling from dozens of hooks set into the stone were lengths of barbed chain, some just long enough to brush the head of a man making his way forward. Linked and interlinked, sometimes tangled together in a jumbled mess, the chains formed a thick web that stretched down the entire length of the hall.

And hanging from those chains was the source of the noise.

They were recognizable as goblins by their size, although all of the bodies had experienced decay. There were at least a dozen of them. The creatures, clearly zombies of some sort, had been snared on the chains, which in some cases passed through their bodies, holding them pinned.

As Dar and Shay pushed the doors wide open, the goblin zombies intensified their struggles. One, hanging almost directly above the door, yanked out a length of chain and swung it down at Shay. The scout shifted slightly, and the hooked end clanged off the wall. Several of the other zombies began dragging themselves down, their bodies tearing as the hook on the chains bit away pieces of their rotten flesh.

Nelan stepped forward, and presented his divine focus. “Perish before the light of the Father!” he cried. White light flared from the device, but it flickered, flaring out against the dread power of this place. Even so, three of the zombies came apart, their bodies crumbling into ash as holy fire consumed them.

Ten feet down the passage, a zombie landed on the ground. It started toward the companions, armed with an six-foot length of chain that had come free with it. Behind it, two more tore free and fell to the ground, rapidly rising to join their companion in attacking.

Dar didn’t wait; he lifted *Valor* and stepped forward to meet them.

“Careful, Dar!” Nelan warned. “They are not normal zombies!”

That much was obvious, as the creatures that shambled forward to attack the fighter were neither slow nor hesitant. The one with the chain lashed out at Dar, but the improvised weapon merely glanced off the greave covering the fighter’s left arm. The blow did not slow him in the least as he slashed down with *Valor*, cutting the zombie in two from shoulder to hip.

But the zombie’s companions were quick to press their attack. One smashed a length of chain across Dar’s gut, but again it failed to inflict damage through the fighter’s armor. Dar lifted his sword to strike again, but a length of chain slashed down from above, twirling around his right wrist. Dar looked up to see a zombie, its body pinioned by at least three chains, dangling above him, pulling on the chain hooked around his arm.

Another zombie leapt at Dar’s leg, intent on exploiting the fighter’s distraction. But Shay sprang forward and cut down with *Beatus Incendia*, dashing the creature’s head from its shoulders. Even as the goblin fell, two more dropped down from the chains near her, and quickly leapt to the attack.

A *fireball* shot past the pair and exploded further down the corridor, immolating several more zombies before they could work free from the chains and attack. Dar and Shay’s cloaks were blown back by the force of the blast, but Alderis had placed the spell precisely, and neither were actually harmed.

Nelan and Mehlaraine rushed forward to join Dar and Shay, but the battle was already winding down. Dar had yanked the chain holding him hard enough to rip the zombie off its anchor. The creature’s weapon now became a hindrance to it, as Dar snapped it up into a cut from *Valor* that took its entire arm off its body. Shay destroyed the other one that had been attacking Dar, and Selanthas finished off one last straggler still stuck on the chains with a volley of arrows.

Dar tore off a hook that had dug into one of the straps of his bracer, tossing the chain aside. “That wasn’t much of a welcoming committee,” he said.

“I expect these guards were placed here simply to delay us, and provide warning to the defenders of the Talon,” Honoratius said. The archmage had withheld her spell power during the brief battle, recognizing that the goblin zombies, even enhanced as they were, offered little threat to the group’s fighters. None of them had suffered any injuries during the encounter.

“We should press on, while our enchantments are still effective,” Nelan said.

“Fine with me,” Dar said. He nodded to Shay, and the pair continued to the end of the passage, where another pair of doors waited. These, unlike the first set, were

decorated, graven with unwholesome images of the sort that the Doomed Bastards were all too acquainted with from their time in Rappan Athuk.

“So much evil,” Allera said, growing pale as her eyes fell on a particularly disquieting scene carved into the doors.

“Where the Light penetrates, the Dark cannot abide,” Nelan said, his hand clutched tightly around his divine focus.

“Let’s get this over with,” Dar said, taking up position at one of the doors. They opened outward, so he and Shay took hold of them, and with a shared nod pulled hard.

The stone doors swung open with surprising ease. The companions had just enough time to register a large chamber, the presence of enemies.

And then a column of fire came crashing down upon them.

Chapter 262

FIRST STRIKE

The companions had been expecting an attack, so the *flame strike* did not catch them entirely off-guard.

Even so, almost all of them took damage from the spell. Shay sprang forward as the column blasted into the end of the hall, avoiding injury, while the elves, with their superior agility, sprang back to the edge of the *strike* and suffered only superficial wounds. Honoratius had protected herself against fire, but the divine energies inherent in the magic still wracked her borrowed body.

But the archmage maintained his equilibrium, and as the unholy fires cleared he fired off his own readied spell.

The room was clearly the inner sanctum of a temple to Orcus. The far side of the chamber was dominated by a large stone statue of the demon lord, lit by an eerie red light that shone down from somewhere above. A broad stone altar, all edges and spikes, stood in front of the statue, while the space between it and the door they had just opened was occupied by another great stone font, a pool of roiling gelatinous fluid easily ten feet across, from which a terrible sucking and slurping sound emitted as the red substance sloshed about its container.

And standing between the pool and the altar, in the center of the room, stood arrayed against them the forces of evil. As the archmage looked upon them, she mentally catalogued and classified them, marking the greatest threats.

The enemy cleric dominated the chamber. At first glance the armored figure, twelve feet tall, looked like a fire giant, but Honoratius recognized the effects of a *righteous might* spell, which suggested that the man was a priest of considerable power. The creature standing next to him likewise first appeared to be a summoned lion, but the archmage sucked in a breath as she gauged the being's true identity.

A jarilith. That indicated a *planar ally*, which boosted his estimation of the cleric's potency up another notch.

There were four of the black skeletons warding the priest, forming a line before him, and an armored fighter standing off to the side. Honoratius's gaze flicked over him, noting the almost certainly magical banded armor he wore, the blocky helm of black metal covering his face, and the greataxe that burned with magical flame in his hands. Several spells warded him, although Honoratius could not immediately identify them at this distance.

All of this the archmage assimilated in the course of a heartbeat, as she unleashed her *chain lightning* spell. But rather than the twisting bolt of electrical energy, the power that erupted from the arcanist's fingertips was a concentrated pulse of sonic vibrations, which distorted the air as it shot across the chamber.

The sonic blast struck the evil high priest in the chest, overcoming his own protections and savaging his body. It then split and hit both the demon and the armored fighter, damaging both of them before it ran through the ranks of the skeletons, vaporizing all four of them.

Alderis attempted to *dismiss* the demon, but the jarilith resisted the spell.

Selanthas lifted his bow, an arrow at the ready. But he held his shot for an instant while Nelan imparted a spell upon the shaft of the missile. As soon as the *silence* settled upon the arrow the elf fired, sinking his shot into the meaty part of the high priest's left thigh. The cleric's face twisted and he opened his mouth to shout in pain, the sound lost within the radius of Nelan's spell.

Thus far the Doomed Bastards had given better than they'd gotten, but they were all aware that the enemy likely held more surprises in store.

One of those surprises appeared just a moment later, as Shay, landing in a crouch as she evaded the *flame strike*, lifted *Beatus Incendia* and charged the enemy cleric. She ran around the stone pool, and had almost cleared it when the substance within rose up and split, revealing one of the creatures that had been concealed within the pool underneath. The thing looked almost like a water elemental, taking on a rough

humanoid form as it emerged from its lair, but its color and substance were the bright acid crimson of fresh blood.

Shay twisted out of its path as the blood golem struck, but one of its tendrils smacked her in the shoulder, knocking her back. The scout cried out as the brief contact revealed the fell power of the creature; its touch sucked blood from her body, leaving her weakened. She gave ground as it emerged fully from the pool, looming over her as its full size became apparent.

Dar had been only a step behind Shay, but he'd gone around the other side of the pool. He started to come back toward the scout, but Shay stopped him with a shout. "No! Get the cleric!" she yelled, holding back the golem's second attack with a swing of *Beatus Incendia* that merely grazed its unwholesome form. The sword hissed as it struck the construct, a terrible stench rising from its body as the holy flames seared it. But the weak attack did not seem to hinder it in the least, and it surged forward to envelop the scout as its long pseudopods of arms lashed around her arms and slapped hard into her back.

Shay screamed as her blood was torn from her body, absorbed by the creature.

As if that wasn't enough, a second blood golem was rising from the dregs of the pool, facing the casters.

Honoratius stepped forward, and began casting again. But even as she lifted her hands, the slender fingers forming the complex gestures of a high-level evocation, the defenders unleashed another surprise. Something flickered in the shadows to the left, along the edge of the chamber, and Zafir Navev became visible as a black *eldritch blast* erupted from its fingertips, streaking with deadly precision at the archmage and the casters flanking her in the doorway.

Chapter 263

BACKBLAST

Navev's *eldritch blast* slammed into Honoratius's chest, flaring in a cascade of black energy run through with bright flashes of yellow and orange.

And then it flashed back along its course, striking the revenant warlock squarely in the center of his torso. Navev was blasted off his feet, and flew backward about fifteen feet, landing hard near the far wall of the temple.

The archmage shot a desultory look at her fallen adversary. "Warlock, I was fighting mage duels when your grandfather was bleating for his mother's teat."

But the battle directly in front of him was still raging, and Honoratius could not spare Navev more attention. She gestured to Alderis, who had witnessed the exchange, and who nodded. Honoratius resumed her spell as though there had been no interruption, her concentration fixed perfectly upon the fragile weavings of her magic.

Dar, rushing toward the enemy cleric, was caught off guard by the sudden intervention of the jarilith. The leonine demon had seemed idle, even bored, as it had watched him come around the blood pool. But that changed in an instant, the demon crouching and springing forward in a blink of an eye. Dar tried to strike with *Valor*, but the demon was far too quick for him. It struck him with the force of a runaway wagon, seizing his arms with its massive claws. Rivets of pain exploded in his gut as the jarilith's hind claws bit into his gut, the sharp nails piercing his armor and the tender flesh beneath. He spat blood as his wind was blasted out of him. He could do nothing as the demon slammed its jaws down at the juncture of his neck and left shoulder, dragging him down to the ground in a feral embrace.

Just like that, the demon had taken down their strongest fighter in a matter of seconds.

Shay tore free from the blood golem as it shuddered from the impact of several arrows from Selanthas's bow. She felt faint as she staggered back from the creature, which recovered quickly and lunged at her again. Facing it head-on had been a mistake, and she now just tried to evade it, using feints with her sword only to keep its attacks at bay. The construct had swollen with the blood it had absorbed from her body, and as it scored another glancing hit on her thigh, it began to quiver. With a sickening sucking sound the creature tore down the center of its body, coming apart into two pieces that fell over in bulbous heaps upon the floor. Shay stared down at it in surprise, but that turned to alarm immediately as the two sundered halves of the creature rose up, and now two of the golems, each smaller but otherwise identical to the original creature, surged forward to attack.

The scout looked up and realized that her situation was about to get even worse. The second golem had been thwarted in its assault upon the mages, and it now hovered at the edge of the pool, held at bay by the potency of Alderis's *repulsion* spell. Thus stymied, the thing cast about for another victim.

Turning, it started moving to join the attack upon Shay.

The enemy high priest had not been long discomfited by Nelan's *silence* spell. His face twisted in anger as he reached down and snapped off the shaft of the arrow, tossing it across the room. Sound returned, but the first thing that Hesperix heard was the surging roar of flames as Nelan's *flame strike* returned the favor of the evil priest's opening spell. The warrior standing beside the cleric staggered back, scorched by the flames, but Hesperix had warded himself against fire, and his layered defenses protected him against most of the divine energy that got through that ward.

Mehlaraine shot up into the air, *Avelis* quivering in her hand. She flew like a dart over the stone font, bypassing both the golem and the desperate battle between Dar and the jarilith, focused on the evil high priest. Hesperix glanced up as she reached the apogee of her ascent and dove at him, her blade flashing as she fixed upon his neck.

The blow never landed. The elf woman's dive suddenly ended, as suddenly as if she'd struck a stone wall. Dazed, she floated back, trying to recover her bearings.

Hesperix, protected within his *anti-life shell*, smiled.

Allera poured healing energy into the room, infusing them with the power of a *mass cure critical wounds spell*. Navev's own *eldritch blast* had knocked him out of the spell's range, but Allera had recognized the true nature of Hesperix's warrior ally, and she focused a stream of the spell's positive energy into him. Thus far he had not attacked, but had suffered grievous damage from the various spells that had been hurled through the chamber. A tortured howl of pain came from within his full helm.

Shay, fleeing for her life from the blood golems, suddenly turned as if struck. Her face pale, she barely heeded the creatures that eagerly lunged at her exposed back.

Honoratius's evocation, a sonically-substituted *delayed blast fireball*, exploded throughout the center of the chamber. The cascading bubble of sound expanded into a globe forty feet across, enveloping not only the cleric and his servants, but Dar, Shay, and Mehlaraine. For a moment, everyone within the orb was obscured by the distortion effect caused by the pulse, which reverberated off of the walls and ceiling with enough power to crack the ancient, weathered stone.

The spell's effect had been intense and devastating. Hesperix staggered back, blood pouring from his ears and nose. The warrior at his side had fallen to his knees, his axe forgotten as he clutched at the sides of his head. The smaller blood golems were disincorporated, collapsing into puddles of sticky goo, while the last quivered as huge chunks of its substance sloughed off from its body.

And yet the archmage's allies remained unharmed. Somehow, through her mastery of arcane magic, Honoratius had *shaped* the wild power of the spell, forming bubbles within the blast within which Mehlaraine, Dar, and Shay had remained unharmed. Even the jarilith, in close quarters with the fighter, had not been spared, as the spell had enveloped its lower half, sending pulses of pain through it as the sonics ravaged its insides.

Dar knew he was in dire circumstances. Allera's healing spell had dragged him back from the brink of death, but he knew he could not face another full attack from the demonic lion. Honoratius's spell distracted it, just enough for him to pull free and stagger out from under it before it could tear him apart with those deadly claws. His limbs felt like lead weights, and he knew that he'd lost a lot of blood. He made it only a

few steps, falling back against the edge of the pool, before the jarilith's growl drew his attention back around.

He turned to see the lion leaping at him again, its jaws as wide as the mouth of a chasm.

Hesperix realized that he was outmatched. His golems and the jarilith had absorbed most of the enemy's fighting strength, but there was no way he could withstand the spell power of the other side's spellcasters. And thus far both his vaulted creation and his warlock ally had proven useless except as damage sponges. But there was still one gambit he could hurl into the fray.

"Back!" he hissed at his warrior companion. "To the sanctuary of the Great Lord!"

An arrow bit deep into the cleric's shoulder. Above him, the elven woman had recovered, and had retreated from the extended reach of *Dacris*. With his *antilife shell* keeping her at bay, she dove down to assist the human fighter against the jarilith.

Hoping to buy time, Hesperix spoke a word of *blasphemy*.

The unholy syllable filled the chamber. In all honesty, the cleric had doubted that the spell was powerful enough to stop these foes, but he was gratified to see a number of his enemies, including the elven woman, the archer, and the opposing cleric, visibly suffer from the weakening effects of the foul utterance. He retreated across the chamber toward the statue; behind him his undead warrior followed, staggering to his feet.

Shay had started toward them, but she'd gotten only one step before the blood golem behind her smashed a viscid tentacle across her back, knocking her sprawling. She struggled to rise, but she'd lost too much blood, and there was nothing she could do as the golem swept forward to finish her off.

On the far side of the chamber, Navev and Alderis had faced off in another direct confrontation. The elf conjured a *wall of fire* over the prone warlock, immolating the revenant within the flames. The flames crinkled its undead flesh, and Navev screamed as it rolled out of the fire. Coming to its feet, the warlock blasted Alderis with an *eldritch blast*. But Alderis, like Honoratius, had surrounded himself with an aura of *spell turning*, and once again the warlock's power rebounded, knocking it back through the flames once more, smashing against the far wall with a loud smack.

Alderis came forward, lifting his wand of *magic missiles* to finish off the crippled foe. But nothing came through the *wall of fire*. Wary of a trap, the elf waved a hand and dismissed the evocation. He saw only empty stone beyond, scorched black from the heat of the flames. The warlock was gone.

Shay rolled over on her back, looking up at the red death descending upon her. But before the golem could strike, a green light flashed around its body. Shay blinked, and just like that half of the creature's body was just *gone*. She lifted her hands as its remains splashed to the floor around her.

Dar had somehow managed to keep hold of *Valor*, and instinct brought the blade up as the jarilith slammed into him. Its claws smashed into the stone rim of the font, flanking his head, and he felt something hard rip into the left side of his neck, opening up a warm trickle of blood down his back. The demon's jaws closed on his helmet, and for a moment all he could sense was the overwhelming smell of brimstone; everything else was darkness. Even his body was numb, the pain of his earlier wounds fading with the blood that continued to stream from his body.

And then the light returned, and he felt his sense of feeling return—and along with it, a whole hell of a lot of pain. He looked up and saw Allera there, gently lifting his buckled helmet from his head.

“Did we...” he began, coughing blood. “Win?”

“Quiet,” she said, her expression betraying the gravity of his condition. She grasped his neck firmly with both hands, and a moment later Dar felt the purging flow of a *heal* spell course through his body.

He looked up and saw Mehlaraine leaning against the edge of the font. “Help me up,” he said. The elf looked at him, and he could almost see the weariness in her eyes.

“The effects of the *blasphemy* will fade in a few moments,” Allera said to the elf. “Here,” she said to Dar, “Lean on me.”

With the healer's help, Dar was able to get up. It took a lot of effort; the jarilith's body had fallen across his legs, pinning them. *Valor* was buried to the hilt in its chest, where it had impaled itself on the sword. For the moment, he left it there; he wasn't sure he could get it out at the moment. Allera's spell had restored his strength, but he still felt overwhelmed.

He looked around. Nelan was tending to Shay; everyone else was present, although Selanthas looked barely able to stand, let alone ply his bow. Since Allera wasn't worried about it, he decided he wasn't going to be, either.

“Where's the cleric?”

“He fled behind the statue,” Allera said.

“And that fighter... that was Talen, wasn't it?” he added, in a low voice.

“It sounded like him,” Allera said. “He went with the cleric. He's undead, now.”

“Great,” Dar said. It looked like it wasn’t time to rest after all; reaching down he put a boot on the dead demon’s shoulder, and with a mighty heave pulled *Valor* free.

“The warlock escaped,” Honoratius said. “But I doubt that we have seen the last of him, or the cleric.”

“Of couse not,” Dar said. “Everyone all right?”

They all nodded; the lingering effects of the *blasphemy* on Nelan and the elves were already beginning to fade. Shay was on her feet, restored by another *heal* spell from Nelan, but she was pale, her eyes haunted.

“All right then,” Dar said, a grim look fixed on his face, “Let’s get this bastard and get our man back.”

Chapter 264

THE LAIR OF THE SEER

Warily the companions approached the statue of Orcus. The granite construct loomed over them, its dark eyes malevolent, but it remained inanimate.

“There’s an opening behind it,” Mehlaraine noted.

Spreading out, they approached the rear wall. They could see the gap that Shay had mentioned, a secret door that now stood partially open, revealing a dimly lit chamber beyond.

“Why’d he leave it open?” Dar growled.

“He wants us to follow him,” Selanthas said. “Into a trap, no doubt.”

“No doubt,” Dar said. “Well, let’s oblige the prick.”

Honoratius lifted a hand to forestall him. “Mayhap we can trigger the trap without immediate personal jeopardy.”

“That would be a first,” Allera said, under her breath.

The archmage cast a spell, an incantation that culminated in a rumbling noise as a roughly-man shaped earth elemental rose up out of the ground. The elemental wasn’t

very large for its kind, standing almost eight feet in height, but when it shifted its squat legs the ground shook with its weight.

Honoratius spoke with it, the gruff syllables of the Terran language sounding incongruous coming from Letellia's mouth. The elemental moved to obey, stomping over to the secret door. It opened it fully, nearly crushing it back against the wall, the portal's concealed hinges snapping before the creature's strength.

Standing in the doorway, the elemental made a perfect target, and it wasn't much of a surprise when a bolt of lightning shot out from the room beyond and smashed into the elemental's body. The blast tore through the summoned creature and kept going, smashing into the back of the statue of Orcus. The hulking image of the demon absorbed the blast more stoically than the elemental, which crumbled into a pile of useless rock. Within seconds, even that was gone.

"Well, we know they're in there," Dar said.

Alderis and Honoratius each fired a bead from their wands of *fireball* into the room beyond the secret door. From their current angle, they could not see any specific targets, but from the way that the flames rushed back out through the opening, the blasts likely filled or nearly filled the space beyond.

Alderis looked at his wand and frowned. "My device is out of charges."

"You mean *my* device," Honoratius said. "I constructed it, seven years ago."

The companions waited, focusing on the open doorway, but no further attacks materialized from within.

"They're waiting for us to go in after them," Selanthas said, testing the tension of his bowstring.

"Enough talk, then, let's get to doing—" Dar began, but he was cut off by a cry from the chamber beyond the door.

"Shay! Help... help me!"

"Talen!" Shay cried. Like a coiled spring suddenly released, she shot forward toward the door.

"Shay, no!" Dar yelled, lunging after her. Allera was even faster than he, rushing forward after the scout.

The three of them leapt through the doorway. The others were just a step behind, but as soon as Dar cleared the opening, a glowing field of energy appeared within it, sealing the room off. Nelan pounded on it, but the *wall of force* was impervious to his efforts.

There was a slight hiss of power, and two more statues of Orcus suddenly appeared on the temple side of the *wall*, flanking the door. These statues were smaller, each standing a mere six feet high, but they were otherwise duplicates of the massive one opposite the secret door, down to the skull-headed wands they bore.

Only these statues were not inanimate, a fact that the companions discovered at once as they suddenly lifted their weapons and attacked.

On the far side of the *wall of force*, Dar, Allera, and Shay found themselves in a low, long vault. Alcoves flanked them to either side, occupied by wizened corpses swathed in preservative cloths. The mummies appeared to be mere carcasses, and they crackled as they burned, the desiccated husks consumed by fires started by the arcanists' *fireballs* earlier. The room was thick with smoke, and full of a musky stench.

Shay had charged a good ten paces forward before she'd come to an abrupt stop, staring ahead in horror. Standing by Allera just inside the doorway, Dar could see that they were not alone.

The cleric was there, reduced now to his normal size, his black scythe raised in one hand. Beyond him, Dar could just make out a shadowy figure in a raised alcove on the far side of the vault; he was almost certainly the wizard who had fired off the *lightning bolt* earlier. Shifting *mirror images* obscured his position. Dar made a mental note to make killing him a priority.

But the sight that drew his attention, and which had stopped Shay, was the face of their erstwhile companion. Dar had known who the cleric's warrior ally was, but that knowledge was not the same as seeing the man standing there, his helm now removed. His skin was a pale, unnatural gray, but otherwise he was the same Talen Karedes that they had known.

"Talen..." Shay managed to say.

"I am sorry," he said, as the evil high priest of Orcus laughed a bitter, terrible laugh.

"Not as sorry as you're going to be," Dar growled, lifting *Valor* and surging forward.

"Dar, wait!" Allera warned, but it was too late.

The cleric of Orcus raised his hand. "HALT!"

The word echoed through the chamber, reverberating off the walls. Dar froze, and Shay, already caught in the spell of her lover's terrible gaze, likewise stiffened as the magic of the *greater command* echoed through the vault.

The cleric turned to Talen. "Take her," he said, waving his hand idly like a king granting a boon.

The undead knight's expression betrayed the conflict raging in him, but he stepped forward, nevertheless. Shay stood there, trembling. Her clothes were soaked in blood, the detritus from the destroyed blood golems.

Allera had resisted the cleric's spell, and she lunged forward. "Stay back!" she shouted, a blue glow materializing around her hands.

But before the healer could reach either Talen or Shay, the Seer unleashed another bolt of lightning. This one struck Allera in the chest, knocking her roughly back, blasting a blackened hole in the center of her armor. Flares of electrical energy radiated out and hit both Shay and Dar, but all they could do was stand there, held in place by Hesperix's magic. Allera landed face-down on the stone floor, groaning. Dar reached for her, but while he was not completely paralyzed, he could not order his feet to move even a small step.

"You're a dead man, wizard," he growled, frustrated.

"Take her, now!" the cleric urged once more. Talen, moving in fitful jerks, came to stand before Shay.

"Talen," the scout said, the word a sob of pain.

"I... I can't... I'm sorry, Shay," Talen replied. He opened his jaws wide, revealing sharp incisors.

"Don't do it," Dar said.

But whatever war battled within the undead knight seemed to have a foreordained conclusion. He embraced Shay, crushing her body against his as his jaws closed on her neck, piercing her flesh. The scout, *dominated* by his will, let out a soft groan, but could not otherwise resist.

Chapter 265

PAYBACK

"Nelan, watch out!"

Mehlaraine stepped in between the first golem and the distracted cleric as it swung its mace ponderously at the back of his head. The thing had to weigh hundreds of pounds,

but she caught its attack on *Avelis* and smoothly turned it away. She stepped inside its reach, striking it with a blow that did no apparent damage but which drew the thing after her as she retreated back out toward the more open space of the temple.

On the opposite side of the door, the second golem had taken a swing at Alderis, but the elf's *stoneskin* protected him from any damage. The thing reached for him with its other hand, but he stepped smoothly out of its reach. He lifted a wand and blasted it point-blank with a series of *magic missiles* that dug craters in its granite form.

"We need to get through that door!" Nelan said. "The others are in serious trouble!"

"Draw near to me, and I can *dimension door* us all beyond the obstacle," Honoratius said. The archmage fired a trio of *sonic rays* into the statue that Alderis had just blasted. The spell blasted great swathes of its body into powder, but the creature kept coming, ponderously shifting as it attempted to close with the arcanists tormenting it.

Selanthas was firing at the other one, blasting shots hard into its back while Mehlaraine kept it busy. "Dearest, we are departing!" he yelled after her. She nodded, ducking under a swing that she made look clumsy as she rushed over to them.

Nelan smashed the first golem with his mace as he rushed past to join the elves gathering around Honoratius. The golem countered with a blow that caught the cleric on the back of the leg. Off-balance, he toppled forward, to be caught by Selanthas. Honoratius was already casting, and she extended her arms, letting each of the others take hold of her.

Talen drank deeply of Shay's lifeblood, the scout whimpering in his embrace. But the vampire suddenly stiffened and drew back, crimson coating his lips as he screamed in pain. Allera had rolled over, and without getting up cast another *mass cure critical wounds*. The injuries she and her companions had suffered from the Seer's magic eased, but Talen felt that pain several times over, as the healer's positive energies ravaged his frame.

Something in Dar snapped, and the compulsion holding him collapsed. The fighter roared and charged forward, slamming into Shay and Talen from behind. The force of the impact separated the pair, the scout falling to the ground at his feet while Talen staggered back several steps, still a bit dazed.

Dar was intensely cognizant of the wizard, who seemed to be hanging back in the shadows of the alcove, not doing anything that he could see. That worried him. But his immediate attention was focused on the priest, who pointed at him, and spoke words of power.

Dar felt the *inflict wounds* spell as a tingling sensation; Allera's *death ward* was still in effect, and it absorbed the corrupt energies of the spell. Dar had no idea what had

happened, but he caught a glimpse of the cleric's face, and his frustration told him all he needed to know.

Hesperix's *mass inflict wounds* wasn't entirely wasted, however; Talen seemed to get a second wind from the surge of negative energy. The fighter had left his axe behind in the temple, but he drew a shortsword from his belt, and turned to confront Dar.

While Dar did not have a problem with cutting on Talen, especially given his new circumstances, the fighter had a better idea, and lunged for the cleric. Unfortunately for him, Hesperix's *antilife shell* was still up, and Dar rebounded from the barrier. The cleric laughed, and the fighter barely managed to get his guard up before Talen slammed hard into him.

Honoratius and the others materialized near the doorway into the room, transported by the archmage's *dimension door*. However, before either she or her companions could react the Seer invoked a readied spell upon a scroll he bore. Another field of force appeared around them, this time a flawless cube ten feet across. Nelan and Mehlaraine pounded on the *forcecage*, but it was utterly unaffected by their efforts.

Honoratius nodded to himself. The wizard did not hesitate, reaching up and yanking the *Web of Transposition* roughly from her hair. She staggered as though she'd been punched in the gut; the mage slumped to the ground, barely caught by Selanthas as he fell.

"What happened to her?" Nelan said.

"I don't know," the elf archer said, easing the stricken mage to the ground. He indicated the fine weaving clutched in her slender fingers, but had no more answers for the cleric.

"Father, your spells..." Mehlaraine began, but Alderis shook his head.

"Neither a *dispel* nor an *antimagic field* will counter this spell," the elf said. "We are well and truly trapped, my dear."

Those trapped inside the *forcecage* could only watch as Dar, Allera, and Shay, already battered and beaten, stood alone against their deadly foes.

Chapter 266

ONE OF THOSE DAYS

Dar felt a tingling sensation creep around the edges of his mind. With an angry snarl, he forced it away with a violent thrust of his will. With Allera's help, he had been

learning to focus his thoughts to resist mental intrusions, and that extra bit of concentration helped him to overcome whatever nasty spell had been cast on him.

He met Talen's initial thrust with a parry from *Valor*, and countered with a quick swing that the vampiric knight likewise turned away. Those preliminaries aside, the two faced off against each other.

"From the moment we first met, I thought it might come to this," Talen said quietly. The knight's sword was about a foot shorter than Dar's, but its steel had a slightly greenish tinge to it, and it was flawless; almost certainly a magical weapon.

"I can't say that—AARGH!"

Dar's reply was cut off as the enemy wizard unleashed a *cone of cold* that blasted through the vault, engulfing everyone save for the cleric of Orcus and those trapped within the *forcecage*.

Something hard smashed into Dar's chest, and he staggered back, trying to fight off the disorientation he'd suffered from the icy blast. As his senses returned, he could see that at least Talen looked to have been hit pretty hard by the spell as well; ice choked the gaps between the steel bands of his armor, and the blood covering his face had frozen, giving him a particularly ragged mein.

"Looks like your new friends aren't too worried about your well-being," Dar managed to say, although his teeth chattered loudly over every syllable.

Talen's lips twisted into a feral snarl, but as he stepped forward to attack again he cried out in pain once more. Dar knew what had happened even as the healing flowed into him, bringing warmth back into his battered body.

"Keep it coming, sweetheart!" he yelled.

Talen wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Without turning, he pointed at Shay, who had not moved from where she had fallen after Dar had charged into her. "Shay. I want you to kill Allera," he said.

The scout stirred, and slowly pulled herself to her feet.

"You bastard!" Dar lunged forward, swinging *Valor* around in a powerful arc. But another spell struck before he could connect; an *unholy blight* that exploded through the chamber. Dar grimaced as his muscles stiffened and his stomach clenched from the dark energies of the spell. This time, he noticed, Talen was not affected in the least.

Dar was starting to wonder just how much of this punishment he could take.

He glanced to the left, trying to sort out what was happening with Shay and Allera, but Talen was on him in an instant, forcing him to raise his guard. He just managed to turn the other man's blade, but Talen smashed him across the jaw with his free hand, knocking him back. The blow felt as though he'd been punched by an ogre; whatever Talen was now, he was damned fucking *strong*.

"You punch like a girl," Dar said, spitting blood. Fortunately Allera's *death ward* still protected him, so his life force remained intact. At the moment, he had little enough of that to spare. His declining tally was further reduced as a series of *magic missiles* peppered him, each one digging a knife of pain into his body.

"You're getting down to the weak stuff, eh, wizard!" he yelled. Talen lunged forward, but Dar was ready for him this time, and he brought *Valor* up into the vampire's gut. Steel crunched and gave way, and this time it was Talen who was driven back. The blow would have crushed a few organs on a living man, but the vampire seemed merely a bit winded.

Dar didn't give him a chance to recover. The fighter rushed forward, his blade flaring with axiomatic energy. Talen stabbed him in the side, and Dar felt something give as the short blade penetrated metal and entered his flesh. But in turn he smashed *Valor* down hard into the vampire's skull. The hit he'd taken coming in had made it a glancing blow rather than a skull-crushing strike, but even so there was a loud crack as bone crunched, and Talen was driven to the ground, a large swath of his scalp dangling from the vicious wound, his sword clattering out of his grasp. The blow would have certainly killed a mortal man, but somehow Talen clung yet to existence, groaning as he struggled to get up.

Dar stepped forward, *Valor* coming up again. He never would know if he would have delivered the killing blow, for at that instant, several things happened. A woman screamed, and Dar became aware of the new threat an instant before the high priest of Orcus attacked. Kept at bay by the cleric *antilife shell*, Dar had made the mistake of eliminating the priest as a melee threat. That assumption proved a costly one, as the cleric stepped forward and swept his scythe into Dar's side. The smoky black blade cut through Dar's armor like the metal wasn't even there, leaving no mark upon the breastplate as it lanced deep into his side.

Dar cried out, blood exploding from his lips as the weapon slashed through flesh, bone, and lung. He fell to the ground in a heap, his surroundings in the vault retreating into a red haze, the fell laughter of the evil cleric pounding loudly in his ears, then rapidly fading away as the black rushed in to claim him.

Chapter 267

A CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Allera pulled herself to her feet, her body shaking. Already wounded by the wizard's *chain lightning*, his *cone of cold* nearly pushed her over the brink into death. Only her earlier *mass cure* had given her enough strength to survive the deadly blast. She was all too aware of the chaotic melee raging just a few steps away, but she could barely move, and her magic felt as though it lay on the far side of a chasm, distant and inaccessible.

She realized she was resting against a smooth, hard object. She blinked her eyes and saw Nelan there, just a few inches away, gesturing to her. Memory returned; her allies were trapped behind the wizard's *forcecage*, and she, Shay, and Dar stood alone against the cleric and his allies.

Including Talen.

She turned her head to see Dar facing off against the man she'd once followed into Rappan Athuk on a mission of mercy, to find and recover another man whose fate was bound to that of Camar. Knowing what it would mean, she summoned her strength and cast another *mass cure* spell. The spell poured warmth back into her body, and she could see the effect it had both upon Dar and Talen.

She felt an almost palpable tug drawing her to Dar's aid, but she knew that her presence in the melee would only be a distraction, and possibly a fatal one, for Dar. Instead she bent low and started toward Shay, who appeared conscious, but who otherwise had not moved since Dar had separated her and Talen just a few moments ago.

Talen's command to the scout was a shock, but that was nothing compared to Shay's response. The scout stirred from her torpor, picking up *Beatus Incendia* off the ground before turning slowly to face Allera.

"Shay, no!"

But the scout did not respond, save to approach the healer. Allera gave ground, retreating to the glowing *forcecage*. She glanced into the interior of the magical prison, but there was no help there; the others were trying to revive Honoratius, who apparently had collapsed.

Allera glanced at the exit, on the far side of the *forcecage*. The *wall of force* was still up, but even if Shay was not much faster than she was, she could not just leave Dar to his fate.

"Shay, don't do this... Shay, if we don't stop them, then Talen, he will be lost to us forever... and undead monster, serving Orcus!"

The scout paused. Her vacant expression did not change, but Allera could sense the war that had to be waging inside her mind. Allera did not have a spell that could purge Talen's mental control over her, so she could not intervene, only pray silently that the scout's willpower would be enough.

Allera could only watch as Dar and Talen met again in a clash of steel. She almost felt the vampire's short blade as it pierced Dar's side, but then the fighter took down Talen with his own stroke, the steel slicing open a wide gash in the side of his head, cracking the skull beneath.

Talen went down, and Dar stepped forward to end it.

Allera saw the cleric of Orcus step forward silently, his scythe coming around in a deadly arc. She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but Shay's scream drowned her cry, a sound of agony that echoed and resounded off the walls of the vault. Allera drew upon her magic, but even as she drew upon the healing powers she commanded to cast another *mass cure*, she felt a white-hot knife of potency stab into her mind. Caught off guard, she could not muster her full strength in time to stop the spell from dissipating.

The wizard! she thought. The enemy arcanist had vanished, but he was obviously still here, and strong enough to counterspell her magic.

All hesitation abandoned, Allera leapt forward toward Dar, hoping somehow that she could forestall what looked like the inevitable conclusion of the battle between Dar and the enemy cleric. She sensed the danger behind her too late, a mere heartbeat before a hard impact crushed into her side. She felt a rib crack, and staggered to the side. She managed to keep from falling, barely, but as she turned to look behind her she felt a cold chill grip her.

Both of the statues of Orcus were there, and as her lover coughed up the last of his life a few feet away, the golems rushed her, their maces coming up to make just as certain of her fate.

Chapter 268

HELL HATH NO FURY

Hesperix reveled in the power of the True God.

The cleric had recovered from his defeat in the Talon, and was now just moments from complete victory over these enemies of his Master. Isolated here in the Talon, lost in reverie after his undoing at the hands of Theron, he had not been aware of most of the

dramatic events of recent weeks. He knew little specifically about these powerful intruders, save the little that Navev had revealed about them. But he did know that Zehn, Gudmund, and Theron had been brought low, and he knew viscerally that the world as he knew it was on a cusp, one where the power of those closest to the Master had the potential to become almost like gods themselves.

His gambit had paid off. By luring the intruders into the private sanctum of the Seer, he had forced the mage's hand. The Seer, while corrupt to his core, and as suffused with evil as Hesperix, was unpredictable in his allegiances and bore no love for the nominal commander of the Talon. But the mage—reluctantly, perhaps—had used his golems and his magical powers to divide and disrupt the invaders, giving Hesperix a chance to destroy them one by one.

His undead thrall staggered to his feet, the vampire's fast healing allowing him to recover from the grievous wound. Hesperix himself was in excellent shape, thanks to a *heal* spell he'd cast on fleeing from the temple. *Dacris* had taken out the fighter that had nearly defeated the vampire, and while the man lying at his feet would almost certainly die without further assistance, the cleric raised his weapon to make certain.

But before he could strike, the woman scout shot into him, screaming with a wild fury as she struck him hard, driving both back several steps toward the rear of the chamber. She slashed a blazing sword at him like a cleaver, hacking at him with neither finesse nor inhibition. Hesperix cut reflexively with *Dacris*, and the head of the weapon, formed of dark energy, infused with unholy power, passed through her armor and clothing and bit deep into her left shoulder. The wound was a critical one, and the woman's arm fell limp, the connections between it and her body mangled by the stroke.

But his foe was consumed with fury, and she seemed barely to notice the terrible wound as she slashed up at his head with the sword. Hesperix staggered back, trying to bring up the haft of the scythe to block. The blow glanced off of his left bracer and caromed off of the skullcap that protected his head. The light helm saved his life, but the edge of the sword, razor-sharp, cracked the metal and scored his flesh, searing it with the purging fire of the Shining Father. For the priest of Orcus, it was like being branded with a spar that pierced his flesh and laid light directly upon the festering corruption of his soul.

Hesperix countered with the powers granted him by his patron. He hurled his most powerful remaining spell at the woman, but the *slay living* spell rolled harmlessly off a ward protecting her life force. He thrust at her with *Dacris*, giving ground as he retreated toward the alcove in the rear of the chamber, but she continued to harry him at every step, the holy sword forming a blinding arc of deadly steel around her. One of those strokes bit into the cleric's side, piercing his chainmail armor and burning flesh, muscle, and liver.

"Talen! Seer! Aid me!" the cleric cried.

But the odds of the battle, just moments ago decidedly favoring the defenders of the Talon, had shifted once again.

Even as Shay leapt to challenge Hesperix, Allera rushed toward Dar. Heedless of the golems lumbering at her back, she drew upon her healing magic for a *mass cure serious wounds* spell.

She was not surprised when she again felt the burning needle of the unseen wizard's counterspell. But this time she was ready for it, and met it with a surge of her own considerable will. The enemy's riposte was turned against that shield, and the spell's life-giving energy poured into her body. She barely felt the blow against her right arm, although the golem's stone mace hit her with enough force to break the bone. Her attention was focused entirely on Dar. When the unconscious fighter stirred, groaning, it felt like a great weight had been lifted from her.

But then her gaze traveled up from the prone warrior, to the slight distortion that wavered in the air just beyond him.

"It will not avail you, healer," came a dark voice from that empty space. Then, the soft sounds of spellcasting.

Everything happened at once. To her left, she was aware of Talen falling to the ground, his flesh melting away from his bones as blue fire scourged him. He collapsed, and what was left of him dissolved into a fine silver mist that rose up toward the shadowed ceiling of the vault.

Behind her, the golems. The second creature moved around the first, lifting its mace to crush her skull.

To her right, there was a shimmer and a distortion. Letellia, Mehlaraine, Selanthas, and Nelan suddenly materialized. The sorceress, only barely lucid, was held upright in the firm grip of the aged cleric. As her *dimension door* spell concluded, she slipped out of consciousness again, and the cleric drew her back, away from the chaos of the battle.

The elves leapt into action at once. Selanthas had an arrow drawn and ready, and he targeted the golem that had been taking a swing at Allera's head. The elf's powerful shot smashed through the golem's wrist, shattering it and sending both its hand and the stone mace flying. The loss did not trouble the construct the way it would a mortal creature, and it merely turned toward the elf, lifting its other hand to attack.

Mehlaraine surged forward toward the invisible wizard, letting her keen senses guide her. The Seer aborted whatever spell he'd been preparing to cast, and instead summoned a *dimension door* that whisked him out of the room a scant instant before the elf's slender sword slashed through the air where he'd been standing.

Hesperix was coming to realize that he was alone; none of his allies were coming to his aid. Blood already flecked his lips; he was bleeding internally. The priest had a handful of higher-order spells left in his reservoir, but nothing more potent than the fourth valence, and this foe was immune to both his *death touch* and any spontaneous *inflicts* that he might have summoned. He had tried to *dispel* her protections, but whoever had placed the wards was stronger than he, and he had only earned another vicious hit that had crunched hard against his side, shivering a rib. Against the tally of his current wounds, the new pain was barely noticeable.

“So be it,” the cleric hissed. He lifted *Dacris* and prepared to launch a full attack at the enemy scout. She was hurt, too, and despite the rage that fueled her, there was only so much that mortal flesh could withstand.

But the woman was no longer there. After delivering her last stroke, even as the cleric lifted his weapon, she suddenly sprang back, landing ten feet back at the edge of the alcove. Hesperix was left alone in the darkened niche, with only hard stone at his back.

“Damn you all to—”

The priest’s shriek was cut off as a long arrow slammed into his chest, piercing his armor and penetrating deep into his left lung. Hesperix looked down at the feathered shaft jutting from his body, then up to meet the stare of the woman, who stood there staring at him, the light from her holy sword highlighting the angles of her face, and the dark orbs of her eyes.

For all his evil, Hesperix shuddered at what he saw in those eyes.

Selanthas fired another arrow, a second shot aimed straight at the dying cleric’s heart. But an instant before it would have struck, there was a shimmering in the air, and Hesperix vanished. The arrow shattered on the stone wall behind him.

Shay turned around slowly. The battle was over; Nelan and Mehlaraine had finished off the golem statues, and Allera was helping Dar to his feet, pouring healing into him as she did so. Letellia had recovered, and as Shay watched the sorceress opened another *dimension door*, transporting herself into the *forcecage* to recover the waiting Alderis.

But Shay only noted those happenings with some distant, detached part of her mind. Her attention was focused on the dark smear on the floor, with a bloody shortsword lying next to it, where Talen had fallen.

Chapter 269

THE SEARCH

They encountered the cleric again not long after.

The priest of Orcus lay on the altar in the Talon, his armored body surrounded by the sharp edges and spiny protrusions of the stone slab. He was dead, his eyes open and staring into nothing. His scythe lay across him, its handle still clutched loosely in a lifeless hand. Dar took the weapon, but after a moment frowned, and placed it back against the altar.

“What’s the matter?” Allera asked.

“It... I don’t know, it felt like I had stepped into a pool of filth, when I touched it.”

The weapon was clearly powerful; Alderis identified its smoky blade as having sort of *brilliant energy* property, capable of penetrating any sort of physical armor, but deadly against flesh.

That much, Dar and Shay already knew.

“The scythe is too valuable to leave to our enemies,” Alderis said.

Before anyone else could comment, Shay stepped forward, and brought *Beatus Incendia* down in a two-handed stroke that smashed hard into the haft of the weapon a foot below the blade. There was a flash of black energy and a sound like a dying animal as the holy sword crushed the scythe against the jagged spines of the altar. Then the weapon clattered to the floor, now just too harmless pieces of wood, the insubstantial blade gone.

Dar looked at Shay in surprise, but the scout was already heading toward one of the doors situated around the perimeter of the temple. The others followed.

Their search was quick but cautious. Dar reminded them that Navev had gotten away, again, and while he personally did not expect the undead warlock to have hung around after their victory over the cleric and wizard, none of them were going to take any chances. As they set out, Allera and Nelan continued to tend to their wounds. They had plenty of healing magic left to them, and soon they were all at full strength, at least in physical terms.

They first explored a complex of rooms that clearly had served as quarters for the late high priest. The chambers were dirty and cluttered, although there were signs of recent attempts at cleaning. The outer chamber, a small sitting room, had a locked stone door that was literally layered with traps, both mundane and magical. Shay found the traps but could not disarm them, so after Alderis had neutralized the ward with a *dispel* Dar used his club to batter the door open. In the process he found another trap that Shay had missed, as a gout of toxic gas poured out from the top of the threshold onto him. But Dar retreated in time to avoid breathing much of the othur fumes, and after a quick

examination Allera pronounced him healthy. Once the cloud had dispersed Dar resumed work on the door, and a few seconds later they were through.

The inner chamber was the high priest's bedroom. This room was more richly furnished than the antechamber, but it too showed signs of neglect. A strong smell hung in the air, and stains covered the linens on the fancy poster bed in the center of the place. The companions spread out and searched the room, examining the bookshelves, wardrobe, and tapestries along the walls. Behind one of those tapestries, Mehlaraine found something unusual; a ten-foot square area of wall that was perfectly smooth, a sheet of utter black that absorbed the light of their torches without reflection.

Shay had retreated to the doorway, clearly impatient, but on the elf's discovery she came forward again. Mehlaraine touched the black wall, cautiously, but drew back her hand suddenly as she received a small electrical jolt from it. "It's solid," she said.

"Are there any indications of how one gets past?" Shay asked.

"Well, there's always force," Dar said, hefting his club.

"Do not bother," Alderis said. He had come over to examine the wall, and he ran his fingers along it, just shy of actually touching the surface. "This is a *wall of force* of some sort, bolstered by a potent abjorative aura. I suspect that you could pound on it for days without making the slightest impact."

Shay stared at the wall. If will enough had been strong enough to sunder its magic, her gaze would have broken it.

"Do you think that Talen came this way?" Nelan asked. Shay shrugged her shoulders, but did not respond.

"Well, let's finish our sweep," Dar said. "We can always come back here later."

They continued their systematic exploration of the complex. Another door opened onto a corridor lit by a diffuse, ruddy light. Forty feet down the passage terminated in another door. The walls of the corridor were marked with runes carved into the stone, and the far threshold was further deeply etched with additional inscriptions.

"There's something... not right... here," Nelan said, shivering slightly. They could all feel it; while the temperature hadn't fallen, there was a cold chill that seemed to run up and down their spines as they approached the far door."

"What are those runes?" Allera asked Alderis.

"They are a warding... and a warning," the elf said.

"Perhaps we should go another way," Mehlaraine suggested.

But Shay, driven by something deeper than conscious knowledge, pressed on to the far door. She opened it, revealing a tunnel that was entirely suffused with a thick, cloying red mist. The coils of fog crept outward toward the scout, wrapping around her arms and legs as they pushed into the passage.

Shay turned, and they could see tendrils of red that had condensed on her skin, looking like smears of blood.

“Shay, close the door,” Dar said.

The scout hesitated. There was... *something* in the mists, a life that beat within like the pulsing of some ephemeral heart. She could see nothing beyond a few feet, but she got the distinct impression that these tunnels continued for a vast, unknowable distance beyond this door.

“Shay!”

The scout flinched as if struck. Dar strode forward, and slammed the door shut. Shay looked up at him, her cheeks stained with red where the fog had touched her. Allera was just behind him, a look of worry on her face.

“We’re wasting time,” the fighter said. “Come on, let’s get moving.” This time it was Dar who took the lead, taking them back down the passage to the temple. Allera remained behind, with Shay.

“Are you all right?” the healer asked.

The scout reached up and wiped her face with her hand. For a moment, she stared down at the bloody smears.

“Shay?”

Without responding, the scout strode suddenly down the passage, leaving Allera to hurry to keep up.

Their exploration of the Talon continued. Trying another of the doors leading off the temple, they found an unfinished part of the complex. In one room they found a number of skeletons and zombies, carrying picks and mauls, standing silently along one wall. The undead did not respond to their presence, and Nelan destroyed them all with a surge of holy power.

Heading to the far side of the temple, they found another door that accessed a complex of private chambers. These too had obviously served as quarters for priests of Orcus. It seemed that at one time the Talon had supported a considerable garrison; there were enough beds here to quarter almost two dozen persons with ease. The decorations

were grim, including frescoes of undead armies sacking villages and putting holy warriors to the sword, and priests fornicating with the dead, or foul demons. The furnishings looked mundane at first glance, but when one looked closer the screaming faces carved into the wood could be seen, or the unholy sigils woven into the fabrics of colorful tapestries and bedcovers. The area seemed to have been hastily looted, and they found nothing truly valuable in any of the four rooms they searched.

They had almost completed a full circuit of the temple, but there were two more doors that they had not yet investigated. One was a mirror of the one on the far side, leading to another warded tunnel and another entrance to the blood-fog complex. Leaving that one for now, they opened the last door to find a torture chamber.

The equipment here needed no explanation, and had obviously been kept in good order. Old bloodstains on the various apparatus suggested that the devices had seen frequent use. Four torches, their flickering red flames clearly magical, provided a bleak illumination over the chamber. There was an arched exit on the wall to their right, and on the far wall they could see four small barred windows.

Selanthas moved to examine the nearest of those openings. “There are cells beyond,” the elf reported. “Likely they put these openings in so that the captives could witness the events taking place in here.”

“By the Father,” Nelan said. The cleric had clutched his holy symbol tightly since they’d started their search, and he looked pale as he tried to assimilate all that he’d seen in this dread place. For all the time he’d spent in the temples of Orcus, there was a calm, almost neutral efficiency in the organization of the Talon that sent chills down his spine.

After absorbing what was—or more precisely, what was not—here, Shay had crossed to the room’s sole exit, and disappeared. Distracted by the chamber’s grim contents, the others hadn’t noticed her absence immediately. Dar was heading after her when the scout’s cry echoed to them through the archway.

“Damn it!” Dar cursed, rushing forward.

They found the scout in another chamber a short distance away. She was on her knees on the edge of a pile of black earth, in the center of which a long wooden box rested.

No, not a box, Dar saw, as he entered the room. A coffin.

The coffin was a crude thing crafted of rough wooden slabs and thick nails. The dirt under it had been dumped in a heap; a few of the canvas sacks it had been brought in lay nearby, forgotten. The scout had pried open one of the boards on top of the coffin, which lay discarded by her side. Her body shook silently, rocking back and forth.

Dar came forward, the others right behind him. He knew what he was going to see, but it didn’t make it any easier.

Talen might have been asleep, lying inside the coffin, his features placid. He was still clad in the banded armor he'd worn in their last encounter, rather the worse for wear for their clashes in the Talon. He appeared to be intact, the damage to his head wrought by *Valor* restored by the unholy power that animated him in undeath.

"Oh, gods, no," Allera said, as she came around Dar and saw him. Like Dar, she'd known what she'd see, but it was still a stark blow to witness it in person. The healer knelt beside Shay, trying to offer comfort, but the scout seemed oblivious to their presence.

For a moment, they just stood there, looking down at the vampire who had been their leader.

And then Talen's eyes opened. Allera screamed as the vampire rose up, arms extended toward Shay, jaws open wide to reveal pointed fangs.

Chapter 270

THE FATE OF THE FALLEN

Lightning flashed from Letellia's fingertips, blasting into the vampire's chest. Talen was flung back into his coffin with enough force to shatter the wood. Black smoke rose from his flesh around the corners of his breastplate. He struggled to rise, but could not.

Dar stepped forward, *Valor* gleaming blue in his hand.

Shay surged to her feet. "No!" she yelled, reaching for Dar's arm. The fighter grasped her with his other hand, and pushed her roughly aside.

"Kill... me..." the dead knight said. He was still weak, his limbs hanging limp from his body, splayed out among the wreckage of dirt and wood fragments.

Letellia still had her hand outstretched, but she looked at Dar, and seeing the look on his face, drew back.

Shay slumped to the ground, sobbing.

Dar lifted his weapon.

"Hold," Nelan said, pushing forward.

"This must be done," Dar said, without turning.

“Perhaps something can be done,” the cleric said. “If not here, then maybe back in Camar... in the holy sanctum...”

Dar hesitated. “The mission...”

“Is over, general. We have destroyed the three temples, as we set out to do. What more can we do against the Demon, with but this handful?”

Dar looked down at Allera. “If there’s a chance at all, then we must take it,” she said.

“The vampire will not come peacefully,” Letellia said. “You make a mistake if you still see Talen Karedes in it.”

“Your weapons and spells cannot kill it,” Nelan said. “But a shaft of wood through the heart... that will render it ‘dead’, so long as it is kept in place.”

Dar nodded. Allera looked at him in surprise as he handed *Valor* to her; it had been the first time in her memory that he had willingly relinquished the weapon to another. The weapon tingled slightly in her hand as she held it in both fists, point-down.

Bending down, Dar picked up a shard of wood that had been shattered by Letellia’s spell. It was about a foot long, and tapered to a rough point.

Talen, seeing what was coming, tried to get up, but could only manage to flail his arms weakly.

Dar loomed over him. He planted one boot on Talen’s right elbow, pinning the vampire to the earth. Talen snarled, and fixed his stare on Dar, but he had not yet recovered enough of his powers for that gaze to penetrate the fighter’s will. Dar drew his punching dagger, and sawed off two of the straps holding Talen’s breastplate to his torso. He was careful of another attack, but Talen could not manage anything more than a feeble lunge that was defeated by the weight crushing his arm. His task done, Dar yanked the magical breastplate free and tossed it across the room. It clattered loudly, and more than one of them flinched at the sudden noise.

Talen looked around at all of them, but saw nothing but pity and resignation on the faces of his erstwhile companions. Finally, he focused on Shay. The scout, somehow sensing the weight of his stare, lifted her head and met his gaze.

“I am sorry,” he said. He opened his mouth to say something else, but whatever it was, it was cut off as Dar slammed the wooden spike into the vampire’s chest, impaling it through the heart. Talen instantly went limp, leaving the small chamber silent save for the desperate sobs of Shay. The companions could only stand there, witnessing the latest horror wrought upon them by the dark master of Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 271

OUT

A stale wind blew hard across the hills as the companions emerged from the dark of the cave into the surface world once more. Their cloaks whipped around their bodies, as if trying to escape. It was late afternoon, but impossible to be more precise than that, with the sun's light trapped behind a dense gray expanse of cloud that stretched from horizon to horizon. Within the densest part of that mass, to the south, there were occasional flashes of power, rumbles that carried to them like the growl of a cornered beast. It was like a storm, but none of them felt those stirrings to be anything remotely resembling a natural phenomenon.

They had spent an uncomfortable night in the Talon, recovering their strength and their magic. They found no trace of either Navev or the evil wizard that they had battled in the vault, and no hostile creatures had ventured into the temple to assail them. As always, the warriors had kept watch while the casters had rested first, but despite the lack of interruptions none of them got anything close to a good night's sleep. Talen's fate had hit them harder than if the knight had merely been killed. It was a reminder that there were things worse than death, in Rappan Athuk.

The knight's body now rested in Shay's *bag of holding*. Nelan had taken custody of the container, for now. That had been at Dar's insistence. While all of them understood the emotional strain that the scout had experienced, Dar no longer felt confident in the woman's judgment. He personally doubted that there was anything that could be done for Talen, and even if the priests of the Father could somehow restore him, he was not sure if that was the best choice. After what had happened in the Talon, could the man live with what he had become, and what he had done?

Dar scanned the surrounding hills as his companions emerged from the cave one by one. These sorts of thoughts were new to him, and he did not like them. He was a man of action; contemplation of the consequences of actions was alien to him. Or it had been. Looking to the south, he realized that Rappan Athuk had changed him as much as any of the others. Maybe as much as it had changed Talen.

His hand fell to the hilt of *Valor*.

He sensed Allera behind him, although he could not hear the sound of her footsteps over the constant rush of the wind. "They're ready," she said.

Dar turned. They were all there. Nelan and Honoratius, the old cleric standing beside a woman with half and nearly twice his years, at the same time. The elves, thin and silent

in their dark cloaks. And Shay, standing apart, staring out at nothing, seeing things that Dar felt better not knowing.

Allera had been right. They had done what they had come here to do. More... more would have to wait.

“Let’s go home,” he said, stepping forward to join Honoratius. He looked at Alderis. “You will be in touch?” he asked. He already knew the answer, they had already discussed matters in their camp below, but he wanted to hear it again.

“We will be ready,” the elf said. With that he extended his hands. Mehlaraine and Selanthas took them, and before Dar could say anything further he spoke a word and all three vanished.

Dar felt a hand close around his. He looked down at Allera, drew strength from her even as he lent his own. Honoratius extended her own hands, and the pair joined Nelan in forming a circle. After a moment, Shay came over to join them, stepping into the gap between the cleric and healer.

Honoratius spoke words of power, and the air around them shimmered. And then they were gone, leaving only the wind and the barren hills, empty of life, behind them.

THE END OF BOOK 4

The “Doomed Bastards” in the Dungeon of Graves
Book 5

Chapter 272

TOMB RAIDERS

A small noise shattered the stillness of the empty tomb. It started as a subtle tapping noise, faint but persistent. As the seconds passed into minutes the sounds increased, maturing into a rhythmic pounding that echoed through the interior of the dusty chamber. The noise continued until an entire wall of the tomb exploded, raining a hail of dust and debris and shards of ancient bricks across the floor of the outer chamber.

A tall form strode through the hole opened in the wall, widening the hole as he came with heavy blows from a small but menacing-looking pickaxe. Dust and dirt clung to his garments, the loose body covering that the desert people called a *zurqa*. The design of the garment failed to conceal the hard lines of the intruder, or the muscles that bulged as he wielded his tool with simple, powerful efficiency. This man was a warrior, with a falchion slung across his back, yet he moved with a certain grace that belied the ancestry of a hunter as well.

As the warrior moved beyond the new entry, another pair of individuals followed him into the tomb. The first was a stark contrast to the warrior, a lean, angular figure of a man, with the sly features and nimble bearing of a fox. He sniffed the air as he entered the tomb, caution blaring in every subtle aspect of his expression and movements. He possessed only one eye, the other covered in a simple patch of plain leather, but his gaze missed nothing. He was clad in an unremarkable suit of dark garments that blended into the stone walls of the tomb, and his soft leather boots made no sound upon the floor as he moved.

The last man brought light with him, a torch blazing bright in his hands, pushing back the darkness of the tomb. He was clad in the heavy gray robes of a Razhuri mystic, and what little of his face could be seen under his cowl revealed the white marks of a Seeker. Yet there seemed to be more to him as well than was evident at first glance, and the way his robes bulged slightly when he moved hinted at the presence of armor, weapons, or both concealed under their folds.

The warrior started forward, but the fox-faced man forestalled him. “Hold a moment, Anku,” he said. “My nose does not like this place.”

“Your nose would not be happy unless it were buried along with the rest of you under a mound of whores in the depths of a Karashin brothel,” Anku replied. The man spoke Drusian with the thick accent of a Ashtur tribesman, but despite the light tone of his words his gaze did not shift from his intent search of the perimeter of the chamber.

The other man clucked in amusement, and tapped his nose. "True, true, my friend. A sublime state for a man to be in, and one which I hope to resume soon, very soon." He turned back to face the mystic. "Well, Tammuz?"

Tammuz thrust the torch out and peered around the entry chamber, which appeared to be empty of anything save dust and some shards of pottery, their original function lost in the decay of time. "We must seek out the burial chamber," he said. "When I hired you, you claimed the title of the greatest tomb-robber in the Empire, Esir; you may lead."

"You honor me too greatly, noble sir," the lean rogue said, with a small bow just slight of mocking. He led them across the room, toward an alcove that appeared to lead nowhere at first glance, but which concealed a narrow passage that led deeper into the mound. Esir vanished into the crack, which gave the other two some difficulty before they were able to follow him. After a short distance they came to stone steps weathered by time that took them further underground. They descended in silence, the flames of Tammuz's torch flickering off the stone blocks of the low ceiling.

The stairs deposited them into a tunnel that led straight ahead into darkness. Esir waited for his companions there. He pointed toward a gap between two stones along the left wall. It was difficult to see even with the light playing full upon it; how the rogue had detected it in the darkness was a mystery.

"A trap?" Tammuz asked.

"It was," the rogue said. "Triggered long ago, or perhaps the mechanism was merely claimed by time. But there may be others further ahead that still retain potency. Be wary; step where I step."

He led the others down the tunnel. They came to an open pit; Tammuz shone the torch down into it. The light reflected faintly on the spikes below, and the bleached white bones of a previous tomb-robber.

"These traps are not very impressive," Anku said. He looked at Tammuz, his expression doubtful.

"It appears that there is a larger room up ahead," the mystic said. "Let us investigate."

Esir led them to the indicated chamber. It was evident at once that this was the main burial chamber of the tomb. The remains of the sarcophagus dominated the center of the place, although one entire side of it had been stove in, perhaps by heavy sledges. Broken pottery, somewhat more intact than that in the outer chamber, was gathered in heaps along the walls. A few amorphae were still recognizable by their forms, but all bore serious damage, clearly long empty. The niches in the walls had likewise been quite thoroughly cleaned out. The wall to their left had been carved in what once had probably been an elaborate relief, but even a casual look indicated the marks where

precious inlays had been roughly pried out of the stone. What was left was no longer distinguishable as anything in particular.

Anku kicked a piece of pot across the room; it clattered loudly. "Looted. Empty." He spat. "You promised gold, jewels, holy man."

Esir looked back at the mystic. "My companion speaks truly. When you led us here, I had my doubts; all know that the tombs in this region were picked clean centuries ago. There is nothing here."

"That is what you were meant to believe," Tammuz said. He walked over to the carved wall, and ran his fingers across the bare stone. Behind his back, Esir and Anku shared a dubious look.

The mystic shook his arms out of his robe, and leaned in close against the wall. He muttered soft syllables, words of ancient power. His hands glowed faintly, and then, where he touched, the stone began to melt away.

As the stone retreated, it revealed a space beyond, sheltered by a full three feet of thickness of solid rock. The portal that Tammuz created through the rock was not large, but it was enough for him to step through, followed by the others.

They found themselves in a small chamber that had the look of a natural cave. Before them stood a sheer wall of black rock, and in that rock was embedded a door.

The door was remarkable. Crafted of stone, it looked like a single massive slab recessed deep in the surrounding wall. There were no handles or hinges that they could see. Set into the center of the door was a three-dimensional figure; a carving of a large, gaping mouth, full of stone teeth.

"That doesn't look promising," Esir said.

Tammuz stepped forward. He drew something out of a hidden pocket in his robes. It flashed in the light, but before his companions could get a good look at it, he thrust it into the stone mouth, working his hand, and then much of his arm, through the maze of teeth. If the stone mouth was in truth a trap, it could easily take off his arm.

"Bold," Anku said.

There was a click, and the mystic drew back unhindered as the stone block began to sink slowly into the floor. It revealed a dark passage beyond, formed of massive blocks so expertly fashioned that they could barely see the joints where the stones met. Tammuz turned to face his companions.

“Gentlemen. I give you the tomb of Amar-Sina, emperor of the Third Dynasty, and the repository of what is perhaps one of the greatest unplundered treasure hoards left in Drusia.”

Esir and Anku shared another look; wary, but overlaid now with a greed so tangible that it seemed to hang in the air between them like a living thing.

Chapter 273

THE TOMB OF AMAR-SINA

The click was a faint sound, barely audible over the sound of their own breathing.

But Esir dropped and snapped out his feet, kicking Tammuz solidly in the chest. The surprised mystic staggered back as darts flashed across his path, the tiny missiles shattering as they struck the opposite wall. Anku, bringing up the rear, had caught Tammuz as he fell backward. The lithe thief recovered smoothly, landing in a crouch before he slowly turned back to face his companions.

Tammuz, having recovered his equilibrium, grimaced and looked down at his forearm. Two tiny darts were embedded in his flesh. He shook his head, and plucked them out.

Esir recovered one of the darts that had missed, and sniffed the head. “Sagar,” he said. “The poison forms a crystal when the substance evaporates, which allows it to remain preserved over long periods of time. The crystal dissolves instantly in the bloodstream. Extremely deadly.”

Anku watched the mystic expectantly, but the man merely incanted some words and waved his hand over the damaged limb. He still looked a bit pale, but did not appear likely to suddenly keel over dead.

“It would appear that you are difficult to kill,” Esir said.

“The gods watch over me,” the mystic said. “And I thank you for your quick reflexes, Esir. Had those darts struck closer to my heart, I may not have had the leisure to neutralize the poison.”

The rogue nodded. He looked down at the floor, where the trigger for the trap had been located.

“I walked precisely where you walked,” Tammuz said.

Esir rubbed his chin. "Clever, very clever," he said. He held his hand over one of the flagstones. "The trap was set to trigger only when a certain weight was placed upon it. I did not trip it, but you, with your armor and other gear, did. I believe it was intended to catch a thief on his way out, perhaps, burdened with sacks of treasure..."

The mystic nodded. "We will have to be careful. This tomb's traps will not be depleted, and there will almost certainly be guardians."

Esir fixed him with a stare. "How did you know that this tomb was hidden here?"

The other man's return stare was perfectly level. "No secret is beyond the knowing of the gods, my friend."

They made their way deeper into the complex, bypassing another two deadly traps through the talents of Esir. The narrow tunnel twisted and turned at right angles, progressing without apparent reason or plan further under the ground. It finally deposited them in a small room, only maybe fifteen feet across. The chamber was dominated by a dark shaft in the center, about ten feet wide. As Tammuz's light fell across it, they could see that a very narrow stair curved around the inside of the shaft, the carved steps barely six inches wide.

"Can you manage it?" Esir asked.

"I believe so, although it might be preferable to have a contingency in place."

Esir nodded to Anku, who was already digging out a coil of silk cord from his bag. The tribesman secured the line to a nearby protruding slab, and handed it to Esir. Rather than tossing it down the shaft, the rogue carefully looped the line around his arm.

"All right. I will go first, and lay out the line as I go. Tammuz, start down when you hear my whistle. Anku, you bring up the rear."

"What about the light?" Tammuz asked.

The rogue's eyes glimmered as he looked at the mystic. "I work better in the dark." With a wry grin, the thief vanished into the shaft.

The signal came about a minute later, and the others followed him down. Tammuz was the only one to have difficulty on the narrow stair, but the rope steadied him, and he was able to make it down without serious threat of falling. Esir was waiting for them at the bottom.

"I do not like the smell of this place," he said, gesturing out toward the room.

The shaft had opened along one side of an underground vault. They had been deposited on a stone ledge, maybe ten feet wide and half again as long. The floor of

the chamber was another fifteen feet or so below them, accessed by another staircase that ran down from the ledge. There were a few low archways below, which offered the possibility of exits from this place. The chamber was empty, thick with dust, and as silent as the grave.

“Do you detect anything?” Tammuz asked. Esir looked back at him from the top step of the stair, and shook his head.

“Cold,” Anku said. And in fact it was noticeably cooler here, a subtle chill that sought to seep the life and warmth from their bodies. The tribesman drew out his falchion, the heavy blade giving the man an overt air of deadliness as he followed Esir forward. Tammuz trailed behind them, the light of his torch casting long shadows over the two men ahead.

Esir had nearly reached the bottom of the stairs when a soft wind stirred in the center of the room. A plume of dust rose into the air on the breeze, which had come, apparently, out of nowhere. The thief froze, alert to any new danger that this unexpected event might presage.

“We are not alone here,” Tammuz said, his voice sounding hollow in the open depths of the vault.

As if in response to his words, three... *things* materialized out of the swirling dust. They were vague, insubstantial things, creatures of air and spirit rather than of flesh. Even as the dust was flung away the three forms became more distinct, and as they surged toward the wary tomb raiders, they became more defined. They were not quite human, but the air-creatures had taken on the outlines of human shape, at least from the chest up. Slender “arms” jutted from the masses of their bodies, and at the top of their forms heads and faces became evident, even if nearly transparent.

To their surprise and alarm, each of the three intruders found their own features looking back at them. The faces that the monsters had taken on were their own.

Chapter 274

THE BREATH OF LIFE

Anku was a brave man, but the sudden appearance of his own face in the visage of an alien creature unnerved him. He was a veteran warrior, but he was also infused with the superstitious dread of his people at spirits and the dark powers of the netherworld, and in this foe he found both in copious quantities.

That vulnerability made him susceptible to the magical power in the creature's stare, and it darted eagerly forward as the barbarian froze, temporarily paralyzed.

Esir shared his companion's fear, but the little rogue was much more used to encountering strange and terrible things in the course of looting tombs. He mastered his fear and acted, his hand darting into a leather pouch at his hip. He drew out a long leather whip, which he uncoiled and lashed out with practiced ease. As the long strand flashed in the air, sparkling twists of energy flared around its tip. The whip tore through the creature, but while it failed to get a purchase on its insubstantial form, it was clear from its sudden howl that Esir had managed to hurt it.

It dove for the thief, one of its arms coming down at him like a scythe. For all the seeming mistiness of its form, the concentrated blast of air struck with the force of a battering ram. Esir, however, was already moving, diving forward in a roll that carried him around the creature, already drawing up his whip for another attack. The blast of air from the creature's strike actually aided him, adding to the momentum of his tumble, and he escaped serious injury.

The last creature flew toward Tammuz, but its gaze attack held no terrors for this man. The mystic calmly lifted a hand and invoked some dread power. Something dark and mysterious flowed through the room, and each of the three creatures shook as black sparks erupted through their bodies. His foe lunged at him in a violent fury, but Tammuz merely withstood the blow, grunting as it lashed a solid blast of wind across his torso.

Anku's enemy drifted up until the tribesman and the creature were almost touching, face-to-face. The nebulous thing hovered in front of the paralyzed tribesman, and then swept forward, its substance brushing his lips in a twisted mockery of a kiss. As it drew back, tendrils of glowing essence flowed out from the man into the creature, which swelled as it drank deeply from the well of his strength. Anku became pale, but the look of fear in his eyes was replaced by a growing rage, as he fought against the fell power holding him captive.

Esir dodged away from the creature pursuing him. He lashed at it again with his whip, but it was clear that his intent was merely to harry it, to buy time while keeping his distance from the thing. The monster was fast, but the wiry rogue was quicker, and as he ducked under another wind-lash he tumbled back toward his companions. The whip darted out again, this time slicing through the back of the one threatening Anku. The monster, flush with the energy stolen from its victim, barely registered the hit.

The distraction, however momentary, gave Esir's foe an opportunity that it exploited. It spun and came at him from behind, striking him hard across the shoulders. The rogue rolled with the force of the impact, but as he came back up to his feet, it was clear that he'd felt this latest hit keenly.

Tammuz did not bother to attempt evasions from his foe's assault. As the creature hissed and raised its arms for another attack, he merely thrust a hand into it, and invoked his power once more. Black bolts flared from his outstretched fingertips, and the monster dissolved with an airy shriek.

Anku's foe pressed its advantage, seeking to draw more breath from the body of the barbarian. But this time, the creature failed against Anku's resistance, and as it recoiled from him, he roared a challenge and swept his falchion around in a wild but powerful arc. The blow clove the thing in two, and while it survived the cut the way that a fully physical creature could not, it was clearly weakened, suffering damage that undid the strength it had stolen and then some.

Esir tumbled away as his foe sought him again, keeping away, not letting it get close enough to suck at his breath. It continued to attack him with its wind scythe attack, but the rogue was too fast and too canny to let it get in a second telling hit. And his own blows were doing damage, cutting gashes in its airy form that left trailing bits of mist behind it in its wake.

Anku's adversary rose up into the air, out of reach of the tribesman. But now that he had his mobility back, he would not be undone. The barbarian crouched and sprang into the air, rising up surprisingly high without magical augment or other artificial aid. The creature clearly had not expected such an assault, and it failed to get away before the barbarian clove it again with his curved blade. This time the creature could not absorb the damage wrought, and it came apart with a soft hiss.

Anku's leap off the stairs carried him out far over the chamber, but the ten-foot fall he faced was not a difficulty for him. Esir glanced up and altered the trajectory of his latest tumble, drawing the creature almost to the spot where his companion landed. The monster realized too late that it had been outmaneuvered, and before it could escape it, too, was struck by blade and whip, and it dissolved into nothing.

Tammuz walked down the stairs slowly to join the others. The three men stood there, alert for any further attacks, but nothing further stirred from the dark openings scattered around the perimeter of the vault.

"What were those things?" Esir asked.

"They are called breathdrinkers," Tammuz said. Anku frowned, checking his falchion, but the creatures had left no mark or ichor upon the blade. "It is fortuitous that you had magical weapons; I doubt that normal blades would have affected such."

"Fortuitous as well, that we had your power against them," Esir said.

Tammuz turned to the nearest of the dark passages. "We should press on."

The tomb robber held up his hand. “Nay, we should pause a moment, take our rest, eat something. There is no rush; we should be fresh when we confront further trials. I suggest up there, on the ledge; it gives us a commanding vista over the chamber.”

The others agreed, and they returned to the ledge. Anku broke out a wheel of traveler’s bread and a smaller disk of hard cheese, which he shared around. Tammuz offered to treat the effects of the drain suffered by the tribesman, but the man demurred. He finished his meal in a few bites, and then excused himself to attend to personal functions, moving to the far end of the ledge as a courtesy to his companions.

Esir watched Tammuz with a keen eye as the other man washed his cheese down with water from his goatskin bag. He indicated the tribesman with a slight inclination of his head. “He is troubled, not so much by your power, but by what he sees as his own failure in the battle,” Esir said, his voice quiet so as not to carry over to his companion.

“The creatures used magic; there is no fault. Had our luck been poor, you or I could just as easily been affected.”

Esir nodded, and popped a hunk of bread into his mouth. “Your accent, it is very good,” he finally said.

Tammuz’s look sharpened, but he did not respond.

“I normally do not seek to intrude into the privacy of others,” the thief said. “Especially an employer. But the tomb of Amar-Sina... that is an atypical matter. One must know what one is dealing with, in such a circumstance. You understand?”

“I imagine it would be difficult to slip something past you.”

Esir smiled as he cut off another piece of cheese with his knife. “I am not only known for my plundering of tombs; I am also widely renown as one of the great liars of this age.”

“A useful skill.”

“Indeed.” He popped the cheese into his mouth. “Do not fault your disguise; it is very good. But you rely overly much on magic, to my thinking. A little powder on the skin, some crushed *abrath* reeds—for the scent, you see—that would be more effective and less susceptible to detection.”

“I take it you can pierce illusions, then?”

The rogue nodded, and tapped the patch covering his left eye. “I cannot use it all the time, or it gives me truly fearsome headaches.”

“A valuable item.”

“Indeed,” he said again. “So, man of... Camar?” He waited for Tammuz’s nod, which came after a moment’s pause. “So, what brings you to this place? Not simple treasure, I assume.”

Tammuz finished the last of his bread, which gave him a moment to consider before he spoke. “I seek the Tears of the Gods.”

Esir rubbed his chin. “Ah. So they are not legends, then.”

“No more than the tomb of Amar-Sina.”

The thief smiled. “Indeed, indeed. Precious, those stones would be. Priceless?”

“There are very few things in this world that one cannot put a price upon.”

The thief chuckled. “Well said.”

“You have been very frank with me, so I will be equally forthright. I did not lie when I spoke of the treasure to be found here. You and your companion will find the prizes well in excess of our initial agreement, or I will make up the difference myself. But the Tears, those come with me. I do not seek to challenge your honor with this statement, but this must be known, up front.”

Esir finished the last morsel of food, and licked his fingertips. “So long as there is enough wealth to go around, good sir, then you will find my friend and I boon companions. And I suspect that there will be more dangers ahead, deadly trials that will be hazardous enough without us looking over our shoulders.”

Tammuz nodded, and looked up as Anku came back over to them. “Are you ready?” the tribesman asked them.

“Are we?” Esir asked, looking to Tammuz. The mystic nodded. “Then let us be on our way,” the thief said, springing to his feet, brushing his hands to clear away the last remnants of their meal.

A detailed search of the chamber below turned up two exits from the vault; a third passage was blocked by rubble just a short distance down its length. After a few moments of investigation, Esir suggested the tunnel to their left, and the companions set out again. Their awareness was sharpened by the memory of the traps they had encountered above, and of their battle with the breathdrinkers. Esir’s instincts served them well once more, as he detected another trap just a short distance down the tunnel. This one had a number of interlocking triggers set into the floor and the surrounding walls, and it took them a good half hour to make it safely past, with Esir marking a safe route on the flagstones using a bit of chalk. At one point, he hammered a pair of spikes into cracks in the walls, creating a step and handhold that they used to bypass a wide

stretch of trapped floor. Anku and Esir could have perhaps leapt across the dangerous trigger, but Tammuz lacked that degree of agility.

“Let us hope that we are not compelled to return this way in a great rush,” the thief said, as they made their way past the threatened zone.

The tunnel continued for almost a hundred feet, then bent sharply to the right. They passed through an empty room that Esir scanned carefully for traps, before directing them to proceed. The passage continued on the far side, and ultimately deposited them on the edge of another, significantly larger chamber. This place had a floor several feet lower than the passage, accessed by a series of broad stone steps. Another similar exit was visible to their left, but it seemed as though their destination lay ahead, on the other side of the room.

The far side of the room was dominated by a large mural that covered much of the wall. Tammuz held his light aloft as they approached; the scene was still discernable despite its obvious age. Crafted of colored tiles set into the stone, it showed several scenes of men engaged in a variety of scenes. The men were dark-skinned and muscular, clad in skirts that covered them from navel to knee. The mural was a history of sorts, showing those men building cities, engaging in wars, and worshipping ancient gods. Over them all, rising up onto the slanted ceiling above, was the god-ruler, the emperor Amar-Sina, seated on a throne that resembled a giant ziggurat. The ceiling portion of the mural had lost the most tiles, and parts of the emperor’s body were covered with gray patches, as though he’d suffered from a pox.

The mural overlooked a broad arch in the far wall that sheltered a deep alcove. A pair of pillars of weathered stone flanked the alcove, and they could just see the outline of broad steps, twenty feet wide, leading up into another area deep within. The steps led up to a pair of massive stone doors that stood slightly ajar.

The three just stared at the scene for several long, quiet moments. The reality of the place seemed to strike them in its full impression then.

Anku finally moved forward, bits of fragmented tile crunching under his boots.

Esir sniffed the air, and frowned.

Tammuz merely waited.

A sound echoed back from the alcove. It came from beyond the stone doors. A creak of metal, that grew louder, closer.

Anku’s falchion came into his hands; the tribesman fell into a wary stance.

Esir shot a glance at Tammuz. “Another guardian?”

The mystic did not reply, his attention focused on the doors. His hands wove a pattern before him, as syllables of magic seeped from his lips.

They did not have long to wait. Mere seconds passed before the source of the noise appeared at the doors. A bulky head poked through the opening, followed by a long, sinuous body.

It was a serpent. But that was where any reference to the natural world ended. It was made of bronze, a massive, deadly construct, its body formed of segmented metal that echoed oddly the scales of the real creature it imitated. Its jaws sprang widely open, and as they watched, flaring sparks of electrical energy arced between the long, nasty fangs set around the rim of that opening.

“By all the gods,” Esir whispered, as the unliving guardian slithered forward to greet them.

Chapter 275

THE BRONZE SERPENT

Anku did not wait for the creature to close with them. The barbarian tribesman lifted his curved sword and charged, letting out a guttural roar of challenge as the battle-rage of his people filled him with strength. The soft heels of his light boots barely scuffed on the stone, as he rushed the bronze serpent with catlike speed and grace.

The serpent, however, was surprisingly fast for a beast of its size. The blunt head shot down at the onrushing tribesman, its fangs lashing out like twin daggers. Anku sprang and darted under its reach, narrowly avoiding its attack of opportunity. He arrested his leap with an outstretched hand and came up a mere stride from the creature’s long body. Before it could react, he smashed his falchion into a junction of two of the metal’s snake’s segments, intending to sever it in twain.

The blow was powerful, but the monster’s durability was in more than the mere metal that comprised its body. Steel, even magical steel, could not cut the bronze, and while the blow opened a small crack in its body, that was all it accomplished.

Anku staggered back, his arms trembling from the backlash of his hit. The snake, quick to recover from its initial lunge, twisted and snapped at him again.

“Anku, look out!” Esir warned.

The barbarian crouched and leapt once more, intending to vault the serpent’s body and come up on its other side. But this time he was just a shade too slow, and one long

fang snared Anku's shoulder, tearing his zurqa and snagging on the light shirt of mail links he wore underneath. The tribesman cried out in pain as the metal snake bit down, driving the fang through his body, while a surge of electrical energy shot through him, causing his arms and legs to spasm uncontrollably.

Esir glanced back at Tammuz, but the mystic was still lost in his incantation, preparing some spell that would hopefully disable or destroy the serpent. The tomb-raider was not without courage, but he knew his strengths, and close-fighting was not one of them. He lashed at it with his whip, hoping to distract it. He scored a hit, but not only did he fail to note any damage from the hit, the injury that Anku had inflicted upon it earlier flashed with white sparks, and the gap in the bronze closed. The thief's eyes widened as he realized that far from hurting it, he may have actually benefited the creature.

Anku had recovered enough to grab onto the snake's head with his muscled hands, trying to pry its jaw open. He'd dropped his sword when the snake had grappled him, and his feet kicked empty air several feet above the ground, giving him little leverage against it. But the snake was obviously quite strong, and he was unable to so much as budge its grip upon him. Anku's face twisted into a paroxysm of agony as it sent another jolt of energy through his body. Blood was pouring down the man's body from the vicious wound in his shoulder, but he refused to give up, fumbling at his belt for his pick. Meanwhile, the snake began to coil its long body around the man's torso, rapidly enfolding him in a crushing grip that would soon grind the hapless warrior's bones into powder.

A flash of red smoke and a hissing noise announced the completion of Tammuz's ritual invocation. The brief eruption faded quickly, revealing a huge, hulking horror. It was an ape, easily eight feet tall, with a monstrous visage and an extra set of arms jutting from its torso. It was covered dirty white fur streaked with crimson, making it look like it was covered in blood.

The fiendish girallon fixed at once upon the snake, and charged forward at it. The serpent, engaged with Anku, was not able to defend itself adequately as the ape smashed into it, attacking with all four of its huge claws. It got a good grip with two claws about six feet below its neck and twisted. Metal groaned as the bronze bent under the strain of the ape's incredible strength, and tiny flashes of energy flared around the abused joints in its body. The ape, not quite done, even tried to bite the serpent's body, but it only suffered a shattered tooth from the attempt.

The violent and furious assault finally accomplished what Anku had been unable to do on his own. The snake's jaws opened wide and it tossed its captive aside, focusing on the dangerous threat posed by this new adversary. The ape saw those deadly fangs coming down and it tried to intercept it, seizing the construct's jaws in its uppermost pair of claws. For a moment abyssal muscles contended successfully against the serpent's artificial strength; the snake's body creaked with the effort, and the eight hundred pounds of summoned creature was driven back, a foot, then two, its hind claws scratching deep on the stone. The ape's lower claws tried to grab onto the neck of the

snake lower down, but with the bulk of the girallon's attention focused on the head, they could not find a secure purchase. Then, when it looked as though the two had come to a stalemate, the snake's tail whipped around, smashing hard into the girallon's lower body. The blow distracted the ape for just a second, but it was enough for the snake to tear free and slam its jaw down onto the girallon's shoulder.

The girallon's roar of pain shook the chamber with its intensity.

Esir had circled around the melee, doing his best to avoid getting killed by the thrashings of the snake or its adversary. Tammuz reached Anku just as he did.

The barbarian had fallen against one of the pillars fronting the alcove, where he lay coughing up blood. His zurqa had been torn away, and there was a long rip in the mail shirt underneath, revealing the ugly, gaping wound in his shoulder. The man's flesh had been blackened where the energy discharge from the monster had poured into him, and while the wound had been cauterized shut, it was clear from the way that bright red blood continued to burst from his mouth that his lung had been punctured. He was obviously dying, but his hand continued to fumble on the handle of his pick, and his legs continued to scratch at the ground, trying to get enough leverage to push him back up.

Esir fumbled for a healing potion, but Tammuz was quicker, falling into a crouch beside the stricken tribesman. Ignoring the violence taking place behind him, the man uttered a brief incantation in a low voice. Esir, with his sharp ears, heard part of it: "*Dagos defaeca, malum seca...*" A flickering glow appeared around the mystic's hand, and as he seized the injured warrior's shoulder, not quite roughly nor in a gentle manner, that energy seeped into Anku's body.

The effect was remarkable. As a man in a risky profession, Esir had naturally witnessed magical healing on multiple occasions, and in fact he carried a variety of curative balms, serums, and elixirs secreted about his person. But he'd never seen healing like *this* before. Anku's eyes shot open, and the barbarian's body convulsed once, and then, just like that, was whole. Esir blinked as he realized that the wound in the man's shoulder was just *gone*.

Their attention was drawn around by a last desperate roar, as the girallon went limp, its body crushed within the bronze serpent's coils, its neck locked in its jaws. As it expired the summoned monster dissolved back into a red mist, which vanished in seconds.

"My sword..." Anku said, casting around for the blade even as he pulled himself to his feet.

"Use your pick," Tammuz commanded. "That black metal is adamantine; it should prove more effective."

The barbarian nodded and took up the weapon as the snake's head revolved around to face them once more. Wary now, Anku waited for the beast to come to them, using the adjacent pillar to offer some degree of cover.

Esir and Tammuz fell back. The thief looked down at his whip. "My weapon is useless... worse than useless, it heals the thing."

"Trust in the gods," Tammuz said. The pair watched as the serpent lunged again at Anku, but the barbarian darted behind the pillar at the last instant, avoiding the lunge. The impact of the snake's blunt head ripped out a considerable chunk of stone, sending a plume of debris across the floor of the chamber. Anku came around the far side of the pillar and struck the serpent's body with his pick. True to Tammuz's advice the head of the weapon bit into the serpent's body, releasing a geyser of electrical sparks. Anku ripped the weapon free and dove forward as the construct's head came around the pillar, seeking the flesh of its tormentor.

"Anku, get free!" Tammuz shouted. The barbarian heard over the noise made by the serpent, and leapt forward even as the snake lunged after him.

"Pyrotatus!" the mystic shouted, lifting a fist into the air in an invocation of power. A column of fire exploded down from the ceiling, driving into the center of the bronze serpent's body. The inferno engulfed the creature, overcoming its magical defenses to ravage its metallic body. As the flames died, the serpent fell to the ground in a loud clatter, its joints fused by the heat of the blast. Steam rose from cracks where the bronze had faltered, and the air above it wavered as heat continued to radiate from its body.

The companions gathered and watched the sundered construct in silence. Finally, Tammuz gestured toward the opened doors.

"Come, gentlemen, our fortune awaits."

Behind him, Esir and Anku exchanged another meaningful look. But they followed the mystic, Anku recovering his falchion as they departed the chamber.

Chapter 276

LOOT

Anku laughed as he cracked the top of the clay pot he was carrying, and a flood of silver coins spilled out. The barbarian balanced the heavy container to stop the coins from falling out, but at least fifty had slipped out, clinking on the stone floor as they bounced and rolled across the room.

“By the gods, man, why must you make such a clatter!” Esir said. He hurried over with a small canvas sack, which he held under the barbarian’s pot. Anku carefully tipped the pot, dumping hundreds of the coins into the sack. The ancient coins were thin and irregular by modern standards, but the contents of the pot still appeared to greatly exceed the capacity of the sack. Yet the cascade of silver vanished into the bag swiftly, and barely caused the canvas to bulge as they settled.

“Here, help me gather up this mess you made,” the thief said, collecting the nearest of the scattered coins.

“Bah, you scabble about on the floor,” the tribesman said, flashing a wry grin. “I think I saw another of those containers in the alcove here.” He headed over to the far side of the room, and started digging around in the debris of ancient tools, weapons, pots and other accoutrements that had long since decayed beyond practical use.

Not far away, along the near wall, Tammuz dug through the insides of a stone tomb. They had already cleared out the six sarcophagi along the perimeter of the room, but the mystic was giving them a closer examination, searching for hidden objects or secret panels. They had been wary of traps or undead guardians when they’d opened the sealed stone blocks, but inside there had only been the mummified skeletons of those laid to rest here, covered in the ruined remains of once-fine clothes and armor. Now, all that was left was junk, claimed by the advancing hand of time.

This was the last of four burial chambers that they had cleared out, each richer than the last. All of the weapons, armor, and other useful goods were decrepit and useless, but they had found valuables that retained their worth to the tomb raiders. Ancient coins, stamped with the faded visage of a ruler dead for millennia. Semi-precious stones, inlaid into the hilts of rusted weapons or crumbled armor. Jeweled artifacts such as bracers, anklets, belts, and torcs, constructed in crude fashion by contemporary standards, but prized for the copper, silver, and gold from which they had been made.

The haul thus far had been in bits and pieces rather than a deluge, and Esir’s spacious *bag of holding* had not had difficulty absorbing the entire quantity of the treasure. Neither he nor Anku complained; the increasing frequency of valuable loot the deeper they continued into the tomb only presaged the greater treasures further on. Thus far the tombs they had found had only housed elite soldiers, councilors, and extended kin of the long-dead emperor. The bones of the fallen prince himself, and his immediate family, had to reside somewhere ahead.

Tammuz’s probing fingers found something, caught in a narrow crevice in the bottom of the tomb. Shifting the mummy, he was able to dig his treasure free. As he lifted it into view, he sucked in a breath.

It was a gemstone, a crystal about as wide and maybe half the length of his little finger. It was a long oval, tapered to a point on one end. As the light of his torch played upon

it, the stone came alive in a glimmer of reflections, the brightness shining on hundreds if not thousands of tiny facets in the gem. It was beautiful, and with the light gathering upon the myriad facets, almost hypnotic to look upon.

Esir and Anku had noticed the mystic's discovery and come over to join him. "So, you have found one of the Tears?" the thief said.

"Yes," Tammuz said, closing his hand around the gem and placing it in his pouch. "Yes, although it is a very small one. According to my sources, the more potent stones approach the size of a closed fist."

"They are magic?" Anku asked.

"Of a sort," the mystic explained. "They are more accurately conduits for certain kinds of energy, and are capable of absorbing and storing a great deal of power within their matrices."

"And the gods looked down at what their creations had wrought, and their tears fell hard upon the earth," Esir said, his voice strangely distant.

Tammuz looked intently at him. "The old gods had good reasons for their grief," he said.

"The new ones, as well," the thief returned.

Tammuz looked thoughtful. "Yes. Yes." He turned to Anku. "Did you recover all of your treasure?"

"Yeah, that last pot was cracked, empty. I'm ready to move on, if you are."

"We're getting close to the Emperor's tomb, aren't we?" Esir asked. Both men looked at Tammuz.

"I do not know the precise layout of the tomb," the mystic said. "But I suspect that you are correct."

That revelation made them all somewhat somber, as they departed the tomb and continued deeper into the complex. They were still alert for traps, with Esir clearing the ground ahead of them before every single step forward. They did not encounter more such obstacles, but they did find a mortared wall that required Anku's pick for them to progress further. They made their way through several empty vaults and passed a few side passages that Tammuz led them past without stopping. The mystic seemed to be guided by instinct, and the other two men felt a building anticipation that only grew with each empty chamber they passed.

The tunnel abruptly gave way to another set of stairs, which broadened as they descended until they were in a long gallery of sorts. They could each feel a sense of cold oppressiveness now; they had to be far beneath the surface of the earth, with all of the descents they had made since entering the tomb.

The stairs ended but the hall continued, with two rows of pillars running down the center, supporting the vaulted ceiling twenty feet above. Tammuz's torch indicated deep alcoves to either side between the pillars, but the mystic left them unmolested. There were objects in those alcoves, vague forms as the light passed them quickly by, but Esir and Anku stayed with the priest. They could always come back, once the greatest treasures had been looted. The pair were taking on the airs of a diner who snubs his nose at a rich buffet, in favor of the finest morsels said to be at the high table. They had already recovered a small fortune in Esir's magical bag, but since entering the tomb, each had developed escalating expectations at what the private hoard of an emperor's tomb would contain.

Finally, they came to a broad but relatively low stone arch that marked an end to the hall. Anku's head nearly brushed the stone as he followed Tammuz through; his skin tingled slightly as he made his way into the chamber beyond.

Esir felt it too. "A ward?"

Tammuz did not turn back toward them. "Be wary. Do not touch anything unless I say it is safe." There had been a subtle shift in the man's demeanor since the last tomb, and now it was he who took the lead, as they moved further into the room beyond the arch.

The immediate area was crowded, with pillars half again as thick as the ones in the outer hall holding up a low ceiling. But after about thirty feet, the space opened up once more into a large chamber, almost cavernous in its scope.

The place was impressive. Huge stone forms had been carved into the walls, rising to support the ceiling some thirty feet above. There were almost a dozen of them, quiet stone guardians carved with skirts and breastplates in an archaic style. Their faces were not quite human, but even with Tammuz's torch held high they could not quite discern their precise identity.

The statues ringed a huge stone bier in the center of the room, accessed by a series of stone steps that faced them. Upon the bier was another tomb, this one carved in great detail with scenes that formed several parallel rows around the perimeter of the container.

Tammuz started toward the stairs, but he was distracted by Esir's sudden exclamation.

"Here! Over here!"

The three of them rushed over to where the thief had indicated. Tammuz's light indicated another small arch on the far side of the room, near the huge leg of one of the statues. As the torchlight spread through the opening into the space beyond, it shone brightly on the familiar sheen of gold.

"A fortune..."

Even though they could only see part of the room beyond the arch, one look was enough to prove the truth of the tomb raider's exclamation. The light revealed considerable mounds of precious objects, overwhelmingly gold, but leavened with items of brass, silver, and platinum, most generously encrusted with precious gemstones. These objects were neither crude nor small, and included objects both practical and decorative to suit almost any function one could imagine. It was as if someone had taken the contents of a lavish palace, transformed them into solid gold, and pressed them into the confines of the small room beyond the arch.

"Forgive me for ever doubting you, priest," Esir said, his voice almost breaking with the raw greed that filled him. He started forward, arms outstretched, Anku just as wide-eyed a step behind.

"Stop!"

Both men seemed to come out of a haze as Tammuz's command echoed off the walls of the crypt. Anku frowned as he turned around, and Esir's expression was even darker.

"What is it, priest?"

"That archway is warded with powerful magic." Tammuz stepped forward, and the other two parted to make way. He walked up to the very edge of the arch, but no closer. He muttered words of magic, and stared into the opening, ignoring the incredible treasure to focus on small details, from the grain of the stone to the faint specks of dust that floated in the air. Esir came up behind him, and conducted his own examination, without disturbing the priest.

"Well?" Anku finally asked.

Tammuz let out a breath. "I am sorry. The ward is incredibly potent, and bound to the very fabric of this place."

"What are you saying?" Esir asked. "That we should just give up that loot, because you cannot bypass the ward?"

But Tammuz had already grown distracted; he turned and headed for the great stone tomb in the middle of the room once more. "Perhaps later, I can prepare magic to evade the ward," he said over his shoulder.

Anku growled something, but Esir forestalled him with a raised hand. The two followed the man, as he ascended the bier and approached the tomb. They watched as he scanned the stone box, which was large enough to hold the remains of ten men. They knew who was held inside, however, even before Tammuz touched the full-sized engraving carved into the lid of the tomb. The details of the carvings had faded some in time, but their exceptional quality was still evident. This one was the representation of a powerfully-built man, clad in elaborate armor, his arms outstretched. Below him, miniature figures paraded across the lower half of the tomb, their eyes and hands lifted in supplication to the great figure above.

“Come, help me with the lid,” Tammuz said.

“Odd, that they would place wards upon their lord’s treasure, but not upon his remains,” Esir said, shooting a wary glance at Tammuz. He took up a position to the priest’s left, while Anku took hold of the lid at the foot of the tomb.

“Together, on three, push,” Tammuz urged. “One, two, three!”

The stone lid slipped aside slightly. It took several more concerted thrusts before they could see the opening below. A dry gush of stale air rose from the darkness within. The walls of the tomb were thick, a full foot of stone on all sides. The stone continued to resist them, but finally Anku grunted and pushed with his full might, and with a huge crash the lid toppled over onto the bier, lying propped against the side of the tomb.

The three men leaned over the edge and peered into the tomb. There wasn’t much to see. The body of the god-emperor Amar Sina lay bound in ceremonial wrappings. He wore armor, but the bits of leather that had held the bronze pieces together had decayed with age, leaving only scattered components. A sword had been laid in the right hand of the skeleton; Anku reached in and grabbed it, examining it with a keen eye.

“Worthless,” he said, tossing the sword away. It landed with a loud clatter and skittered into a corner.

“A collector of antiquities would pay thousands of gold pieces for that pitted blade,” Tammuz said. The cleric had started a detailed search of the interior of the tomb, taking more care with the remains of the dead man than the tribesman had.

“If you could convince him that the weapon was what you claimed it to be,” Esir said. The thief’s own cursory examination had revealed no treasure in the tomb, at least nothing immediately valuable.

With a subtle inclination of his head, he directed Anku to follow him. Tammuz, bent fully over the edge of the tomb as he searched, paid them no heed.

The two retreated to the edge of the bier, and engaged in a quiet but intense conversation.

The priest, meanwhile, had grown more intense in his own search. Carefully sliding the body of the dead emperor out of the way, he closed his eyes and felt along the bottom of the tomb. The stone was covered with a layer of dust, powdered stone mixed with the detritus of the human body following centuries of natural decay. His fingers found the slight indentation where a piece of the tomb had settled. He pressed upon the spot, calling upon his magic, whispering words of power.

Before his touch the stone melted away, revealing a small, concealed recess below. Within rested a small bag. Carefully he reached for it, knowing that the fabric would likely crumble at his touch.

A noise drew his attention, and he lifted himself up out of the tomb.

His companions were gone. He lifted his torch and looked around, his gaze drawn inevitably to their most probable location.

A sudden peal of laughter confirmed his suspicion. It came from the arch leading to the treasure room. A moment later, Esir reappeared, accompanied a moment later by Anku, both burdened by several heavy artifacts of solid gold.

“What have you done?”

“Ho, priest!” Esir said, with a grin. “Your warning turned out to be nothing... the ward was pathetic, a flash of light, a little clap...”

“You fools! The ward was...”

He was interrupted as a low rumble filled the crypt, echoing off the walls. The noise intensified rapidly, and the ground shook beneath their feet, nearly knocking Tammuz down. Anku dropped a heavy golden candelabra, and it broke into pieces as it hit the stone floor. “What’s happening?” the barbarian shouted.

“The place... it’s collapsing!” Esir yelled in reply. The shaking intensified, and dust and bits of stone began dropping from above, as cracks appeared in the walls and ceiling, and rapidly began to widen.

“The exit!” the thief shouted, dashing for the far arch, still carrying his burdens. Anku started to reach for the largest chunk of the candelabra but thought better of it, running after the thief with a golden chalice, a ruby-encrusted scepter, and a platinum and silver bowl still clutched in his arms. Neither paid any heed to Tammuz, who had returned to the tomb, and reached into it, heedless of the larger chunks of stone that were beginning to crash down around the perimeter of the bier.

Esir was like a streak of lightning as he darted for the exit. Anku was only a step behind him, but both were still a good twenty paces from the arch when a massive roar filled the place, and the huge blocks of the arch came crashing down into the opening, accompanied by ten thousand pounds of rock and earth. The force of the collapse was enough to knock the two men backward, and it was only luck or desperation that kept them on their feet. Their treasures fell forgotten to the floor. There was so much dust now that it was almost impossible to see, but they could hear the pounding of stones upon the floor all around them. The shaking had not ceased, and if anything continued to intensify until the ground was like the back of an enraged bull beneath their feet.

“The... priest!” Esir coughed, grabbing Anku’s arm and dragging him back toward the crypt.

They staggered out of the collapsing foyer into the huge chamber of the emperor’s tomb. The room was coming apart, and the stone blocks falling from above were the size of carts, slamming into the floor with enough force to crack the stone. The stone statues that ringed the chamber were still intact, staring down at the pair with gazes that seemed triumphant. One finally succumbed to the abuse of the collapse, its head tumbling from its shoulders to land within two paces of the desperate thieves.

“There!” Esir yelled, pointing.

Tammuz stood atop the bier still, adjacent to the empty tomb. He held a scroll in his hands, and somehow though all the chaos Esir could almost hear the words of magic, as the priest drew upon some power to escape.

“Tammuz! Take us...”

But he never got a chance to finish, as the ceiling above opened with a mighty cracking. The priest looked up and fixed his erstwhile companions with a neutral stare.

Then the air shimmered around him, and he was gone.

* * * * *

The Nightfall vespers were approaching peak, and there were nearly twenty white-robed priests of Soleus gathered in the small chapel in the rear of the great cathedral in Camar. This ritual was an echo of the public one held in the huge temple in the nave of the building at sunset. That daily gathering attracted as many as five hundred citizens of the city; these days, with all of the troubles facing Camar, every service held in the cathedral was packed to capacity.

The Nightfall service was quieter, more solemn, and attended only by those consecrated to the service of the faithful. Patriarch Jaduran was not presiding this evening, as he was spending another long night in consultations with the Tribune and the Council in the ducal palace. The old bishop conducting the service had spent sixty-

two years in the service of the Father, and he spoke the ritual words with the familiarity of one who knew them better than he knew himself. He stood before the altar, facing the gathered priests, who knelt with heads bowed, echoing his words with the appropriate replies. Behind him a ring of candles around the altar filled the room with a soft light. The damage recently wrought in the chapel had been repaired, although black marks could still be seen on the wooden beams high above, a reminder of the scandal that surrounded the last Patriarch's removal.

There was a soft sound, a quiet *whump* that fell in the midst of the bishop's invocation of safety for the people of Camar in the absence of the sun's blessed light. The man trailed off, his eyes wide, his mouth hanging open in surprise. The gathered priests looked up in confusion at the unprecedented interruption.

There was a man standing in the middle of the sanctum, facing the altar and the surprised bishop. He was shrouded in a dark robe, hanging askance about his person. He was covered in dust, and motes of it floated in the air around him.

For a moment, the priests stared at the unexpected intruder in surprise. A few started to rise, alarmed; one even began casting a spell. But the newcomer raised a hand in placation.

"Excuse me, gentlemen. I did not mean to interrupt your service. Please, bishop, finish the invocation; I will remove myself."

With that, Licinius Varo turned and departed, leaving the surprised priests to share looks of confusion behind him.

Chapter 277

A HIDDEN PLACE

The screams were a raw, terrible thing, echoing off the unadorned stone walls of the tunnels deep under the Gold Quarter of Camar. None could enter this place save with the proper keys both mundane and magical, but if someone had been able to penetrate this sanctum, they could have followed those wrenching cries to an iron door set into a massive stone threshold at the bottom of a set of stone stairs worn smooth by the passage of untold centuries. There the intruder would almost certainly been stopped, for the door bore several additional wards, markings of potency that few alive today could replicate, let alone defeat.

The screams died.

In the vault beyond the door, a grim silence persisted for almost a minute.

“We have failed,” the Patriarch of the Shining Father said.

“You... don’t... say,” the source of the screams said.

Talen Karedes, or rather the vampire that the knight had become, sagged in the firm grip of his chains. He was clad only in a simple wrap of white fabric that covered his torso and legs down to his knees. His wrists were held firmly within manacles of silvery-white mithral, firmly attached to thick iron rings that dangled from the low ceiling. Similar bindings, attached to another ring set into the floor, secured his ankles. A magic circle formed of silvered runes encircled him, the markings glowing slightly with a faint light.

Talen shifted, although he was unable as of yet to stand on his own. His movements tugged open his garment slightly, revealing the ragged hole that marked the center of his chest. His skin bore an unhealthy palor, accentuated by the pale light that was emitted by the two crystal globes set into the walls.

“What happened?” Dar asked.

Allera, her expression tight, dropped a handful of diamonds, now brittle and useless, into her pouch. “The spell could not recover his soul,” she said. “The ritual detailed in the ancient books should have sundered the taint holding him to unlife, allowing my *resurrection* spell to bring Talen’s soul back to us. But I could not... it was like thrusting my hands into acid, trying to... I could not...”

“Shh,” Dar said, coming forward and taking her hands in his. They were trembling. “It’s all right, we all know you did what you could.”

“The power that resisted us was... immense,” Patriarch Jaduran said. He and Nelan had added their own spell power to Allera’s spell, using an *atonement* spell, coupled with a *dispel evil*, in an attempt to sunder the demon lord’s hold on the former knight. It had been like trying to slay an ancient dragon with a hunting knife.

“How do we proceed from here?” Nelan asked.

Talen shifted again in his chains; the clatter of metal drew their attention back around. “There is nothing that you can do,” the vampire said. “Orcus has my soul in his grasp, and you fools lack the power to loosen his hold. You have only one choice.”

“We will find a way, Talen,” Allera said. “We just need time...”

The vampire surged up, his bonds tightening as he stretched to the very edge of the magic circle. He held that position for several full seconds before he sagged back, overcome with weakness once more. Dar’s grip on the hilt of *Valor* did not loosen for some time after that.

“You fools,” he said, finally, his voice thick with weariness. “You don’t understand. You don’t *have* time, none of you. **He** is coming, and there won’t be anything any of you can do...”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” Dar said. “We’ve kicked the ass of more than one demon; if Goat Head wants to come into my world, he can get in fucking line to have my steel shoved up his ass.”

Talen sneered. “You understand... nothing.”

“Talen,” Allera began, but the vampire cut her off. He turned his head to look at the final occupant of the chamber, who had stood there silent during the entire ritual, her body stiff like a statue. “Shay. I can’t exist like this... please... help me... put an end to this...”

The scout did not move, did not so much as flinch.

“He cannot get out of those?” Dar asked Jaduran quietly.

The Patriarch shook his head. “Those manacles were fashioned by Artemus Tekal himself. Even if they were to fail, the circle holds him imprisoned within. And even if he could defeat both, the wards upon the door would obliterate a creature such as he, were he to attempt to force his way through.”

“It seems like the church might have had dealings with this sort of thing before,” the fighter said.

Jaduran nodded softly. “Even in the short time since I accepted my new position, I have learned much about the history of my own faith that I never would have suspected, even as a bishop.”

Allera had gone over to Shay, who allowed herself to be led back toward the door. Talen watched her leave, an anguished look on his face. As the five living occupants of the room exited via the heavy door, his voice followed them out.

“He is coming!” the vampire shouted. “He is coming!” The sound of his words continued to echo off the long corridors deep under the streets of Camar, even after the thick door clanged shut, and the heavy bolts slid hard into place, sealing Talen Karedes securely within his prison.

Chapter 278

HANGING BY A THREAD

Letellia looked up and stopped pacing as the door to her great-uncle's chamber opened. She felt a tiny stab of relief as she saw Allera's face; the other woman's expression was grim, to be sure, but not dark enough to bear the news that she'd feared.

"How is he?" she asked.

"The archmage is resting," the healer told her. "The stroke was not as bad as it could have been, but there is only so much that healing magic can do in the face of old age."

"Thank you for coming back again. I know that... well, I heard about what happened under the cathedral."

Allera nodded, and ran a hand through her hair absently. Much of it had grown back, although the cut was still too short to be fashionable. The scars that covered her scalp, however, were hidden from view.

"The spell was wreaking a terrible havoc upon him, even before the sudden break in the *transposition* in the Talon. He had to know what effect it would have, to suddenly disrupt the spell like that."

"There was little choice," Letellia said. "The mage's *forcecage* was interfering with the mental transfer in any case, and it would have taken a minute, at least, to manage the transition safely and return control of my body to me. He knew that I had command of the *dimension door*, to bypass the prison in time to stop the foe from slaying the three of you."

"I spoke to the cleric of the Father who attended to him in the aftermath. I am not pleased that he allowed Honoratius to cast the *transposition* again the next day."

"You have spoken with my great-uncle," Letellia said. "His personality is a... forceful one."

"That is not an excuse for reckless behavior."

"He is almost a hundred years old," Letellia said. "He made his decision with full knowledge of the consequences. If he hadn't returned to Rappan Athuk, then we'd still be there."

Allera nodded.

"Will he recover?" Letellia asked, after a pause.

"He was lucid, earlier, and I do not believe that the injury affected his faculties. But I cannot condone further use of the *transposition* magic, not in his current condition."

Even a regular casting of the spell could trigger another stroke, and a disruption like the last one could kill him.”

Letellia nodded, but it was clear that she was keeping her calm only through an effort. She bit her lip. “I will do what I can, but I cannot guarantee that he will accept that condition.”

“I understand. He is quite an imposing man... even in these circumstances.”

“Thank you for coming, Allera. I know that there are other matters...”

“Honoratius was there for us, when we needed him. I will check in with you again tomorrow. Until then, try to see that he gets lots of rest.”

“I will.”

The sorceress escorted the healer to the door that led to the tower’s main stairs. They paused there. “Is there any news from the Tribune?” Letellia asked.

“Tiros has headed to the old legion camp at Trajaran, to consult with the leaders of the Second Legion,” Allera said. The Second Legion had just returned from Dalemar, and from what Allera had heard, its men were in poor shape after the long siege of the northern city. It had been a long tradition in Camar not to quarter armies in the city itself. There was a newer camp just a mile from the city walls, but that site was full with the recruits for the budding new Fifth Legion, barracked for the winter. Tiros had ordered the old training camp at Trajaran reopened. His motives were not just to provide for the reprovisioning of the Second; with all of the trouble facing Camar, it was likely that there would be more refugees arriving from the south and north seeking succor. Trajaran was almost a city itself, and was located only about five hours away from the capital city if one had fresh horses. “Dar and I were supposed to meet with him tonight, but he got a late start, and he may end up spending the night there.” The road connecting Trajaran and Camar, like all of the roads near the capital, was kept in good repair, and at one time the journey along the north road had been pleasant, even at night. But these days there was more to fear than a lingering winter, and most travelers were staying home, unless desperation drove them out onto the roads. And desperate people made the roads even more dangerous.

After a quick and slightly awkward embrace, Allera took her leave of the sorceress. The young apprentice that had shown her here had departed, but the healer knew the Tower well enough by now to need no guide. A year ago, the thought of entering this stronghold of ancient magic would have sent chills down her spine. It was strange, but this place of alien wonders and sinister secrets had become just another location for her of late. Maybe it was the knowledge that the Guild of Sorcery was neither as powerful nor as numerous as she’d believed growing up. Or maybe it was just that the constant exposure to strange and wondrous—and terrible—things in the past months had deadened her to those sorts of feelings.

The ground floor of the tower seemed cavernous and empty. She nodded to the guard at the door, a youth of barely sixteen armed with a wand, and headed out into the courtyard. As she walked, she thought again of Tiros, and of Camar.

While he had not admitted it, Allera suspected that Tiros had elected to abandon the siege of Dalemar. The Third Legion was still up there, in a winter camp outside the city, but they were likely in as bad shape as the Second. For all the critical significance of the northern province, the issue of Camar's immediate survival was more pressing. The return of the Second Legion had done little to calm the fears of the people of the city, and Allera was likewise uncertain whether the presence of another legion would make a difference. She had not been surprised at the fear and anger she'd sensed on the streets of the city since their return. What had caught her unawares, however, was the sense of resignation that had fallen over the city. She hadn't spent much time out on the streets, especially with the icy cold wind that seemed to blow constantly off the sea, but she had seen hundreds of people either shambling about with blank faces, or huddling in the shelter of doorways or within the galleries that hosted open-air markets during the warmer months. Even with the recent flood of refugees into the city, there were plenty of empty buildings to shelter people from the harsh elements. The Night of the Dead had cut through entire neighborhoods, and had been followed by an exodus that the influx of refugees had not yet countered. But despite the cold, people seemed to want to gather together in the open air, and Allera passed at least five collections of at least a dozen people, standing in close knots around fires in empty plazas or intersections of mostly-deserted streets. Some of those people recognized her healer's robes and looked questions at her, but she had no answers for them. What could she say to console these people? Pulling her cloak tighter around herself, she hurried past each such gathering.

She encountered more people as she approached the ducal palace. Here there was a great deal of activity, much of it conducted by men in the varied uniforms of the new City Guard. The loss of General Pravos and three hundred men to the claws and teeth of one of the ravager spawn had hurt the city's main defense force, but more men and women had continued to join the ranks, enough so that they had run out of the old orange and gold uniforms of the Ducal Guard. Pravos had started designing a new uniform with new colors to distinguish the new organization from the old, but it had still been in the planning stages with his death. So the Guards now wore a mixture of garments that included Guard uniforms, Legion formal and battle dress, or in a number of cases, just an armband of orange cloth worn with street clothes.

The huge gates that warded the main entry to the palace complex were open, and the guards there came to attention at her approach. These men, at least, were well trained, and in the past few months they'd had plenty of experience in wielding the short swords buckled at their sides. Allera acknowledged them with a nod, and entered the courtyard beyond the gates.

The inner court was pretty in the spring, with its gardens blooming and the long galleries to each side lined with trees sagging with fresh fruit. Now, it just looked cold and barren; the plants all dormant or dead. There was activity here, with a half-dozen wagons being unloaded at one of the side entrances. As she watched a pair of teamsters boarded one of the empty wagons and lashed the two dray horses into motion. The men barely glanced at her as they left, returning to the city.

Her boots scuffed on the packed dirt of the courtyard as she made her way to the marble steps that led up toward the main entrance of the palace. There were guards here as well, and she knew that there were others that she could not see. She crossed under two statues of robed men whose outstretched arms formed an arch of sorts over the entry, and headed inside.

The palace itself was pristine, kept up by the same small army of servants that had supported it in the days of the Duke. It was an impressive feat, Allera thought, considering the not-quite-so-small army of soldiers and visitors that passed through these halls each day.

A man clad the orange-trimmed robe of a palace functionary had been standing in an alcove near the entrance; he came forward as Allera passed into the foyer. His bow was practiced and perfect. "Healer Hialar, can I be of assistance to you?"

"I am looking for General Dar."

"I believe he is in the East Hall," the man said. "If you would come with me?"

Allera knew the way to the East Hall, but she let the man lead her. She glanced back and saw that another servant replaced her escort as they left the foyer and headed deeper into the palace. For some reason, that small sign of efficiency gave her a feeling of reassurance. At least there was something that was working well in Camar, these days.

She heard Dar before she saw him. Her lover was wearing his dragonhide breastplate, which gave him a fearsome appearance even exclusive of the dour look that seemed etched onto his face of late. *Valor* hung at his side, and a young adjutant hovered a respectful distance back, close enough to provide assistance as needed.

Dar was engaged in a discussion—if you could call it that—with Gallo Eutropius, the representative of the city's mercantile guilds on the ruling council. The olive-skinned Eremite was gesticulating to punctuate the points of his argument, but he broke off as Dar said something that Allera could not quite make out. His hand had fallen to the hilt of *Valor*, she saw.

The merchant turned and strode away, and after a moment Dar gestured for the adjutant to follow after him. Eutropius did not acknowledge her as she passed, but Allera could read his mood quite clearly in his eyes.

“You’re the first person I’ve encountered today that I’m happy to see,” Dar said, as she came up to him.

“What happened with Eutropius?”

“He wanted me to give him answers that I don’t have.”

“You threatened him?”

“I told him that if he wanted answers, he had to talk to Tiros. I’m just a sword-swinger. My job is to hack shit up.”

“You told him that?”

“I may not have used exactly those words.” His grin, however, indicated that they hadn’t been far off.

“I think the esteemed councilor was less than pleased at that comment.”

“The esteemed councilor can go fuck himself. By the gods, sometimes I wonder how many of these idiots don’t realize what’s going on here.”

“They weren’t at Rappan Athuk, Corath. They don’t know what we know, only that everything is crashing down around them. There’s a lot of fear in the city; you can see it in the faces of anyone walking in the streets.”

“They should be scared,” Dar said. “They—”

He stopped at a small gesture from Allera, and turned to see five men standing behind him. They hadn’t quite snuck up on them, but the healer hadn’t spotted them until they were almost upon them, and it wasn’t clear from where they had come.

They were of foreign ancestry, with coloration ranging from a deep tan to a rich earthen brown. They were clad in nondescript but high-quality garments that covered and obscured their bodies, but which did not look bulky enough to conceal large weapons. Four carried themselves with the air of warriors, obvious despite the lack of armor and weapons, subtly warding the fifth, whose eyes bore a sharp and canny look of intelligence.

Dar was not in the mood for an interruption, and he made his feelings clear at once.

“What the fuck do you want?”

The guards tensed slightly, their expressions darkening, but the leader calmed them with a slight gesture. “I do not wish to impose upon your time, General Dar, but I have

come on an important errand, and I believe that Tribune Tiros is not available at the moment.”

“You can wait until he gets back. I don’t have time for—”

“Excuse me for interrupting, but this matter does affect you directly. And you too, Allera Hialar.”

Dar’s eyes narrowed. “Just who are you? And how did you get in here without an escort?”

The man made a small bow. “My name is Master Alzoun. These are my associates.” He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping conspiratorially. “We have come to offer what aid we can to those who war against the Demon.”

Allera saw that Dar’s hand had fallen once more to the hilt of *Valor*. Allera glanced around; there were no guards within sight, and in fact she suddenly realized that the hall was unusually quiet.

If Dar noticed the change, he didn’t indicate it. “You’re walking a dangerous path, Alzoun. I want to know who sent you here, right now, or there is going to be... trouble.”

The man nodded, and reached up to draw out something on a chain around his neck. “I believe you will recognize this sigil,” he said.

“Gods fucking damn it,” Dar muttered.

Chapter 279

THE CAVERN

The quiet and darkness were absolute, pure, and that made the breaking of both that much more dramatic.

He was alone, surrounded by an soft glow of magical light. His boots made only the slightest scuff on the bare stone floor, but even those faint sounds echoed deeply throughout the place. The odd angles and unusual formations of the cavern made every noise echo back strangely, until one could not recognize the nature of the original sound.

Elegion Alderis moved deeper into the cavern. Most elves did not look their age, but the arcanist wore the effects of Rappan Athuk upon his frame, and his steps were deliberate, as though every movement cost him credits from a diminished account of

vitality. In this place, the magic of the layered auras protecting him seemed to sizzle in the air.

Others had come, since he had first found this place. He could sense them in the very air of the cavern. But the Conclave had not found what he had found here, that he knew.

It was gone now. The crystal he'd taken from this place had been destroyed by his old friend, Sultheros; there was nothing left here but memories and nightmares.

Then why was he here?

With some difficulty he made his way down a staggered tier of stone shelves that deposited him on the edge of a natural gallery fashioned in a deep crevice in the rock. Moisture glistened on the bare rocks in the glow of his *light* spell.

And then, so suddenly that it seemed to jump out of the darkness, he saw it.

It looked innocuous to casual observation. A vein of... *something*, not quite mineral, not quite crystal. The substance seemed to drink in the light of his spell. There was an opening in the middle of the vein, a depression that had held an object about the size of a wand, only thicker, like a dagger. It looked like a crack in the crystal, and one wouldn't have known there was something unusual about it, if you hadn't known to look.

Alderis knew. He knew all too well.

Without conscious thought he extended a hand toward the gap.

A flash of blackness.

For an instant, the gap between heartbeats, he was in a different place. A vast hall, sinister, with walls fashioned out of the bones of millions of dead creatures. A stale stink of death filled his nostrils. Behind him, something huge and terrible stirred.

Another flash, and he was back in the now, back in his reality. Pain exploded through his chest, and he staggered back, nearly falling.

He looked at the crystal formation. It had all begun here, when he'd been lured by the promise of power to take that which did not belong in this world.

A flash.

He saw himself, young and vital, reaching for the object embedded in the wall. He heard laughter, but his echo-self did not hear it. There was a flash, and he heard himself cry out in pain.

Reality. He was alone, back in the present. But the pain continued to burn inside him. He reached down and tugged at the neck of his robe, baring his chest.

There was a radiance coming from within, beneath the surface of his flesh. His chest shone with a crimson glow, like iron heated within a blacksmith's forge, but the skin was icy cold to his touch. Black tendrils of power radiated around him. Somehow, he could see them, although his light had diminished, failing before that unholy glow.

A flash. The pain surged.

He was in the land of his dreams. A blackened landscape, populated by the dead and those who were on their way. A vast plain, as far as he could see, only corruption and decay.

A flash. The agony in his chest had grown almost unbearable, but his mind clung persistently to consciousness.

The heart of Aelvenmarr, once his home. Trees, their dead branches reaching for the sky like claws. A vile substance flowed around his ankles, burning where it touched his skin. He felt the pressure of unseen eyes, and turned to see a dozen dark figures standing behind him, their cold eyes accusing.

A flash. Fire, searing through his soul.

Here. No, not here, not again. Anywhere but here. The Dungeon of Graves, the humans called it. Darkness. Memory. And death. So much death. The death of a world. And within it all, the power of the dark god. Laughter, again, mocking, terrible.

There was another eruption of power, one that washed his sense of self away like smoke before a gale. The elf only gradually became aware. He was lying on the floor. His fingernails throbbed where he had clawed at the hard stone, and blood trailed down the side of his face where he had bit down on his lip. Pain lingered all throughout his body, but it was the dull ache of old wounds, not the flaming dagger that had cut a swath through his soul before.

Dazed, Alderis slowly dragged himself up to a seated position. He could not move any further, not yet. Once again his *light* spell surrounded him with a warm bubble of illumination, but the darkness beyond seemed malevolent still. He rubbed at his chest. The red glow was gone, but he still felt a cold emptiness inside him, one that did not fade as feeling returned to his body, and he slowly picked himself up off the ground. The elf stood there for what seemed a long time, his head bowed. Then, shaking himself out of the lassitude that clung to his bones, he spoke a word of magic, and vanished.

Chapter 280

THE HUNGER

When Gnaeus Sorio woke, he was greeted with the most intense feeling of hunger he had ever experienced. It felt as though there was a chasm inside of his belly, yawning empty, fiercely demanding.

He tried to move, but could not immediately do so. A foul stench filled his nostrils, equal parts filth and shit and rot. Somehow the smell only intensified his hunger. The need clawing at him finally gave him the strength to move, at least to roll over.

The source of the stink was identified; he lay in a ditch that was thick with filth. It covered his body, and a part of him recoiled at the sudden urge to lick the noisome gunk off of his arms. He was weak, so very weak, but as the hunger continued to build it was giving him strength.

It was night, yet somehow he could clearly distinguish his surroundings. Realization set in; he was in one of the trash middens set outside the outer edge of the camp. He tried to remember how he had gotten here, but the hunger made it difficult to concentrate. He'd been in his tent... no, he'd been on punishment duty... hadn't he? His memories swam together and apart, indistinct, vague thoughts that fled as soon as he tried to fix on them. The hunger was overpowering.

Something stirred in the midden nearby. His hand shot out, and seized a fat mound of fur. It squeaked as he grasped it, and it bit his hand, but he felt only a faint dull pressure that faded against the force of the yawning need.

The next thing he knew, he was looking down at the bloody remains of the rat, not much more than scraps of fur and a few bones. His hands were covered with blood and filth. There was some small part of him that felt sick, but that was overridden by the brief, fleeting feeling that was already fading as the hunger returned.

The rat had given him some strength. Sorio crawled forward, to the edge of the ditch. He did not notice that his hands were like claws, which found easy purchase on the steep lip. Within a few seconds, he had pulled himself up.

The night was dark, very dark, but he could clearly make out the details of the stockade wall a few dozen paces away. The camp was dark, but he could smell the familiar stink of unwashed human bodies. The hunger leapt and roared at the taste of it in his nostrils, and he quivered at the power of it.

The confused jumble of memories were quickly dying, but there was one that had grown clearer, a beacon that survived the surging hunger, accompanied by a name. Lucan. Yes. Lucan.

The name was one that was known throughout the Second Legion. Sergeant Lucan was a man in the same sense that a wolf was a dog. In the winter camp outside Dalemar he'd created a nice little fiefdom for himself. As the weather had grown increasingly harsh the fact of the siege had become little more than a technicality, and the men had turned to the more immediate question of survival. In that situation, there were advantages to be had for a man with special skills and few scruples.

Lucan's empire had begun with food. In the winter camp, with rations tight, everyone in the legion had become a scrounger. The choicest prizes had made their way up to the officers, enough to keep their eyes turned away. As the siege had lengthened Lucan had diversified into gambling, fights between animals and men, and whores. The sergeant had built a small corps of toughs around himself, hard veterans who had monitored his operations and kept rivals in check.

Sorio hadn't thought of himself as a rival, but on one of his patrols he and three others had come upon a farmhouse that somehow hadn't yet been plundered. The farmer had protested, but that was nothing a sword thrust couldn't fix, and suddenly Sorio found himself an entrepreneur. For a week he and his companions had found themselves suffused with wealth.

Until Lucan's men had paid him a visit.

The beating had been fearsome, but his assailants had been experts, and while he had not suffered permanent debilitation, neither had he ever fully returned to what he had been before.

He hadn't realized until later that his companions had sold him out; not until he saw them in Lucan's hut on another occasion.

He had borne a grudge. Shortly after they'd returned to the camp here at Trajara, he'd gotten his chance. Lucan had had a favorite, a camp follower named Helena. In the chaos of settling into the new quarters at the old legion camp, Sorio had watched and waited for an opportunity. He had finally caught her alone as she fetched water from one of the nearby streams. It had only taken a moment. He had doubted anyone would catch him; Lucan had a lot of enemies, and no one had seen him leave the camp.

He had been wrong, about a great many things.

The stockade wall was in ill repair, but even so it formed an impressive barrier, fully twenty feet high around the perimeter of the camp. But it barely slowed Sorio, as he sprang up and clambered over with surprising quickness. He landed softly on his feet, inside the camp.

The smell of flesh was almost overpowering, and he had taken several involuntary steps toward the nearest of the long, low barracks buildings before he stopped himself. But

his hatred retained enough of an edge to guide him, and he crept through the darkness toward the far end of the camp, set upon his goal. As he passed by barracks buildings men inside stirred in their sleep, moaning as dark things invaded their dreams. But the camp of the Second Legion remained unaware, as death stole silently through their midst.

Chapter 281

THE RISING AT ALBRITH

Galev Kostas held his lantern high as he walked the deserted streets of Albrith. The ring of light surrounded him for a good fifteen paces, but it offered little reassurance to the nervous guardsman. The town, stricken by calamity, seemed haunted by fell spirits.

Some of the buildings on the south edge of the town had been reinhabited, or scavenged for materials with which to build shelter. In the aftermath of the disaster, the survivors had established a camp in the woods to the south, but with the winter storms battering the region in a seemingly neverending succession, returning to the town was almost inevitable. It testified to the stubbornness—or foolishness—of people as far as Kostas was concerned.

He shook his head. He was in no position to offer criticism. Ella had wanted to leave with the others, the exodus that had survived the quake but which had decided that one lucky break was enough. There were only about three hundred people left in Albrith now. Kostas had inwardly agreed with his wife, but where could they go? Their house had been completely destroyed; it had been through the Father's grace that the four of them had escaped with their lives. He had kin in Emor, but that journey was long and hazardous in the best of times, let alone in the depths of a particularly harsh winter.

He slowed as he neared the end of the street and saw the chasm up ahead. Most of those who had remained to Albrith had committed to rebuilding, but it wasn't clear if there was enough left of the town to support its revival. Those structures that hadn't fallen into the chasm had been heavily damaged by the quake, and fully nine out of every ten were like Kostas's house, either wreckage or too unsafe to reoccupy. His brother-in-law, who'd owned the cooperage, had spoken of hard work and the stubbornness of Albrithers at the last town meeting, but inwardly Kostas had already decided that with the coming of spring, he would follow Ella's prompting and take his family to Emor, to start anew.

A noise from ahead drew his attention back to the present. There was nothing there but the chasm, but it was possible that some fool was defying the standing orders of the town council and looting the wreckage close to the tenuous edge. Kostas reached for the sword at his hip, the movement causing the lamp at the end of the pole he carried to

gyrate roughly, almost spilling the oil. Berating himself silently for his foolishness, steeling his nerves, he recovered and started forward, alert for any signs of trouble.

The chasm was a black slash that gaped like an open wound in the earth, over a hundred feet across. The quake had struck right in the center of Albrith, opening a gash through the center of the town that extended for almost a half-mile in either direction. Most of the buildings that had been near the edge had tumbled into the opening as the earth had bucked and opened.

He paused, and listened. The scrabbling sound that he had heard before was not repeated. Maybe he had scared off whoever it had been.

But there was... *something*, a vague perception of danger that flitted beneath his conscious awareness. It was an instinct more basic, more primitive, that hadn't been fully civilized out of him by a life in a town. That instinct told him to run, but Kostas had always taken his duty seriously, and he knew how to use the weapon that he carried.

The watchman drew his sword, and stepped forward almost to the edge of the chasm. He respected the crumbling edge, and remained a good distance back. He held out the lantern, his senses fully alert and extended.

The gap was too broad for the fitful light from his lamp to reach to the other side. But the progression of the chasm was uneven, jagged, and to his right there was a jutting outcrop that allowed him to clearly see the cliff face as it descended into gloom.

As his light fell upon that rough surface, Kostas sucked in a terrible breath.

The cliff was... *alive*.

It was hard to distinguish the individual creatures; they clung together in a close mass, dragging themselves up the cliff, their claws finding purchase in the rough rock. A few looked up as the light flared upon their pale, sickly gray flesh, and they hissed in anger. The leading edge of the wave was just a few paces below the lip of the cliff.

Kostas staggered back as if struck. His limbs felt stiff, as if he'd forgotten how to move. The hissing noise made by the unholy creatures he'd seen was sounding larger, filling the chasm; the watchman suddenly realized that it was not just an echo, but a chorus, a noise torn from thousands of throats, all united in a common purpose.

The scream he'd been holding suddenly came alive as his muscles came alive again, and he fled toward the far edge of the town, where the survivors of Albrith had taken shelter.

Behind him, ghouls clawed their way up out of the chasm, forming a wave that swept forward over the town, seeking blood, and marrow, and life to destroy.

* * * * *

Just over two hundred miles away, Nelandro Agathon suddenly shot up from a deep sleep, his eyes wide, his body trembling. He looked around him in fear for a moment, before he realized that he was in his room in the rectory of the Great Cathedral of Camar. He spoke one word, laden with dread.

“Albrith.”

Chapter 282

A RUDE AWAKENING

Velan Tiros, Tribune of Camar, woke suddenly.

The former marshal had picked up the habits of a light sleeper in his first campaign. Those instincts had been dulled just a bit, perhaps, by the recent months sleeping in comfortable quarters in the Ducal Palace. With consciousness came awareness of the myriad physical aches that had become constant companions of late. Tiros pushed them aside ruthlessly. Old age was a real bitch, but one had to make an accommodation with her.

“What is it?” Tiros asked, before realizing that his adjutant hadn’t woken him; he was alone in his tent.

The Tribune pulled back his coverlet and rose, shivering slightly in the cold air. Through the thin gap in the opening of his tent he could see that it was still dark, likely that deep, quiet time that came just before the dawn.

He did not remember what had woken him, but he felt an odd tingle, a sense of anticipation that he’d learned not to question. Then he heard it; a faint noise, distant, but likely still within the borders of the camp. The stockade walls served to keep in sounds, he knew from his days with the legions. One learned to tune out the background noises, which were a constant feature of an occupied camp, even in the depths of night. He wasn’t familiar with the distinctive noises of Trajaran yet, but they weren’t far off from those of every other camp he’d spent time in during his life as a soldier.

But this was something different. And then a noise he knew all too well; a scream, thick with fear and agony.

When his adjutant finally burst into the tent, the marshal was already buckling on his armor. "Status!" he barked, reaching for his sword. The weapon was magical, a prize taken from Rappan Athuk. It was not *Valor*, but it nevertheless bore a potent enchantment. Talen had given it to him...

He thrust that thought violently aside as the adjutant tried to make sense of chaos. "There's an attack... something, in the camp, it seems to be localized in one place, cohorts are rallying..."

Tiros yanked the swordbelt tight around his torso, and cinched the buckle. "Come on," he said, clapping the young man hard on the shoulder.

Once outside the tent, Tiros could better discern the situation in the camp from the layered noises that filled the area within the stockade wall. Men were all around, the yells of sergeants and centurions trying to bring order out of the chaos. The men of the Second were veterans, and the situation was not complete anarchy, although it would have taken a keen eye to recognize the difference.

Over it all, Tiros was drawn to the noises coming from one part of the camp, near the rear wall of the stockade. His adjutant had to hurry to keep up with him as he rushed in that direction. Another man rushed up, bringing his horse, but Tiros ignored him; the camp wasn't that big, and he didn't want to risk trampling someone in the dark. A pair of men bearing torches appeared, joining the small coterie that had formed in the Tribune's wake.

By the time he reached the source of the disturbance, just over a minute later, his followers had grown to a loosely organized mob of just over a hundred men. The noises had come from within a knot of old barracks, most of which hadn't yet been rehabilitated for safe occupancy. With the rickety old structures unsuitable for use, the unit assigned to this location had set up its tents in the open space between the long, low buildings. There was a fairly large gathering of men there already, about forty men, armed and armored, facing inward. Tiros could taste the fear in the air.

A terrible cry rose from within the circle of men, a noise of torment and longing. Tiros thrust himself forward, and as those on the outer edge of the ring heard his approach, they parted and gave him access. Tiros could see that the camp was in disarray, with several of the tents lying collapsed, and the weapons that should have been gathered in neat arrays were scattered about. The light was poor, but he saw something lying half out of a tent that might have been a body. The command tent for the century, a heavy structure the size of a small cottage, had been erected against one of the barracks on the far side of the clearing.

"What in the name of all the gods..."

"Sir, watch out!"

Several things happened all at once. There was a loud crash that came from within the command tent, followed by a sick cracking noise that sent a cold chill down the former marshal's spine. But even as the soldier shouted his warning, Tiros stepped forward into a wave of pain.

The wracking needles of agony made his muscle aches feel trivial by comparison. It was as if someone had thrust a hot knife into his body in a dozen places. Fire clenched in his gut, and he was barely able to keep the bile from exploding out of his throat.

Several men rushed forward and grabbed him, and pulled him back. As they retreated, the pains eased.

Tiros scanned the crowd, and finally settled on a man wearing the shoulder boards of a non-commissioned officer. There were no men of higher rank present, as far as he could see, but many of those present were not in uniform, clad in bits of armor or the plain tunics worn by members of the legion when off-duty. "What is going on here, sergeant?"

The sergeant's uniform bore the markings of a veteran campaigner, but his face was pale and his hands shook as he spoke. "There's something... in the tent, sir... we can't approach, the pain... It's coming from inside... We heard... sir, it was terrible..."

"Cordon off the area!" Tiros shouted, directing the order to the men behind him. He glanced back at the command tent, gauged the distance at about fifty feet. The tent was dark, so he could not see what was inside, not even the shadows of movement. "Set torches around the perimeter!"

"Sir!" The shout was accompanied by a palpable surge of dismay from the crowd.

Tiros turned in time to see the thing that emerged from the tent.

Only subtle hints remained to indicate that it had once been a man. The remnants of a legion tunic clung to its hips, and the markings of what might have been a legion tattoo covered one shoulder. It was difficult to tell; its flesh was gray and bloated, its body gruesomely obese. Its face was an abomination, dominated by huge jaws that were covered with blood. It carried a bloody mess of a carcass, and as the legionaries watched in horror, it lifted its prize to its mouth, and thrust huge gobs of still-warm human meat down its massive gullet.

The soldiers of Camar cried out and retreated as the monster's aura of pain washed over them with its approach.

All save one.

Tiros stood there, his face tight with the effort of withstanding the waves of agony that radiated from the creature. He drew his sword.

“SLAY THAT MONSTER, FOR CAMAR!” he shouted, his voice echoing loudly throughout the camp, like a beacon lifted in the darkness.

Chapter 283

THE DEAD HORDE

The dawn was just starting to brighten on the eastern horizon as five nebulous, insubstantial forms drifted down out of the sky toward Albrith. The town proper was cloaked deep in shadows, dominated by the black slash that cut through its center and formed a wound upon the earth.

The ghostly figures descended and drifted over the southern edge of the town. The place was silent, without even the chirping of a bird to disrupt the stillness.

Albrith was a graveyard. There were not many bodies visible in the air, the occasional limp form crumpled in a doorway, or a bloody limb jutting out from a ruined building. Bloodstains here and there. They might have been taken as lingering remnants of the original disaster that had struck the town, but the five *wind walking* over the place knew better.

The travelers drifted to the ground near one of the larger, more intact structures and took on substance. Allera was the first to fully materialize, and she rushed toward the open door of the building. Dar was right behind her, *Valor* bare in her hand.

“Allera, wait!”

He ran into her just inside the entry, frozen, pale.

The chamber was an abattoir. Blood covered the walls, dark splatters that continued to trail thin lines down the long wooden planks, gathering in pools that merged in shallow depressions in the floor. Most of the furniture had been smashed; there was enough left near the door to suggest that a barricade had been hastily erected and defeated there. Scattered amidst the chaos were... *remains*, not enough to call bodies. Bones could be seen, starkly white; many of them had been split to access the marrow within. There was one intact body not far from the door, lying on its belly, its gray flesh hacked with crude cuts.

“By the gods,” Dar said, affected despite the many terrible things he had seen in recent months. He took Allera and forced her toward him, turning her away from the grisly scene. Behind him, he could hear Nelan voiding his stomach. He took Allera out.

The other two were outside. Letellia, and Yanis. The sorceress and the ranger looked pale. Yanis still looked a bit bewildered, but he came to attention as Dar fixed his stare on him.

“Check out the surrounding area for tracks or other signs, but don’t go far, and don’t leave sight of this spot.”

“Aye, general.” The ranger saluted and started looking around.

Yanis Ophilio had been a last-minute addition to their company. When Nelan had come to the palace compound, just a few hours previous, he’d brought a warning of the Demon unleashing another attack upon the world of Men. With Tiros still out at Trajaran, Dar had found everyone looking to him for guidance—a position he was not pleased to be in. Nelan’s sense of urgency had been contagious, and he’d insisted that a dire threat had emerged at the ruined town of Albrith. He’d prayed to the Father for guidance, and had been granted the power to transport himself and four others on the winds to the region to determine the nature of the threat.

Nelan had wanted to leave at once, but he’d agreed to Allera’s suggestion that they seek out Letellia’s aid. Honoratius was still at death’s door, but the young sorceress had proven her own talents in Rappan Athuk, and they might have need of an arcanist against the still-unknown threat. Shaylara, however, was nowhere to be found, and ultimately Dar decided that they couldn’t wait for her to turn up. He sent a rider on a fast horse to warn Tiros at Trajaran, and left further orders for the leaders of the Watch and the Fifth Legion outside the city to prepare to face battle. Yanis had been in the wrong place at the wrong time; they’d needed a scout, and the ranger had been a tracker in the Border Legion. He’d survived the debacle at Southwatch only because he’d come down with pneumonia in the long forced march that Dar had led from the camp in the Galerrs. He’d been assigned to help with training duties for the new Watch, and Dar had all but grabbed him out of his bunk, ordering him to get his gear and get ready for battle. Now he was finding himself having to deal with things alien to his experience, such as *wind walking* across two hundred miles of terrain to explore a dead town.

“What is it?” Letellia asked.

Dar opened his mouth to respond, but Allera beat him to it. “Ghouls,” the healer said.

“How many?”

Dar looked around. The sky was starting to brighten incrementally, and he could now see the deep claw marks that cut into the threshold of the door to the building where the last survivors of Albrith had made their ineffective stand.

“Many,” he said.

Nelan emerged from the building, his face grim. “We don’t have much time,” he said.

“General!”

Dar turned to see Yanis hurrying over. “There were a lot of them,” the ranger said. “They headed northeast. It won’t be hard to follow their trail.” He pointed in that direction. Even from a few hundred feet away, Dar could see the marks made by the undead horde as it had left Albrith. Their own route here had been indirect, as they’d followed the River Nalos before turning south along the trade road. The path chosen by the undead had been more direct.

Northeast. Straight toward Camar.

Chapter 284

THE FAMINE SPIRIT

Men screamed and armored bodies crashed loudly to the ground. In the confined space bounded by the old barracks structures, the chaos of battle was amplified.

Tiros ground his teeth painfully, his jaw clenched against the unending surge of torment that emanated from the monstrous ghoul. The thing had already taken wounds that would have killed a dozen men, and it seemed almost invincible. It seemed to be healing the damage it had suffered, even as the determined soldiers hacked at its body with their swords.

At his initial order, the men of the Second Legion had attacked. A wave of *pila*, the light but deadly javelins favored by the legions, had shot out toward the creature, accompanied by a few arrows from those few archers who had arrived. At least half a dozen of the spears scored hits, piercing the creature’s fat body, but it had ignored the wounds. Three dozen men had charged forward, their short swords raised as they roared the battle cry of the Camarian legions. That cry had wavered some as the phalanx encountered the ghoul’s aura of pain, but the men of the Second had grimaced and kept going, closing the distance between them and the creature.

The ghoul had not waited for them to come to it. Yanking a pair of spears out of its body, the creature had charged forward with a speed unbelievable for a thing of its bulk. Within a few heartbeats it had covered half of the distance separating it from the onrushing legionaries, and then it had leapt into the air, its bloated form rising a good ten feet above them before it plummeted down directly in the center of the charging ranks. One man had screamed as the creature’s weight shattered his legs; the sound had died quickly as it reached down and seized his head, ripping it off his torso. As the surrounding men looked on in horror, the ghoul had thrust the entire head into its mouth,

which stretched improbably wide to admit the prize. Blood and brains splurged from its mouth as it crushed the dead man's skull within the vise of its jaws.

Tiros had been on the right edge of the charge, and had urged the others to attack. Those soldiers closest to the ghoul on its landing had hewn at it almost by reflex, but the constant torture of being close to it had hindered their blows, and the monster had suffered little by the shallow gashes inflicted upon its flesh. One man, driven almost to madness, had leapt at the monster with a fierce scream, sweeping his sword at its head with both hands. The blow never landed; the ghoul had lunged, and seized the soldier's right arm at the elbow in its jaws. The man screamed as the ghoul bit down hard, and he fell to the ground, blood gushing from the stump of his ruined arm.

The survivors had nearly broken, for all that they still outnumbered the creature by more than thirty to one. But Tiros had driven them forward, his voice a stentorian voice of command over the agonized cries of the soldiers and the terrible noises that issued from the creature. He could not come on it himself at first, as men pressed around it from all directions, flanking it and delivering more blows against it from all sides. The ghoul roared as the legionaries struck at it; with it surrounded, it could not avoid all of their attacks, and while none of the hits thus far appeared to seriously hinder it, the gashes covering its body looked to be taking a gradual toll.

But the ghoul retaliated with a counterattack that was amazing in its violence and speed. As a legionary buried his sword in the ghoul's back it spun and swatted him with a meaty paw. The blow hit with enough force to knock the soldier sprawling, gasping as he tried to draw air into his crushed lungs. With its other claw it seized a soldier, and effortlessly lifted him to its snapping jaws. Its bite encompassed the joint where its neck met its body, and it bit through armor, leather, and flesh alike as it ripped a huge chunk of meat from the hapless soldier's throat. The soldier died in a spray of bright crimson, and the soldiers pressing the creature drew back in horror at the sudden change of initiative. The ghoul pressed its advantage, tossing its latest victim aside, and leaping eagerly into the nearest knot of legionaries. It took several more hits, but delivered another pair of crushing blows that dropped men like ninepins, and seized another man who screamed as he tried to get away, only to have his left leg bitten off just above the knee. Even as the ghoul swallowed the soldier's limb, it swung the dying man like a club, striking down another soldier who was only trying to get away.

The fragile morale of the surviving legionaries would have collapsed right there, but for Velan Tiros. The marshal roared a challenge as he leapt at the ghoul from behind. Tiros no longer looked like an old man as his blade, shining with magical potency, bit deep into the ghoul's sagging, bloated flesh. The ghoul, which had started to take another bite of the soldier it had just killed, dropped its victim and turned to face this new threat. Tiros raised his sword to strike again, but the ghoul smashed its hand across the marshal's face. Even with his helmet on, Tiros felt like he'd been struck with a battering ram. The thing was... *strong* didn't begin to describe it. The ghoul fought with a ferocity unlike anything he had ever seen. It came at the marshal again; Tiros

tried to dodge its second swing, but the ghoul's meaty punch smashed into his right side, just under his arm. The blow knocked him sprawling.

He was able to roll over just in time to see the monster bearing down on him, its jaws yawning wide like the mouth of a bloody cave.

Chapter 285

THE GHOUL ARMY

There wasn't much to the village of Derber's Point, thirty-four structures huddled inside a low wall crafted from the stones that had been cleared from the surrounding fields over twenty generations. Most of the buildings were simple one-room cottages with thatch roofs; the place did not even boast an inn, and the "general store" occupied a corner of one farmer's barn. The center of the village was dominated by a meeting hall that had once been a waystation for the Camarian legions. The long stone structure was now used for winter storage and as a shelter when a particularly harsh storm made it this far inland off the rough seas far to the east.

About one hundred and sixty people called the village home.

The village was doomed.

Dar, Allera, Nelan, Letellia, and Yanis drifted high over the village. From their vantage the village seemed literally packed with ghouls, swarming over the buildings, tearing and destroying. There were a number of breaches in the village wall, but as they watched ghouls vaulting the obstacle where it was still intact, it was clear that the fortifications would have made no difference in any case. The densest concentration of undead was around the stone hall in the center, where ghouls were still pouring into a huge hole in the side of the building. Noises drifted up to them, but it was impossible to discern anything that might have been made by the living over the general din made by the undead.

Allera had started to drift down as soon as they'd spotted the village, but Dar and Nelan had both darted in front of her, warning her off. They could not easily communicate in the gaseous form granted by the *wind walk* spell, but their gestures were clear, the futility of their intervention immediately obvious. There had to be a thousand of the vicious undead monstrosities down there, if not more.

And now, as they watched, a new horror appeared. The stone hall seemed to shudder, and then another wall exploded outward. Emerging from the wreckage was another undead creature, a massive humanoid thing that loomed over the ghouls like an armored giant. It carried a pair of huge spiked flails, both messy with fresh blood, and

the nearest ghouls all but fell over themselves in their haste to get out of its way. Death roiled around it like a cloak, and each of the five watching felt a cold fear clench in their guts at the sight of it.

It stood there, absorbing the chaos of the carnage of Derber's Point. It had no ears, and its lips and eyelids were sewn shut with blue thread. But when it turned, and looked up at the sky, the five *wind walkers* could feel the sinister pressure of the creature's perceptions locking onto them.

Nelan gestured frantically, and a sudden wind rose, bearing them away to the south. The action was timely, as a surge of arcane power erupted in their wake, a surge of magical disruption that they only narrowly escaped. The village fell behind them as they drifted southward, holding a steady two hundred feet above the ground below. A track that could not quite be called a road headed in this direction, and they flew over an abandoned cart, accompanied by the gruesome remains of what had been a pair of horses. They could see several structures, farmsteads isolated outside the protective shelter of the village, and ahead of them a broad stream. The road curved to follow the stream, and they could see several more buildings and what looked like a bridge up ahead. They saw more ghouls, too, moving in packs through the countryside.

Allera suddenly broke from their formation, streaking down toward the road ahead. The others followed, and within a few seconds they could all see what had alerted the healer.

A desperate company fled in abject terror down the road. None of them had horses, but an ox drew a cart that was loaded with small forms—children, their cries dimly audible from this far away. There were about thirty adults, all clad in the simple garments of peasants, clutching farming tools like hoes, sickles, and scythes in the unfamiliar manner of weapons.

The farmers were being pursued by a pack of about sixty ghouls. The undead were gaining quickly, and one look was enough to reveal that there could only be one outcome here.

The wind drove Allera down like an arrow. She streaked over the ghouls, which did not note her passage, so intent were they upon their prey. The group of farmers was starting to come apart as panic ripped its ugly claws through them; a few men broke off, and two dove into the stream, hoping to escape that way. But the stream was only a dozen paces across and sluggish, not much of a real barrier. Another dozen adults, men and women alike, formed up behind the cart, pushing at it or clutching their "weapons" in sweating fists.

As the gap between the two groups fell under a hundred feet, the ghouls hissed in anticipation and surged forward with an added burst of speed. A few had broken from the mass to pursue the humans that had separated from the main group, but there were over fifty left, a wave of claws and gnashing teeth. The villagers screamed.

Allera's misty outline took on substance as she fell the last few feet onto the dusty surface of the road, just behind the trailing edge of the refugees. "Go!" she yelled to them, before turning to face the ghouls. Extending her hands, she summoned forth a wave of positive energy that she unleashed through the ranks of the onrushing ghouls. Blue fire erupted around the first rank of undead, and almost a dozen collapsed, wrought into burning husks by the potency of her magic. But several of the ghouls survived the *mass cure*, and if anything were driven to a greater fury by the impact of the spell. Allera's eyes widened in surprise; she'd used a *mass cure moderate wounds* to be certain, and no ordinary ghoul should have been able to resist the power of that magic.

But it was becoming increasingly clear that these were not ordinary ghouls.

The ghouls surged forward, and Allera hit them again. This time she used a more potent spell, and a full fourteen ghouls were felled by the healing energies of her magic. There was no time for further defense, and as the healer glanced back she saw that the fleeing farmers had made it further down the road, but were still several hundred feet from the bridge.

The first rank of surviving ghouls leapt at her, claws outstretched eagerly, but even as they surged across those last few precious yards her companions were appearing around her. A wisp of cloud dropped down directly in front of her, and then Corath Dar was laying about him with *Valor*, dropping the first ghoul, and then the second, and then a third that he nearly cut in half with the blade. Others clawed at his arms, and the first one he'd knocked down flailed weakly at his legs, but none could get purchase on his flesh through the protection of his armor. Another pair eschewed subtlety altogether and simply leapt upon him, seeking to bear him down, but he merely grunted and hurled both off him with a sweeping motion of his left arm. Infused with strength by his magical belt, and armed with a weapon designed to battle the chaos of such creatures, he seemed invincible.

An island of biting and clawing ghouls formed around him and Allera, but most of the undead cluster just kept going, rushing forward for the easier prey that was still desperately trying to escape. Nelan and Yanis materialized a short distance further down the road, off to the side, and quickly found themselves surrounded by foes. The cleric summoned a wave of holy power, and those ghouls closest screamed as they were blasted into gray ash. That only drove the others into a greater frenzy, and Yanis found himself engaged in desperate battle, trying to keep the creatures off the cleric so that he could call upon the power of the Father once more.

Only about a dozen ghouls had kept focused on the fleeing farmers, but even that diminished force seemed more than a match for the hapless commoners. One man, a wiry fellow barely past twenty, lifted a bow and fired an arrow into the first ghoul. The shot hit it in the chest, but the ghoul paid it no heed. The man paled and fumbled his second arrow, which fell into the ground at his feet. A woman screamed.

Letellia materialized next to them, and as she took on solid form she hurled up her hands, summoning her inherent magic. A translucent *wall of ice* materialized in a long arc across the road, forming a barrier some hundred feet across and ten feet high. There was a cry of frustration from the ghouls, but almost immediately a pair of claws appeared on the top of the wall, quickly followed by a feral gray face.

“That won’t hold them long... keep going!” the sorceress shouted. She lifted a hand, and blasted the ghoul with a barrage of *magic missiles*. The creature hissed, and lost its grip, falling back onto the road on the far side of the barrier.

Letellia looked to the right and left, wondering on which side the ghouls would come around her *wall*.

Allera felt a cold sensation creep through her as a ghoul tore at her with her claws. But the healer was made of stern stuff, and she resisted the cloying paralysis of its touch. Another pair seized her from behind, but all three disintegrated as she hit them with another *mass cure*. The spell also helped clear some space around Dar, at least for a moment; another half-dozen of the creatures surged forward into the space, only to meet *Valor*. Dar was putting more strength into his swings, having recognized the durability that these monsters possessed. Fortunately their all-out assault made little provision for defense, and thus far he had been able to cut them down without suffering any serious injury from their own attacks.

And then, so abruptly that it came as something of a surprise to the companions, the battle was over.

Dar grunted as he crushed the skull of a ghoul lying on the ground at his feet, putting a final end to its struggles. Twenty-three ghouls lay around them in the dirt, most of them charred by the healing surges of Allera’s *mass cure* spells. Nelan was bent over Yanis, purging the ranger of paralysis. The northman hadn’t killed any of the ghouls himself, but he’d kept them off Nelan long enough for the cleric to clear the area with bursts of positive energy.

Letellia and the farmers were not visible, their view blocked by the hundred-foot *wall of ice* that still blocked the road. No ghouls were in sight in that direction. The four of them hurried around the right edge of the barrier, worried about what they might find behind it.

The slab of ice ended just a few paces from the sloping banks of the stream. Dar got there first, and he rounded the edge to see that matters were well in hand here. Five ghouls lay in a row at his feet, their bodies bearing the familiar markings of impact by a *lightning bolt*. There was another clump of them not far away, lying on the ground within a circle of blackened earth about forty feet across. The refugee farmers had stopped a few hundred feet down the road, and now stood in an uncertain knot around their cart.

Letellia was with them, brushing dust off the arms of her coat. No, not dust. Ash, probably.

Nelan came forward with Yanis. Both men were pale. "The last few, the ones that had broken off of this group, have retreated," Nelan said.

"What about the stragglers?" Allera asked. She looked down the stream, but there was no sign of the men who had tried to cross.

"Almost certainly dead," Yanis said. "When I was following you down, I saw a couple of them monsters on their heels, in the water."

"There are more coming up the road," Nelan said.

"Your spell, can we still use it to get out of here?" Dar asked.

The question created a moment of silence. Then Allera spoke.

"I won't leave those people behind," she said, quietly.

Dar had not shifted his gaze from the cleric. Finally, he nodded, the motion stiff, as if someone had grasped his head with invisible hands and forced it into motion.

"Yanis, I want you to get back to Camar. Let them know what's happened, and tell them to send help."

The ranger looked relieved even as he opened his mouth to protest. But Dar didn't give him the chance. "That's an order. Get going, now."

The ranger swallowed and nodded. He concentrated, and his body began to slowly fade, dissolving back into gaseous form. The *wind walk* took full effect again, and Yanis rose into the air, rising about fifty feet up before a brisk wind launched him toward Camar. Dar walked toward Letellia and the farmers, Allera and Nelan close behind.

"The bridge, maybe we can..." Allera began, but Dar shook his head.

"The stream isn't enough of an obstacle; they can flank us too easily. We need to find a place where we can make a stand." He looked down the road, where the path was obscured by a strand of trees that lined the banks of the stream.

Letellia was waiting for them. "There is a mill a short distance down the road, along the stream," the sorceress said. She nodded to one of the men, who said, "That's right, sir, ol' Karon's place, near the ol' tannery. It's not much, but it's got stone walls."

Dar and Allera shared a look. Stone walls had not stopped the monstrous general of the ghoulish army in the village. But Dar only nodded. "Get these people moving. We'll head for the mill."

Chapter 286

HUNGRY FOR DEATH

Tiros fumbled for his sword; he'd dropped the weapon with the last hit, and his hand clawed only on bare earth. The ghoulish towered over him, its breath thick with blood and death. It reached for him, and through the spasms of pain he felt a cold fear clench at his gut.

Then something blurred between them, and there was a flash of bare steel, and a terrible roar from the creature.

"Marshal, get back!" And then hands were grabbing at him, pulling him to his feet. Tiros staggered as he tried to get his legs working properly. He turned and saw his adjutant, the young officer Tiberius Probus, hacking at the ghoulish with a long blade. Another two men, both young officers in his staff, flanked Probus, trying to force the ghoulish back with a pair of short spears.

"Tiberius, no!" Tiros knew what was coming, but he could do nothing to stop it; it was as if time had slowed to a dragging crawl around him. He could only watch as the ghoulish reached out, batting aside Probus's blade almost casually, seizing his arm with a meaty paw. It yanked hard, ripping the man off his feet. Its mouth opened cavernously, and with a single motion it engulfed his entire skull. Even as Tiros's shout echoed in his head the creature bit down, and decapitated the young officer.

Noise and motion came crashing back upon him as time resumed its normal flow. Tiros felt a surge of bile rise in his throat, and he staggered back, half-dragged by a pair of young soldiers whose faces were wide with terror.

Finally he was able to tear free from the men holding him, although the effort nearly cost him his balance again. All around him was chaos; men were fleeing, and screams of pain and panic echoed through the camp. Behind him was carnage, a field of dismembered corpses extending to where the ghoulish continued its swath of violence.

Glancing back, Tiros saw that the ghoulish had taken down one of the spearmen; as the other screamed and tried to flee it leapt onto his back, bearing him down into the dirt. It reached down and tore the poor man's arms off, stuffing them into its gaping maw one after the other.

Looking around, the marshal realized that he was, at least in the immediate area, alone. As the ghoul turned its hungry gaze upon him, he turned and started to run. His foot turned on a dropped spear, and he fell hard, the breath knocked from his lungs by the impact.

Oh, you've got to be kidding me! Tiros thought, the pain and fear making him feel almost giddy. He could no longer distinguish the pains of his own body from those that surged out from the ghoul. He did not look back, grimacing as he tried to pull himself back up. His limbs felt like they belonged to someone else, controlled by a tangled skein of cords by a distant puppeteer. He could not get up.

But as he struggled, he looked up and saw something unusual; a nebulous, misty form, descending from the sky toward his position. Tiros's eyes widened in surprise as the vague cloud touched down just a few paces in front of him. It took on substance as it landed, the mists coalescing into a physical form, and with a start he recognized the newcomer.

"Varo!"

The cleric reached down and grabbed the marshal, lifting him to his feet. Tiros felt a flood of magical energy rush through his body. It did not dispel the pain that radiated from the ghoul, but it purged his injuries, and restored strength to his battered frame.

Varo pressed a weapon into his palm, a heavy mace of black metal. As he grasped it, the head of the mace burst into eager red flame.

"Keep it busy," the cleric said. A slight twist in his lips was the only indicator that the cleric was even aware of the pain that was exuded from the undead monster. Without waiting to see whether Tiros would comply, he took a step back and began incanting, clutching the dark sigil of his god in one fist.

Tiros turned to see that the ghoul was already coming. It was continuing to feed, cramming dismembered chunks of man into its huge gullet as it tromped forward. The wounds it had suffered in the earlier battle appeared to have healed completely, although a few arrows still jutted out from its bloated body. Other than a few groaning, crippled men, the area was clear of soldiers; those who could flee had done so. Tiros could hear men shouting orders from elsewhere in the camp, but those sounds faded into the background as he focused his attention on the ghoul. His gaze started to shift, toward the wreckage that had been Tiberius and the other young officers, but he mercilessly forced his stare back to the creature.

As he strode forward, the ghoul paused, regarding him with a cold, hateful expression. Its entire head and torso were splattered with blood and gore from the victims it had consumed. Tiros's hands clenched on the haft of the mace.

“All right, you fucking bastard, come deal with me!” he shouted, his roar echoing the feral hiss that issued from the ghoul. The marshal took a step forward, but that was all he got to do before the ghoul sprang forward, closing the distance between them in a surprising blur of motion.

Once again, the ghoul held nothing back, laying out a heavy paw in an all-out power attack aimed squarely at the marshal’s midsection. But Tiros had expected the move, if not the speed with which it came, and he hurled himself aside at the last instant. Its claw swiped through the air where he’d been standing, close enough so that the ends of its nails tore through his already-tattered surcoat. Tiros countered quickly, smashing Varo’s mace into the creature’s meaty side. The blow scored, the flames burning around the weapon’s head searing its unholy flesh. But otherwise it was like clubbing a whale with a switch; the ghoul was preternaturally tough, and its sagging flesh absorbed most of the impact of the blow.

Tiros lifted the mace to strike again, aiming this time for the creature’s head. But the ghoul was faster. Once again its mouth gaped impossibly wide, and it lunged forward, engulfing the marshal’s shoulder in its jaws. Bones cracked as it bit down, hard, and Tiros screamed in pain. The ghoul tightened its claws into meaty fists and slammed its arms together, striking the embattled commander hard on the sides of his torso. Despite his armor, ribs cracked under the force of those titanic blows. Tiros staggered and nearly fell, but it was clear that whatever stubborn determination kept him standing would not long withstand the violence of the ghoul’s assault. He tried to break free, wrenching his arm up and thrusting the burning mace against the side of the ghoul’s head, but the attempt was feeble, and the creature ignored his efforts. The undead monstrosity wrapped its arms around its prize, dragging Tiros into a rough embrace. His armor held, keeping it from tearing his entire shoulder from his body, but as it gained a secure hold it started to shift its attention toward his neck, where only a thin covering of chain links protected his flesh.

Tiros struggled feebly and uselessly against the ghoul, his grasp on consciousness wavering. But before the ghoul could finish him, he became aware of a loud rumbling noise that seemed to rattle deep within his bones. The ground bucked beneath his feet, staggering both him and the ghoul, but the undead creature refused to release its prize. Looking up over its shoulder, the marshal saw something... *huge* rise up out of the bloody ground of the camp yard.

The ghoul sensed the threat and turned, just in time to absorb an incredible blow that knocked it flying backward. The collision broke the connection between Tiros and the creature, and the marshal landed hard ten feet from where he’d started. The impact severed the last tenuous grasp he held on consciousness, and the black rushed in to enfold him.

But mere seconds passed before the marshal was yanked roughly back into awareness. He felt a fading tingle, the familiar rush of magical healing. The sensation was replaced almost immediately by a resurgent pain, a generous elixir comprised both of his own

wounds and the aura that surrounded the ghoul. He looked up, still a bit dazed. He was lying on his stomach, with dead bodies scattered around him. He could not see Varo, and for an instant he wondered who had healed him.

That thought was eclipsed by the sight of the raging battle in front of him.

The thing that had struck him and the ghoul was a massive elemental, a creature formed from the very earth of the camp yard. It was over thirty feet tall, and it moved with the ponderous strength of a titan. As he watched, the ghoul smashed at it with its fists, but the elemental withstood its attacks far better than Tiros and his men had. Reaching down, it seized hold of the ghoul, its thick hands engulfing the much smaller creature.

A bright flash of light blinded Tiros. Its source was Varo, revealed now as the beam of *searing light* tore into the body of the ghoul. The creature screamed and intensified its struggles, but it could not break free of the elemental's grasp.

And then, abruptly, it disappeared.

The elemental straightened ponderously, casting around for its missing enemy. Tiros stood, wincing slightly. The intense pain from the ghoul's aura was gone, but the healing he'd received hadn't been enough to fully repair his battered ribs and shoulder.

He looked at Varo. "Where..." But the cleric interrupted him with a raised hand.

The ghoul reappeared a moment later, materializing in mid-leap. It descended upon the cleric, jaws open wide, claws reaching for his throat as it dropped.

Chapter 287

AN UNCERTAIN REDOUBT

There wasn't much to the old mill, a stone rectangle maybe ten paces by twenty, with the heavy wooden waterwheel jutting out into the stream on one end, and a squat stone silo attached to the building on the other.

Dar had to admit, the place looked sturdy, if worn by age. There were only three small windows, more like arrow slits, and the entire construction was of stone blocks, with a roof of heavy wooden slats. There was only one narrow door that he could see, although it was possible that there might be other exits on the far side of the building, or other points of access where the wheel mechanism entered the building. The entry was surrounded by a small courtyard ringed by a low stone wall, with a gap containing a wooden gate facing the road. An old wagon, missing a wheel, and some weathered

barrels occupied the court, which was otherwise packed dirt broken with occasional weeds.

“This used to be the frontier,” Letellia said, echoing his thoughts. “The buildings of that era were built for security as well as durability.”

“Get everyone inside,” Dar said. Nelan had pounded on the door as soon as they had arrived, but the place appeared to be unoccupied. If they were wise, the owners of the mill had already fled. Or maybe they had been in the village during the attack. If that had been the case...

Dar thrust those thoughts aside as irrelevant. He hadn't gotten a good count back at Derber's Point, but he'd seen enough to know that what was coming was going to be anything but pleasant. He reflexively loosened *Valor* in its scabbard.

Nelan finally got the door open, forcing the lock without seriously damaging the door. He led the frightened villagers inside.

Dar went in, but only took a quick look before returning outside. The interior was dominated by the wheel and gear mechanism for the mill. The wooden gears were set into large sockets crafted into the floor. The interior was entirely stone, save for wooden braces for the roof, and a loft accessed by a ladder. There was some furniture, tables and chairs and a heavy wooden dresser, enough for a basic barricade. The gap between the main shaft that connected to the waterwheel was a problem; the space between the wooden shaft and the surrounding stone was tight, but a determined invader could probably squeeze through.

Nelan was trying to direct the farmers; his calm, commanding voice helped overlay their fear. Dar left him to it. A few of them looked at him, their expressions laying responsibilities upon him that he did not want. The women were helping the children up the ladder into the loft, the most secure location inside the place. Not that it would help them any, if the ghouls got inside.

Damn it, this place isn't a castle, Dar thought, returning to the courtyard outside. He looked down the road, which was quiet in the early morning chill. It wouldn't remain so for long, he knew.

Allera came out to join them. “I can keep them at bay, at least for a time,” she said. “The spell is the same one that Alderis used in the lower temple, in Rappan Athuk.”

Dar nodded. He almost asked why she hadn't used it on the road, but he knew the answer. That was also why he didn't suggest leaving, while Nelan's *wind walk* spell was still in effect. A year ago, he wouldn't have given it a second thought; he would have fled the moment he'd had the chance. He was no coward, but there was a difference between bravery, and stupid lingering in the face of insane odds.

A year ago, it wouldn't even have been a question.

But a lot could happen in a year.

His hand stole to the hilt of *Valor*. Then, as if realizing what he was doing, he angrily pulled it away.

"This is going to get messy," he said.

"I know," she said, coming up to him from behind, folding herself into the crook of his arm. He wrapped his arm around her, and the two watched the road together, waiting for what was coming.

They did not have to wait long.

They heard them coming long before they could see them. The collective, hungry hissing from a thousand ghouls sounded like the buzzing of a horde of locusts.

The companions had done what they could to prepare. Dar had moved the broken wagon to block the gate, but it wasn't likely that the four and a half foot wall surrounding the small courtyard would seriously hinder the ghouls. Nelan stood in the doorway of the mill. They would fall back into the structure, that was inevitable, but Dar wanted to bloody the ghoul army first. And he was worried about the monstrous thing that had so effortlessly destroyed the stone building in the middle of the village of Derber's Point.

Letellia was at the highest of the three windows. She had broken one of the clouded panes of thick glass set into the narrow gap, giving her both a clear view of the road and enough space to use her magic. Farmers stood at the other windows, clutching their weapons in obvious fear. The lower windows had shutters rather than glass, but those wouldn't long stop a determined adversary. If they were lucky, the ghouls wouldn't be able to fit through the narrow slits in the stone walls.

Dar had unslung his rarely-used longbow, and grunted as he strung the weapon. He had almost left it behind; he was glad he hadn't, although he would probably only get off a few shots before the ghouls reached their redoubt. He extracted a handful of white-fletched arrows from his magical quiver, and laid them out in a row atop the wall. "These shots had better be as potent as Alzoun said," he muttered.

Allera came up and touched him, laying a magical ward upon him. "You'd better get inside," he told her.

"My spells will be more effective out here," she said.

He started to respond with something harsh, then he saw the look in her eyes, and nodded.

“I love you, Corath Dar,” she said simply.

He nodded, although Allera noticed that his hand fell once more to the hilt of his sword. “I love you too, angel.”

A cry from above drew their attention back to the road. The light was still poor enough to leave long shadows strewn across the crude path in the distance, but it was enough to distinguish the movement of dark forms moving in their direction.

Many dark forms.

Chapter 288

THE FURY OF DAGOS

Varo did not flinch as hundreds of pounds of ghoul descended upon him. As the creature landed, its claws smashing down into his shoulders, he merely reached up and touched its chest.

The cleric was flung roughly back, smashed prone by the force of the ghoul’s powerful attack. But the ghoul was seriously damaged as Varo’s *heal* spell raged through its body. Huge swathes of flesh burned away from its torso as the power of the spell was fully discharged into it.

With a violent fury, the ghoul hurled itself forward at the cleric, who was slowly rising to a crouch.

Tiros unleashed a furious yell as he barreled into the ghoul from behind. He had lost Varo’s mace when the elemental had separated them, but he’d grabbed a fallen spear from the assorted weapons left behind by the dead and fleeing legionaries. The pain had returned with the creature’s reappearance, but this time he was able to master it, his jaw clenched with the effort of fighting through the constant pressure upon his awareness. He had built up speed as he closed the distance between where he had fallen and where the ghoul stood over Varo, and as he reached them he drove the spear into the creature’s back with the full force of his momentum and weight behind it. The steel head penetrated deep into its body, but if it hit anything vital, the ghoul did not betray that in its actions. It merely shrugged and twisted its body, knocking the marshal roughly aside, then continued on toward Varo.

“Varo, look out!” Tiros yelled.

The priest looked up, but he took no action to evade the ghoul’s rush. It leapt at him again, its jaws open wide to engulf its foe’s entire head. Varo lifted an arm, and as the

ghoul landed his entire limb vanished into its gaping maw. Divine energy flashed as the cleric released another spell, and searing fire flared from the ghoul's mouth, ears, and nostrils as another potent healing spell wrought destruction upon the creature.

But the ghoul got its revenge a moment later; as Varo drew his arm back, it snapped its jaws violently shut. With a crunch of bone, the limb gave way, and Varo fell back, his right arm a bloody stump that ended at the elbow.

Tiros tried to rush back in, to recover the long haft of the spear that jutted from the ghoul's back. But he had to abort the maneuver, and hurl himself aside as the earth elemental lumbered forward, and delivered a powerful, two-fisted strike that connected solidly across the ghoul's shoulders.

The hit would have crushed half of the bones in a mortal man, and the even the seemingly-unstoppable ghoul could not easily absorb the impact. It collapsed to the ground, one arm jutting up at an improbable angle from its ruined shoulder joint. But it still moved, its bloated body quivering as it tried to rise. Tiros could almost feel it healing, regenerating itself from the considerable damage it had absorbed. For an instant, as its eyes passed over him, he could feel its hunger, the burning need that drove its existence. He looked around for another weapon, but there was nothing within reach.

He pulled himself to his feet.

Varo stepped forward, his ruined arm cradled against his body. The ghoul, sensing his presence, snarled and lashed at him with a claw. The cleric took the hit across his right hip, the force of the impact sufficient to knock him a full step to the side. He wavered for a moment, but he kept his balance, and lunged forward, placing his left hand, holding his divine focus, upon the ghoul's forehead.

"Dagos bids you leave this place, famine spirit," he said, unleashing another spell.

The ghoul screamed as holy fire blasted through the contact into its skull. Varo did not release it, channeling more of the power of his god into the undead monster, driving it deeper into its body. Tiros watched in amazement as the ghoul's terrible cry faded, and finally both it and the light died. The ghoul toppled over backwards, its head a blackened wreck. It did not move. Varo stood over it in silence for a long moment, and then cast another spell, touching his divine focus to the stump of his severed arm.

Tiros walked over to him. The elemental regarded him silently, and then began to crumble, sinking back into the ground. In its wake, the marshal could see the entirety of the wreckage left by the ghoul's rampage. Dozens of men, dead, their remains scattered about like a child's forgotten toys.

Varo finished his spell. Tiros turned to him. "Your arm..."

“The final confrontation is coming, marshal,” the priest said. “You must be ready.”

Tiros was uncertain how to reply. As he watched, the cleric began to dissolve once more into mist, and before he could say anything further, Varo rose up into the air, vanishing into the morning sky on his *wind walk* spell.

Within just a few seconds, he was gone, leaving Tiros alone with the carnage. The men of the Second Legion found him there a minute later, standing over the body of the ghoul. A veteran officer, his face pale, came up to him.

“Your orders, marshal?”

Tiros looked up at him. It took a few seconds for recognition to set in, but when he finally spoke, his voice was clear and calm, and loud enough to carry to the nervous-looking soldiers standing behind the officer. “The creature is dead. Prepare a burial detail at once, captain; I want this place cleansed. And direct all command-level officers to meet me in my tent in ten minutes.”

“Sir!” the man saluted. He started to hurry off, but Tiros forestalled him.

“And get me a horse, and an escort of twenty men. I will be riding for Camar.”

Chapter 289

THE SIEGE

A *fireball* blossomed over the rutted path, a brilliant if short-lived blaze that lit up the weak morning. Ghouls screamed as the flames burned their oily gray hides, but the creatures were infused with the dread potency of their demon god, and they kept on coming despite the terrible burns that covered their bodies.

The ghoul horde surged forward, and withstood more attacks as they closed with the lonely millhouse on the edge of the stream. Another *fireball* exploded in the midst of the horde, and then a *flame strike* descended from above, slamming down into a dense knot of the creatures. Nelan’s evocation incinerated a dozen of the ghouls, but they kept on coming, heedless of their losses.

Arrows knifed hard into ghouls, the shafts piercing their rubbery hides, the holy missiles wreaking terrible damage with each hit. Even at the long range, Dar could hardly miss; the ghouls were packed together in a mass that extended from the edge of the woods to the bank of the stream. There were hundreds of them, and more were still coming from the direction of the village.

A third *fireball* exploded in the van of the ghoul charge, and now some of the ghouls were going down, twice or thrice-burned, or with Dar's arrows jutting from their bodies. But each casualty seemed trivial against the sheer numbers of undead present. They started shrieking eagerly as they closed upon the mill, closing the range rapidly, too fast to stop.

Until Allera raised her hands, and invoked a protective ward over the entire mill.

The overwhelming majority of the ghoul force stopped as if they'd struck a stone wall. Screaming in frustration, they clawed at the invisible barrier that held them at bay, ninety feet from where Allera stood, a look of calm control on her face. Many started pouring to the sides, seeking a way around the *repulsion* spell.

But about one in every eight ghouls, driven by bloodlust or hatred or the sheer potency of the force that had animated them, were able to crash through Allera's barrier, and their cries became jeers of triumph as they surged forward. There were only a few, at first, but even in that initial surge at least fifteen made it through, and they rushed as one at the woman whose blessed power kept their peers at bay.

The stone wall barely slowed them. The first three sprang over it easily, but a fourth clipped a leg on the top of the wall and pitched forward, collapsing in a heap on the far side. That did not dissuade the others, and even those that did not clear the wall in their first attempt recovered quickly, clambering over it in mere seconds.

Dar dropped his bow and slid *Valor* out of its scabbard, stepping back into the middle of the small courtyard to meet the ghoul charge. The first ghoul he cut from shoulder to hip, severing its body in twain. Even as the sundered pieces collapsed into the dirt he spun to block the next two. Claws tore at his breastplate, failing to find purchase. *Valor* cut once, twice, and then both ghouls were down, one missing its head, the other sliced open like an overripe melon. Dar extended *Valor*, cutting down another ghoul that tried to rush past him to get to Allera.

And then he was hit by a surge of a dozen ghouls, tearing and biting in a deadly gray wave. Dar gave ground before their assault, but each step was bought with cloven flesh and sundered limbs. Several claws tore his flesh, but he resisted the cloying touch of paralysis that threatened to undo him, summoning every last bit of the fortitude that drove him. He knew that if he faltered, even for an instant, the creatures would tear him apart. And if they got through him, Allera and the others would be slain in an instant.

But even as the thought formed in his mind, Allera unleashed another *mass cure* spell. Ghouls collapsed in bright flares of blue energy all around him, and those that did not made quick work for *Valor*. But Dar looked up to see more surging over the wall, another two dozen, at least. Beyond them hundreds more had already gathered at the invisible edge of Allera's *repulsion* barrier, temporarily held at bay. A flash of lightning from the window above slashed down into the mass of ghouls, incinerating a dozen, but Letellia's spell did little to diminish the total number of foes.

“Fall back, inside!” Dar yelled, not turning as he slowly gave ground before the new rush of ghouls. Ghouls rushed the fighter and died, but there were more behind them. One sprang up at his face, its jaws slavering as it sought his throat. Dar thrust it away, and again he had to muster his strength to fight off the paralyzing effects of its touch. There was no time to finish it; four or five others were already coming at him from his flanks, trying to get a hold on him.

Something subtle drew his attention, even over the chaos of the surging melee and the cries of the hundreds of ghouls at the edge of Allera’s barrier. He glanced up, and instantly recognized what had alerted his instincts. It was far back still, but it dominated over the ghouls like an oak tree in the middle of a field of weeds.

The deathbringer had arrived.

For a moment, the eyeless creature met his stare, and Dar felt something cold press at his vitals. And then the *repulsion* field collapsed, and the ghouls rushed forward as one, screaming in their eagerness to rend warm flesh.

Chapter 290

THE CRESTING WAVE

Dar fell back toward the door of the mill, which gaped open invitingly ahead of him. Ghouls were all over him, tearing at his flesh. Nelan raised his holy symbol, and as the silver torch blazed with light, those closest to him dissolved into gray ash. It gave him only a moment’s respite, but one which he put to good effect. Allera was there by the door, casting another spell; he didn’t wait to see what effect it had, and simply wrapped his arm around her as he passed. Nelan darted through the doorway, and Dar was only a step behind, all but throwing the healer into the mill ahead of him. Dark energies flared around him as he reached the entry, but Allera’s *death ward* protected him. The ghouls on his heels drank up the potency of the *negative energy burst*.

The door slammed shut, and the two farmers who’d been assigned to that position hastily thrust the heavy dresser into place to reinforce it. Their haste was necessary; they’d barely secured the door when something slammed into it from outside, and they could hear claws tearing at the wood.

“Letellia!” Dar yelled.

“I’ve put up a *wall of ice*, but that won’t hold them for long!”

“What about the leader?”

"I don't... wait, by the gods, it just *dispelled* the wall... it's coming!"

The men at the windows cried out and fell back, leaving the shutters open behind them. Dar cursed and headed for the nearest, but before he could reach it several long gray arms appeared, clawing at the inside of the opening. Fortunately, it seemed as though the gap was too narrow for the ghouls to make it inside.

A *fireball* went off outside, close enough so that flames rushed in through the window, singeing him slightly. At the other window, Nelan unleashed the power of *order's wrath*, and ghouls screamed as the energies of pure Law ripped through their bodies.

Dar glanced at him, and saw two gray forms struggling in the tight gap where the waterwheel shaft entered the building. "Nelán, the wheel!" The cleric turned, and seeing the threat, hastened off in that direction.

Dar heard tearing noises above, and looked up to see cracks appearing in the wooden slats of the roof. Some of the ghouls had clambered up the rough stone walls of the mill, and were trying to get in from above. Some of the cracks were opening above the loft, and several of the farmers screamed as the ghouls worked on widening the cracks.

Dar turned to Allera, to see if she could deal with that threat, but he never got the chance. He only got a slight warning, as the tearing at the door abruptly ceased, and then there was a massive crash, and the entire mill trembled as if hit by an earthquake. Stone cracked, and shafts of light stabbed through the wall as blocks were knocked free. Letellia was flung back from the window, and she nearly fell out of the loft. One of the roof beams groaned and sagged, and for a moment Dar feared that the entire structure would collapse. But the old building held together.

Not for long, Dar thought grimly.

As if in answer, a mighty blow impacted the wall, followed quickly by another. The second caved in a five by five section of wall, and the cause of the damage broke through: an ugly spiked flail, its head as thick as Dar's torso.

"We need to stop that thing!" Dar yelled.

His companions did their best to comply. Allera hurled a *mass cure critical wounds* through the gap, focusing the spell upon the deathbringer. The monster resisted the full potency of Allera's magic, but still took considerable damage from the spell, and the nearest ghouls were simply destroyed outright. Letellia, perched tenuously on the edge of the loft, fired a *lightning bolt* through the gap a moment later. The electrical discharge struck the hulking undead creature on the arm, but it paid little heed to the blast.

Instead, the deathbringer drew back one long stride, before it lifted both arms and stormed headlong into the side of the mill.

Battered stone finally gave way. The doorway exploded into the mill, along with most of a ten-foot section of wall. Dar was struck by the flying dresser, and nearly went down; one of the farmers was hit in the back of the head with a piece of rock the size of a fist, and he crumpled. Several ghouls were trampled by the deathbringer, but dozens of others swarmed around it as the undead general trod forward into the building.

Dar roared and leapt forward to meet it. A flail crashed across his breastplate, but the enchanted dragonscale absorbed most of the force of the hit. He stepped within its reach and whipped *Valor* around in a blinding arc. The blade sang with power, and for an instant the terrible undead thing recoiled from the potency of that sound. The fighter's sword bit through the armored plates covering the deathbringer's torso, and bit deep into the ruined flesh beneath. But the deathbringer had a fearsome stamina, and a disembowelment meant little to a creature that did not possess life. It swept its flails down, the twin heads of spiked steel intersecting at Dar's body. The fighter tried to dodge away, but the tight confines and poor footing made escape impossible. Both weapons connected, and Dar cried out in pain as they battered his body through his armor. He remained standing, but as he lifted *Valor* to strike again, the deathbringer unleashed a final surprise. It twisted one of its weapons, and jabbed the haft, which ended in a vicious spike, down into the neck of its foe. The spike caught on the edge of one of his shoulder plates, and bit hard into his flesh. Bright red blood spurted up into the air from the terrible wound, and the fighter crumpled to one knee.

Ghouls, pouring in around the deathbringer, descended upon him, driven to a frenzy by the sight and smell of fresh blood.

Chapter 291

THE GRIM REALITY OF ODDS

Dar tried to get up as ghouls tore at his face and arms, but the deathbringer dug its weapon deeper into the fighter's shoulder, keeping him down. It lifted its other flail to strike him down.

"Get off him!" Allera yelled, rushing forward with her arms outstretched. Her third and final *mass cure critical wounds* spell blazed out from her, and the ghouls surrounding Dar fell back, ravaged by healing power. The deathbringer merely flinched as blue energy flashed around its arms and torso, but that, along with the boost granted him by Allera's spell, gave Dar the opening he needed. He reached up with his free hand and tore the nasty spike free of his body, staggering back as he won free. The wound closed as Allera's spell finished its work upon him, but even so, the fighter could barely stand from the battering he'd taken. More ghouls were pressing in around the edges of the

breach in the mill's wall, cautious now both of the power that had destroyed their kin, and the violent movements of the deathbringer.

The deathbringer brought its flail down, but instead of striking at Dar, its target this time was the healer. Allera screamed and threw herself back, her arms coming up to shield her face. There was an audible crack as one arm was broken by the impact of the deathbringer's weapon, and one of the spikes cut a bloody gouge across her right temple. She spun around and fell to one knee, blood pouring down her face in a torrent from the vicious wound.

Nelan rushed toward her, but the ghouls were faster. And the deathbringer was not done; it lifted its other flail, still dripping Dar's blood, to finish the job.

Dar roared and thrust past the three ghouls that were trying unsuccessfully to grapple him. The deathbringer shifted and kicked out at him, but he dodged the armored limb and brought down *Valor* in a two-handed strike that was precisely targeted at its knee. The axiomatic blade struck the joint and tore through both tainted flesh and the bone beneath. He did not manage to sever its leg entirely, but the knee was ruined utterly, and as the creature shifted for its next attack it gave out under its weight. The deathbringer toppled sideways, crushing a pair of ghouls, and tore away another segment of wall as it smashed into it.

Dar's expression was almost feral as he followed the monster, hacking apart a ghoul that tried to block his path. But before he could strike again, the deathbringer invoked its dread power, and an explosion of negative energy filled the interior of the mill.

Dar, protected still by Allera's *death ward*, felt only a cold chill that traveled down his spine before fading. But his companions cried out as the pulse sucked life from their bodies, and the farmers, those that still lived, screamed and fell, their bodies stiff and lifeless. The undead, ghouls and deathbringer alike, drank up the corrupt energies of the burst, their wounds closing as the negative power filled them.

The deathbringer started to lever itself back up, its flails scraping upon the adjacent stone.

"I don't think so," Dar snarled. A ghoul leapt at him as he lifted *Valor*, seizing his arm, but he elbowed it hard in the face, and it fell away, its jaw shattered. The deathbringer turned its face toward him, but that evil, eyeless stare did not stop Dar. It tried instead the more practical approach of smashing him again with one of its flails. But *Valor* came up and down in a blur, and the flail went flying, still grasped in the severed fist of the deathbringer.

And Dar wasn't done. He leapt at it, using a piece of broken wall as a springboard as he drove forward. The monster tried to draw back, but the remnants of the wall held it long enough for Dar to swing *Valor* around in a glittering arc that intersected with the center of the deathbringer's skull. The tip of the blade cut through the sewn sockets of

its eyes, drawing a line across its face that flickered with blue energy. The deathbringer stiffened and toppled backwards, out into the courtyard where hundreds of ghouls were still trying to push forward, into the building.

Dar fell back inside, into a knot of hacking claws and feral bites. Within a few seconds, he took multiple hits, and while he fought off the paralysis, he knew that the building numbness in his exhausted limbs would eventually claim him. Looking up, he saw that the deathbringer's destruction had forced the ghouls outside back for just an instant, but now they were pouring forward again, an army of death.

And then he blinked, surprised as a white plane suddenly appeared where the gap in the wall had been. Realization set in, as the icy chill of Letellia's *wall of ice* reached him.

But there were still almost two dozen ghouls inside the mill. The press around him was so thick that the creatures got in each other's way, hindering their effectiveness, but he was surrounded, making a cohesive defense impossible. He could see Nelan and Allera, backed up against the far wall, likewise surrounded by ghouls. The priest was invoking the power of the Father, but for every ghoul he destroyed, another was there almost instantly to take its place. Ghouls were continuing to squeeze in through the narrow opening for the waterwheel shaft, and pieces of wood continued to rain down from above as more of them tore openings in the roof.

The situation was dire, insane, hopeless.

So Dar gave himself over to the battle.

Two ghouls seized his right hand, and tried to claw *Valor* out of his grasp. He came to them, smashing his forehead into the face of one, then delivering an elbow-strike to the second. Ghouls tore at him from every direction, but he got his sword free enough to sweep it around in a tight arc, like a maid churning butter. Ghoul flesh was ripped open, and clawing arms went flying as the legendary sword severed the limbs that reached for him. The fighter went through the ghouls like an elemental force, a tidal wave crashing onto the ramshackle huts of a coastal village. The ghouls kept on clawing and biting; the fighter's arms and legs were covered in scratches and gouges that oozed blood. But Dar did not stop. Healing energy poured into him, but he barely noticed it, just kept swinging, kept destroying. The interior of the mill was a red haze, and nothing could stand against him.

Allera's voice finally drew him back to reality, a cold balm that washed away the fury of battle. "Dar! Dar! It's me, Allera!"

He blinked and saw that the healer, along with Nelan, had joined him, forming a perimeter in one corner of the mill. Both were wounded, and Allera still held her broken arm close against her body, but the nasty wound on the side of her head had been reduced to a faint scar. He glanced back, and saw behind him a trail of heaped bodies

and severed ghoulish limbs that stretched back to where he'd started, fifteen feet away. He sucked in a surprised breath; the entire interior of the mill was a slaughteryard, with over thirty ghoulish bodies scattered about the place.

Looking around, he realized that their situation was still grim.

Letellia's *wall of ice* was coming apart. Ghouls were smashing at it with huge stones that had come from the shattered stone wall of the mill. As he watched, several ghouls crawled through gaps in the barrier; they came through rimed in frost, their movements slowed, but still very much intact and dangerous. To his left, the ghouls had ripped the shaft of the waterwheel from its moorings, allowing them to squeeze through the gap in the wall with greater ease. And above, there were huge holes in the roof, through which ghouls were dropping in increasing numbers, heedless of the damage suffered as they fell to the hard floor twelve feet below. Most of them landed on bodies, in any case, cushioning their landing.

"There's too many of them!" Nelan cried, smashing around him with his mace, his holy powers depleted.

"Letellia!" Dar yelled. He couldn't see up into the loft, but he heard the familiar sizzling sound of her *lightning bolts*, followed by ghoulish screams.

And then she appeared, charging toward the edge of the loft. A ghoulish appeared out of nowhere, leaping at her for a flying tackle, but Allera summoned one of her few remaining *mass cure* spells, and it fell, screaming. The sorceress looked to be heading for the ladder, but there were already several ghouls on it, climbing up from below. She caught sight of the three of them. "Look out!" the fighter yelled, as a segment of roof directly above her was ripped away, and a half-dozen slavering ghouls appeared. The sorceress and ghouls looked at each other for a second, and then the creatures leapt at her, claws eagerly extended.

Letellia summoned her magic, and abruptly vanished. She appeared an instant later in the corner on the ground floor, behind Dar and Nelan.

"I need six seconds!" she yelled, her expression sharpening with focus as she drew once more upon her innate magical talent.

The ghouls surged forward. There were over fifty inside the mill now, with more pouring in with every passing second. One leapt at Nelan's face, wrapping its claws around his shoulders. It bit down hard on the priest's ear, drawing a scream of pain from him. Nelan had taken a dozen hits during the battle, each time fighting off the deadly effects of the ghouls' touch, but his luck finally ran out, and he stiffened, overcome by its paralysis. Another three ghouls seized onto the priest's arms and legs, and tried to drag him out into the middle of the room.

Dar and Allera were there in an instant. Allera reached out and touched the ghoul clinging to the priest, unleashing a powerful healing spell into it. The ghoul released its captive and fell back into the ranks of its kin, its flesh blackening as the healer's power destroyed it. Dar cleared away the others, smashing skulls and severing limbs with precise strikes from *Valor*. He grabbed onto the cleric and thrust him back into the corner, where Letellia grabbed him.

"Whatever you're going to do, do it now!" Dar yelled. Allera screamed as four ghouls seized her. Dar turned toward her, but a ghoul grabbed onto his leg, and he nearly went down as another three ghouls sprang on him from ahead.

"Grab Allera!" Letellia yelled. Dar roared and lunged at her, dragging several ghouls with him. He seized the healer's wrist as the ghouls dragged her away, just as Letellia, still holding Nelan, reached out and touched Dar's back.

Invoking her last *dimension door*, she transported the four of them out of the mill. The ghouls shrieked in frustration as their prey escaped, and started destroying everything they could get their claws on.

With a flicker of light, the four companions materialized on a lightly wooded rise. It was immediately clear where they were; the noise of the ghoul army drew their attention east, where the mill stood only about two hundred yards distant, across the stream.

"Ah... couldn't you have teleported us farther away?" Dar asked. Allera bent over Nelan, who remained gripped by the ghoul paralysis.

"The *dimension door* only has a limited range," Letellia explained. "I pushed it to its limit just to take us this far."

"What about the villagers?" Allera asked. Dar and Nelan shared a look; their fate was obvious.

"The giant's *negative energy burst* killed those in the loft," Letellia said. "The women, children..." She shuddered, closing her eyes for a moment as she mastered herself.

Dar looked around; there was not enough clutter in the landscape nearby to offer shelter. The few trees were scant affairs, with trunks only about a half-foot in thickness, and not enough brush in the rocky soil to offer much in the way of concealment. There were no ghouls in their immediate vicinity, but the army gathered around the mill covered a considerable area, and there was a considerable number on their side of the stream. "It's not going to take them long to realize we're here." As if in reply, there was a cry from below, and a small knot of ghouls to the southeast started charging toward their position. "Damn it, I hate it when I'm right. Allera, can you help the priest?"

"We need to... the *wind walk*," Nelan said. As Allera purged the paralysis, he rose, grimacing from the pain of the gashes covering his arms and neck, and the nasty bite

wound on the side of his head. Part of his right ear was gone, torn away by the ghoulish that had paralyzed him. "The magic should still be in effect... concentrate on it."

"I'm concentrating... nothing's happening."

"Remember, it takes some time," Letellia reminded him.

"Yeah, well, if it doesn't start working real quick, we're going to have a situation here," Dar said. More ghouls had joined the rush toward them, and the alert seemed to have spread across the stream, where large groups of ghouls had started detaching from the mass, heading in their direction. The first group had started up the rise, and was less than a hundred yards away, closing rapidly.

"Now would be good," Dar said. But Letellia had already started to dissolve into the mist-form, followed a few seconds later by Allera. The ghouls had gotten within twenty yards when Dar and Nelan both joined them, and all four rose into the air. The ghouls shrieked below them, but the sound grew distant as the four ascended, a magical wind springing up to carry them back toward Camar at great speed.

Behind them, the ghoulish army started moving again, following in their wake at a much slower, but untiring and inexorable, pace.

Chapter 292

AN UNEXPECTED INTERVIEW

The corridors of the Gathering Hall were quiet, this early in the morning, with the sky just brightening to the east in the first glimmers of the predawn. The Hall was situated on a rise overlooking the spreading expanse of Aelvenmarr, but most of the town yet slumbered, its inhabitants resting or meditating prior to the start of another day.

The wings of the Hall rose up out of the base of the structure like the branches of a tree. Suspended on curving struts of shaped wood, the extensions looked like an architectural impossibility. But the aelfinn could build things of wood that lasted longer than the sturdiest castles of hard stone, and they possessed the gift of melding natural beauty with function in a way that could bring the coldest outsider to tears.

The lean figure clad in a simple black robe paid no attention to the attractive features of the Hall this morning. The elf looked as ageless as most of his kin, but there was a furrow in his brow, a subtle reflection of the serious thoughts that engaged him. His fingers were slender, delicate, his hair a silver cascade that was neatly ordered by a pair of golden rings.

The elf made his way to a door carved with intricate designs of fae interacting within a pastoral scene. The rune upon the door responded to his touch, and the portal opened quietly.

The area behind the door was a small private study, lushly decorated. Bookcases carved in intricate designs covered most of the walls, except where several beautiful paintings were hung in frames of golden scrollwork. The room contained a desk that was built into the far wall, swinging out in a wide arc across the room. The desk was apportioned with neat cases that ordered scrolls, small leather-bound folios, quillcases and vials of ink, and other assorted miscellanea. Behind the desk was a small, comfortable-looking chair, which was occupied by another elf, who looked up as the black-robed man entered. The newcomer's eyes widened in surprise, as he recognized the other seated before him.

"Lord Draelai. I apologize for this intrusion, but..."

"Alderis! How dare... how did you get in here? What do you want?"

Alderis placed his hands upon the desk. "Reasonable questions. The answer to the first lies in the Conclave's overreliance on magic, in my view. As for the second..."

Draelai had recovered some of his equilibrium. "I do not care about your motives, Alderis. If you think you can... steal in here, and challenge me in my own office..."

Alderis raised a hand. "It is not my wish to challenge you. If I had thought I could get a fair hearing by approaching you in public, I would have. Unfortunately, as you know all too well, my presence in Aelvenmarr is not a welcome one."

"With good reason. You were mad, a danger to yourself and others. I don't know how you escaped from custody..."

"To be honest, I am somewhat murky on that point myself. I do not blame you or the Conclave for taking the actions that you did. In your place, I may have done the same."

"Why then, have you returned?"

"Has the Conclave taken note of the otherplanar phenomena that have been manifesting throughout Camar over recent months?"

Draelai did not betray any reaction; the elven mage was renown for his self-control, and he had recovered fully from the initial surprise he had evidenced at Alderis's sudden appearance in his office. "The problems of the humans do not concern us."

"I am afraid that your assessment is wrong, Draelai. A great disaster is befallen us, a day of dark reckoning that will affect all of the peoples of this world."

“Are you certain that you have fully recovered, Alderis? I recall you ranting of similar things, in the early stages of your madness. When you were still partially... lucid.”

Something flashed in Alderis’s eyes, but he otherwise remained cool. “I have been to Rappan Athuk.”

“The Dungeon of Graves? Only a madman would enter that place.”

Alderis leaned back, and chuckled softly. “That was so lacking in subtlety to be beneath you, Draelai. When we sparred in the gatherings of the Conclave, your barbs were more nuanced.”

“What do you want, Alderis?”

The elf leaned forward and folded his hands atop the desk. “Whether or not you and the others wish to acknowledge it, there is a great evil stirring in the world. I will assume that you are aware of the assaults upon Camar; you and your cabal may be petty and insular, but you were never fools. I have already joined in the battle against this darkness, and will return to that fight.”

“The humans will not thank you for your sacrifices, Alderis. Their very civilization is a blight upon the land, their values rooted in intolerance and fear of that which is different. Their lives are but the flicker of a flame, but they pass down their hatreds from generation to generation, and they have not forgotten the wars between our peoples.” There was a subtle flash in the elf’s eyes, and a terse undertone in his words that indicated that he, too, had not forgotten.

Alderis heard what was not said, and understood. “I am not asking them to forget,” he said, his voice quiet. “Nor to forgive.” He lifted his eyes and met the other elf’s gaze squarely. “You were not the only one to lose a loved one in the last war, Draelai. But neither would I have the past blind me to the danger that faces both peoples.”

“Go then, and do what you will. Aelvenmarr is no longer your home, and so long as you do not remain, you can cast yourself into the pits of Sarcarr for all I care.”

Alderis nodded, and did not respond for several seconds. “I will do so. But first, I require that my property be returned to me.”

“Ah, so that is what this is about. The matter is beyond my control; your books were turned over to the Lyceum shortly after your escape and flight.”

Alderis nodded. “I know. And we both know that they are not the materials of which I was speaking.”

The two elves regarded each other in cold silence. Finally, Draelai spoke. “Leave this place, Alderis. There is nothing more for you here.”

“Not without my property. This is not a personal matter, Draelai, and if only my interests were at stake, I would leave you to enjoy your plunder. But I urge you, do not test me on this.”

“It is you who should be cautious, Alderis. Your talents were never a match for mine.”

“I am not the same man you knew, Draelai.”

“Be that as it may...”

The elf never finished; he abruptly spoke words of power, and manifested a spell. A glowing line of force materialized in the air in front of Draelai, a *mage’s sword*. “Slay him,” Draelai said calmly, lifting his arm to point toward Alderis. He never finished the gesture; the elf suddenly stiffened, transformed into a statue by Alderis’s *flesh to stone* spell.

But the magical sword had apparently gotten enough instruction, for it surged toward Alderis. The elf was heavily warded, but his protections were of little use as the sword crashed into his side. His *stoneskin* protected him from what would have been a critical injury, but even with that defense the impact knocked him flying over the desk. The sword followed him as he rolled to his feet, giving ground as he summoned a *dispel magic* spell to remove the deadly weapon.

Unfortunately, the spell failed to disrupt Draelai’s magic. The sword darted in again, and pain exploded in Alderis’s side as the sword bit deep into his flesh. He fell back against the wall; the sword lunged in to finish him.

Barely in time, Alderis invoked an *antimagic field*, and the sword abruptly vanished.

The elf grimaced, and walked over to where Draelai stood, a silent, stone sentinel. He waited until he was certain that the time duration on the *mage’s sword* had expired, and then he dismissed the *antimagic field*.

He checked the door; the brief fracas had not drawn attention. Draelai’s custom of arriving this early in the morning had been the main reason he had elected to confront the other elf at this hour, but Alderis knew that he did not have a great deal of time.

He laid an *arcane lock* upon the door, and walked over to where Draelai stood frozen in mid-gesture. He looked at the desk, and picked up a heavy paperweight of polished obsidian from a pile of parchment sheets.

“I am sorry,” he said, then he used the paperweight to snap off two fingers from each of Draelai’s hands.

He placed the paperweight down, and cast another spell. A green radiance darted from his fingertips and spread around the statue, limning it with a soft glow. He then took a length of fabric out of his pocket, and wrapped it around the statue's head, securing it tightly across its slightly-open mouth.

Those tasks complete, Alderis started another incantation, uttering the complex syllables of a *break enchantment* spell.

Chapter 293

A SECRET

Nelandro Agathon did not look up as the doors to the chapel opened, and a tall figure entered. The priest of the Shining Father knelt before the altar on the far side of the chamber, the candles ringing the display casting the shadows in his features into stark relief. His eyes were closed, and his lips moved soundlessly in prayer.

The newcomer did not interrupt him, but as he moved into the chapel, taking a seat in one of the shadowed pews along the edge of the chamber, a clatter of metal drew the attention of the priest. Nelan blinked and rose, looking for the source of the disturbance. His eyes finally settled on the form shrouded in darkness in the corner. Nelan squinted, but the light was insufficient to identify the stranger.

"Varo?"

"No, it's just me," Dar said, rising out of the pew, his weapons clanking again around his body. Ordinarily, armed persons were not admitted into the cathedral, let alone the private chapel in the rear of the building, but Dar had gained a certain degree of notoriety of late, and to those few who knew some of the truth of what had happened to Camar in recent months, he was fast becoming a legend. One of those groups included the clergy of Soleus.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you," the fighter said. "But I wanted to catch you, before you headed over to Tiros's little gathering."

"I was just about to leave," Nelan said. He looked at the stained glass windows set high in the walls; all four were dim, and it was difficult to make out the scenes depicted within each. "How late is it?"

"Sun just went down, as I was coming in here."

Nelan blinked. "I must have lost track of time." He brushed off his robe, and walked over to where the fighter waited. "What did you want to talk to me about?"

“Tiros is going to talk about Rappan Athuk. Going back, one last time.”

Nelan nodded. “I expected as much, especially with what has happened of late. Has there been any more news from Janaris?”

Dar shook his head. “No. If there are any more ghouls out there, they’re lying low. We’re still getting casualty reports, though, especially from outlying settlements that we missed in the evacuation.”

“How many in all, now?”

“Five hundred and sixteen. That includes the ninety-six men from the First, Captain Olvaris, and the two clerics that were killed at Laddan’s Respite.”

“Yes... yes, I’d heard. It could have been a lot worse, general. If you hadn’t sent Yanis back with that warning, the First Legion might not have gotten to Janaris in time to fortify the town’s defense.”

“It wasn’t in time for the other three villages that the ghouls destroyed before they got there.”

“But we were able to warn how many? A thousand? Two thousand? Not to mention the population of Janaris, which is another four thousand people who might not be alive today, were it not for your actions.”

Dar rubbed his forehead with two fingers. “I don’t know that it matters. From what I heard about what happened at Trajaran, that fat fucking bastard can strike at us at the core of our defenses.”

“All the more reason for this mission,” Nelan said quietly.

“Earlier, you thought I was Varo.”

“Yes. He came to be, before. It was he who dragged me back into this. Said it was my responsibility to the people of Camar.”

Dar frowned. “He has an agenda.”

“You do not trust him?”

“No. And if you knew what I knew, priest, you would not either.”

Nelan sighed. “The world has gotten more complicated since I returned.”

“Yeah, things were a lot simpler when I was a selfish bastard concerned only with myself.”

The priest smiled. “We shouldn’t keep the tribune waiting, I suppose.”

Dar hesitated, and Nelan turned back to him, waiting. “There’s one other thing, Nelan.”

“Yes?”

“It has to do with Varo. He gave me something, when we last saw him, during the briefing, before our last trip to cleanse the temples. He told me... well, it has to do with Rappan Athuk. And your death.”

“I see.”

“I didn’t want to say anything before. I mean, fuck, I thought we’d all be dead, when we went back there last time. And this time... well, I don’t know a lot about demon lords, but I know enough about fucking Rappan Athuk to know that Sobol wasn’t bullshitting when he called us the Doomed Bastards.”

Nelan looked thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe you are right, Corath, that our actions are in vain. But all we can do is our best, and say that we stood against the darkness, in the light. And I can think of no man I’d rather have at my side than you. And I suspect that if the Demon fears anything in this or any world, it would be wise to fear your blade.”

Dar snorted, but his lip twisted in a slight grin. “And Varo?”

Nelan put a hand on the fighter’s shoulder. “The priest of Dagos knows a great deal, but he does not know everything. I believe—I must believe—that we control our own destinies. And even if he does somehow know of my death... that does not change my power to determine how it is that I will die, with the Father’s name on my lips, and my face toward the evil that threatens us all.”

“All right.” He rested his hand on the hilt of Valor. “All right, priest.”

They’d barely left the chapel when a priest rushed up to them, a desperate look on his face.

Twenty minutes later, Nelan and Dar were at the head of a small column of men and women, most of them priests of the Father, who rushed through the catacombs under the cathedral. They entered an anteroom from which four tunnels branched. Dar saw the bodies at once, and raised a hand in caution.

Nelan crossed to the closer guard, and bent to check him. "He's alive, but unconscious," the priest said, incanting a brief spell of healing over the man. "I don't see any wounds... he may have been poisoned."

Dar was already moving down one of the tunnels, his torch fluttering in his hand. Nelan shouted orders for some of the underpriests to tend to the stricken guards, and then he hurried after him.

He caught up to the fighter at the door. Both men knew what they would find there, but it was still a cold realization to actually see it.

The iron door lay open. Beyond, the chamber was empty. The silver circle in the floor had been breached; the manacles set into the ceiling dangled empty.

As Dar stepped through the doorway, he saw that the room wasn't completely empty. Lying within the broken circle on the floor were two swords. He didn't have to go over to look at them, he knew what they were.

The first was *Beatus Incendia*.

The second was the holy sword they had found in Rappan Athuk, the one that had been carried by Shaylara Pallen, when they had last seen her.

Chapter 294

THE GATHERING

Allera waited in the sunlit hall outside the large chamber where the governing council of Camar met. Once it had been used by the Grand Duke as an audience chamber, its high domed ceiling and vaulted arches a physical reminder of the power of the nation that had long ago tamed this continent for the race of Man. Tiros had spoken of returning this place, and the entire palace compound, back to the people of Camar, perhaps using the great chamber as a venue for musical or theatrical performances that were subsidized by the state. Allera shook her head. Such concerns seemed mundane, now, as Camar tottered on the brink of oblivion.

The din from the half-opened door that led into the gathering chamber began to die down. Nelan appeared in the doorway. "I believe that they are starting, Allera," he said.

She looked down the hall. "I will be right in." She tried to judge the time by the angle of the rays of sun that shone down the hall. She let out a sigh and turned to go in, but paused as a familiar noise drew her attention back down the hall.

He was many things, but *quiet* was not one of them. Dar was clad in his full regalia, armor and weapons covering his body. Someone had provided him with a new uniform after Derber's Point, and he wore it well, she thought, the insignia and other markings of his rank fitting in with the aura of power and confidence that he radiated. It was impressive even as she recognized it to be partly an illusion; the items that Alzoun had provided for them included a pair of *cloaks of charisma* of significant potency, sized for her and Dar. Dar had not seen the need for such frippery, as the cloak provided no martial benefit, and could even become a hindrance in a violent melee. Allera had insisted that he wear it, however. The merchant-cleric of Dagos had been possessed of considerable insight, Allera thought, his "gifts" shaped to needs that they hadn't even realized they had. Now, as she looked upon her lover, she saw the leadership that the people of Camar were going to need as they took on the darkness that endangered their very existence.

Thinking of Alzoun reminder her of Varo, and she frowned. Dar saw the change in expression, and misinterpreted it.

"Yeah, I don't like all this garbage either," he said, indicating the uniform tunic and the cloak. Allera stepped forward and adjusted his tunic, her frown deepening as she saw something else. She placed her hand on a fist-sized icon dangling from his neck, the silver torch of the Shining Father.

"I've never seen you wear a holy symbol before," she said. "And... what's that smell?"

He lifted a small mesh bag that dangled from his swordbelt. "I don't think we've seen the last of Talen," he said, his voice darkening. His hand dropped to the hilt of his sword, and there was a subtle change in his stance, one that Allera knew from past experience to be a presage to violence. "I intend to be ready when that happens."

She looked down at the bag in confusion. It contained a number of small objects that were the source of the odor. "I don't understand."

"Garlic. Keeps vampires at bay."

Allera placed a hand on her forehead, then leaned into him. She shook, slightly, and he frowned until she drew back, and she realized she'd been laughing quietly. "Want to let me in on the joke?"

"Corath. These are *shallots*."

"What?"

"Sha— Oh, for the love of all the gods... they're *onions*, Corath."

The fighter's expression darkened. "I am going to kill that merchant..."

She laughed again, and placed a hand on his chest. "Thank you. I really needed that." She wiped her eyes, and took his hand. "Come on. They've already started, and Tiros will need our support."

They made their way into the great chamber; a guard standing in the entry nodded in recognition as they entered. The huge chamber was occupied by upwards of two hundred people. Allera knew most of them, although some she had first met only last night, at the strategy session that Tiros had convened, and which had lasted long into the night. She had to fight back a yawn at the thought; she hadn't gotten much sleep. Tiros was addressing the gathering, but it sounded like they were still in the introductions part of his speech. Listening with one ear, Allera took a quick look around.

Most of the people here were rich, important, or otherwise influential. About half of them were nobles, members of Camar's social elite, but there were also high officers of the legions and the City Watch, priests of the Shining Father, and the top leaders of the mercantile guilds. There were also a few outsiders, one of whom turned his head and nodded to them as they entered.

"Thane Gravorr," Dar said, acknowledging the gesture. Like him, the dwarf was clad in heavy armor, and the axe slung across his back was functional rather than ceremonial. His seconds were behind him, a pair of dwarves who looked almost identical, resembling rocky crags in their stoic expressions.

"I notice that the elves aren't here," Dar whispered to Allera.

"Tiros sent an invitation through our ambassador to the Conclave of the aelfinn," Allera muttered back. "There has been no official reply."

"What about our crazy wizard friend?"

"Nelán sent him a *sending*. He said he would be there when the time came."

"Wonderful."

"Quiet, I want to hear this."

The crowd listened as Tiros spoke about the dire threat facing their land, and the terrible events that had plagued Camar in recent days. He spoke of how the people of Camar would come together with their neighbors to defeat the power of the demon that was responsible for these disasters. He indicated Gravorr, who acknowledged the introduction with a nod, and then another group whose presence gave Allera a surprise.

"Well, well, look who decided to come back," Dar said. Allera had to shift position to see who he and Tiros were talking about, as the crowd blocked her view of the far gallery. She finally caught a glimpse of the small knot of robed men, their heads shaven bald, their hands folded within the sleeves of their garments.

Setarcos, the monk they had rescued within Rappan Athuk, nodded deeply to Tiros, and then, as if sensing their stare, turned and offered a slight nod to Dar and Allera.

Tiros acknowledged several other groups: a small cluster of men clad in the raiment of Razhuri corsairs, the dark skin of their faces marked by multiple decorative piercings. A group of Emorite tribesmen from the far north, clad in their winter furs, hard looks on their faces as they stood warily next to a group of *jakkis* from Erem. The olive-skinned men were a head shorter than the Emorites, but their reputation as the finest riders in the world was well-earned. Both provinces had worn the mantle of Camarian domination uneasily, but their presence here testified to Tiros's skill in gathering a coalition of forces against the evil threatening Camar.

Allera looked up at Dar, saw the doubt in his eyes, if not in the expression that he carefully kept neutral. The plan that they had devised last night was backed by a considerable force, but like him, she knew that the fate of Camar would likely come down to those few who could stand up to the dangers of Rappan Athuk.

As Tiros continued his speech, recapping information that Allera already knew, her thoughts drifted back to last night's meeting.

The meeting had not been held here in the palace, but in the tall tower of the Guild of Sorcery. The reason for that choice of venue had been the man who of all of them seemed to best understand what they were up against. Allera felt a momentary twinge at that, but she pushed the stray thought aside.

She remembered well the surprise at Honoratius's appearance. The elder archmage had always seemed venerable to her, but that night, lying in his bed, he had seemed to her like nothing more than a withered husk, looking more like one of the undead than a living, breathing creature. Allera knew that the ancient figure suffered from a decay that she could not battle with her arts, although she had done all that she could to make him comfortable. If anything, however, the intensity that burned in his eyes had grown, and while he could barely speak, he had used a small spell to amplify his voice so that everyone present could hear him.

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but Allera could still hear his words in the back of her mind, as if the archmage was whispering them in her ear.

"The attacks at Albrith and Trajaran were only a harbinger of what is to come," he had told them. "The destruction of his temples in Rappan Athuk weakened the Demon, but it is linked to our world, now, and every death it inflicts will increase its strength until it will be capable of unleashing the final doom of everything. There is no question now of what we must do. We must strike and destroy the Demon, or fall trying... and with us, our world."

The interval of time since their last trip to Rappan Athuk had not been wasted. Both Patriarch Jaduran and Nelan had *communed* with Soleus. The power of the Demon was such that direct questions about its activities were met with silence. The information that they had been able to gain had been haphazard and incomplete. They knew that there was a way to access Orcus's hiding place within Rappan Athuk, but the specific details that they needed had thus far escaped them.

But last night, Honoratius had provided the answers they had needed. Almost immediately after he'd come out of the coma that had followed his stroke, even before a cleric could be summoned to tend to his wasted body, he'd demanded the Guild's incomplete copy of the ancient tome, the *Codex Thanara*. There, within the twisted and misleading passages of that deranged text, he had uncovered the clues to finding and destroying their enemy. Perhaps, while lying insensate within the dreamless depths of his sickness, his mind had latched onto some whisper of information that had completed the complex puzzle of deciphering the *Codex*. Or perhaps some other agent had placed the clues within his mind. Whatever the source, they now had at least some idea of how they had to proceed.

"The place Orcus resides is a demiplane without name, a quasi-reality sustained by its foul existence. It borders on both the Prime and the Abyss, but is part of neither. It cannot be accessed by the usual spells that permit planar travel; it is an anomaly, an aberration that is beyond the rules of the universe that we know. It requires a specific key..."

Honoratius had broken off at that point with a spell of coughing, but Allera remembered that he'd fixed Dar with a peculiar stare, just for a few heartbeats. No one else had commented on it... had she imagined it? When the archmage was finally able to continue, his voice had become a strangled rasp that sounded eerie under the amplification of his spell.

"The only entrance to the lair of the Demon is through a level of Rappan Athuk called the Gates of Hell. Powerful guardians dwell there... you must pass through... fire... and water... and madness... The sacrifices... three are keys..."

There had been more than a few concerned looks around the room, Allera recalled. Honoratius had recovered, returned to his usual lucidity in a few moments. But he did not even seem to remember what he'd been saying.

Tiros had directed them toward the plan for their assault. The final assault, he had said. Allera shuddered as she recalled all that she had seen—and done—within the dark halls of Rappan Athuk. She had been held prisoner there, by the servants of Orcus. She had battled demons, and abominations, and worse. Was there anything more terrible than those experiences that could outdo the horrors she had already encountered?

She shuddered again at the thought.

Tiros had stopped speaking, and Allera returned abruptly to the present. There was no applause, no response from the crowd; the gathering was too somber for that. But at least they moved as people who had a purpose now. They all knew their roles in what was to come. Tiros had not told them everything; it was too likely that the Demon could discern their plans.

It must know that we will be coming for it, Allera thought. She looked up at Dar, and saw the same thought reflected in his eyes. He smiled at her, but it was clearly forced.

“We have a day,” Dar said. “I don’t know about you, but I plan on spending most of it in a bed.”

It was a joke, or at least it would have been, before. Something fundamental had changed in Dar, or her, or maybe everything. She joined him, sliding into the space under his left arm. Several people came up to them, but stopped before speaking, sensing their need for a time apart. They left the gathering silently, and vanished into the shadowy corridors of the palace, down halls where the weak sunlight of the winter day failed to dispel the lingering gloom.

Chapter 295

IT BEGINS

The sun had risen, even if was not yet visible over the high walls of the interior courtyard in the rear of the Ducal palace. It was one of those rare clear days, but while the calendar indicated that spring had started almost a month ago, the air was still bracingly chill. Winter had lingered well past its time, another piece of evidence of the touch of the Demon upon the land of Camar.

Dar ignored the cold with the iron practicality of a veteran soldier. He stood on the steps that led back to the palace, adjusting the heavy gloves he wore. He had kept his cloak on, but the elaborate uniform he’d worn the day before had been replaced by a more practical outer garment of rugged, undyed cloth. *Valor* hung at his side, and a new longbow was slung across his back, replacing the one he’d lost at the mill outside Derber’s Point.

The courtyard in front of him was busy with activity. Armed men and women checked their gear, and tested the edges of weapons that had already been carefully examined a dozen times already. The two robed monks of the Order of the Vigilant Fists stood a short distance away, watching the preparations of the others in calm silence. Dar had spoken to Setarcos briefly the night before, and had asked about Kupra. The monk had reported that Banth’s former apprentice had found peace for herself, but he had not

elaborated. Allera had told him something about the Drusian monastery being attacked by members of a death-cult, but the fact that they'd sent aid anyway spoke well of them as far as Dar was concerned. He wasn't quite sure how useful they would be without armor or weapons, but he'd seen Setarcos fight in Rappan Athuk, and figured he could at least handle himself. His companion, Dar had doubts about; it was tough to tell with his shaven head and the bulky robe, but he looked like he was in his early teens. The other four monks had left with the men of the Second yesterday evening.

The others were all Camarians, either from the city or from its provinces, but their origins were as diverse as those of his circle of companions. The men of the City Watch were nervous and wary, but they were all veterans of the Night of the Dead, and one had fought with Dar before. Dar nodded as he met Octavius's eyes briefly. His companions were Nonius and Decimus, and all were clad identically in chainmail tunics crafted of blacksteel, augmented with greaves on the arms and legs, and skullcaps with dangling noseguards protecting their heads. Each of them carried a magical sword and a heavy crossbow, and their quivers each contained several bolts blessed by the Patriarch himself.

The two priests were next in line. They were about as different as two men could be; Tullus Aquila was bald and weathered, and likely had a few years on Nelan. He bore a staff that purportedly possessed healing powers, and his armor hung awkwardly on his frame. Marcus Felix, by contrast, was tall, youthful, and muscular. He had been a corporal in the legions when he'd discovered his religious calling, and he was as comfortable with a broadsword as he was with a mace. The only thing that they'd had in common was that they'd both been out of favor under the previous Patriarch; they had only recently returned to Camar after spending years out in the provinces. Neither cleric was even close to as strong as Nelan, but their faith was fervent, and their abilities considerable.

Dar felt a momentary twinge as his gaze traveled over to Talen's knights, and his hand dropped to the hilt of *Valor* at his side. He hadn't met most of the young men and women that the former head of the Knights of the Dragon had trained, but from what Allera had told him, Talen had worked them hard. Most of the knights had already departed with Nelan, but there were three here, two men and a woman. Alexion, Zahera, and Xenos—all provincial names, although Alexion and Zahera could have easily passed for Camarian born. Xenos was obviously an Emorite, his skin a dusky gray. All three of them had a hard look that none of the other soldiers here could match. They were clad in suits of plate armor, and like the watchmen, their gear bore numerous magical enhancements. Dar's gaze lingered for a moment on the sword that Xenos carried. Tiros had told him that the Emorite was Talen's best swordsman, so he'd given the man Shay's *holy flaming longsword*.

Beatus Incendia rode on Dar's back, in a new leather scabbard that had been wrapped in a fur coverlet. Tiros had looked at him with a raised eyebrow when he'd come to the final strategy meeting with the sword slung across his back, but the marshal hadn't pushed the issue. Dar did not consider himself a leader, despite his new title, but

neither was he a fool when it came to military matters. He wasn't sure himself why he'd taken the sword, instead of giving it to another to wield. He still felt uncomfortable when his hand touched the hilt, and just having it around him made him think of Talen, which was not useful. But those impediments had not been enough to make him discard the weapon.

Dar swept his gaze over the rest of the company. The others gathered were not coming with the first team, and Dar thought he could detect an undercurrent of quiet relief among them.

He heard someone coming and turned to see Allera emerging from the palace. "Any sign of the elf?"

"No, he hasn't arrived yet."

"Dammit, we're on a schedule here."

"He will be here."

"He'd better show up soon, or he'll have to catch up on his own."

"The archmage is on his way. He and Tiros were discussing a few last-minute details."

Dar nodded. He could sense the disapproval in Allera's voice, but he could understand Honoratius's decision. Letellia had refused, at first, but she had been all too aware of what was at stake here, and ultimately she'd had no choice but to capitulate. Remembering the withered, broken creature that had spoken to them the night before last in the Guild tower, he wondered just how long the old man would last. They had a contingency in case he could not manage the first part of the plan, but from what Letellia had told him, there was a small chance for error if she was compelled to use her own magic to facilitate the transport.

Dar snorted. With their luck, "small chance" meant a virtual certainty of a fuck-up, in his mind.

"What's so funny?" Allera asked. The healer had changed clothes as well, wearing trousers and a white linen tunic under her magical armor of boiled leather. Her hair had gotten long enough for her to be able to tie it back, and a leather cap with side flaps provided protection for her head. She still bore her light mace, but only carried it at Dar's insistence. Her true weapon was her healing powers, which they would rely upon not only to keep their warriors in the fray, but to destroy any undead that they might encounter.

"Nothing," he said. "Ah, here we go."

Letellia and Tiros appeared together, flanked by a pair of armed guards. Dar had spent enough time around the sorceress, both with and without Honoratius riding along, to know that the archmage was present. There was a certain puffiness to her cheeks and under her eyes that suggested that she'd been crying, but she carried herself now with an utterly calm aplomb.

Tiros nodded to him. "General. Let's get ready."

Dar turned to the men and women gathered before them in the courtyard. "All right, listen up, everyone." The activities and discussions going on in the courtyard had faded as Tiros and Letellia had arrived, and now every eye was on them. Dar glanced at Tiros, but the marshal nodded for him to proceed.

"They call me a general, but really I'm just a soldier," Dar said. "Hells, just a few months ago I wasn't even that, just some fucked up mercenary looking out for his own selfish shit. I'm not going to give you a big speech about honor and glory and sacrifice; you've heard enough of that already. You know that I've been where we're going, and I won't lie to you, Rappan Athuk is the fucking bung-hole of the universe, and it will do everything it can to see that every one of us lies dead in its fucking bowels."

"You know all this already. But I'll remind you why we're doing this. We're going there because we have no fucking choice. That gods-damned pit is where old Goat-Head is hiding, and because that fucker won't stop until this world is dead, we've got to go in there and cut his fucking head off."

Dar drew *Valor*. The sword gleamed brightly in the morning air, even though the sunlight still hadn't crested the outer wall. Something flashed in his eyes. "I swear this, right now," Dar said. "Anything that gets in my way is going to die. If I have to cut my way to Orcus, I will, and I won't stop until either that fuck is destroyed, once and for all, or I'm am fucking exterminated. Because that is the only thing that is going to stop me. I swear it!"

The men and women in the courtyard lifted their own weapons, and echoed his words; all save the monks, who stood there as still as statues. "I SWEAR IT!"

"I too, swear it," came a voice from behind them.

Dar and the others atop the step turned to see Alderis come forward. The elf was clad in a wondrous robe of fine gray cloth, covered in intricate spiral designs in silver thread that seemed to move as he walked. A silver circlet covered his brow, sparkling with six diamonds the size of a man's thumbnail. Despite the damage wrought upon him by the experiences of recent months, he looked the true archmage, and power shone in his dark eyes.

His daughter and son-in-law were not with him, but the elf was not alone. Behind him a tall form moved into the arched entry, and for all his experience with strange things, Dar couldn't help but start slightly in surprise.

It was a construct, a thing built in a vaguely humanoid shape, but formed of wood and stone and metal. Silvery metal plates had been affixed to its arms, legs, and torso. It stood almost nine feet tall.

"Shield guardian," Honoratius said. "Impressive. I must remember to ask sometime how you managed the mithral augmentations."

Alderis acknowledged the comment, then turned to Dar. "I am ready, general."

"What about Mehlaraine and Selanthas?" Allera asked, quietly.

The elf looked at her, and smiled sadly. "My people believe that each of us must make our own decisions, and face our own destiny."

The healer nodded. She understood.

"You all know your assignments," Tiros said. Alderis and Letellia moved down into the courtyard, the elf trailed by his hulking protector. Those gathered in the courtyard took their positions.

"You are the last to depart, but make no mistake, you are the first wave," Tiros said. "By now, Nelandro Agathon and his cohort will be nearing Rappan Athuk. Thane Gravorr and his dwarves left with the riders from Erem and three centuries of the Second Legion last night; by midday they will meet up with General Darius and the First marching down from Janaris. Tendaji Jaddo's corsairs have already sailed for the south along with sixteen ships of Camar's Seafarer's Guild, bearing supplies and support troops from the Fifth Legion and the City Watch, along with Sukat Koth's Emorite hunters."

Tiros gestured to Honoratius. Everyone present had been briefed on the unique situation with the archmage and his niece, and they listened to her words without question or disagreement as she took over the briefing. "Earlier this morning I *scried* Rappan Athuk. The valley is quiet, but that does not mean that we will not encounter resistance. It is our task to secure a defensible position and wait for Nelan's force to join us. Then we will begin our probe into the complex. If we encounter enemies that we cannot defeat, we will fall back and await reinforcement. Each day, I can *teleport* more forces to our location, if we are in an area that is not shielded from magical travel."

"Are there any questions?" Tiros asked. After a few moments of silence, he continued, "All right, first team forward." Dar, Allera, Tullus, Alexion, and Zahera moved next to Honoratius, while Marcus and Xenos stepped over to where Alderis waited. The monks and the watchmen would be taken the second wave, once Honoratius *teleported* back to Camar. In essence, they would be using the same tactic they had used at Alderford,

where Honoratius had delivered fifteen warriors to block an undead assault closing on Highbluff.

“Thirty seconds,” Honoratius said. There was a brief flurry of activity, as the spellcasters prepared wards. Alderis reached up and touched his shield guardian with a wand; the creature’s body glowed softly for a moment before fading back to its usual coloration.

“Ten seconds,” Honoratius said. The champions of Camar drew their weapons, and formed in a close group around the mages. The Drusian monks drew back the sleeves of their robes, revealing intricate black patterns tattooed upon their hands, wrists, and forearms.

“Good luck,” Tiros said. “Every man, woman, and child in Camar is depending upon you.”

“We will not fail you,” the knight Xenos replied.

Dar opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak, the wizards invoked their spells, and the entire group of ten, including the shield guardian, abruptly vanished. The five who were set to go in the second group waited; if all went well, Honoratius would be back for them in a matter of seconds.

All did not go well.

The companions materialized on target, on the northern edge of the valley of Rappan Athuk. Their arrival was accompanied by a brief but painful surge of disorientation, and several of them fell to the ground, momentarily stunned. When they finally recovered enough to recognize their surroundings, however, a grim chill settled upon each of them.

“Oh, fuck us,” Dar said.

The first thing they saw was that the valley was not as Honoratius’s *scrying* spell had indicated it. A huge spiraling formation of dark clouds hung low over the area, gathering in the center in a mass so dense and foul and black as to appear almost solid. Flashes of sickly yellow light cracked within the center of that unnatural storm, and noises that sounded vaguely like a dying man in the last throes of torment.

The sky was alive with winged creatures that twisted through the air in chaotic formations. The majority were green gargoyles, the twisted guardians they had battled before in this valley. But there were dozens of them, and among them, not clearly discernable in the shadowed heights, more sinister, alien forms could just be discerned.

The floor of the valley was likewise alive with movement. The tormented groans of the undead rose up like a miasma, clutching at their bowels with a raw, primordial fear.

They could see skeletons and zombies of all shapes and sizes, along with ghouls, wights, and more terrible things, things that they could not give name to, but which were whispered of in ancient texts of cracked parchment and by cults that practiced unholy rites in places where the sun's light never reached. It was impossible to put numbers to them, but the valley could have easily accommodated thousands of the creatures.

The mists that lingered in the dell were gone, and they could clearly see all the way down to where the mausoleums of green stone had warded the entrance to the dungeon. But now those structures were gone, replaced by a huge, gaping hole at the nadir of the vale. The opening was surrounded by plinths of green stone that ringed the hole like uneven teeth, and amidst those monuments they could see shadowed forms, ranging from squat, bulbous things to hulking monstrosities with bulging muscles and alien features. These creatures, unlike the other servitors of Orcus, had life, but their origin was in the blackest pits of the Abyss, and their very presence here was a violation of their world.

Demons.

"We were deceived," Honoratius said.

"We have to abort the mission, get out of here," Dar said.

"What about Nelan?" Allera asked.

"He'll see this long before he gets here, but we can't stay!"

"Alderis?" Honoratius asked. The elf and those he'd transported were within fifteen paces of them; Marcus was helping the elf to his feet while the shield guardian loomed over them protectively. The elf was still clearly not fully recovered, but he latched onto the archmage's voice and forced a nod.

"I can manage another *teleport*, but it will cost me," he said.

"Everyone, back together!" the archmage ordered. Less than ten seconds had passed since their appearance, but already cries were starting to echo from the gargoyles above, and several groups of the creatures were already winging in their direction.

Honoratius cast his second *greater teleport*.

Nothing happened. Alderis's *limited wish* likewise failed.

"I can't help but notice that we're still here," Dar said.

"There is some sort of lock in place," Honoratius said. "I cannot transport us out of here."

“They’ve seen us, they’re coming!” one of the knights warned, pointing with his sword. The cries of the gargoyles had started to echo, building as they were taken up by the thousands of unnatural forms that filled the depression. As that deafening roar broke over the champions of Camar, the nearest of the gargoyles swept down out of the air, their wings folding as they dove, claws outstretched, eager to rend. Below them, the vast army of undead began to move, surging up toward the lip of the valley like a swarm of hungry ants.

Chapter 296

NELAN’S FLIGHT

The winds had been growing in intensity over the last half-hour, and Nelan struggled to maintain the focus on his *wind walk* spell. He glanced over his shoulder at the eleven others flying in a V-formation behind him. Below them stretched the uneven mounds of scrub hills that stretched for miles in every direction; to the west they could see the green expanse of the Forest of Hope, while to the east the vast expanse of the ocean could be seen beyond the farthest ranks of hills.

And ahead, their destination.

They had long since left behind the clear skies that had miraculously appeared above Camar. Above them stretched a great bank of gray, which had deepened in color and malevolence the further south they had traveled. And now, as he peered into the distance, he saw that there was a particularly dense gathering of black clouds ahead that hovered over a point in the midst of the hills. It was a good twenty or thirty miles ahead, he judged, but as he watched he could see flashes in the sky, reverberations of dark power that he could not clearly distinguish in the mist-form granted by his *wind walk* spell.

He could guess where that unnatural storm was centered.

He looked up again and tried to gauge the level of the sun through the clouds. He could not be sure of the time, but he suspected that Honoratus, Dar, and the rest of the first wave were getting ready to depart, if they hadn’t done so already. He was tempted to rise up above the clouds briefly to check the position of the sun, a trivial exercise with the *wind walk*, but despite the security of his faith, he was not accustomed to flying, and the thought of leaving the ground so far below was more than a bit unnerving.

He berated himself slightly for the thought. If he was unused to flying, he could only imagine what his companions were feeling. None of them had broken formation, and while there had been a few pale faces when they had paused briefly at Highbluff to rest and take a hasty breakfast, none of them had complained. At least the two priests and

the two temple guards were familiar with the concept of *wind walking*. The six knights, however, had merely accepted their orders, their faces all hardened with the same grim look of men and women who had accepted death as a likely outcome of their oaths.

Talen had done something to these people, Nelan thought. There was something missing from them. Maybe if one of them had shown fear at the thought of being transformed into mist and whisked over landscapes faster than the fastest horse. Or even cracked a joke, or shed a tear. It could be that they were just better at hiding their feelings than most people. But Nelan had felt decidedly uncomfortable around them.

Another gust of wind buffeted him, and he gestured to the others to follow him down lower. Thus far the wind had not been sufficiently intense to cause physical injury, which was a real hazard to a *wind walker*. But just from the look of the skies ahead, it seemed likely that they would not be able to fully reach their destination via the spells he and Patriarch Jaduran had cast before dawn that morning.

He turned back just in time to see it.

It appeared out of nowhere, dropping down from the sky above, maybe a thousand feet ahead of them. It was big, and vaguely humanoid, but its features were difficult to make out due to the dark cascade of energy that surrounded it. Nelan recognized that nimbus as an *unholy aura*.

He gestured frantically, even as the driving wind carried them closer to the creature. The formation split, with half of the group following Nelan down to the left, while the other half veered right. The monster, which Nelan now saw to be some sort of demon, just hovered there on stubby wings that seemed incapable of supporting its hulking weight.

Nelan glanced back, and saw that the final member of his group had broken off, and was heading toward the demon on a direct course. As he watched, his *wind walk* dissolved, and the figure took on the solid form of a muscled, golden-haired youth clad in a simple white robe. Gravity asserted its hold as the spell ended, but the youth's form began to shift and shimmer, and within seconds a pair of feathered white wings had appeared from his back, and a bright glow had erupted around him.

Nelan gestured for his cadres to keep going. He wanted to aid his *planar ally* against the demon, but he knew that he could not help short of landing and returning to solid form, which would put him in no position to be of any use.

A pair of vrock demons materialized in front of the demon, and immediately dove at the oncoming deva. The celestial lifted his mace, but before the two creatures could reach him he uttered a *holy word*. Both vocks stiffened and fell, blasted insensate by the pure force of that syllable. The deva flew past them, its attentions focused upon the greater demon.

The nalfeshnee waited until the deva was almost within striking distance, and then it *teleported* away.

Nelan looked back and saw the deva falling farther behind them. He raised a hand and started to slow his rate of speed; the others started to shoot past him before they too began to slow to match him.

The first warning he had was a twisting sensation that shot through him like a crossbow bolt. Four of the five others accompanying him suddenly materialized as the *wind walk* was *dispelled*. The temple guardsman, priest, and two knights screamed as they fell, their momentum continuing to carry them forward as they plummeted toward the ground over one hundred feet below. Nelan could do nothing but watch in horror as all four smashed hard into the barren, rocky hillsides.

The nalfeshnee descended upon them from above. Even slowed as they were, the *wind walk* spell still carried them forward faster than the demon could follow, and soon he and his last companion—a temple guardsman named Valerian—were out of its range.

Nelan was at a loss what to do. The four that had fallen had dropped a distance that should have killed them, but it was possible that one or more might have survived the fall. He looked around for the other group that had split off when they'd first spotted the demon, but he couldn't see them; *wind walkers* were hard to spot any any distance beyond a few hundred feet. He looked at Valerian, and could see the terror on the man's face even with the distortion to his features caused by the spell. He caught the man's attention, and pointed toward the ground. They descended toward a hilltop that jutted up from the rolling terrain like a bent thumb.

They had nearly reached it when the demon appeared in a sudden rush of blackness and sound above them.

Valerian panicked and veered sharply to the right. Nelan headed downward, under its reach. The insubstantial form granted by his spell provided some protection against physical attacks, but he did not doubt that the demon's power was sufficient to overcome that obstacle.

But the demon did not attempt to seize him in its massive claws. Instead it focused its dark stare upon the cleric, and hit him with another *greater dispel*. This time, Nelan's magic dissolved under its attack, and the cleric dropped like a stone, plummeting forty feet onto the side of the hill. He was lucky to land in a mound of dead scrub, which cushioned his fall slightly, but his momentum and weight dragged him down, and he tumbled hard down a rocky, uneven slope, his breastplate protecting him some against blows that would have otherwise crushed the bones of his torso. He finally came to an abrupt stop at the base of the hill, slamming into a boulder the size of a wagon. There was a flash of pain as his right arm was snapped by the impact, and then for a moment everything swum out of focus, and darkness enfolded him.

Chapter 297

AGAINST ALL ODDS

Dar looked around, quickly. There was little that could promise cover; a few clumps of small boulders nearby, some small ravines tangled with brush, a cleft in a hillside about a hundred yards off. Ironically, the best thing he could see was the burned wreckage of Lord Sobol's fort, but that was on the northwest side of the valley, and they stood on the edge to the northeast.

All they had to do to get to it was hack their way through a few thousand undead.

"Fall back to those rocks!" the fighter yelled, pointing to a knot of man-sized boulders about forty feet behind them.

The screams of the gargoyles drew his attention back up, as his allies drew back. His earlier guess about their numbers took a sharp tick upward; there looked to be thirty, maybe forty of the things, and all of them looked to be coming their way.

Valor snicked from its sheath as he fell back toward the rocks. Ahead of him, at the valley's edge, undead were already appearing, skeletons of all shapes and sizes, packs of slaving ghouls, about a dozen pale-skinned wights, a feral light shining in their eyes.

"Come on, you bastards!" he yelled, brandishing his sword at the gargoyles, trying to draw their attention away from the casters.

Alderis, half-carried between Marcus and Xenos, pulled himself free and cast a spell. Almost at the same time, Allera invoked the same magic, the two forming overlapping globes of *repulsion* around them. Between them, the diving gargoyles were driven back, shrieking as they were forced to abort their dives against the invisible barriers of potent magic. The elf's spell held them farther out, almost a hundred and fifty feet distant, while Allera's had made the edge of her barrier closer, so as to leave any undead at the borders within range of her *mass cure* spells. The leading edge of the undead charge was already within those ranges, but the overwhelming majority of them suddenly stopped, held at bay by the potent combination of divine and arcane magic.

The gargoyles were held at bay, their will insufficient to penetrate the *repulsion* fields. Several fast undead, however, penetrated the outer field, and charged toward Dar. Alexion hurled his *javelin of lightning*; the shaft transformed in mid-flight into a bolt of electrical energy that tore through a pair of wights. Marcus and Zahera started to come to Dar's aid, but the fighter ordered them back. "Get the spellcasters to those rocks,

form a defensive ring!” he ordered. A wight rushed up behind him; Zahera shouted a warning, but Dar smoothly spun and met its attack with a downward strike of *Valor*. The wight went down, its head and torso falling one way, its legs and hips another.

More undead that had made it through both *repulsion* fields were on his heels. Above them, the frustrated cries of the gargoyles echoed over the battlefield like the raucous yells of spectators. “Ring of steel... nothing gets through!” Dar yelled. The three knights and Marcus had formed a half-circle with the rocks at their backs, and with Honoratius, Alderis, Allera, and Tullus inside. Alderis’s shield guardian stood slightly off to the side, rising over the low mound of boulders. Dar rushed into position on the left end of the half-circle, and spun to face a ghast that had pursued him all the way across the rocky field. Shields clashed and weapons bit into undead flesh as Dar and the knights hacked down the few undead that had penetrated their wards thus far. But more undead were ascending from the valley; and already two groups of several dozen each had accumulated at the curving edges of the barriers established by Alderis and Allera.

“Well, archmage, let’s get going with the blasting!” Dar yelled. With his foe down, he glanced over his shoulder to evaluate their position. The “wall” of boulders was really just a jumble of rocks, none of them larger than six feet tall, but it at least offered them some degree of protection for their backs. Thus far the undead had only come at them from directly ahead, but that would change as more of them made it through the barriers.

More undead were continuing to trickle forward, their arc of approach widening as the newcomers moved around those already penned in against the barriers. The surge of undead coming into view over the valley’s edge had become a flood, and while most were held back by the overlapping spell auras, the sheer numbers meant that more would be able to muster the will to force through.

Honoratius did not respond to Dar’s shout. Most of her higher-order spells had been invested in the *transposition* necessary to link the consciousness of the venerable magus lying in his bed in Camar with Letellia’s, and in the multiple *teleports* that now seemed to be useless. The archmage had a number of potent evocations in reserve, but she held them for the moment, knowing that more dire threats existed here than the foes they had faced thus far.

That thought was given substance a moment later by a shout from Marcus, who was holding their right flank. “Demons!”

Sizzling pops around the edges of their *repulsion* fields announced the arrival of fiends as they *teleported* in. There were about a half-dozen tall, impossibly slender black forms, their rank hides oozing red ichor like droplets of blood. They were accompanied by a fat, toadlike hezrou, its claws flexing in anticipation of rending human flesh. And finally, high above them, a trio of vrockes shimmered into existence, each surrounded by a shifting array of *mirror images*.

Honoratius nodded to herself as she catalogued each of the demons. This was going to be a problem.

Unable to get close enough to attack, the vrock instead concentrated their spell powers upon the defenders. Rocks ranging from stones the size of a fist to small boulders the size of a man's torso suddenly sprung up off the ground, flying toward the line of warriors as though fired by a catapult. Dar, Xenos, and Zahera all took hits, the woman knight screaming as her right arm was crushed by a missile twice the size of her head.

That assault was followed by a surge of chaotic energy as the hezrou unleashed a *chaos hammer* upon them. Even as the violent explosions of color faded around them, the babaus hit them with a barrage of targeted *dispels*. They had no way of knowing which of their foes was the source of the invisible barriers that kept the undead back, so they focused their efforts on those who looked like spellcasters. Their magic was much weaker than that of the companions, but one got lucky, unraveling the *repulsion* aura that surrounded Alderis.

Instantly two hundred undead came charging forward, accompanied by three dozen green gargoyles that plummeted down eagerly. Most of them stopped again after a mere thirty paces, as they ran up against the second *repulsion* field around Allera. But many of the more powerful entities, including an assortment of about twenty wights, ghosts, and mohrgs, kept on coming, hollow shrieks coming from their gaunt bodies as they pushed past their more mindless brethren. Above them the green gargoyles shrieked in renewed frustration as they ran up against Allera's *repulsion*, again kept at bay by the magic.

Meanwhile, the three vrock drifted down from above. They did not test Allera's barrier, but began to circle just above it, twisting and gyrating in the complex maneuvers of their dread *dance of ruin*.

Chapter 298

HOLD THE LINE

"Hold the line!" Dar yelled, gesturing with his sword as the outer wall of undead moved forward from Alderis's collapsing barrier to the inner circle formed by Allera's spell. Zahera rose to her feet, nodding in thanks as Marcus treated her injured arm with a *cure serious wounds* spell. The cleric drew his sword and joined her in place in the line of defenders, bolstered by the *divine power* of Soleus. Behind him Tullus incanted a *prayer*, infusing them with strength of purpose and iron determination.

Allera drew upon a pure cascade of divine potency, surrounding herself and each of her companions with the brilliant enegy of a *holy aura*. Each of the companions felt that

glow to the core of their being, steadying them against the evil powers of the hordes of Orcus.

And then the arcanists unleashed their power.

Alderis extended his arms wide, incanting words of magic. In response a *wall of fire* rose up in a ring seventy feet out from where the elvish abjurer stood. The flames rose up to block the view of the undead that were gathered at the edge of Allera's *repulsion*, just ten feet further out, but they could hear the screams of rage and pain as the heat of the *wall* scorched the bodies of the undead. A few that had just penetrated the healer's ward were caught within the flames as they erupted upward, and they were consumed within seconds by the blazing pyre. The other undead fell back from the deadly circle, leaving behind a few dozen scorched skeletons and ghouls that had been roasted by the initial wave of heat.

Honoratius targeted the vrocks with a *greater dispel magic*. The spell cut away the *mirror images* surrounding two of them, but the demons continued their dance unabated, the supernatural potency of their ritual unaffected by Honoratius's potent magic. The archmage frowned.

Dar and the knights met the undead charge, absorbing attacks on their armor and shields, bolstered by Allera's *holy aura*. Tullus lifted his holy symbol and called upon the might of the Father, causing some of the weaker undead to recoil. But the others fought back with terrible ferocity. A mohrg smashed a powerful fist into Dar's torso, and its sinuous tongue lashed out and pricked him on the side of his neck. But the fighter's fortitude was such that he easily shrugged off the paralytic effect of its bite, and he countered with a two-handed downward stroke that crushed the creature's skull and kept going, smashing it into a hundred pieces. On the far flank, Marcus faced another of the terrible monstrosities, but he too was able to fight it off, delivering powerful blows augmented with *divine power* that smashed bones and bit into the foul substance that crammed the cavity of its chest.

The knights were almost overcome by a pack of leaping ghouls, ghastrs, and wights that surged into the center of their defensive line. Zahera was hit by a wight and groaned as life energy was siphoned from her body. Xenos was nearly dragged down by three ghastrs, and only the potency of the *holy aura* enabled him to resist being paralyzed and torn apart. Alexion fared better, holding off two wights and a ghoul with his magical shield, but his pick was designed to cripple living foes, and his initial counterattacks had little effect on them. More undead continued to come forward, but as they spread to the flanks, trying to get around the fighters toward the juicy, unarmored casters behind, they found only Dar's sword and Tullus's holy power waiting for them. A small pack of ghouls rushed around the mound of rocks, seeking to bypass the warriors altogether.

And then a wave of healing power surged down the line, restoring the humans and destroying undead at the same time. The few undead that survived Allera's spell were quickly hacked down by the defenders, who then reformed their line at Dar's command.

The ghouls that turned their flank found only more destruction waiting for them. Springing over the rocks with feral agility, they found Alderis's shield guardian waiting for them. As the ghouls leapt to attack, Alderis glanced up and spoke a word to his construct. "Defense."

The guardian invoked a spell, and a magical *shield* appeared in the air before it. The mithral-clad construct extended its arms and met the attacking ghouls with fists like battering rams. Gray bodies crunched and cracked, and ghouls fell in mangled heaps into the cracks between the stones. The monsters counterattacked, tearing at the guardian with claws and bite, but they had little effect upon its armored body. Several tried to get past it to get to the easier prey below, but the guardian abandoned its own attacks to block them, absorbing more damage as it knocked the creatures back.

The ghouls intensified their efforts, and two dove under the guardian's arms as they hurled themselves forward at Alderis and Allera. The stench they brought with them indicated that these two foes were ghouls, more canny and deadly than their weaker cousins. The elf calmly pointed and cast a spell, blasting the first with an empowered *scorching ray*. The ghoul's chest turned black as the magical flames tore into it. The elf hit it with a second ray, transforming its head into a charred mess. As it fell, Alderis turned and fired his third stream of fire into the monster attacking Allera. It took damage but still managed to lunge at the healer with one jagged claw. It grabbed her arm, but Allera easily resisted the power of its touch. The ghoul could not maintain its hold in the face of the healer's *holy aura*, but its struggles ceased abruptly a moment later as the shield guardian brought a heavy stone boot down onto its body, crushing it.

"Alderis! The vrock!" Honoratius yelled, pointing upward. The demons' wild dance was approaching culmination, and tendrils of energy were beginning to flash within the chaotic space between them.

Another area-effect spell, this one an *unholy blight*, exploded around them. Ignoring both the sickening effects of the hezrou's foul magic and the wild melees still going on both ahead and behind them, the arcanists focused their magic upon the greater threat above.

A screaming roar echoed over the battlefield, drowning out the cries of the gargoyles and the undead below. Honoratius's sonically-substituted *chain lightning* blasted into the first vrock, shredding its spell resistance, devastating its flesh. The secondary arc hit the second vrock, and then cascaded through the *mirror images* of the last, drawing a scream from it as they finally found the real creature. Pulses shattered green bodies as the spell depleted itself through several of the gargoyles, which drew back from the demons.

Most were not quick enough to avoid the empowered *fireball* from Alderis that exploded in the wake of Honoratius's spell. The blazing globe scorched the demons even through their inherent resistance to fire, and when the flames died, one of the vrock—

the one that had been the focus of Honoratius's spell—broke away from the others and plummeted to the ground, its body blackened and quivering.

Another *chaos hammer* hit them, fired blind by the hezrou through the *wall of fire*.

"What the fuck!" Dar yelled, grimacing as the spell's energies blasted him, one pulsing strand of energy hitting his arm and running down the limb into the fist that clutched *Valor*. "Will somebody kill that fucking demon already?" The knights were equally hard hit, but Allera eased their injuries a moment later with another *mass cure* spell.

"Look!" Alexion yelled, pointing ahead. Dar looked up to see Alderis's *wall of fire* fading, sundered by a *dispel magic* from one of the babaus. The companions, paled, all of them, as the burning barrier's collapse revealed a ring of undead that completely surrounded them. There had to be at least six hundred of them, ranging from tiny zombies created from vermin, to hulking, monstrous skeletons of umber hulks and minotaurs. They had been kept at bay by the *wall of fire*, but now moved forward again, intent only upon the utter destruction of those who stood against their Master. Many stopped at the edge of Allera's *repulsion*, but dozens did not, picking up speed as they rushed forward in a wave to attack.

And then Allera was hit by several targeted *dispels*, and in quick succession her *holy aura* winked out, followed a second later by the collapse of the *repulsion* spell.

A sea of undead rushed in from every direction, as the gargoyles above screamed in joy, and dove down to attack.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me," Dar said.

Chapter 299

THE CLOSING RING

"Keep them at bay... just for a few seconds!" Allera yelled. She closed her eyes, and spread her hands, whispering as she drew upon healing power.

"The gargoyles," Honoratius said to Alderis. The archmage hurled a sonic evocation into the air, and the gargoyles screamed as it shattered the air in their midst. The companions felt it as a pulse that shook their bones, but the spell had been precisely placed, and none of them suffered any lasting harm. Allera did not stir, completely lost in her concentration.

Alderis lifted a hand and fired a *cone of cold* into the descending swarm of gargoyles. Gargoyles stiffened as the magical cold froze their bodies, already ravaged by

Honoratius's sonic. The creatures plummeted to the ground, shattering as they hit the rocky soil. One landed on a ghoul, crushing it, and a second nearly smashed into Marcus as he held off a pair of skeletal wolves.

"Keep them off Allera!" Honoratius yelled, ducking as a gargoyle tried to seize her head in its claws. With a half-dozen layered wards still protecting her, she was difficult to harm, but the gargoyles were sufficiently big and strong to carry her off, if they got a hold on her.

Alderis's shield guardian took a gargoyle out of the sky with a swipe of one armored limb. At the elf's command the construct stood over Allera, protecting her from the descending attackers.

Undead came at the line of warriors, attacking in a violent fury. Skeletons, ghouls, and wights went down under their blades, but more surged forward, and others simply leapt up and came down upon the defenders, trying to bear them down by sheer weight. Marcus was struck in the face by the skeletal claw of an umber hulk, and he would have fallen had not Tullus stepped forward, supporting him with one arm while his other wielded his mace with unaccustomed fury.

A moment later, a ghast leapt onto the older cleric, bearing him down.

Zahera staggered as a zombie beetle seized her ankle. Three wights seized her, and a ghoul sprang onto her shoulders, trying to rip her helmet off.

Dar formed a wall of hacked and dismembered undead in front of him, but for every one he killed, two or three others charged into its place.

Vrocks descended lazily from above, looking for opportunities.

Another *unholy blight* exploded around the companions. Alexion cried out, and two ghouls ripped his pick from his hands. Xenos felt a prick on the side of his neck as he hacked down a ghoul with his holy sword, and looked up to see a mohrg standing there, even as his muscles stiffened and stopped obeying his command. A skeleton smashed him in the face, and he fell to the ground, claws already tearing at his flesh.

Forty ghouls surged over the low rock mound, rushing at the companions from behind.

And more undead kept pressing forward.

Chapter 300

THE LIGHT

Allera drifted in a calm space in the midst of chaos. Her concentration was like a razor's edge, as she drew in more and more holy power into herself.

In the aftermath of their defeat at the hands of the ghoulish army at Derber's Point, Allera had sought out solitude to reflect. She had wandered the streets of Camar's Gold Quarter, and had ended up in the grove of Camarellia. The place was deserted, and Allera had been struck by a calm melancholy as she'd walked through the park, looking at the skeletal trees and bushes, the browned fields of grass, the empty beds that bore only dead scraps, now. At one time, this place had been alive with growth, and Allera had spent hours upon hours here, just absorbing the bloom of life and energy, the laughter and smiles of the people who came here seeking relief from the endless stone and wood and noise and smells of the city.

She had found a bench, and sat alone in the dead park. But as she had contemplated, she realized that her initial perceptions had been mistaken.

Camarellia, like Camar itself, was not dead. Both were dormant, and under fierce attack by an enemy that would see all life crushed before it.

But life, Allera knew, was determined. It found a way to survive, to persist, to grow.

On her way out of the park, she had found a flower, a winter starbloom, half-concealed under a scragged, barren bush. She had knelt there, appreciating its beauty, for some time.

Her thoughts were now of that flower, and of the power it represented, as Allera drew upon more healing energy than she had ever channeled before. She soaked up that power until she felt as though her very existence would be torn asunder before it, for there was a limit to what mortal flesh could absorb. She felt the suffering around her acutely, and the tormented existence of the creatures all around felt like rough scabs upon her perceptions. Her eyes were closed, but each of them flared in her consciousness like a red beacon. Each, a violation.

Finally, with a cry of release, she released the power.

The *mass heal* spell blasted outward like a tidal wave of sheer power. Undead creatures flared with blue fire, and were blasted into ashes. Each of her companions was filled with that power, and their wounds closed, their suffering eased. Balance returned, and Allera felt giddy with it as the surge ended. She felt a rush of heat, but that came from outside her, not from within. She did not see it, but that came from a *fireball* that Honoratius had detonated right on top of their position, shaping the spell to leave a hollow center where the companions remained unaffected. The undead, weakened by Allera's holy pulse, were obliterated.

Allera opened her eyes, and blinked against the light.

The undead horde that had been swarming all around them a moment ago was just... gone. The ground around them in a circle thirty feet across was covered in the charred remains of creatures, and flecks of ash danced around them in the wind. A few undead, those that had grappled with the companions or gotten inside their defensive ring, were still intact, but their flesh was blackened from the impact of Allera's spell, and they were slain within a few moments. A few gargoyles fluttered overhead, heavily scorched and confused, but those too quickly succumbed to a barrage of *magic missiles* and *scorching rays*. The demons were gone, having fled before the display of raw power.

The knights drew off their helmets, and looked at Allera with awe.

"Impressive," Honoratius said, with a slight nod of deference. Allera felt unsteady, and for a moment she thought she might fall.

And then Dar was there, crushing her into his embrace, and reality returned in a rush, and she sucked in a breath, overcome.

Chapter 301

THE FATE OF THE CLERIC

Nelan felt a soft warmth grasp him within the black, and gently ease him back into consciousness. He opened his eyes, and found himself staring into the calm, otherworldly stare of the astral deva he'd summoned via his *planar ally* spell that morning.

"The others?" he asked.

"None are present here," the angel replied. The winged youth offered him a hand as he pulled himself up from the knot of scraggly brush and jutting rocks into which he'd fallen. He flexed his injured arm; the pain was already just a memory, purged by the deva's potent healing abilities.

"The demon could have finished me off easily," he said.

"I believe that the nalfeshnee's objective was to prevent anyone from reaching Rappan Athuk," the angel said. "It departed here in haste once it had *dispelled* your *wind walk*. I imagine that it is hunting the others in your group."

"Did you see what happened to the man who was accompanying me?"

"I neither saw him fall, nor detected him in the immediate area."

Nelan nodded. "Search the area; see if any others survived the demon's assault. If any did, please direct them to my location. I will be heading south." He gestured toward the mass of clouds which filled the horizon in that direction.

"I can transport you there directly now, if you prefer."

"First check on the others. There may be some who are gravely wounded, and require aid."

The deva nodded. "As you command." It lifted into the air, and headed southwest, vanishing over the hills within moments.

Nelan looked up the rough, craggy hillside that stretched before him. The terrain to the west and east didn't look much easier.

With a sigh, he picked up his mace and started to climb.

Chapter 302

PREPARATIONS FOR THE PIT

After the grueling experience of their initial welcome to Rappan Athuk, the companions decided to withdraw and rest before essaying the dark pit in the center of the valley. Nelan and his contingent had not yet appeared, and they needed to see if there was still a way to bring the reinforcements that waited in Camar to their current location. Honoratius would report on their encounter here and Nelan's absence when he returned to his own body in the tower of the Guild of Sorcery.

The archmage remained with them just long enough for them to retreat into the hills, seeking out one of the secure campsites they had used in the past. Of course, as Alderis pointed out, physical security meant little against foes that could *teleport* at a thought, without chance of error.

Honoratius promised to do what she could; the archmage possessed a spell that could create a more defensible extradimensional refuge, but she had not had the available spell slots to take it this day. Instead she conjured a *secure shelter* and set several *alarm* spells about its perimeter outside. Then, sagging visibly, the magus departed Letellia's body.

"The strain... it has cost him," Letellia said, once she had recovered from the transition.

“There is nothing I can do for him now,” Allera said. “He knows the risk he is taking, and yet he chooses to make the sacrifice needed.”

“Yeah, we’ve all got it rough,” Dar said, heading into the cabin. “At least he gets to go home every night.”

Alderis’s suggestion that a demon could materialize within the *shelter* at any time was unnerving to all of them, but that did not stop the elf from collapsing into his bunk. His shield guardian remained outside, watching for intruders.

“Do you think that the demons will attack?” Zahera asked Dar, as the fighter unrolled a length of sausage from his pack.

“It’s what I would do,” he replied. “We’ll keep three on watch at all times; it’s more important that the spell-slingers sleep first. Everyone else, on shifts. Keep your weapons handy.”

“I don’t know that I can sleep,” Marcus said. “That battle... I thought we were all doomed.”

“We are,” Dar replied, fixing the young cleric with a hard look. The cleric swallowed. “I don’t care if you’re tired or not, get some sleep. Don’t worry, we’ll wake you if the demons come to visit.”

But before he could obey, Xenos called out from one of the windows. “Someone’s coming!”

Everyone but Alderis filed out of the cabin. They saw it, coming from the east. It was Nelan, born aloft by a white horse that sprouted broad, golden wings. The pegasus swept low, spreading its wings to catch the air as it landed a few yards away.

“What took you so long?” Dar asked, as the magical horse transformed back into the deva’s other alternate form, that of a young, perfectly-formed human. “And where are the others?”

“Dead, all of them,” Nelan said. “We were attacked by a powerful demon. It cut through us like old wheat.”

“We had some trouble of our own,” Dar said.

“Honoratius’s scrying was fooled by some magic,” Allera explained. “There was a whole army of undead and demons waiting for us.”

“Was?”

“Yeah, what’s left of it you can scoop up with a shovel,” Dar said. “But some demons got away, so we’re expecting trouble.”

Nelan glanced around, and peered through the nearest window of the cabin. “Where are the others?”

“We’re it,” Dar said. “Some sort of lock, the wizard said. We got in, but couldn’t get back out. Don’t worry about it, Honoratius has already gone back to tell them what we’ve run into.”

“But the mission...”

“Tomorrow. The spellcasters need to regain their spells, and that includes you, I guess. Get inside and grab a bunk.”

“There are some hours left to my term of service,” the deva said. “I will watch over your sleep, and ensure that you are not disturbed.” His form shimmered again, and his wings sprouted from his back. Rising into the air, he vanished from view, cloaked in *invisibility*.

“You do that,” Dar said, after him. “That friend of yours, he wasn’t any good against the demon?”

“The celestial saved my life. It is very powerful, but it cannot *teleport* instantaneously like the demons can. That is how the creature got ahead of us, and took us down one by one.”

“Well, we can use his help tomorrow.”

Nelan shook his head. “I cannot summon celestial aid within Rappan Athuk, nor bring such a creature compacted without inside.”

“What? Why the fuck not?”

“That was what I was told, when I called Zadkiel to service,” Nelan said. “I do not know the reason for the restriction.”

“Maybe the servants of the Father quail before the power of the Demon,” Alexion said.

“Do not question the motives of the Father,” Tullus replied. Marcus likewise looked discomfited by the knight’s suggestion.

“All right, it doesn’t matter,” Dar said. “As always, we’re on our own here, so get in and get some sleep while you can. I have a feeling that tomorrow going to be a real long fucking day.”

They returned into the shelter, while above them to the south, the dark clouds roiled angrily in a neverending swirl over Rappan Athuk.

Chapter 303

NIGHT WATCH

The night descended upon the hills surrounding Rappan Athuk like a blanket. The sky above was an inky blackness save for a faintly luminescent knot that hovered over the site of the Dungeon of Graves. The cold wind that had blown all day intensified as the day faded, whistling as it rushed around the squat and artificial obstacle that had been summoned by magic into the midst of the hills.

Nelan slid out the door of the *secure shelter*, careful to close it behind him before the omnipresent winds could blast it wide open. A hulking, dark form loomed over him in the darkness near the entry, and he started before he realized that it was Alderis's shield guardian, keeping silent vigil over them.

Peering into the near-darkness, the cleric started forward, stumbling once or twice on the loose stones.

"You should be resting, Nelan," came a voice from nearby. Nelan turned toward the sound, only then noting the dark shadow that sat against a jutting boulder a few paces distant.

"I have already prayed for my spells from the Father, and he has granted them," Nelan said, shivering slightly in the cold night air. "And in any case, I find that I cannot sleep easily right after a meal. Age wreaks havoc with the digestive process."

"Time has the last laugh on all of us," Dar said.

Nelan glanced up, searching the dark sky above.

"He's still there," Dar said. "Said he'd remain up there until morning, when we were ready to go."

"The celestial spoke to you?"

"Yeah, but we didn't exactly have a conversation." There was a slight sound of metal on stone as the fighter shifted on his perch, and Nelan could almost feel the man's gaze shifting away from him. The cleric didn't say anything for a moment, letting the calm of the night—a false calm, to his senses—play about him. The wind whipped at his cloak, forcing him to hold it against him with his hand.

“Something on your mind, Nelan?”

“After what’s happened... I just wanted to ask you, about our mission.”

For a moment, the fighter did not speak, and Nelan wondered if the other man had heard him over the wind. He finally opened his mouth to say something else, when Dar started talking.

“It wasn’t that long ago, when we were here last. You remember, cleric? ‘The last camp’, we called it. It might have been within this very dell—these hills all look the fucking same to me. We buried that dead hero here, and moved into Rappan Athuk the next day.”

“I remember,” Nelan said.

“Talen was in charge... he was born to lead, that one. He was responsible for taking down the Duke, did you know that? I was just a fucking sword-for-sale, he took over after Tiros’s death—the man had some balls, no doubting it. Led a team into Rappan Athuk to recover the marshal.”

“It’s not your fault, what happened to him.”

“I didn’t say it was, priest. He knew the risks, we all did. We were all on fucking borrowed time, still are. Rappan Athuk doesn’t play by the rules and it doesn’t give shit for odds. Though I am going to cut that wizard’s head off if we run into him again. Fucking Zafir Navev.”

Nelan didn’t respond, and the silence stretched out again for almost a minute.

“Fuck, I didn’t ask for this shit.” There was a loud scrape as he rose. “Come on, sitting outside in the dark isn’t going to solve anything. Assuming the demons don’t come for us in the night, we’re going to have a full day tomorrow.”

“And the mission?”

“The mission is the same as it was before. Being short-handed doesn’t change that.”

There was a conclusion in Dar’s voice, and he started to walk past the cleric, but something prodded Nelan to push again. “And if we find the portal to Orcus’s demiplane? What do we do then?”

Dar stopped, and while he could not see the other man’s face, Nelan could feel the weight of his stare. “One way or another, this is going to fucking end here, Nelan. One way or another.”

The fighter turned and walked away, vanishing into the dark, his footsteps fading as he moved back to the *secure shelter*. As the fighter's presence retreated, Nelan felt the night surging in all around him, and imagined that there were dark things within that inky expanse, claws poised to rend his flesh.

Shuddering, the cleric hastened after the fighter, leaving the night to the darkness and the wind.

Chapter 304

ONE LAST TIME

The air was thick with moisture, and the stench of rot. The shaft's wall glistened, and when one of the companions brushed against them, they came away sticky with some sort of resinous secretion.

They went down slowly, cautiously, dropping hand-over-hand along the thick ropes that they'd brought in Letellia's *pouch of holding*. The mages drifted alongside them, magical flight easing their passage, but they remained close to the ropes, in case more demons appeared and disrupted their magic. Alderis had already scouted out the shaft, which appeared to be clear to its bottom, but none of them were going to take any chances. His shield guardian rode down first by way of a *feather fall* spell, and waited for them patiently at the bottom.

Dar finally touched down at the bottom of the shaft. He carried an *everburning torch*, and used it to scan the immediate environs. The light brightened as Nelan joined them, the *daylight* he'd cast on his shield driving back the darkness a full sixty feet. But there was nothing to see; the tunnel that led away to the east was empty.

"It appears that the tunnel echoes the original construction of the complex," Honoratius said. "Just bored out to a greater size."

"I hope we don't meet whatever did the boring," Zahera said, wrinkling her nose at the stench.

"The smell... it is... like a sewer," Tullus said, holding a cloth over his face.

"It gets worse," Dar said, lifting his torch in one hand, *Valor* in the other, as he started down the passage.

"Are you all right?" Allera asked Honoratius, as the archmage drifted down and floated into the line behind the knights. He had returned to Letellia's body after their rest, but the healer could see the strain that had come over the sorceress's expression once the

magical transposition had taken hold. Since then, she had carried herself as though made of glass, with deliberate movements that belied the youth and vigor of the host body.

The archmage turned and favored her with a wan smile. "I am well," she said. "I merely wish to return my niece's body to her in the same condition that she donated it to me."

The passage culminated in the entrance to Rappan Athuk that the Doomed Bastards had now used several times. The pit that had been here before had been replaced by a rough slope, and the doorway at the bottom had been replaced by a more or less featureless passage. They could still see places where the original stonework remained, and occasionally the ends of timbers or jagged stone blocks jutted out from places where the tunnel had been widened.

The others caught up to Dar and the knights at the first fork. Here, the complex was almost as it had been on their last visit, with the left passage leading to a mostly-collapsed chamber, a dead-end where they'd once bypassed the dung monster. To the right lay additional rooms, and their eventual destination. The doorway had been widened, the supporting timbers sundered and a wide swath taken out of the surrounding walls, but the way was clear.

"Keep a look out," Dar warned. The fighter led the way, and the others had to hasten to keep his pace.

They lacked a scout, in Shay's absence. There had been several trained scouts in the cohort that had been supposed to reinforce them today, but it appeared as though no allies would be reaching them via magical means. Honoratius had used her *arcane sight* to detect the source of the interference with their magical transportation; she had reported that the unnatural storm was like a huge reverse funnel, fed by the gaping hole in the center of the valley of Rappan Athuk. She had posited that whatever was blocking them was selective; clearly it had not hindered the demons in any way. Most of their extra-dimensional spells and powers seemed to function; Dar's magical quiver and Honoratius's *pouch of holding* both operated normally. As a test, the arcanist had successfully opened a *dimension door*, traveling across the vale where there *secure shelter* had been erected. But an attempt to *teleport* back to Camar not only failed, it resulted in a backlash that had nearly knocked the archmage unconscious.

"But how did we get in in the first place?" Allera had asked.

"There is an intelligence at work here, cunning, adaptive. I would not be surprised if it proved able to adjust to neutralize other tactics that we might utilize."

"We'll see," Dar had said.

When Honoratius had rejoined them the next morning, the archmage had reported that Tiros and Jaduran had decided against sending more men via *wind walk* to rendezvous

with them. Clearly Orcus had anticipated that stratagem, and it was likely that the demon that Nelan had encountered was still warding the aerial approaches to the valley. Tiros had told them that the columns force-marching from Camar would reach Highbluff in a few days, and would then proceed at once southward to Rappan Athuk. By the time that the army reached the Dragonmarsh Lowlands, the ships of the Camarian and Razhuri fleets should have already reached the region, and they would be bringing supplies and reinforcements from a beachhead fifteen miles east of the dungeon. With what had already happened, and the obvious fact that their foe was waiting for them, Tiros had not ordered Dar to press on with the few forces he had at his disposal. But he hadn't had to; Dar could count days on a calendar.

They made their way deeper into the complex of rooms. When they came to a staircase rough-hewn from the stone, Dar pointed out the missing step where he'd snagged his foot on their first visit. That had been a few months and a lifetime ago. They passed the pit where they'd trapped the dung monster, and the tunnel to the north where the barbarian Ukas had lost his life. Dar did not linger over old memories, and led them straight on to the south. Allera rushed ahead to catch him, pressing between the silent forms of Alexion and Xenos, who followed him like shadows.

"Dar, wait a moment, please."

The fighter turned, and for a moment Allera was surprised to see something in his eyes, a focus that was almost frightening. Then he seemed to recognize her, and that look faded. He glanced back, and saw that the others had fallen behind; Tullus was flagging, and was being helped by Marcus, while Alderis drifted in the rear alongside his shield guardian, which had been slowed some in navigating the stairs and the pit.

Dar nodded, and waited for everyone to catch up.

"You've all been briefed on what we encountered this way before, and the route that Honoratius has sketched out. The route down to the first temple is open now, but we'll be taking the river down to the second temple."

"The river clearance is pretty tight, right, sir?" Alexion asked

"Yeah, at places. But Nelan's spell will keep you from getting too wet, knight."

"I was thinking more about if we were attacked while on the river, sir."

"Yeah, well, if that happens, just poke that sticker of yours into the nearest demon, and keep doing that until it stops moving. Any other questions? All right, let's get going."

They made their way to the end of the tunnel, which had been a tight fit, before. Now the opening into the river cavern was a huge, gaping hole. Even Alderis's shield guardian did not need to duck to enter.

As Nelan's shield filled the cavern with *daylight*, the companions came to an abrupt halt.

"Well, that's new," Dar said.

They stared at a huge... thing, which squatted in the middle of the cavern, near the bank of the river. It looked like a statue at first glance, its bloated, hideous form instantly recognizable to those of them who had spent time in Rappan Athuk before. The goat-horns of the thing didn't quite touch the ceiling, but its sheer mass made Alderis's construct seem tiny by comparison, even though the representation of the Demon was only a few feet taller. The thing lacked legs, its lower body bulging out in a fat mass that splayed out across the floor. Their light glistened on its substance, and as they watched, sick pustules of filth trickled down its frame, adding to a slick mess of filth gathered around its base.

A smell so foul that it hit them like a physical blow washed over them. Tullus bent over and voided his stomach, and even the stalwart knights looked pale.

"That thing... it's made of shit!" Xenos exclaimed.

"No," Dar said. "No... we killed it..."

With an ugly, noisome sucking sound, the mound of filth shaped like Orcus shifted. At first it seemed like it was coming apart under its own weight, but then it rose, its fat body rising on legs that seemed to grow out of its mass.

The companions watched in horror as the shit-demon stared down at them. Then it took a step forward.

The dung monster, given new life and form by the will of Orcus, attacked.

Chapter 305

THE GOD OF SHIT

Honoratius gestured and spoke arcane syllables, and a glowing *wall of force* appeared across the creature's path, bisecting the cavern in front of the companions.

"That won't help us get to the river," Alderis said. "The angle is wrong."

"The creature's position precluded a viable slant, and the cavern is too large for me to erect a barrier that stretches to the far side," the archmage calmly explained.

"If we fall back to the tunnels, it might not be able to reach us," Tullus said.

“We’re not retreating,” Dar said. “We killed this fucker once before, we can do it again.”

“If it is indeed the dung monster, then it will be impervious to our magic,” Alderis said.

“Then use your spells to bolster us, and we’ll hack the fucking thing to pieces.”

“Look!” Marcus cried, pointing at the creature.

The dung-Orcus had paused at the *wall of force*. Its head was merely a sculpted form, and it had no “eyes” to stare at them. But it somehow seemed thoughtful as it regarded them through the transparent barrier. Now, as Marcus drew their attention back to it, they could see the thing moving along the obstacle to its edge, where it met the cavern wall. The creature extended an arm, and delivered a blow to the wall at the edge of the glowing field that reverberated through the cavern. Then another, and another. Stone was blasted from the wall with each impact, and with its third hit, small bits of debris shot through the space on the companions’ side of the *wall of force*.

“It would seem that the creature is less mindless in its newest incarnation,” Honoratius said. “Nelán, I would recommend that you prepare your *water walk* spell.”

As the priest began casting, the dung-Orcus pressed its fist into the small opening that it had created between the stone wall of the cavern and the *wall of force*. Its foul substance began to flow through the opening, dripping through onto the far side.

“We should attack it now, while it is transitioning!” Xenos said. He lifted his burning sword, and took a few steps toward it before Dar held up a hand.

“No, wait! Its substance is sticky as hell, and it’ll yank your weapons right out of your hands! We’ll try the wizard’s plan.”

Nelán completed his incantation, and began touching each of them in turn. Alderis, meanwhile, enhanced them all with a *haste* spell. “Everyone, gather by the far side of the *wall of force*,” Honoratius instructed. The companions rushed in that direction, Alderis’s shield guardian trudging heavily in their rear. Already more than half of the dung-creature’s body had poured through the small opening it had made, and it was already beginning to reform into its original shape.

Allera and Dar shared a look. “It’s gotten faster,” the healer said.

“Just get everyone to the river,” Dar said. “It couldn’t follow us through the water, before.” He lifted *Valor*, the muscles in his arms and neck tensing in anticipation.

With a slight gesture from Honoratius, the *wall of force* came down. “Go!” the archmage shouted.

With the barrier suddenly removed, the dung-Orcus plopped abruptly forward. It splattered heavily on the floor, but quickly rose up, new arms and legs forming out of its turgid mass. The hideous face took on definition, and swiveled toward the companions as it lumbered after them.

“Go! Go!” Dar yelled, driving the others before him. The dung monster was much faster than it had been before, treading forward on legs rather than oozing along in a bulbous mass, but it was still ponderous, its tread shaking the ground with every step. Even with the heavy armor and weapons borne by the knights they were still able to widen the gap between them and the creature, thanks to Alderis’s spell. Within a few seconds, Alderis, Honoratius, and Allera had made it to the mouth of the river tunnel, with the clerics and the shield guardian just a few steps behind. Dar and the knights were bringing up the rear.

“Hurry!” Marcus shouted, helping Tullus step down from the rocky bank onto the fast-moving surface of the water. Empowered by Nelan’s divine magic, they were able to tread upon the river as though it was a flattened expanse of sidewalk.

And then Zahera slipped. Glancing back over her shoulder at the massive hulk rushing behind them, she did not see the mess of foulness that slicked the ground where the creature had stepped earlier, and trod heavily upon it. She cried out as she hit the ground hard, her shield jabbing painfully into her side as she fell. She struggled to get up, but then a massive thump sounded right behind her, and she looked up to see the foul visage of the dung-god looming over her, its terrible face oozing putrescence and death.

Zahera cried out and lifted her shield as the monster’s fat arm came down to smash her.

Chapter 306

A NARROW ESCAPE?

A roar of rushing water came crashing down on Zahera, knocking her off her feet. A wave some sixteen feet high surged past her and slammed into the dung monster, arresting its momentum and driving it back half a step. Filth splattered around it, spreading outward in a wide swath around the creature. But the wave, instead of coming apart, drew back and reformed, and they could see that it was an elemental, with twin points of azure light shining within its aqueous substance.

Zahera, soaked through, was splashed again as the dung monster smashed a huge fist through the elemental’s body, ripping free a considerable portion of the material that made up its form. She blinked away the spray and tried to get up, but her limbs felt leaden, her armor like a millstone holding her down.

Two forms materialized within the cascade of water. Dar and Alexion seized her, all but dragging her to her feet. The knight turned toward the creature, but Dar grabbed his shoulder and thrust him around. “Get back, now!” he yelled, following the two of them as they rushed once more toward the river.

Behind them the elemental came apart in a spray of water as the dung-Orcus blasted it with another powerful blow of its fists. Even as the summoned creature came apart the monster stomped through it, pounding toward its escaping foes. Allera, Tullus, Marcus, Nelan, and the shield guardian had already reached the river, while Alderis and Honoratius hovered above it. Xenos waited at the bank, looking back to see if the others needed further assistance.

“Get going!” Dar shouted at them. “Move, all of you!”

The arcanists flew through the narrow opening where the cavern wall hung low over the river entry. Alderis had already sent his guardian ahead. Marcus assisted Tullus through, but Allera waited, looking back at Dar.

“Go, jump!” Dar yelled, glancing back over his shoulder. The monster was about twenty feet back and getting closer with each step.

Zahera and Alexion sprang down onto the river, Nelan’s spell pressing their boots back atop the surface after a slight splash from their impact. The two ran toward the overhang, Dar close on their heels. Allera and Xenos ducked through ahead of them.

Glancing back again, Dar saw that the dung monster hadn’t followed them onto the river, but had turned and was now moving along the bank toward the overhang. “Fuck! Hurry up, hurry up!”

The armored knights had to bend almost double to fit through the gap, but Xenos and Allera helped them from the far side, all but dragging them through. Dar, hearing the pounding of the monster’s feet draw closer and closer, dove forward and slid through the opening, relying on the power of Nelan’s spell to keep him above the surface of the water. It worked, and he came up on the far side of the opening to see Allera waiting for him.

“It’s right behind—”

A loud crash cut off his words, and the overhang collapsed. Bits of stone battered Dar and Allera, one sharp stone cutting a shallow gash along the left side of the healer’s forehead. Water rushed over them as massive chunks of stone fell into the water.

“Are you all right—” Allera began.

“Yes... go, move, now!” Dar yelled, thrusting her before him as he dragged himself to his feet—not easy despite the *water walk*—and started down the tunnel. He could see one of the knights heading back toward them, and gestured forward. “Keep moving!”

Behind them they could hear a loud splash, followed by a change in the noise of the river. Dar didn’t have to look back to know what it meant.

The monster was following them.

Chapter 307

A WATERY CHASE

Dar bit off a curse as he banged his head for the fourth time on a low-protruding bit of stone. If it wasn’t for his helmet, he would have likely bludgeoned himself into unconsciousness a while ago.

And this was the *high* part of the river tunnel.

They had come this way several times in their explorations of Rappan Athuk. The river route was never easy, but with an indestructible monster following them, it became rather more... challenging.

He glanced over at Allera. He’d given up on getting her to go on ahead with the others; she remained at his side regardless of what orders he tried to issue. He didn’t need to look back; the noise made by the creature’s progress behind them was constant. The knights were visible up ahead, having as much if not more difficulty than him in managing the tight confines of the tunnel. Nelan had shown them the trick of pushing into the water to get by low overhangs, letting the current grab hold and drive you forward at a faster pace until you were past the obstacle and could let the spell push you back up to the surface again. It was the only thing that had kept them ahead of the creature thus far, that and the fact that the creature nearly filled the tunnel with its bulk, holding back the river and lowering the level of the water in the tunnel slightly for the rest of them.

He felt the surge of energy from Alderis’s second *haste* spell fade from his limbs. It wouldn’t be long, now.

He looked up to see Honoratius and Alderis drifting back toward them. The arcanists were the only ones to have no difficulty in the tunnel, their *overland flight* spells letting them drift through even the smallest openings with relative ease.

"It would seem that the monster has gotten over its aversion to water," Honoratius said. They matched their speed to Allera and Dar, who kept moving as quickly as they could despite the lack of magical augmentation. They were gaining on the knights, who were starting to flag. Moving quickly in difficult circumstances was a challenge in heavy armor.

"Yeah, no shit. If you'd let me face it in the cavern, we could have fought it head on, and had a chance. If it catches us in this tunnel, we're fucked."

"Can either of you delay it?" Allera asked.

Honoratius glanced at Alderis. "I can *polymorph* myself into an umber hulk, and collapse the tunnel," the elf said.

"That sounds like a good idea," Dar said. "So why aren't you doing it?"

"The river complicates the procedure," Honoratius said. "And Alderis would be at considerable risk; the burrowing ability of an umber hulk is not a sovereign protection against being crushed by falling stone."

"And our avenue of retreat would be cut," Alderis added. "The river would overflow its banks, and might flood the lower levels of the dungeon..."

They were interrupted by a loud crash behind them, and suddenly the dung-Orcus appeared from under the low overhang they had just navigated. The knights all turned around, so they too caught sight of the creature rising up out of the water, not ten paces behind Dar and Allera. It surged forward toward them

"Whatever you're going to do, just do it!" Dar yelled, turning awkwardly in the confined space, drawing *Valor* from its scabbard.

Alderis invoked a *limited wish*. In response, a transparent *wall of force* appeared across the tunnel, blocking the river entirely. Instantly the water level plummeted, and within a few seconds Dar and Allera had fallen to their knees on the muddy floor of the tunnel. Ahead of them, Xenos fell, and Alexion moved to help him back to his feet.

The elf looked pale for a moment. Through the wall, they could see the dung-Orcus, surrounded now by water as the river backed up against Alderis's barrier. "That will not hold it any longer than the last *wall of force* did," Honoratius said. "We must hasten!"

The others needed no encouragement, and they charged down the now-dry tunnel, the mud sucking at their boots. Dar and Allera caught up to the knights quickly, but Dar remained behind them, urging them to greater speed. All of them were covered now in filth and mud, their once-fine garments utterly spoiled. But the determination that shone in their eyes had not yet faltered. Just ahead of them, Marcus and Tullus were just keeping the pace, while Nelan and Alderis's shield guardian took the point about fifty

feet further on, the cleric's blazing shield marking a clear path for them along the underground river's course.

Dar tried to estimate how far they had gone thus far, and how much further remained, but his thoughts were more than a bit jumbled. A sound of rushing water became audible behind them. "It's breaking through," Honoratius said; needlessly, in Dar's opinion.

"Can you collapse the tunnel before it gets here?" Dar asked Alderis. The elf met the fighter's gaze for a long second, and then nodded. "Then do it."

Alderis drifted to the ground, already spellcasting. His shield guardian approached, summoned by some unspoken command. As he summoned the *polymorph* magic, his form began to shift, expanding and growing until the familiar but alien features of an umber hulk regarded them. Dar and Allera had witnessed this metamorphosis before, when Honoratius had used the form to reopen the staircase that led to the third level of the dungeon. But it was still jarring, especially when the creature looked at them with huge eyes that shone with the intelligence of the elf.

Alderis turned toward the nearest wall.

"Everyone keep on going," Dar said. "Don't stop until we get to the cavern at the far end."

Allera forestalled him with a hand on his arm. "We can't just leave him here," she said.

"We can't help him. Either this works, or it doesn't, but once the roof goes, it'll be up to him to dig free."

Reluctantly, Allera nodded, and let herself be pulled back down the tunnel. The elf and shield guardian fell rapidly behind, and as the darkness swallowed them up again, she could hear the rumbling noise of stone giving way.

Chapter 308

EXCAVATION

"How much longer do you intend to wait?" Honoratius asked.

"As long as it fucking takes," Dar snapped. He rubbed his head. "Sorry. I don't know. How long has it been, ten minutes?"

“A bit longer. Alderis’s *polymorph* spell would have ended by now. I asked only because my ability to remain with you today is limited, and I will have to release Letellia and return to Camar within the hour.”

“The fact that the river hasn’t started up again means that he was successful, right?”

“Possibly. In any case, the *wall of force* that Alderis created would have long since expired.”

Dar turned away from the archmage. “Anything, Nelan?”

The cleric stepped back from the edge of the dry riverbed. Alexion and Marcus were with him, keeping watch on the dark, empty tunnel. “Nothing, general.”

They were in the large open cavern where they had once battled a pack of vicious displacer beasts. The chamber was considerable, extending for almost a hundred feet on its longest axis, although much of that was inaccessible due to the rock formations and squat stalagmites that were cluttered along the walls. Other than the riverbed, there was one other exit, an opening in the rear wall that accessed a small cluster of natural caves before it gave access to the Second Temple of Orcus. That outpost of evil had been destroyed by Nelan on their last visit. Zahera and Xenos were keeping watch there, just in case some new occupants had moved into the complex since that trip.

Dar glanced over at Allera. The healer was helping Tullus, who had made it out of the river path, only to slump to the ground, complaining of stabbing pains in his side. The cleric seemed all right now, but the healer continued to talk to him quietly.

Honoratius was still waiting for a reply. “All right,” Dar said. He started to turn back toward the far exit, but was interrupted by a shout from Alexion. “Something’s coming,” general!”

A flurry of activity followed the announcement, as the companions hastened to prepare weapons and assume defensive positions. Dar hurried over to where Nelan held his shield out, shining its light down into the river tunnel.

He heard it before he saw anything. At first, the heavy tread sent a trill of alarm down his spine, but as the sounds grew more distinct, he realized that they weren’t those made by the dung-Orcus.

The shield guardian appeared in the glow of Nelan’s light about a minute later. Cradled in its arms was Alderis. The elf looked pale, and he was covered in muck and grime. He grimaced as the construct reached the edge of the river where it met the cavern, and clambered slowly up the incline to join the others. He ordered the guardian to put him down, his face twisting with pain as he shifted within its grasp.

“What’s the matter?” Allera said, gesturing for Marcus to help her ease the elf down to the ground.

“My leg, I believe it’s broken,” the elf said. He looked up at Dar. “General.”

“Glad you could make it, elf. We were about to move on without you.”

Honoratius stepped into view. “We assumed from the absence of water that you were successful in instigating a collapse of the tunnel.”

“Apparently you were a little *too* thorough,” Nelan said.

Alderis nodded, the pain in his expression easing as Allera poured healing magic into his injured leg. “Yes, but that’s not all. The creature. It’s still coming... I could feel it moving the stones... as I dug myself out.”

A sudden silence filled the cavern at the elf’s announcement. And then, like the pounding of a drum, came a distant sound from the dark opening of the river tunnel.

THUMP.

THUMP.

THUMP.

The rhythmic pounding continued, growing slowly but steadily closer.

Chapter 309

ROUND ONE

Marcus looked pale. “There’s no stopping that thing...”

“We stopped it before, we’ll stop it again,” Dar said. He gestured around the room. “This is as good a place as any; it’s big enough for us to take it from all directions, and for some maneuver, if necessary.”

“The properties of the creature appear to have changed significantly since our last encounter with it, general,” Honoratius said. “It may prove beyond our ability to defeat.”

“Then we’re fucked either way. We keep running from it, eventually we’re going to run into something nasty, and it’ll just come on us from behind while we’re distracted. This way, at least we have a chance to face it on *our* terms.”

The noise from the tunnel was growing louder. Dar gave some more instructions, listened to a few suggestions from Alderis and Honoratius, and set Nelan to keep watch for the creature's approach. Not that they needed a watchman; they could all hear it coming, and bits of dirt had begun falling from the top of the river tunnel, as the ground shook with the heavy tread of its coming.

Dar turned to Marcus. "I am sorry for my earlier outburst, general," the priest of Soleus said. "I will face the thing with all honor..."

The fighter cut him off with a slash of his hand. "I expect nothing less, cleric." He held the younger man's eyes for a moment, and then unslung his bow and club, followed by the straps that held the leather wrap in place across his back. "You may be able to make some use of this," he said, unfolding the wrap to reveal *Beatus Incendia*.

Marcus's eyes widened in surprise as he recognized the blade. "That is..."

"Yeah, I know." He hefted it, and extended the hilt toward the cleric. "Don't miss."

"I can see it!" Nelan yelled, falling back from the edge of the riverbank.

"All right, everyone hold your positions!" Dar shouted. Blue-white light flared from *Beatus Incendia* as Marcus took it up, the bright flames casting his youthful features in stark relief. He began to chant, invoking the power of Soleus to protect him and infuse him with strength. Elsewhere throughout the room, Honoratius, Alderis, and Tullus likewise placed buffing spells upon the warriors. Allera waited until the very last instant to cast her *holy aura*, to maximize the duration of the protective magic.

She did not need to wait long. Barely ten ticks after Nelan's shouted warning, the huge form of the dung monster, clad again in the form of the demon prince Orcus, exploded out of the mouth of the river tunnel. The creature's lifeless eyes regarded them as it rose to its full height, and it immediately clambered forward toward the crumbling bank of the river bed. The obstacle offered no hindrance to it, and as it stepped up, the thing loomed high over them, its horned head nearly scraping the cavern ceiling.

"Hold your ground!" Dar shouted.

The dung monster started to turn toward Alexion, who was stationed along the left wall of the cavern. Dar, standing near the far exit, stepped forward. "Over here, you fucking prick!" Zahera, standing behind him, lifted her bow and let fly an arrow that struck it in the face. Instead of sinking into its noisome substance, however, the steel head glanced off, as though it had struck a granite wall.

"The structure of its external shell has changed," Honoratius said. "Ware!"

The monster shifted and started coming forward toward Dar. "That's right, come to daddy," the fighter muttered, his fists tightening on the haft of his club.

Everyone tensed as the monster moved into the center of the room. Dar held his ground as the creature lifted an arm to strike; bits of stone clattered around it like rain as the limb scraped the rough natural ceiling. It was only one step away from being able to reach the fighter.

As that foot came down, Honoratius *disintegrated* the ground beneath it.

The monster's left foot vanished into the pit that suddenly gaped before it. Unable to adjust in time, the creature toppled forward, its body crashing into the forward lip of the pit, its right leg jutting back at an awkward angle as its weight dragged its body down into the ten-foot hole. Its arms caught on the edges of the new hole, and it started dragging itself up almost at once.

"NOW!" Dar yelled, surging forward.

Dar bellowed a violent cry of battle as he leapt forward and smashed his club into the monster's head with the full power of his considerable strength behind it. Instead of sinking into its body and sticking, like their weapons had in their last encounter, the blow cracked hard against its substance, hard enough to shake Dar's bones with the force of the impact traveling up the length of his club. A pulse traveled through the creature's head, and Dar could see cracks traveling out from the point where he'd struck, cracks that rapidly closed shut, leaving its body unblemished.

All around it, the warriors leapt to assault the creature. Stuck in the awkward position of being half-in, half-out of the pit, it could not bring its superior reach to bear before they could attack. Alexion and Xenos hewed at it with their weapons, but they had little effect upon it. Alexion's pick scraped loudly against its right shoulder, while Xenos's first strike cracked the hard shell of its back, but otherwise seemed to faze it little.

Zahera had fired a second arrow that had struck the creature in the arm. But that hit was as ineffective as the first, so she dropped her bow and rushed forward, drawing her scimitar as she came.

As the *divine power* of his patron filled him, Marcus lifted *Beatus Incendia* and charged forward to join the attack. Stepping in beside Xenos, he tried to target the crack that the knight had opened, and which was already starting to seal shut. But the cleric's foot struck a loose stone, and the hit went wild, glancing harmlessly off its back. Off-balance, the cleric was struck by the creature's body as it surged up out of the pit, and he fell to the ground.

Nelan hurled a spell at the creature, but his divine magic proved as ineffective as the arcane power of the wizard, dissolving against the indefatigable resistances of the

unnatural creation. Swallowing, the cleric drew out his mace and looked for an opening to attack.

Alderis held his ground, but ordered his shield guardian to attack. The construct surged forward, slipping past Alexion as it bowled into the dung creature. It smashed down with both fists, trying to push the monster back into the pit. The sound of its mithral-encased fists striking the creature's shoulders echoed loudly through the chamber, but it failed to stop the creature from lifting itself up out of the pit. It shrugged off more hits as it got both legs up under it, and it was the companions that were forced to give ground as it drove forward, rising up again to its full height.

The companions continued to hew at it, shifting their attacks to its legs and torso. Marcus, struggling back to his feet, joined Xenos in striking at its back, while Alexion and Zahera harried its flanks. Nelan started to come in beside Zahera, but was forced to dodge back as the monster's huge arms came around to confront the shield guardian. Alderis's construct continued smashing the creature across the chest, but the spiderweb cracks that each blow created were healed almost as quickly as they were made.

The monster countered with a powerful swing of one arm that hit the shield guardian squarely across the chest. Alderis's construct had to weigh over a thousand pounds, but it was knocked back like a child's toy, toppling over backwards and hitting the floor with a loud crash.

Dar roared again as he brought his club up into the monster's gut. Again the blow had a significant if transitory effect, as cracks opened across its torso, and a pulse reverberated through its body. Its wounds continued to close, if more slowly now that it was absorbing more damage from its tormentors.

"Keep hitting it!" Dar yelled, lifting his weapon to strike again.

The monster struck with its other arm, bringing its fist down on Dar's right shoulder. The blow felt like he'd been struck with a sledgehammer, and he was driven down almost to his knees by the force of it. But he had bigger problems; the fist had flattened across his shoulder, and it stuck to the dragonhide plates of his armor like strong glue. As he tried to pull away, the substance of its fist became amorphous, oozing out to engulf his neck and chest. A scream was torn from his lips as that vile goo burned his flesh, but that cry died as it spread up over his jaw, and tendrils of it flowed into his mouth, eating away his flesh as it traveled.

Chapter 310

WRESTLING WITH DUNGIE

“Corath!” Allera yelled, rushing toward the creature. “We’ve got to get it off him!”

The knights were there first, attacking the creature with furious intensity. Xenos hacked at the limb that held Dar, the burning sword flaring in his hand. The blessed steel bit into the monster’s substance, but it was like hewing a log. Not to be forestalled, the knight raised his weapon and kept striking at the minor gash he had opened, trying to cut through enough to make it release Dar.

Zahera and Alexion continued to smash at its body, trying to draw its attention. Marcus and Nelan struck at its back, but their blows, while they struck sparks and made loud noises, failed to harm the creature in any identifiable way.

Honoratius, concentrating intensely, conjured a globe of pulsating sonic energy. She hurled it at the creature, striking the arm holding Dar just above the wrist. The spell, a variant of the *acid arrow* magic, had fashioned an autonomous energy pulse that existed independent of the wizard’s arcane power. As such, it did not wink out as it struck the monster, and instead embedded itself into the creature’s substance, blasting tiny bits of its matter into dust as it penetrated slowly deeper. The monster ignored it.

Dar was still holding onto his club, and he brought it up with desperate strength into the oozing claw that clasped his shoulder. He felt his head begin to swim with nausea and lack of air as the monster’s substance probed into his throat, cutting off his ability to breathe. The skin of his face and neck felt like it was on fire.

And then the monster’s hold on him slipped incrementally. Summoning a last desperate reserve of strength, he tore free and fell to the ground, gasping for air. He tried to get up and failed; his armor had become incredibly slick, no doubt what had allowed him to pull free of the monster’s grasp. He retched violently, spewing up some of the gunk that the monster had poured into his throat.

And then Allera was there. “Hold still, this will only take a few seconds...”

“Help me up,” he croaked. He managed to get onto his side, and looked up to see chaos raging just a few steps away.

The dung-Orcus was under heavy attack from every quarter. As he watched, a beam of *searing light* cut across his vision, causing glowing spots to obscure his view for a few seconds. But Tullus’s spell had vanished the moment it had struck the creature, absorbed without causing any damage or inconvenience to the monstrosity. The thing had seized onto Xenos, wrapping its right claw around his waist, its substance oozing out around him the same way it had with Dar. The knight was still slashing with his holy sword, trying to break free, while Zahera was trying to get around to its side, hewing at its arm in an effort to help him escape the creature’s hold. Alexion was down, but he didn’t look to be hurt bad, and Marcus was there, helping him to his feet. The two of them attacked its right knee, trying to unbalance it. Dar could have warned them not to

bother; the creature had neither bones nor muscles, and seemed barely conscious of the damage they were wreaking upon it.

“Get back!” he tried to yell, but his voice rasped in his throat. “Allera, tell them to get back!”

Healing came in a torrent, but it did not push away the feeling of dread that was growing in his gut. That feeling expanded tenfold as the monster lifted Xenos off his feet, and slammed the struggling knight into the fat, bulging mass of its gut. Xenos screamed as the creature’s body split open, and then he vanished as it pushed him inside, driving him deeper until only the edge of his shield protruded out. The others watched in horror as the gap closed, cutting off the knight’s cries with grim finality as it sealed itself.

Chapter 311

SMASH SMASH AND SMASH SOME MORE

Dar managed to stagger to his feet. He started forward, but Allera grabbed him, her hands sliding on the magically slick surface of his armor. “No, Dar! He’s gone... we have to get out of here!”

Dar looked around and saw a situation that looked hopeless. The only sign of Xenos was half of the knight’s shield, jutting from the monster’s fat gut. The knights and clerics were continuing to attack it, but while their hits continued to inflict damage, the monster’s regenerative powers were as strong as in their past meetings. And with its newly armored shell, it was far more difficult to injure than when they had beaten it before.

Alderis’s shield guardian had gotten back up, and doggedly resumed its attack. As Dar watched, the dung monster seized the construct by one arm, and hurled it across the room. It landed in the river bed in a loud clatter, and while Dar could hear it moving, it was not quick to rise.

Dar could still hear Allera’s voice, and the shouts of the knights, but everything seemed to fade back into an indistinct blur. Only the creature existed in clarity, a monstrosity that rivaled anything that Dar had ever faced. Even the Ravager’s spawn seemed manageable in contrast to this thing.

Marcus managed a solid hit against the creature’s leg. *Beatus Incendia* flared as white fire surged through the cracks in its limb.

Dar’s gaze lingered there. *The cracks were not sealing...*

Dar charged. His yell filled his ears. The monster, perhaps sensing somehow that this foe was more dangerous than the others, turned to meet his rush. It almost casually batted Marcus aside with one fist, knocking the cleric off his feet. Its other arm came up, no doubt to try again what it had failed to do before with this defiant human.

Dar kept on coming. The arm came crashing down.

Dar shifted, and *Valor* exploded from its scabbard in a blur as he dropped his club. The axiomatic blade met the descending arm, the blue steel striking right at the spot where Honoratius's *sonic arrow* had opened a deep pocket in the creature's limb. There was a flash, and then Dar spun away.

Their eyes were drawn to the monster's hand, which clattered across the floor, coming to a stop at Honoratius's feet. The severed fist lay there for a moment, inert, and then it collapsed into a heap of noxious goop that spread across the floor in a thick puddle.

Dar rushed at the creature again, but the dung monster still had a lot of fight left in it. It drew back its injured arm, the stump already bulging as it began to regenerate. But as Dar had seen, the damage being wrought by him and his companions was overpowering the monster's ability to repair itself. Even as he watched, Marcus scored another powerful hit with *Beatus Incendia* that expanded the network of cracks that now splayed up and down the length of its right leg. Alexion was digging at the same spot with his pick, but his weapon, while magical, lacked the potency of the holy sword wielded by the priest.

The monster shifted, lifting its damaged leg in an attempt to stop the cleric that kept harrying it. Alexion thrust Marcus out of its way, but the leg caught both men as it thundered down, knocking them sprawling. Fortunately neither were caught under it, and the battering they suffered was eased almost at once as Allera flooded the chamber with a *mass cure serious wounds* spell.

Dar watched the monster carefully as he swept *Valor* around for another strike. The axiomatic blade clanged loudly off its body, and this time Dar felt a tug as he dragged it across its torso. Ooze was beginning to seep from the wounds in its body, and Dar briefly wondered if they were going to have to face it again as a blob.

Such musings were driven rather forcefully from his mind as the monster brought its arm down to strike. He'd been ready for it, but even so he took a glancing hit across his back that nearly tumbled him forward into its left knee. The creature caught him by surprise again as it dropped its still-regenerating left arm down across his back. Pain exploded through his torso as he was slammed hard into the stone floor.

He looked up in time to see the creature's foot descending toward his head.

Chapter 312

RESILIANCE

Dar felt a sudden tug, and his magically slickened armor slid him out of the way just as the monster's foot slammed into the ground, mere inches from his face.

He looked up and saw Allera holding onto his right ankle. She reached down to help him up, but before he could take her hand a dark shadow loomed over them.

"Look out!"

Dar sprang up, sweeping his arm across Allera's body, knocking the healer back as the dung monster struck again. Pain exploded in his arm as the creature hit him hard in the shoulder, driving him hard into the ground. He felt a solid pressure against his torso, and for a moment he could not draw a breath. Then he was being lifted into the air, and he realized that the monster had grabbed onto him.

He struggled, but his right arm hung limp, broken in several places, and even with the *grease* spell on his armor he could not get enough leverage to break free. He'd lost his grip on *Valor* and had no idea what had happened to the sword. He heard shouts and the clash of metal on stone, and knew that the others were still attacking the creature, but details were lost in the haze of pain and twisting sensation that were dragging him down toward unconsciousness.

Suddenly the dung monster came into clear focus as that disorientation sloughed away. His arm tingled as Allera's *mass cure* spell poured life back into him, but his situation hadn't otherwise improved. The dung monster's hand had melted around his body, securing its grip, and tendrils of its caustic substance were probing through the gaps in his armor, eating away at leather, clothing, and flesh.

The monster itself looked like a wax figure that had been left too close to the fire. Foul ooze had issued forth from the cracks in its torso, forming long runnels that bulged down over its legs. Its right leg was likewise a mess where Alexion and Marcus had savaged it, but that had helped it in the short run, for Dar could see that *Beatus Incendia* had gotten stuck in the morass of ooze, and the young cleric was struggling without much success to free the weapon from the monster's grasp. On the far side of the creature, Zahera and Nelan were continuing their attacks, but that side of it showed much less damage, indicating their overall lack of success.

Dar looked up into the "face" of the monster. The representation of the Demon was frighteningly detailed, the one part of the creature's form that had remained unblemished. For a moment, Dar thought he saw something... *alive* in the putrid brown orbs of its eyes, a mocking look that swirled and was gone.

He knew what was going to happen, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do to stop it. But before the monster could do to him what it had done to Xenos, he felt a soft touch on his ankle, and looked down to see Alderis standing there, touching him.

The dung monster thrust its hand into its gut, but as it did Dar dissolved into mist, gusting effortlessly out of the creature's grasp as the elf's *gaseous form* took hold. The monster swept its other arm, the hand still incomplete as it continued to regenerate, through the fighter's insubstantial form. The swing cut right through him, driving him back across the room like a wisp of smoke caught in a strong wind. Dar drifted to the ground, where he again took on solid form.

Alderis lifted his hand and fired a *cone of cold* point-blank into the dung monster's face. The magical spell had absolutely no effect upon it, save to draw its attention. The creature smashed Alderis with a fist, knocking the elf flying across the room. He flew past Honoratius and landed in the far corridor, groaning but conscious thanks to his *stoneskin* spell.

Marcus had finally pulled *Beatus Incendia* free from the creature, and as he smashed it yet again into the creature's knee the battered limb finally collapsed into a mass of foul ooze. The dung monster listed hard to its right, but as its weight settled its entire lower body dissolved into the blob-form that they had fought before. Its arms became long pseudopods of ooze, but the head alone retained its form, bloated and bulging but still clearly recognizable as the face of their Enemy.

The companions continued their attacks, but with the reversion of its form the dung monster's body had regained its adhesive properties. Zahera and Nelan had their weapons torn from their grasp as they struck it, and Alexion was nearly dragged inside of the creature as his pick stabbed deep into its body. The monster extended its tendrils toward Alexion and Marcus, smacking both of them hard. Both were stuck fast, and were drawn toward the creature, which oozed forward to engulf them.

With a heavy tread Alderis's shield guardian, recovered somewhat from the beating it had taken from the monster, charged back into the fray. It was about to attack, when a series of shouted commands in elvish brought it about. Instead of smashing the dung monster with its fists, it reached down and grabbed onto Alexion and Marcus, dragging them back from the creature's grasp. The monster did not release its captives easily, however, its substance stretching as the construct pulled at them. Both men continued to struggle, and Marcus slashed *Beatus Incendia* across its body, opening a long gash that spat forth a gusher of foulness from it.

Dar had stumbled to his feet, rather the worse for wear from his narrow escape. He was covered in filth, and his clothes hung in tatters from his body, where the dung monster's acidic secretions hadn't eaten them away entirely. His armor was still intact for the moment, although the leather straps and fasteners that held it together had been seriously damaged. Allera rushed over to him, *Valor* cradled in her hands. As he took back the blade, she touched him, pouring healing energy into his body.

“Thanks, angel,” Dar said, as he rushed back into the battle.

The dung monster formed a new pseudopod and smashed it across the chest of Alderis’s shield guardian. The construct took the hit but refused to release its grip on Alexion and Marcus. It could not pull either man fully clear of the dung monster, but it did keep the creature from fully absorbing them.

Dar charged into the thing from behind. *Valor* flashed, and he cut a great swath through its form with a powerful cut from the blade. Filth splashed over him, but he kept cutting and hacking, tearing long gashes that oozed terrible fluid like blood. The monster reacted by surging at him, lunging at his arms and face with its tentacles. It seized one arm and nearly dragged him off his feet, but he merely shifted *Valor* to his other hand and kept cutting at it. With the creature focused on him, Alexion and Marcus were finally able to pull free, and they renewed their assault. Zahera, unable to recover her scimitar, fell back and recovered her bow, while Nelan retreated and fell to the ground, violently ill.

Ooze and sludge flew about in every direction, as Dar kept hacking and cutting. The monster drew back, but he merely stepped forward, deeper into it, unleashing a violent fury. Blood splattered the brown as the creature’s secretions dissolved his flesh, but Allera continued to pour healing energy into him, and new skin kept regrowing over the ruins of the old.

He no longer looked like anything human.

“Corath! DAR!”

The yell finally reached him, and he stopped. Around him, the remains of the dung monster were collapsing into a shapeless ooze that spread out over the floor.

Dar looked down. There were a few large lumps in that mass, which became visible as the creature came apart. A jagged piece of metal that had been the rim of a shield. The hilt of a holy sword, now just junk attached to half a foot of steel. An oblong object that became recognizable only when Dar prodded it with his boot, and he could see the ivory white of it, slicked with filth. There were more bones, most at least partially dissolved.

Dar vomited. Someone came toward him, but he held them back with a raised hand.

The fighter stepped forward awkwardly, stiffly. His wounds had been healed, but he was covered in wretched filth, and everything he had was either ruined or damaged. Even the wrappings on the hilt of *Valor* had been eaten away, although the blue steel remained unblemished.

He trudged forward through the slime. He was aware of eyes following him, but he did not pay them any heed. He made it to the edge of the river, where a muddy trickle had resumed. He stumbled forward, down the steep slope, and all but fell into that weak flow. The stream was slowly growing deeper, as the river widened whatever opening the dung monster had opened in Alderis's collapse, but it still barely rose to his ankles.

The water was muddy, but Dar buried his hands and face in it, sloughing off some of the filth that still burned against his skin.

When he finally lifted his head, he dropped *Valor* into the water, letting it cleanse the foulness that covered the blade.

The others came up behind him; several of them clambered down to join him in washing the remnants of the battle off their bodies. Allera's *holy aura* had faded, leaving them clad in shadows and gloom that their *everburning torches* could not quite dispel. He heard some of the others talking, but he was barely aware of the words.

Finally, he was, if not clean, at least purged of the worst of it. He leaned back, his sword bare in his hand.

"I'm getting too fucking old for this shit."

That was when the demons attacked.

Chapter 313

DEMON ATTACK

They materialized all around the cavern, *teleporting* in with a series of hissing pops accompanied by a sweet stench of singed flesh. They were the cadre that they'd battled above in the valley, some of which still bore the marks of wounds suffered in that engagement. The six babaus appeared around the edges of the room, while the hezrou materialized a second later near the edge of the foul slick that had been the dung monster. The vrock appeared near the exit, surrounded once more with *mirror images*, and a moment later it became clear that the demons had gotten some new friends, as a final pair shifted into reality near the toad-like hezrou. One was a hideous, man-sized demon with a dirty white hide, feathered wings, and massive blades, like cleavers, attached to its forearms. A third eye that glowed red burned in its forehead. The last demon was a vile creation, a bloated fly-like thing that hovered in the air, and which began to issue a low-pitched buzzing noise as soon as it had fully materialized in the cavern.

The demons shrieked and leapt to the attack. Alderis, who had been farthest back toward the edge of the chamber, was assailed by three babaus that leapt upon him, their claws eager to rend his flesh. His *stoneskin* protected him from their raking attacks, but two seized upon him, pinning his arms and interfering with his ability to use his magic. His shield guardian, standing not far away, started immediately to come to his aid, but the construct was intercepted by the zovvut, which laid into it with powerful blows from its huge claws. The guardian had several feet and likely several hundred pounds of advantage over the demon, but its vicious blades carved deep gouges into its armored torso, driving it back.

Another babau and one of the vrockes rushed toward Honoratius, while the last two babaus charged at Allera. The demons had clearly marked the efficacy of the enemy spellcasters in their last engagement, and were intent upon neutralizing them early. Honoratius looked about calmly, marking each of the demons, then cast a *delayed blast fireball*, substituted for sonic energy, on her position.

The blast of concentrated energy reverberated throughout the chamber. Honoratius, using the mastery of shaping she had gained as an archmage, wrapped the wild pulse of sound around herself and each of her companions, creating bubbles of protected space where the destructive energies did not reach.

Everything else, however, was pretty much devastated.

Demons screamed, the sounds buried under the intensity of the sonic discharge. None of the demons were destroyed outright by the spell, but the babaus, chasme, and zovvut were in dire condition, and even the more potent demons had been sorely damaged. The only demons that escaped were the two babaus that were grappling Alderis, protected by the small hole that Honoratius had created in the spell's blast around the elf.

A babau leapt at Honoratius, black blood oozing from its skin where Honoratius's spell had ruptured it. The archmage avoided the initial attacks, her wards protecting her from harm, but was overcome when the vrock unleashed a powerful shriek, stunning both her and Alderis.

Thus far, only seconds had passed since the demons had appeared, and the warriors, most of whom were washing in the stream, were still trying to grasp what was happening. Allera, standing at the edge on the streambed, turned to see two seriously injured but still dangerous babau demons rushing toward her. The healer raised her hands and invoked a *repulsion* spell that filled the chamber. The two demons halted in mid-charge, screeching in frustration as ichor dripped down from their nostrils and ears.

The second vrock drew upon its Abyssal powers and summoned a dozen dretches to the Prime. The hideous little demons popped into reality around Allera. Several of them toppled over into the muddy riverbed, where they rose and started clawing at the nearest foe.

Dar had hurled himself to his feet as the first demon had appeared in the chamber, and he vaulted up the steep slope of the riverbank onto the cavern floor. *Valor* blazed hungrily in his hand, a shaft of blue steel that shone brightly in the weak light. He had started toward the knot of demons in the center of the room, the hezrou, zovvut, and chasme, but he hesitated as the dretches appeared around Allera.

The healer saw him turn, and shouted, "GO!" even as several of the small demons started clawing at her arms and legs.

Dar turned back, but the delay had proven costly, as the hezrou spoke a word of *blasphemy*.

The dire syllable reverberated through the cavern. Alexion, Zahera, Tullus, and Marcus all fell to the ground, blasted insensate by the dark potency of that utterance. Nelan was dazed, and two dretch immediately shambled over to him, eager to take advantage.

Dar started forward again, but his head started to swim as the effects of the chasme's sonorous droning began to seep into his mind. He fell to one knee, but then shook his head and rose, fury blazing in his eyes.

The fighter charged, and the hezrou demon leapt forward to meet him. Its size allowed it to attack first, striking the fighter across the face with a claw. The blow smashed hard into his helmet, knocking his head roughly back. But Dar took the hit and shrugged it off, stepping under the demon's outstretched arms to smite it hard across the belly.

Valor flashed like a beacon of blue flame as the sword cut the demon's body wide open, drawing a gash that stretched from its right hip to just under its left arm. The creature fell to the ground as ichor and entrails spilled out from the terrible wound, and it expired in a noisy, thrashing mess.

Dar looked up at the chasme, which rose into the air and summoned an *unholy aura* around itself.

Alderis, stunned by the vrock's stunning shriek, fell to the ground with three babaus tearing and ripping at his flesh. Thus far his *stoneskin* had been the only thing keeping him from being torn to pieces, but one of the babaus had already begun hitting him with targeted *dispel magics*, and the other two were quickly working through the ability of the spell to absorb damage. One got its claws around his throat and started twisting, trying to strangle him to death.

The shield guardian trod forward, ignoring the zovvut that continued to tear at its back with its claws. The construct leaned down and batted aside the babau trying to asphyxiate its master, taking up a defensive position over him.

Allera ignored the dretches tearing at her and leapt down into the riverbed. She immediately dove for Alexion, who had fallen face-down into the muddy water when the hezrou's *blasphemy* had struck. With a grunt she pulled the knight over onto his back, ignoring the dretch that was trying to claw at her face. She already bore several wounds, but her magical armor offered at least some degree of protection. Thrusting forward, shouldering the demon aside, she bent and placed her hands on the knight's neck, purging him of the fell power that held him. A second dretch a few feet away foolishly tried to *scare* her, but the magic slid off her without effect.

The knight stirred as the soft blue glow seeped from her hands into him. His eyes widened as the dretch leapt on Allera's back, screeching noisily.

Chaos reigned in the center of the room. Honoratius began to stir again, recovering from the vrock's stunning shriek. The babau had overborne her, but she too was protected by *stoneskin*, and its follow-up attacks were proving as ineffective as its initial attempts. That changed as the vrock leapt forward, smashing her across the face with a claw. *Mirror images* fluttered around it as it lunged down, its beak opening wide to snap off her face.

Dar surged into them, roaring a cry of battle. He took off the babau's head with a precise sweep of *Valor*, and then laid into the vrock. Whether by luck, instinct, or some other agency he drove through the *images* and clove into demonic flesh, driving eighteen inches of steel into its chest cavity. The demon fell backward, trying unsuccessfully to summon its magic to escape while blood poured from its punctured heart into its lungs.

Dar pulled Honoratius to her feet, then rushed off to help Alderis. But before he got to the elf, Nelan spoke a *holy word*.

The spell sounded a note of purity that swept away the foul memory of the hezrou's *blasphemy*. The dretches were blasted into greasy smears, while the remaining babaus blinked out as they were banished back to the Abyss. The zovvut, chasme, and remaining vrock were able to resist the spell, however. The vrock rose up over a bloody carcass that had been the cleric Tullus, and leapt at Nelan, its wings flapping wildly as it flew across the chamber like a streaking bird.

The chasme hit Dar with a *ray of enfeeblement*, sapping some of his strength. It was paid back a moment later, however, as Honoratius fired a cascade of *sonic rays* into it. It fell to the ground, black ichor oozing out of its cracked carapace.

Alderis staggered to his feet as the babaus disappeared. His shield guardian turned to face the zovvut, but before Dar could reach it the elf peppered it with a barrage of *magic missiles*, and it expired.

Nelan cried out as the vrock dove at him, clawing with all four of its limbs. One clipped his head, cutting deep gouges along his right temple under the edge of his half-helm.

He staggered back, but determination flared in his eyes as he invoked the power of the Father and *dismissed* it.

Quiet returned to the chamber, save for the noise made by Allera and Alexion as they dragged their still-paralyzed companions out of the way of the steadily growing river. Dar and Honoratius walked over to where Nelan knelt over the ravaged body of Tullus. The priest hadn't had a chance; he'd been paralyzed by the hezrou's *blasphemy*, and the vrock had been able to rip open his body from neck to crotch, splattering his insides in a wide swath in a matter of seconds.

"He was a good man," Nelan said, looking up at them. "He volunteered for this mission, almost as soon as he'd returned from the frontier."

"We'll bring him with us," Dar said. "Maybe Allera can..." He trailed off.

"We will need to rest, and tend to our equipment," Honoratius said. She touched Dar's armor; the straps holding the breastplate to his chest had suffered heavy damage and in two places had been completely eaten through; the armor hung loose, and was probably only solid hit away from falling off him entirely.

"Not here," Dar said. "Get your things together. As soon as the others have recovered, we move out."

Chapter 314

THOSE STILL STANDING

"Tullus was a servant of the Light, who dedicated his life to the service of the Father. Xenos lived and died as a Dragon Knight, sworn to protect the people of Camar from the darkness. May both of them lie sheltered within the blessed glow of Soleus, who brings life to this world, and who drives back the shadow wherever he shines."

There were a few acknowledgements around the circle that stood in quiet attention around the cairn where they had laid the remains of Tullus. The pile of stones was not large; they had cremated the body. Of Xenos there had not been anything more than part of his skull and a few half-dissolved bones, but those too had been added to the grave that held the remains of two of their company.

"All right, get your gear together," Dar said. The companions prepared quietly. There had been little conversation of any sort in the last few hours, and even Allera's *heroes' feast* that "morning" had not eased the somber mood that clung to them like an unpleasant scent.

They were in one of the small rooms near the caverns where they'd battled the dung monster and then the demons. They had camped in this complex before, on past visits; the rooms were situated not far from the Second Temple of Orcus, and had seemingly been abandoned for quite some time. They picked a room where the door was mostly intact, and braced it with both iron spikes and with some extra boards that they had salvaged from one of the other rooms.

Allera had tried to resurrect Tullus, using the magical rod that they'd found near the First Temple above. She had reported that the device functioned as intended, but Tullus had not stirred.

"*Resurrection* only works if the soul is willing to return," Nelan had said. None of them had put words what was on all of their minds, that it was far more likely that the failure of the spell lay with the agency of the Demon. It put a hard edge on what they were doing here, the knowledge that the fate of the cleric and the knight could be theirs at any moment.

Honoratius had been compelled to leave shortly thereafter. Though clearly reluctant, Dar had agreed that they should hold their ground and rest for the remainder of the day, allowing the spellcasters to recover their magic and the archmage to regain enough strength to return. Letellia was grave, worried about the strain that each casting of the *transposition* was placing upon her uncle. But they had no choice; without the archmage they would have almost certainly already been annihilated.

After the debacle with Tullus, Dar had taken Alderis aside for a few minutes, and spoke to him quietly. The fighter gave the elf something, but neither spoke of it when they returned to the group.

They remained close together. When someone needed to attend to private functions, they used a corner of the room, shrouded by a cloak. No one paid heed to the smell, even though it was a clear reminder of their battle with the dung monster. After what they'd experienced in Rappan Athuk already, such things had become trivial.

Their clothes had been ruined; what was left was gathered together and discarded. Fortunately they had brought extra clothes for each of them in Letellia's magical pouch. They also had an ample supply of leather cords, linen thread, and metal wire, which they used to make repairs to their damaged gear. Dar spent a long time carefully rewrapping the hilt of *Valor*, staring at the spiked door, as if expecting visitors at any moment.

But no attack came, and the companions took their rest uneasily. It was impossible to gauge the passage of time, down here, especially since their magical fires did not consume fuel. They rested, and prayed, and read, and tended to their gear. They were waiting for Honoratius to return, and it happened shortly after they finished Allera's *feast*. Letellia started shaking as the *transposition* settled upon her, and then she toppled

over. Marcus and Zahera barely caught her in time. Allera was there in a flash, and held up the groaning woman's head, peering into her eyes.

"Archmage... archmage, is that you?" she had asked.

After a few moments, the vague look in Letellia's brown eyes had slowly focused on the healer. "Yes... yes, thank you. I am... I am here."

Once she had recovered enough to speak to them, Honoratius had related grim news from Camar. Neither she nor Patriarch Jaduran were able to *scry* Rappan Athuk or its environs at all; their efforts revealed only a pure blackness that seemed to pulsate within their viewing devices. Another wave of harsh storms had blown in off the ocean, slowing the progress of the army southward, but the main force had still managed to reach Highbluff a half-day ahead of schedule. The dwarves were driving the march, covering more ground per day than the taller humans, spending upward of sixteen hours a day trudging through mud and wind and rain. Sickness and accidents bred from exhaustion had already overcome dozens of soldiers of both races, and it was an open question as to just how many would actually be able to finish the long trek south.

The combined Camarian and Razhuri fleet heading south had outrun the storms, but it had met its own disaster. Honoratius reported that a red dragon had assaulted the fleet the day before, as it sailed down the coast. Six ships had been utterly destroyed before Tendaji Jaddo's crews, assisted by the steel-eyed bowmen of Sukat Koth's Emorite contingent, were able to drive off the creature. Several of the remaining ships had suffered heavy damage in the attack, and the fleet had been forced to seek refuge in one of the sheltered coves that dotted the coast, and attempt repairs.

Honoratius also related that she had not been successful in finding a spell that would allow them to penetrate the barrier that surrounded Rappan Athuk. "For the moment, I can still pass back and forth, using the *transposition*, she said. "But it is becoming... difficult."

"Is there any *good* news, wizard?" Dar had asked.

"We still live," she had responded dryly.

Now it was time to set out again, into the dungeon. Nelan's ritual farewell to their fallen comrades had been the last thing holding them back. Weapons were tested, pouches examined to verify that spell components were near at hand. As Alexion and Marcus hammered the spikes free of the door, Dar glanced back at the small cairn. "What is it?" Allera asked.

"I had suspected of Tullus..." The fighter shook his head. "It is nothing. Let's get moving."

Once the door was open, and the knights had confirmed the corridor outside remained clear, Nelan began incanting a spell. They would be guided forward by two sources; the passages that Honoratius had been able to divine from the *Codex Thanara*, and the insight provided by Nelan's *find the path* spell. The latter was facilitated by the former, as the archmage's researches had clued them in on what they needed to find.

"Show me the way to the doorway that leads from the Gates of Hell to the Portal of Darkness," Nelan said, as he completed his casting. The others watched the cleric expectantly.

There was a slight flash from his divine focus. The cleric nodded, and said, "This way." Alexion moved out ahead of him, taking the lead as they resumed their progress deeper into Rappan Athuk.

They made their way down the corridor that led to the Second Temple, but at the intersection near that huge chamber Nelan led them north instead of south. Allera's gaze lingered for a moment on the broad corridor they left behind. It was there, in the desperate battle for the Second Temple, that they'd lost Talen. And before that, both Theodoros Zosimos and Marcus Valus had been killed, on an earlier visit. The healer still had nightmares of the time she had spent as a captive of the cultists of Orcus, and she shuddered.

The north passage led them to a round chamber that accessed three staircases, narrow, winding flights that offered access to other levels of the dungeon. Nelan did not hesitate, directing them to the first stair on the left, which descended into darkness. Alexion led the way again, and they descended single-file, with the heavy tread of Alderis's shield guardian bringing up the rear.

The staircase descended for an interminable time, bending back upon itself several times as it took them deeper into the bowels of the world. Allera could feel a tightness in her legs by the time that the brilliant light from Nelan's shield revealed an open space below.

The stairs deposited them on the edge of a vast underground cavern, its dimensions such that even Nelan's *daylight* spell could not reveal its full extent. Several huge natural columns supported the ceiling high above, and forests of fat stalagmites rose from the uneven floor. Allera tasted moisture on the air, and as the companions paused to look around, she could hear the faint gurgling of water; likely another of the underground rivers that seemed to pervade the bedrock that housed the interlaced levels of Rappan Athuk.

"Which way, Nelan?" Dar asked.

"To the left, there," the cleric replied, pointing across the cavern. From her perch on the stairs Allera could not make out what lie in that direction, save the stalagmites that rose up like broken teeth out of the cavern floor.

“All right, move out,” Dar said.

The cavern floor was rough and difficult, with fungus growing in the crevices, and in the crowded spaces where the jagged stalagmites clustered together. Nelan’s glowing shield revealed mushrooms and lichens in colors ranging from crusty browns to stark violets and shining greens. Some were streaked with the color of fresh blood, which added a garish-looking caste to the scene. It also revealed the twisting course of another underground stream, which bisected the cavern from right to left. Nelan was guiding them toward the left, where the stream disappeared into a low opening in the cavern wall.

“Looks like we may be getting wet again,” Dar said.

They made their way toward the river tunnel. They were alert for trouble, but none of them were sharp-eyed enough to distinguish the subtle distinction that would have warned them of the danger before it struck. Zahera saw something, a slight motion out of the corner of her eye, but when she turned, all she saw was a toothy row of stalagmites on the far side of the stream. Nelan and his bright light were facing toward the left, so the details of the opposite bank were vague with shadows, but she still would have seen anything creeping among the rock formations.

She had already started to turn back when one of those stony pillars *moved*.

The knight opened a mouth to shout a warning, even as she set an arrow to her bow. But her cry was beaten by an angry hissing noise, and something flew out of the shadows right at her. Zahera’s shout became a cry of alarm, but the attack was not meant for her. The missiles shot past her and struck Nelan, and Zahera could see that they were long, thin tendrils, like the tentacles of the giant squids that her father would catch in the deep blue waters of the Inland Sea. Six of them had struck the cleric, affixing to his legs, arms, and torso, and one even to his neck. Nelan reached up to grab that one, but before he could even try to free himself weakness overcame him, and he collapsed to the ground. As his shield fell, the darkness rushed in to the edges of the weaker light cast from their torches.

The tentacles holding Nelan grew taut, and the cleric was yanked roughly forward, and he was dragged over the rough ground toward the stream. But his companions were quick to respond to the attack. Dar and Marcus rushed to Nelan’s aid. The young cleric tried to pull his superior free of the sticky tendrils, but their grasp was tenacious, and he could do no more than slow the rate that he was dragged toward the stream.

Dar, however, took a more direct approach. *Valor* came down in a blinding arc, severing two of the tentacles entirely, and deeply scoring a third. *That* had an immediate effect; the remaining tendrils holding Nelan immediately detached, and shot back across the stream.

Zahera lifted her bow and fired in the direction that the tendrils retreated, but in the half-dark it was difficult to tell if she hit anything. Alexion came running back from the front of the column, his pick at the ready, but there wasn't anything immediately obvious to attack.

Meanwhile, Alderis, aided by his elvish vision, had identified the source of the tendrils, and he hurled an empowered *fireball* across the cavern. The brilliant explosion of flames blinded them for a moment, but they could hear the high-pitched, alien shrieks of *something* on the far side of the river.

No, not something. Some *things*...

Even as the flames died, their unidentified foe attacked again. But this time, there were multiple streaks of tentacles. Out of one barrage of six, only four struck Alderis, who was warded with layered magical protections. But those four were enough to completely drain his strength, and he fell to the ground.

The other barrage targeted Dar, who was hit by all six of the tentacles. For a moment, the fighter roared and yanked back against them, and it looked as though he would simply ignore the strength-draining properties of the tendrils. But as they drew taut, Dar visibly weakened, and *Valor* trembled, and dipped as the fighter struggled to keep his feet as the tentacles pulled him step by step toward the stream.

Chapter 315

ROPEERS

Allera rushed forward. She started toward Dar, but Marcus and Alexion got to him first. Marcus hewed at the tendrils holding the fighter, while Alexion dug his pick under one of the tendrils stuck to his armor, yanking it free with a solid tug. Dar himself, weakened but not helpless, managed to get *Valor* up and sawed through a tendril, cutting it in two.

The healer ran to where Nelan had fallen. She crouched over him, and saw that he was alive, if completely helpless and unable to move. His arm was trembling as he tried to reach for something. Allera looked and understood. She reached over and took up Nelan's fallen shield, torn from his forearm by the monster's initial volley. As she lifted it, the *daylight* spell on its front space blazed out over the chamber.

In that light, their foes were cast into sudden and stark relief. Allera saw that there were three of them, misshapen pillars that were almost indistinguishable from normal stalagmites until they moved. The tendrils that they used to attack jutted from their sides, and in the center of each there was a huge, gaping maw that shone with crystalline teeth.

Now that the foe was clearly revealed, Honoratius blasted them with another *fireball*. The blast engulfed all three, but Allera could see that they possessed some sort of spell resistance, for two of them appeared to be untouched by the blast. The third, however, was ravaged by the flames, and toppled over, slain. The one that had assaulted Dar released him and drew its tentacles back, as did the one holding Alderis. Apparently the creatures were intelligent, and could identify and target the greater threats. Allera glanced over her shoulder at Honoratius, and saw that the archmage had recognized the same thing.

Zahera continued firing her bow, and now that she could clearly see her foes, her arrows were scoring hits. She got an arrow into the craggy maw of one of the creatures, and in response it fired a barrage of strands at her, hitting her with five of them. Zahera was tough, but she was not invincible, and her bow fell from her hands as she fell to the ground, utterly drained by the creature's assault. This time it did even bother to start pulling her in, retracting its tendrils into its body as it sought out another foe.

Allera had expected the other one to target Honoratius, but that was before Dar charged. As soon as the monster released him, the fighter rushed forward the stream, which was deep and fast-moving, and almost ten feet across at its narrowest. Weakened and burdened as he was, trying to leap it was a foolish gamble.

Naturally, he jumped.

His boots splashed as he landed on the far bank, on the very edges of the stream, and he nearly went down as loose rocks shifted under his feet. But then he was over, and charging toward the nearest of the creatures. Behind him, Alexion cleared the stream cleanly, but Marcus landed two feet short, and fell hard into the water. His momentum carried him onto the far bank, and he was in no danger of being swept off, but neither could he quickly get up, his hands clawing for purchase on the slick stone as he tried to get his footing. *Beatus Incendia* clattered into a shallow crevice a few feet away.

The creature shot its tendrils at Dar as the fighter charged. Again he was struck by all six, hitting him in the chest, legs, and arms. He fought in vain to free himself as the monster dragged him in, like an angler working a reluctant fish.

Allera used a *restoration* spell to purge Nelan of the weakness caused by the monster's tendrils, but didn't linger as he stirred and got up. Zahera was closer to her, but she ran over to Alderis, who was warded by his shield guardian, standing sentinel above his limp form. Without orders, the construct had not moved except to protect its master. A severed tendril lay on the ground where the guardian had ripped it free. The elf's eyes followed her as she ran up, but he could not even muster enough strength to speak.

Honoratius stepped behind a stalagmite that offered at least some cover from the creatures. He targeted the one that had snared Zahera, and before it could fully retract

its tendrils for another attack, he hit it with a *disintegrate* spell. This time he overcame its spell resistance, and the monster crumbled into dust as the green beam struck it.

Dar gave in and lunged forward as the monster brought him within reach, its ugly jaws opening wide to receive him. *Valor* glanced off its stony hide, and it roared something in a language Dar did not understand. Its tendrils drew him close against it, and he felt its jaws bite down on his arm. Fortunately the hide bracer protecting his forearm held, and he was able to yank the limb free before it could get a more solid grip. He looked up and saw its eyes, dark orbs recessed into its body, staring at him with hatred.

Alexion charged past him, driving his pick down with precision into one of those eyes. The monster spasmed as the pointed head of the weapon slammed through the socket, and Dar was flung free as it collapsed, the long tendrils going limp as it died.

It took him some effort to drag himself to his feet, but he was able to do it before Alexion was there to help. "That all of them? Is everyone all right?"

"We're all right here!" Honoratius shouted back. Allera was tending Zahera, and she looked up at the three on the other side of the river. "You may want to let us string a rope before you come back over," the healer said. Marcus, limping slightly, grinned sheepishly.

"What were those things?" Zahera asked, as Allera restored her strength to her. The rod that she had taken from Tribitz was almost completely drained of power, but she still had a small pouch of diamond dust in one of her pockets, and her wand of *lesser restoration*.

"They are known as ropers," Honoratius said, as Alderis ordered his shield guardian to assist the others in recrossing the stream. "They are a not uncommon hazard in the deep tunnels of the underworld." No more of the things appeared, and they were reunited on the near bank of the stream in a matter of minutes. Allera treated Dar's weakness using her wand, and then they set out again, Nelan again directing their course using his *find the path* spell.

His light revealed the path well before they reached it. As they drew close to the stream tunnel, they could see that a path ran along its side. Similar to the one that they had taken in the Great Cavern, this one was narrow but otherwise sized to accommodate human travelers, and appeared to follow the course of the stream for as far as Nelan's *daylight* spell penetrated.

"This is the way?" Dar asked.

Nelan nodded.

"Wonderful," Dar said. He glanced around at the faces of his companions, and settled on Honoratius. "How will we know when we reach this 'Gates of Hell' place?"

The archmage's expression was inscrutable. "You will know."

"Damn it, that's what I thought you were going to say. Well, no sense waiting for that fucker to send more demons after us. Let's get moving."

He took the lead himself, heading into the tunnel, bending slightly to keep his head from scraping the low ceiling. The others followed in single file, the guardian again coming last, trudging through the stream, the swift current flaring around its chest as it followed in their wake.

Chapter 316

THROUGH THE GATE

They followed the stream path for several hundred yards. The tunnel curved slightly to the right, but otherwise remained unremarkable. They occasionally had to duck to avoid rock formations that jutted from the low ceiling, but for the most part the stream tunnel was smooth and the trail easy to follow. The wizards had no difficulty at all, drifting casually under the power of their *overland flight* spells. Honoratius indicated markings on the tunnel walls that indicated where the water level had risen in the past, which likely explained the lack of obstructions. There were no tracks to indicate that others had come this way recently, but they knew enough about Rappan Athuk by now to know that this observation did not necessarily mean anything.

As they pressed on, the stream grew swifter and deeper, and Alderis's guardian had more difficulty keeping up. Finally, Honoratius cast a spell upon the construct that allowed it to rise up above the surface of the water. The spell did not grant it any power of lateral movement, but with its weight effectively neutralized by the archmage's magic, Alderis was able to easily push it along, hovering behind it with his *overland flight* spell providing enough propulsion for both of them.

The *levitation* spell only lasted a short time, but before it faded they identified a breach in the side of the tunnel that indicated a possible exit ahead. The river path ended at that point, and as they crept forward they could see that there was in fact a passage beyond. They started in that direction, but before they could reach the opening, Nelan clutched at his head and sagged against the tunnel wall.

"Nelan! Are you all right?" Allera asked. She began to summon her powers, but the cleric waved her off with a hand.

"No, I'm all right."

“What happened?” Dar asked.

“A surge of power... I don’t... wait, my *find the path* spell, it’s been broken. I cannot sense the correct direction any longer.”

Honoratius cast a spell and scanned the area. “There is definitely a tangible aura of magic and evil in this place,” she reported after a few moments. “It grows stronger ahead.”

“Before you were hit... the spell was guiding you that way?” Dar asked, pointing to the breach.

The cleric nodded. “Then I guess that’s where we’re going,” the fighter said. “Carefully, and quietly. Alderis, keep that clunking heap of yours back away; we’ll never surprise anything with it stomping around. Alexion, you’re on point.”

The knight took the lead again as they moved as quietly as they could into the passage. The tunnel beyond was narrow and rose slightly as they made their way through it. It had a low ceiling, and the shield guardian could fit only with great difficulty; Alderis fell behind as he escorted it through the tunnel. Glancing back, Dar gestured for Zahera to keep an eye on him.

After about fifty feet or so the narrow tunnel opened onto a wide passageway that split off to the left and right. To the left, the passage sloped steeply down, and it looked as though it might even pass under the stream they had just traversed. In the other direction, the passage forked after just a short distance, and it was that way that they headed after a few moments’ whispered exchange.

The stonework here was very rough and very old. The clerics looked very uneasy, and their hands stole frequently to their holy symbols, as though the silver torches could drive back the foreboding that filled this place. All of them could sense a cold malevolence in the air here, along with a faint sizzle of power that prickled the skin and sent icy chills down their spines.

At the fork, they briefly paused to shine Nelan’s light in both directions, and to listen for noises. The tunnel to the left twisted and appeared to dead-end about eighty feet ahead, but a quick probe by Alexion revealed an iron door set into the stone at its finale. The companions went that way, the shield guardian warding the fork behind them.

The door was of solid construction, its hinges recessed into the stone lintel, and it had clearly had been kept in good condition, bearing signs of recent use. There was a latch with a keyhole, but the mechanism was such that they could not see through the small opening into the space beyond. Dar carefully tried the door and was not surprised to find it locked.

“Well?” Nelan asked, his voice low.

“Doors like this one aren’t installed to guard empty rooms,” Dar said. “There’s *something* important behind it.”

“It will take time to force it,” Alexion said, “Time and a lot of noise. Even with your strength, general.”

“Perhaps we can eschew brute force for once,” Honoratius said. She reached into her magical pouch, her arm sinking up to the elbow into the extradimensional space within. She had no difficulty finding what she sought, a small, tightly wound parchment scroll marked on one end with a label that indicated its contents.

“A *knock* spell?” Allera asked.

The archmage nodded. “It often pays to keep a few extra copies of utility spells, against just such a need.” She turned to Dar. “It is highly likely that the spell will alert anyone behind the door, assuming that our presence has not already been detected.”

The fighter nodded, and gestured for everyone to prepare themselves. The archmage unrolled the scroll and read the spell, speaking in soft but clearly audible words that thrummed with magical power. There was a gentle click from the door, and then Dar thrust it open, driving his shoulder into the hard metal.

The chamber beyond was of considerable size, perhaps fifty feet across and eight feet long. The stone of the floor, walls, and ceiling alike had been cut and polished to a fine sheen, and bore streaks of black and red within that formed natural, twisting designs in the rock. The door opened in the center of one of the longer walls, and appeared on first glance to be the only exit.

The place had been decorated with a gruesome décor. Upwards of a dozen panels decorated the walls around the perimeter of the chamber, relief carvings that depicted scenes both abstract and grotesque. Two rows of pillars ran down the length of the chamber, and through them they could see an altar of sorts at the end of the room to their right. Gold glinted in their lights upon a pedestal of stone, which rested atop a dais accessed by three broad steps of black marble.

But their inventory of the place was interrupted by the fact that the chamber was occupied. A half-circle of gaunt, humanoid creatures stood in a half-circle before the dais, clad in long gray robes that obscured the details of their forms. They turned as Dar thrust the door open. As the light from Nelan’s shield spilled over them, the companions could see that these things were in no way human. Their skin was a blotched violet-gray, and glistened faintly with slick moisture. Their eyes were milky orbs, their fingers long and sinuous. But the worst thing was the lower half of their faces, their chins replaced by a nest of long, twisting tentacles that dangled down several feet, probing before them as if tasting the scent of them on the air.

“Illithids!” Honoratius warned, even as the first of the creatures unleashed a *mind blast* upon them.

The wave of mental power was devastating. Alexion and Zahera screamed and crumpled, followed a moment later by Marcus, who slumped against a pillar before sagging to the floor. Dar managed a step forward, *Valor* trembling in his hand. “Get... out... of... my... mind!” he growled, his jaw tight with the effort of resisting the mind flayers’ potent mental abilities. But then another of the illithids hit them with another *mind blast*, and the fighter, overcome, fell to the ground, his sword striking the stone with a loud clang.

Chapter 317

FLAYING THE FLAYERS

Allera invoked a *holy aura* around herself and her companions, a protection that proved extremely timely as several more *mind blasts* washed over them. The semiconscious warriors groaned and twitched, but the casters were able to resist the mental probes that washed over them, flaring around the edge of the healer’s divine shield.

Alderis flew into the room, ascending as he passed between two of the black pillars. The elf extended a hand toward the center of the flayer line, toward a creature that bore black runes upon its robe, and which wore a torc of shining gold around its neck. The elf’s *cone of cold* blasted into the mind flayers, driving them back, and coating the entire dais and pedestal with a rime of frost. The leader and one of the other illithids were able to resist the elf’s magic, avoiding harm, but the others were not so fortunate. None fell, but they staggered awkwardly, the chill blast sending cold penetrating to the bone.

They got rather warmer a moment later as Nelan called down a *flame strike*.

The cleric’s magic was not quite as potent as that of the elf, but the creatures had already been considerably weakened, and four collapsed to the ground, reduced to blackened husks. Again the leader resisted the magic, but the remaining two were in dire condition.

Honoratius was the last to enter the room, and as the archmage stepped forward between the pillars, the illithid with the torc drew upon its mental powers and *plane shifted* away. The other two attempted to follow, but before either could focus its power Honoratius hit them with a series of sonic blasts. Both creatures screeched and crumpled onto to the hard floor.

Allera tended to the stunned warriors, who recovered quickly from the mental blasts. They examined the room carefully, but there were no further threats present, or at least none that could be readily discerned.

“It does not bode well that illithids are in league with our foe,” Honoratius said, once they had all recovered and secured the door. Alderis had brought in his shield guardian while they planned their next move. “That one that escaped will likely return with word of our presence, although the imprecise nature of planar travel may buy us some time.”

“The markings on its robe... those sigils were in Abyssal,” Alderis said.

Honoratius nodded. “I noted that as well. Evidently the leader was a priest of Orcus.”

Zahera had stepped atop the dais, and was moving closer toward the stone pedestal close against the wall. The pedestal bore three golden plates, shining squares each a few inches across. Honoratius forestalled her before she could get any closer. “I recommend caution with that,” the archmage said. “I detect a strong aura of magic, and evil, coming from that object.”

Dar unlimbered his club, and walked over to the dais. Zahera stepped aside, and before any of them could offer challenge or comment he lifted the heavy weapon and smashed it into the pedestal. There was a flare of red light that briefly rimed the fighter, but he ignored the discharge, and struck the pedestal a second, and then a third time. On that third blow the stone cracked, and the pedestal came apart.

A past Dar would have sifted through the rubble for the gold, but the fighter just turned and said, “Let’s get moving.”

As they checked their gear and returned to the door, Alderis stepped over to the remains of the pedestal. Kicking aside a few bits of rubble, he found a small golden ring, which he slipped into a pocket.

They left the illithid temple behind and returned to the fork they had encountered earlier. This time they bore right, following the corridor deeper into the complex. They passed several side tunnels, which they scouted quickly to verify that no enemies waited in ambush. The first such tunnel led back to the underground river, while the second dead-ended in a pair of spur passages. The main corridor ran onward for hundreds of feet, until they estimated that they had come farther than their initial trek along the banks of the underground river. Their caution did not ease, and they moved forward slowly, checking every crevice and spur and side-chamber that they passed. Nelan’s *daylight* spell expired, and Honoratius indicated that she only had a short time remaining to her before she would be required to relinquish Letellia’s body for another day.

“Maybe we should fall back, seek out a secure place to rest,” Allera suggested.

"The enemy knows we are here. If we withdraw, they may rally and strike us in force, wherever we camp," Alderis pointed out.

"If we're going to fight them, might be better to have the archmage with us," Marcus suggested.

"The knight-commander said it was often better to take the fight to the enemy, to face him on your terms rather than his," Alexion said.

"Did he, now?" Dar said. "All right, we'll press on for a few more rooms, but mage, give me a few minutes' warning before you bug out."

"Noted, general."

They followed the passage for only a short distance further before it opened onto a small room with multiple exits. None of the three passages concealed enemies, at least not as far as they could discern. With their torches, it was likely that a foe would see them long before they themselves could detect the threat. But there was nothing to be done for that; Alderis could grant the power of *darkvision*, but he could not provide that boon to everyone in the group without seriously compromising his own spell selection. *And in any case, you didn't think of it*, Dar thought to himself, as Zahera and Alexion checked the passages. There were too many unknowns here, like a man wading into water at night, not knowing where the ground might drop off suddenly, leaving him flailing blindly.

Zahera reported that the first passage opened onto another long hall of worked stone. They moved into that adjoining area, their torches driving back the darkness ahead of them. The hall was about twenty feet wide, and buttressed with curving arcs of black stone at regular intervals along its length. To their left, the hall ended after about thirty feet, so they proceeded on to the right. The hall opened onto a slightly larger chamber after about forty feet, resuming again on the far side. The chamber had two exits, a pair of heavy wooden doors reinforced with strips of rusted iron, and a twisting, narrow passage opposite the doors that looked to have been burrowed into the rock.

"Scout it out," Dar commanded, indicating for Alderis and Marcus to watch the way they had come and the way ahead. Honoratius, Allera, Nelan, and Dar watched quietly as the knights examined the tight passage and the wooden doors. Their search turned up nothing except for some old dung in the corners of the room.

"The doors," Dar said, gesturing for everyone to take up positions around the portals. Once they were all ready, he grasped onto the rusted handle of one of the doors and yanked it open. This time, no enemies greeted them, only a small, triangular-shaped room with another door on the right wall. This room was in worse disarray, and was cluttered with filth, dirt, and the debris of what might have once been furnishings. The air in the room was stale with decay, but no undead monstrosities stirred out of the trash to molest them.

“General,” Marcus hissed, before they could explore further.

They turned back to see the cleric crouched along the wall on the edge of the far hall. “Something’s coming, I think.”

They shifted their position to ward the hall, Dar closing the wooden door shut behind him. As they stopped moving and listened, they could hear something... a low growl, coming down the hall, toward them.

“Shroud the lights,” Dar whispered. They concealed their torches, muting the light to a faint, hazy glow. As the darkness rushed eagerly in, they watched the hall, and waited.

They did not have to wait long. They could hear the owner of the growl approaching, accompanied by a soft scrape of claws on stone.

“Now!” Dar hissed, drawing out his torch and tossing it to the ground. As the others uncovered their lights behind him, the fighter stepped around the corner to see a pair of ugly, hulking black hounds.

They were “dogs” only in the loosest sense; even Dar could clearly mark the otherworldly ancestry of these creatures. Their hides were covered with a foul, oozing secretion that left marks on the floor in their wake, and their eyes glowed with a deep, feral glow. They lunged at Dar with furious abandon, and as their slavering jaws opened wide, flickers of flame played around their black teeth.

Dar met the first with a downward slash of *Valor* that split its skull wide open. The second lunged and snapped its jaws down on the fighter’s right leg, trying to drag him down. Dar held against its weight, long enough for the others to reinforce him. Alexion’s pick bit deep into the beast’s side, and it released Dar to turn upon this new foe. Unfortunately for it that opened it to another attack from Marcus, who smote the creature with *Beatus Incendia*. Its spine severed, the hound collapsed in a bloody heap.

“Abyssal hounds,” Honoratius said, looking down at the bodies with distaste. “There will be more of them; they hunt in packs.”

“They weren’t so tough,” Dar said, grimacing as he examined the wound in his leg. Allera cast a *cure light wounds* spell, fully restoring him. “Let’s see where they came from.”

The hall continued for only about fifty feet before it opened onto the corner of another, larger chamber. This one had a low ceiling, perhaps twelve feet above them, but it extended for a good sixty feet from right to left, and was upwards of forty feet across. The hall continued from the wall opposite, but they could just make out several exits on the far side of the room to their left, recessed doorways set into the stone wall.

It was evident even from a casual glance that this place was the lair of the fiendish hounds. Black slicks glistened on the walls and floor, and ugly piles of feces lay everywhere, scattered amidst broken bones and other assorted trash.

“It’s a fucking kennel,” Dar said.

“Yes, but where are the occupants?” Nelan asked.

Alexion had moved forward along the left wall, holding his torch up high to spread the light. They could see that the three doors in the rear of the chamber had been damaged, with gaping holes where large chunks of wood had been chewed away.

They also saw the glowing points of hostile eyes, staring at them.

Alexion dropped his torch and drew out his pick. The magical flame did not go out, but it cast odd shadows as the illusory light flared and flickered.

The growl started with a distant rumbling, like an earthquake. It was followed by the hounds, issuing from the openings in the doors, one after another until the streams merged into a wide line that closed steadily with the companions.

“More from the far hall,” Marcus warned, indicating several more hounds that crept into the chamber, their sinister eyes fixed on the intruders into their lair.

There were nearly two dozen in all, closing the circle, their growls promising a grim accounting.

Chapter 318

DISASTER

Alexion started to move forward to meet the advance of the Abyssal hounds, but Dar forestalled him. “Wait for the wizards.”

The arcanists answered with a deadly barrage of spellpower. Honoratius’s *fireball*, substituted for cold energy, erupted in the heart of the hound pack, blasting a terrible barrage of penetrating frost through their ranks. Hounds collapsed, frozen into immobile hunks of meat that toppled over onto the hard floor. On the right, Alderis targeted those coming from the far hall. Recognizing that fire would not harm beasts such as these, he instead peppered them with a flurry of *magic missiles*. One hound crumpled, and a second barked with fury as the fifth missile pocked its mangy hide. The three survivors leapt forward to attack, but one staggered aside as Zahera buried an arrow in its shoulder. The other two charged toward Marcus, who lifted *Beatus Incendia* to greet

them. One breathed a gout of fire upon the cleric, while the other surged in to bite. The cleric's armor, bolstered by the magical protections of his faith, withstood the attack, and he slammed the sword hard into the hound, opening a terrible gash in its shoulder.

Honoratius's spell had cleared the chamber itself of hounds. Dar and Alexion started to shift to assist Marcus, but they were interrupted by another loud growl, followed by an explosion of wood as another hound burst through one of the doors. This monster was half again the size of the other hounds, a hoary old creature with jaws as large as a bear's. This fearsome matron did not hesitate over the destruction of her pack, but charged forward with blinding speed, its lips drawn back over its jagged teeth. Dar stepped forward to take its charge, *Valor* sliding down into a ready position, both fists tight around the long hilt of the sword.

The battle was all but over; even the fearsome den mother seemed no more fierce than Corath Dar, and there seemed to be only one possible outcome.

And then, disaster struck.

Zahera heard it coming, and as she fitted a second arrow to her bow she started to turn, her mouth opening to issue a warning. But she hesitated, and the bow dropped, and she just stood there, idle, as the dark-clad, gray-skinned creatures issued from the hallway behind them. They ignored Zahera, who did not respond to their movements, and came upon the mages from the rear.

Neither Honoratius nor Alderis heard them over the sounds of the battle against the few remaining hounds. Honoratius sensed danger and began to turn, but she was not in time as one of the creatures attacked her. These were not like the flayers, muscled and powerful, and she cried out as it grabbed her. One meaty fist snagged in her hair, and she screamed as it tore the *Web of Transposition* from her head. She fell, the grimlock bearing down upon her.

Alderis began casting a spell, but two of the grimlocks leapt upon him, seizing his arms and interfering with the movements required for his magic. The shield guardian, standing just a few steps away, reacted at once, turning toward its master. One of the grimlocks, hefting a large battleaxe, charged to block it, but the construct ignored the blow to its chassis, thrusting forward and striking one of the pair holding Alderis. The grimlock took the heavy blow and loosened its grip, but the second enfolded the elf in a neck lock, dragging him backward.

Nelan, was only a few paces away, and he shouted a warning to the others as two more grimlocks rushed at him. "Ambush!" he yelled, lifting his mace and shield to defend himself. He summoned the power of the Shining Father, and prepared to speak a *holy word* to incapacitate the attackers.

But even as the power filled him, a beam of twisting, sinuous black energy erupted out of the darkness and struck him. The blast caught Nelan in the chest and hurled him

roughly back. He hit the chamber wall at an angle and fell hard to the ground, stunned. The grimlocks rushed after him, seizing him before he could recover, their muscled arms wrapping around his like iron bands.

The black beam forked away from Nelan and struck Allera, who cried out in surprise as a final grimlock leapt at her. The blast of energy slid past the creature and hit her in the gut, knocking her across the room to land in a rolling stop some fifteen feet away. The grimlock pursued.

Dar heard the shouts of warning even as the huge hound met him in a violent collision. His blade bit deep into its neck, but in turn the monster bit down on his left wrist, nearly crushing the limb despite his greave. He tore free, and glanced back to see all hell breaking loose behind him.

“Go!” Alexion yelled, leaping forward to take his place before the creature. The monster started to pursue its original prey, but turned as Alexion dug his pick into its back, opening a vicious wound that pulsed black blood. It snarled and leapt upon the knight, who nimbly stepped out of its path. He lifted his pick to finish it...

An avalanche of mental power reverberated through the chamber. Alexion staggered in mid-stroke, stunned by the *mind blast*. The giant hound tore into him, seizing his hip in its jaws and dragging him roughly to the ground. On the opposite flank, Marcus clutched his head as the wave of mental power washed over him. He resisted the first *blast*, but the second overwhelmed his mind, and he fell to his knees.

Dar withstood both, although his steps wavered as he tried to get back to aid the others. He cut down the grimlock rushing toward Allera, his blade ripping through its armor of layered leather, biting hard into its side. *Valor* was the only thing clear in his perceptions; everything else wavered and spun before him. Summoning up a reserve of fury, he shook his head to clear it, and looked up to see a mind flayer standing before him.

He raised *Valor* to attack the creature, but before he could strike, he heard a voice in his mind.

“You cannot win this fight. Flee, warrior, flee for your life!”

Overcome by the *suggestion*, Dar turned and fled.

Alderis’s shield guardian turned to the grimlock still holding onto Alderis, but before it could assist its master, a mind flayer stepped up and splayed its long fingers across its leg. Summoning its power, the creature transported the construct to another plane. The grimlock it had knocked free leapt once more onto the elf, smashing his fingers hard against the floor as Alderis tried to cast another spell. Protected by his *stoneskin*, the elf was not seriously injured, but neither could he work his magic.

Mind flayers strode forward, sinuous and silent as they stepped through the raging melee. One had a hand on Zahera's shoulder, guiding the knight like a dog through the press. Out in the chamber, Alexion screamed as the huge abyssal hound tore away his gorget, then his cries abruptly died as it sank its teeth into his throat.

Allera struggled to get up. She extended a hand toward Marcus, who knelt a few feet away, stunned by an illithid's *mind blast*. A noise drew her attention, and she looked up to see the grimlock that Dar had crippled, clutching its side as blood continued to pour down its leg from the devastating wound. The creature still had enough strength to lift its axe and come toward her, however.

And behind it, four mind flayers approached. One attempted to use its psionic powers on her, but the tendrils of its thoughts found no purchase against her disciplined mind.

The healer cast a *mass heal* spell. The power surged through her companions, but did not accomplish as much as she had hoped; Alexion was beyond her help, and her magic could not remove the compulsion that had been placed on Zahera.

But Marcus surged to his feet, *Beatus Incendia* shining in his hand. "Get behind me, Allera!" he yelled, stepping forward to face the enemy. The grimlock, leaving prints in its own blood with each step, lifted its axe and somehow managed to summon the strength to rush the cleric, but one flash of the holy sword was enough to finish the crippled creature off.

Nelan staggered to his feet, fighting with all of his strength against the two grimlocks trying to hold him down. At that moment he did not look like an old man. He slipped free of one grimlock's hold and nearly broke free, already reaching for his holy symbol. But before he could cast a spell, a form clad all in black stepped in front of him, and extended a hand. An *eldritch blast*, fired at point-blank range, blasted into the cleric's chest, and knocked him back hard into the wall. The grimlocks were on him again in a second, and this time they grasped him tightly. A mind flayer approached in the wake of the dark figure, its tentacles eagerly probing for the held cleric's skull.

"NO!" Marcus yelled. He leapt forward, only to find his way blocked by the other mind flayers. Tentacles flared, and mental power blasted over him, but the young priest resisted the power hammering at his mind. He swung *Beatus Incendia*, and an illithid went down, cloven nearly in two by the powerful blow. But the other flayers persisted in their assault, and finally Marcus lowered his sword, his expression growing slack as one of them penetrated his defenses and seized his mind.

Allera felt a blazon of pain in her shoulder and staggered back. She looked up in horror as Zahera drew out another arrow from her quiver, and fitted it to her bow.

But her terror and revulsion deepened as she looked past the *charmed* knight, and saw Alderis, on his knees, a pair of grimlocks holding his arms at a vicious angle. A mind flayer had seized the elf's skull in its tentacles, and as she watched, helpless to

intervene, it sank its mouth to his head in a grim mockery of a kiss. There was a loud crack, and terrible slurping noise, and then Alderis was released, falling forward to lie limp on the ground.

Even from where she stood, Allera could see the breach in the top of the elf's skull, a black hole that she knew opened onto an empty cavity.

Another of the creatures had bent over the fallen Letellia, and was affixing its tentacles to her head.

Off to the side, bones crunched as the abyssal hound continued its feasting. Already it was difficult to tell that its victim had once been a man.

"It is over, Allera Hialar."

The black-clad figure strode forward. As the light of the fallen torches revealed its features within the cowl covering its head, she could identify the owner of the voice. But she had known him from the first *eldritch blast*.

"Navev," she breathed.

The warlock laughed, and the mind flayers started forward, the tentacles glistening wetly as they probed the air.

Chapter 319

DESPAIR

The mind flayers and their allies moved forward, closing the circle around Allera. More mental attacks stabbed at her, but she turned them all. The grimlocks that had held Alderis came forward to join their masters, and Marcus moved with them, a bit jerky as he tried to fight the magic that held his mind captive.

Before the enemy could reach her, Allera cast her *repulsion* spell. All of the grimlocks, Marcus, and most of the mind flayers suddenly stopped, held at bay. One of the illithids, resisting the power of her magic, lunged forward, its tentacles swiping at her head. One slick tendril brushed the side of her scalp, but she tore away, and drove her mace into its gut. The flayer drew back just a bit, enough for her to crush the weapon across the side of its face. The illithid recoiled, dazed.

"It would appear that the healer has some fight left in her," Navev said, extending a hand and hitting Allera with an *eldritch blast*. The coruscating beam hit Allera in the chest and knocked her back across the room. She struck a glancing blow against the

wall beside the entrance to the hallway on the far side, and landed hard on the ground under the archway.

The illithids came forward again. Their numbers continued to grow, and Allera realized that Nelan had fallen, his brains slurry for one of the mind flayers. She tried to see Letellia through the press of enemies, but could not clearly distinguish her.

And then there was a shimmering behind her, and the sorceress appeared, passing through a *dimension door*. She looked haggard, her robes torn, oozing wounds on her head where the mind flayer's tentacles had seized her. But she was alive, and her brain was intact.

Letellia opened her mouth to speak, but another barrage of mental energy washed over them. The sorceress screamed and fell against the hallway wall, stunned by one of the *mind blasts*. Allera felt as though someone was pounding at her brain with a hammer, and she knew that she was not invulnerable to the flayer assault; it was only a matter of time before she succumbed to their mental attacks.

More mind flayers were piercing her *repulsion* aura; she could sense them approaching. At least they would block Navev's blasts, or at least that was her hope. Not even looking back, she bent beside Letellia, and *healed* her.

The sorceress's eyes cleared instantly, and widened as they looked up over the healer's shoulder. "More of them!" she hissed, and Allera turned to see three of them *right there*, barely five feet away, tentacles flailing in anticipation of a rich feed.

In the heartbeat before they were too close to block, Letellia summoned a *wall of ice* between them, mere inches from the healer's back. Allera shivered at the sudden wash of cold radiating from it

"That won't hold them long," Letellia said, "Not with that fire-breathing hound."

"We have to find Dar," Allera said, rising and retreating from the edge of the wall. There was a black flash, and a ebony flare that glowed through the ice barrier's center, and they could feel the entire structure shake with the impact.

"Come on," Letellia said. She kept an eye on the wall as they moved down the hall, but it held, at least for now.

"He can *teleport*," Allera reminded her.

"Yes, but I don't think he will. In our past encounters, the warlock has preferred to strike from the shadows. I suspect he will not transport himself into unknown danger, without his allies testing the way first."

They headed down the hall quickly. “The others... I could not see all of them...” Letellia said, trailing off.

“They’re all dead,” Allera said. She was in the lead as the hallway broadened into a small chamber, a vaulted thirty-foot square without any obvious exits or distinguishing features. The hall continued on its far side.

In her haste, Allera did not see the subtle markings upon the gray stone of the floor in the center of the room. But Letellia did.

“Allera, look out!” the sorceress warned. Allera started to turn, but the warning came too late, as Allera stepped over the outer edge of the marker, and vanished.

Chapter 320

DOUBT

Allera almost stumbled with the suddenness of the change, although there was no interruption in her tread from the moment she’d stepped forward in the hall, and reappeared in a small, dingy chamber with a heavy wooden door on one side and a low arch warding a narrow passage on the other. She shone her light around her, gauging her surroundings. She could clearly mark the borders of the teleportation circle now, presumably a mirror to the one that she’d just left. Her first instinct was to return at once, but she waited, unwilling to take precipitous action alone.

Had Dar come this way as well? She shone her torch into the corridor, but there were no markings to indicate that it had ever been used. Similarly the door looked ancient, its metal fittings pitted with rust.

She turned back as Letellia appeared through the teleporter. A magical light shone from a ring on her right hand.

“I was worried that you weren’t coming,” Allera said.

“I had to be certain that the circle was a transporter, and hadn’t disintegrated you,” the sorceress replied. “And for all I knew, it led straight to the front of Orcus’s throne.”

Allera shuddered. “I am glad that it does not. But I am grateful that you came through.”

“Remaining in that hall alone was not an attractive alternative. Did Dar come this way?”

“I have no way of knowing. If he did, I am sure that he would have returned...”

“There is no certainty that the portals are two-way,” Letellia said. “Or that they return to the same destination, even if they do work from both sides.”

“There is one way to find out,” Allera said.

“If we get lost, we serve no one,” the sorceress said. “But I do not think it is wise to linger so near the arrival point; our pursuers will certainly be following.”

“The door, or the corridor?” Allera asked.

“I was thinking of another option. My *dimension door* can take us both out of here...”

“Wouldn’t that be risky, transporting without a clear destination in mind?”

“I have a clear destination in mind. While I do not know how far we are underground, I doubt that it is beyond the maximum range of the spell.”

Allera shook her head as she realized what the sorceress meant. “No! I won’t leave him...”

A loud noise from the corridor drew their attention; it was like a battering ram assaulting a castle gate, but it sounded a good distance away. “We may not have a choice.”

Allera started toward the corridor, but paused under the arch. Letellia, who had drawn out a scroll, heard it too. “Something is coming.”

Whatever it was, it wasn’t trying to conceal the noise of its passage; they could hear metal scraping on stone, a ferocious and spine-tingling noise. Letellia unrolled her scroll, a serious look drawn on her expression. But then Allera suddenly ran forward, the light of her torch shining into the tunnel ahead of her.

“Allera!” Letellia hissed, but the healer did not turn from her rush. The sorceress, uncertain, had no choice but to follow.

The mystery was resolved a few moments later, when she came upon Allera clinging to Corath Dar. The fighter looked rather the worse for wear, his armor covered in black char, and fresh blood splashed across his legs and feet. He did not look to be seriously injured, but blood marked his steps back down the tunnel behind him.

“What happened?” Letellia asked.

Dar shifted Allera in his grasp, without releasing her. “One of those damned flayers enspelled me, I fled blindly, and ran into a transporter of some sort.”

“We came the same way, that’s how we found you,” Allera said.

"I'd dropped my torch in the hound room, so I couldn't see, but I just kept on running. I hit a wall; damn near knocked myself out." He looked behind the sorceress, then down at Allera. "The others?"

The healer shook her head, and Dar cursed. "The archmage?" he asked. By now, he'd spent enough time in the company of both Letellia and her uncle to sense when the latter was no longer hosted within the young woman's body.

"The connection between us was broken when the *Web* was yanked off my head by one of the grimlocks," the sorceress explained. "The trauma of the disruption... I fear that he may have been injured."

"He survived a sudden transition before," Allera said. "In the temple beyond the goblin city."

Letellia nodded, but her face betrayed her doubts. "What lies in that direction?" she asked, indicating the passage behind them.

"Trouble. Once I cleared my head, I was able to make a flame using tinder and flints, but it didn't last long. I made my way back to the transporter, but it took me someplace else, and then that one took me someplace else entire. There were some doors in that last room, and I tried one, only to come face to a hound that made the ones we battled look like puppies. It had three heads, and it breathed fire like a dragon's gout." He indicated the markings on his armor; fortunately the magic in the breastplate had shielded him from the worst of it.

"I decided I wasn't going to stick around to see if its bite met its breath. I hit the teleporter again, ended up in a small room. I'd lost my light, but I found a door. The room beyond was full of fucking giant rats, this fucking mess on my legs is their blood. I couldn't see, but I found another door, which I battered down. I blundered about a bit then saw your light, and here I am."

"The transporters likely have a pattern to them, but it appears that they do not connect in a reciprocal fashion," Letellia said.

"Well, we're not going to get anywhere blundering around," Dar said. "I would wager that the masters of this level know how they operate, and that they'll find us soon enough."

"Zafir Navev is with them," Allera said.

"That fucker and I have some matters between us," Dar growled.

"Letellia believes she can transport us out of the dungeon, using her *dimension door* spell."

Dar regarded them for a long moment, and glanced down at the hilt of the sword at his hip. "All right. Do it."

Letellia urged them to grasp her hand. She focused her mind and drew upon her power.

There was a twisted, lurching sensation, and for a moment the corridor spun around them. Allera and Dar broke the connection, and Letellia fell to her knees, voiding the contents of her stomach upon the cold ground. She recovered after a few moments, and Allera helped her back to her feet. The healer offered her a waterskin, and she drank gratefully. She couldn't speak for a moment, but even Dar could tell what had happened.

"It looks like we aren't going anywhere," Dar said, his face grim.

Chapter 321

HIDING

Unable to escape, and wary of another confrontation with the warlock and his mind flayer allies, the three surviving companions from Camar went to ground.

They quickly searched out their immediate area, looking for a place that looked relatively untraveled. Dar wiped off the blood from his boots and leggings, and they were careful to leave no obvious marks of their passage. Beyond the small room where Dar had battled the giant rats the passage continued, and after a time the corridor widened to a small room, an annex shaped like a triangle that extended out to the left for a good thirty feet. The place was empty save for some debris where one of the walls had begun to crumble, but they found black markings upon the floor and walls, signs that the abyssal hounds had spent time here. The foul scent of the creatures was stale, though, so they elected to hold here.

Letellia drew out a scroll and a length of rope from her *pouch of holding*. She also took out a few other items, a small pack of supplies and a pair of extra waterskins. She handed those items to Dar and Allera, and then removed a few smaller bags that she tucked into the pockets of her robe. Once that was done, she tucked the pouch under a small pile of debris in one corner of the room.

"What are you doing?" Dar asked.

"I am going to cast a spell that will create a place where we can hide," the sorceress explained. "But I cannot bring the pouch into it without hazard. You should hide your quiver as well."

Dar's eyes narrowed, but he did as the sorceress said, withdrawing a quantity of arrows from the quiver and tucking them into his pack.

The sorceress unrolled her scroll and read the words upon it. The rope suddenly came alive in her hand, and rose into the air until it dangled from a point just shy of the ceiling, fifteen feet above their heads.

"Ascend," she told them. Dar went up first, followed by Allera, each of them vanishing as they reached the top of the rope. Letellia came up last, grunting slightly with the effort. She joined the others in an empty, dark space, a featureless circle with utterly smooth gray walls. It was spacious enough for all of them, although Dar could not stand without bending his head a bit. Letellia drew up the rope, and laid it beside the opening, through which they could see the room below.

"What if someone looks up?" Dar asked.

"The transition cannot be detected from the far side," Letellia explained. "We should be safe in here."

"How long will it last?" Allera asked.

"My uncle scribed the scroll almost thirty years ago, when he was not quite as powerful as he is now. But it will last long enough for us to rest, and recover our spells."

"Rest then," Dar said, seating himself on the edge of the opening.

"What are we going to do?" Allera asked.

"Right now, you're going to rest," Dar said. "I will keep watch."

"You won't be able to see anything," Letellia said. "Light cannot pass through the transition."

But Dar remained at the edge of the opening, and as the two women rolled up their cloaks and laid their heads upon them, he remained there, silent, a dark look on his face.

He was still sitting there when Allera woke, the light of her *everburning torch* casting deep shadows into the crannies of his face. She rose, and crept over to him, careful not to disturb Letellia.

"You should try to get some sleep," she told him.

"I am fine," he said. She looked down through the transition of the extraplanar space, but saw only darkness. "I thought I saw something, earlier... I can't be sure," he said.

“They are probably looking for us.”

“I am sure they are.”

“Corath... what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know. The smart thing would be to get out of her as quickly as we can. This room has the black marks; could be that the hallway ahead connects back to where we fought the hounds. From there we could retrace our steps back up to the surface.”

“Without Nelan’s magic, how will we get up the river?”

“Maybe the archmage can figure something out, if he returns. Or maybe Letellia can use her teleportation magic; it seems to work on shorter distances.”

“I don’t think Orcus is going to let us escape,” Allera said, softly.

“We’re not beaten yet, angel.”

“Our enemies knew that we were coming,” Letellia said. The others turned; they hadn’t realized that she was awake. “The ambush was perfect; they struck at our weak points, and took full advantage of our vulnerabilities. If Allera hadn’t been able to hold them off, even for a few moments, we would have joined our companions in their fate.”

“What would you suggest then, lady?” Dar asked, his voice taut. “Do you have any spells that can get us out of here?”

“Perhaps. A series of *dimension doors*, over relatively short distances, might enable us to bypass the river. I was able to use the spell to move across the room during the battle; I don’t know how far the interference that disrupted by earlier attempt extends, but I can test it.”

“What about your uncle?”

“He will not be able to join us while we are in here. Perhaps, once we leave the refuge...” She turned her head abruptly. “The spell’s power is waning; we must have slept longer than I thought. Gather your things, we need to get down the rope before it ends.”

“What happens if we’re still inside when the spell ends?”

“Then you will get to enjoy a brief bout of flying,” the sorceress replied. But they had little in the way of possessions, and within a minute they had dropped the rope and descended back into the small chamber.

“Fuck,” Dar said, checking the pile of debris against the wall. “My quiver’s gone.”

“And my *pouch of holding*,” Letellia confirmed.

“You were right, they were looking for us,” Allera said.

“We had best not linger here,” Letellia said. “The grimlocks are stupid, but the flayers may have be able to discern the significance of our leaving those two items here. There could be another ambush waiting for us.”

Dar drew *Valor*. “If they come, they will not find us easy prey.” But the fighter frowned; he remembered all too well the power of the illithids clouding his mind. He reached into the pouch at his belt, and drew out a small object, a ceramic disk about four inches across, covered in small, almost indistinguishable runes. He looked down at it in his hand, and his expression darkened further, warring with an expression that Allera had not often seen in his face: doubt.

“What is it?” she asked him.

“Varo gave this to me. In the antechamber, in the palace. Right after Talen had told him to go fuck himself.”

“Varo?” Letellia asked. “The priest of Dagos?”

Dar nodded. “He told me that I should speak a word and break it if Nelan were to die. The way he said it, it seemed like he expected it to happen. On our last trip, I’d almost forgotten it.” The cleric had given him something else, but he’d already delivered that item to its intended recipient. The significance of that object, as well as the disk he held, had kept him from sleep during that long vigil inside the shelter of Letellia’s *rope trick* spell.

“What does it do?” Allera asked.

“I do not know.”

Letellia spoke words of magic, and waved her hand over the disk. “Conjuration magic,” she said. “I think perhaps that...”

But Dar didn’t wait for her statement; he took the disk in both hands and broke it. The word he spoke was, “Thanera.”

There was a dull noise that enveloped them, like a powerful gust of wind, but the air around them did not move. A black rent appeared in the air, a tear in the very nature of reality that broadened like a dagger’s cut. A dark figure appeared in that opening, and stepped forward.

The newcomer was armored, and clad all in black steel that shone with a dull metallic sheen in the magical light of Allera's torch. He bore a shield, another wedge of black metal that shrouded his left side, but it was impossible to discern more, for as the portal closed behind him, something else appeared around him, a cloying, terrible black aura that pulsed with evil, enveloping the man in a shroud of living darkness.

Within a heartbeat Dar whipped *Valor* out of its scabbard, ready to face assault.

But the newcomer did not attack, and after only a few more heartbeats it became clear that the black fog was not protecting him; rather, it was destroying him. The armored man lifted a hand and violet flashes tore through the darkness. Terrible sounds like distant animal screams hissed from the cloud, but it tightened its enfolding grasp, until they could see nothing but the vague outline of the man's shape within.

Allera rushed forward, blue fire flaring from her hands. Dar tried to grasp her, to draw her back, but she ignored him, thrusting her hands into the black cloud. She screamed as her pale flesh entered the darkness, but then power erupted from her, a blazing scourge of light that blasted away the shadow, dissolving the cloud in a white flare. The clash of white and black lasted only a few seconds, and then it was done, and the room was quiet once more.

"I thank you, healer," the armored man said. He lifted the visor of his helm, revealing the gaunt but familiar features of Licinius Varo.

Chapter 322

VARO

"Allera, are you all right?" Letellia asked.

"I'm fine." She looked at Varo. "How... how did you get here?"

Varo indicated the fragmented disk in Dar's right hand. "I placed a *refuge* spell upon that device. When broken, it transported me here instantly."

Letellia frowned. "There is an energy field around Rappan Athuk that disrupts long-distance magical transportation. Your spell operates on a principle similar to the arcane teleport spell. Why did it not block you?"

"Because I was already here," Varo said. "I used a *word of recall* on a scroll penned by one of the high priests of Orcus to enter Rappan Athuk; I departed Camar shortly after you did, in fact. The spell took me to a hidden chamber just off of the second temple."

“So you *knew* about the barrier...”

“There is much that...”

The cleric was cut off as Dar suddenly surged forward, seizing the cleric bodily and hurling him into the wall with enough force to knock the air from his body even through his heavy armor.

“Corath!” Allera yelled. But Dar did not loosen his grip.

“You knew, you bastard,” he said, his voice low and dangerous. “You *knew* that the priest would be killed, *knew* that we would be ambushed, you *knew* and did nothing to help us.”

“I am not as omniscient as you...” Varo began, but Dar cut him off again, drawing him back a few inches and slamming him hard into the wall again.

“No. I am sick to fuck with your fucking distortions, cleric.”

Varo’s mouth twisted into a sneer. “I was not the one to reject you!” he returned, with surprising vehemence. “It is only through my intervention that you and Camar’s leaders even *know* about the nature of the threat that looms over our entire world! You may not like what I have said, or done, fighter, but you will *not* question my motives! Were it not for Talen Karedes, and Velan Tiros, I would have been there with you, when Nelan was lost.”

When Varo spoke the names, the fight seemed to drain out of Dar, and he released the cleric and stepped back. He let out a grim chuckle. “Well, Talen’s switched sides now; he’s playing for the other team.”

“Yes, I heard about that. It changes nothing; his fate will become that of many, if we fail.”

Dar laughed again. “Well. It’s a fucking reunion, then. The Doomed Bastards together again once more. Navev’s around here, somewhere, and the mad elf’s corpse; all we need is Tiros and we’d be set.” He turned away; Allera laid a hand on his arm, but he barely seemed to notice. He drew off his helm and ran a hand through his short-cropped, dirty shock of hair, pressing his fingers against his temples.

“I didn’t ask for this,” he muttered. The statement wasn’t meant to carry, but Varo heard him, apparently.

“Do you think I wanted this?” the cleric of Dagos said, stepping forward from the wall. “Do you think I wanted to sacrifice everything that I had, everything I *was*, to this cause? Do you think I haven’t thought *every single day* about what my life would have been, if I hadn’t found that gods-damned book!”

There was a long moment of silence between the four of them. Then, finally, a noise intruded: a heavy scraping upon stone, coming from the corridor to the north. The sound was of something large, coming their way; a red glow was visible around the corner in the mouth of the passage.

Varo sighed. "They are coming." He incanted a spell. Allera surrounded them all with a *holy aura*, while Letellia invoked a ward upon herself.

The stink of brimstone washed over them before the creature arrived a few seconds later. It was a monstrous abyssal hound, which filled the ten-foot passage almost completely. Wicks of flame came from the jaws of its three heads, from which a deep growl emitted, a sound like rocks being crushed. The center head wore a spiked collar of black metal, from which a laughably slender chain dangled. The end of that chain was held by a mind flayer in a black robe, the milky orbs of its eyes fixed on the companions as it entered the room.

Dar lifted *Valor*, ready to charge, but the creature held its ground. "What is it waiting for?" the fighter asked.

The answer came a moment later, as a soft clink of metal announced the arrival of other foes from the passage to the south. One glance was enough to reveal that this cohort of foes were from the ranks of the undead. Ranks of armored things that had once been men shambled forward, clad in heavy armor. Enough of their raiment remained intact to identify what the creatures had been: priests of Orcus, men and women both, now drawn back to serve their master again in death. Their sallow, waxen skin and the wounds covering their bodies suggested that they were zombies, but they moved with a speed and coordination not common to such beings, and something akin malevolence glowed in their eyes as they spotted their foes. Each carried a heavy mace or morningstar.

They were led by a skeleton, a tall figure clad in archaic armor of black plate and chain. The hollows of its eye sockets glowed with twin points of red fire, the glow reflecting off of the crown of gold that it wore upon its mailed brow. It carried a greatsword, a single-edged blade of heavy folded steel that seemed to trail faint wisps of black smoke as it moved.

"So, Saracek, you have finally come at the bidding of your Master," Varo said.

"Some oaths can be foresworn, but others cannot be escaped," the skeleton said, its voice hollow and sepulchral.

Dar took a step forward and lifted *Valor*, so that their light gleamed blue off the length of the blade. "Whoever the fuck you are, you can tell your Master that..."

But he never got a chance to finish his threat, as space twisted on the far side of the room, tendrils of black energy materializing in the air and coming together in a sudden storm between the two passages. The disruption lasted only a fraction of a heartbeat, but in that interval something took form in that space. Some of the black tendrils lingered, coalescing around the entity, an *unholy aura* that cloaked it in corruption and darkness.

The creature's warding spell shielded it somewhat from view, but the companions still recognized it at once. The emaciated form of its body, the familiar stench of corruption, and above all the power within the stare that pierced the *aura* and penetrated into the core of the four humans that faced it.

Maphistal had returned.

Chapter 323

THE RIGHT HAND OF ORCUS

"Oh, fuck, not *him* again," Dar said.

As it had before, in the third temple of Orcus, the voice of the demon sounded in their minds, blasting away even their own thoughts as each word pounded at their consciousness.

"I told you that your souls would be the instrument for the end of your world. Your pathetic attempts to resist have merely delayed the inevitable; everything that you have done has been to further the will of my Master."

Dar, quivering with rage, tore himself free of the demon's compulsion. "You can tell your fucking Master that we're coming for him next, once we kill his dog!"

The demon's voice came again, a crashing wave that blasted down upon them with the sheer force of its will.

"Your companions, they already serve the Great Lord. Now, it is time for you to join them."

Several things happened at once.

Maphistal gestured, and a trio of hezrou demons materialized in front of it, slaving and eager for destruction.

Saracek and its undead minions surged forward, only to stop as Allera erected a *repulsion* field around them. But the three-headed abyssal hound, Revirax, shrugged through both that and the *hold monster* spell that Letellia tried to place upon it. Behind it the mind flayer tried to seize control of Dar's mind, but was unsuccessful against the protection of Allera's *holy aura*.

Varo finished his own summoning, and three fiendish girallons appeared in an arc facing their enemies. The one on the left found itself adjacent to the giant hound, and it lashed out with a claw, ignoring the fact that the creature had to outweigh it by a factor of at least three. The girallon's attack had almost no effect, but it drew Revirax's fury upon it. Two of the creature's heads snapped down onto it, seizing an arm and its shoulder. With a shake of its body the arm came off in a bloody mess, and as the ape flailed with futility the hound caught its throat in its third set of jaws, and put an end to it.

The hezrous quickly joined the fracas, two of them firing off a *chaos hammer* and an *unholy blight* while the last charged forward to face the second girallon. The toad-demon and fiendish ape met in a violent flurry of clawing and biting that ended with both of them tumbling to the ground, ensnared in a deadly grapple.

On the other flank, four of the ju-ju zombies had mustered the will to penetrate Allera's barrier, driven by some vestige of the hatred that had motivated them in life. Varo's third girallon intercepted them before they could get to the healer and sorceress. The creature eschewed subtlety, seizing one of the undead clerics and lifting it above its head before hurling it violently across the room. The zombie struck the far wall with enough force to shatter bones, but it merely shrugged and staggered back to its feet. The other three zombies lashed out at it with their weapons, delivering powerful blows that left ugly bruises on the girallon's legs and torso.

Dar stepped up to Revirax as the slain girallon dissolved in a slick of black smoke. The hound sensed him coming and shot out a bloody head to seize him before he could draw near enough to strike. The fighter dodged under the snapping jaws, taking a blow across his back that staggered but did not stop him. Once inside its reach, he brought *Valor* up in a blur, cutting across its neck. The hound's flesh was like boiled leather, but the axiomatic blade bit deep, and blood splashed all over the fighter from the terrible wound. A terrible roar echoed from all three of the hound's heads, and it reared up, bringing all three heads to bear.

A gout of flame filled the angled corner of the room, engulfing all of the companions. The protections they'd surrounded themselves with offered some defense, but all of them were burned to some extent by the flames.

Dar lunged forward to strike the hound before it could recover, but Maphistal struck first, uttering a word of *blasphemy*.

The demon's fell power echoed through the chamber. Allera and Dar each felt strength sluicing from their bodies, and Letellia groaned and toppled over, paralyzed. Only Varo

was not affected, and the girallons, which drank in the evil of such magic like mother's milk.

Varo raised his divine focus and presented it boldly at the demon. A second icon, a silver torch, dangled from his wrist, along with a small device that was not fully distinguishable. "In the name of the gods of man, BEGONE!"

Maphistal's laughter echoed through their minds. "You are going to have to do better than that, human."

The demon's allies redoubled their attacks. The mind flayer shifted position and unleashed a *mind blast* that tore into the defenders. Revirax and one of the hezrous were caught in the cone of mental power, but the hound was a powerful, hoary old beast, and it was not affected. The hezrou and the girallon it was wrestling were both stunned, but the other two toad-demons eagerly leapt in to take advantage, seizing the dazed ape and tearing it to pieces with their claws and teeth.

The companions withstood the *mind blast*, but with Dar it was a narrow thing. Clutching his head, weakened by the *blasphemy*, his assault on the hound was feeble, managing only one successful hit that opened little more than a flesh wound in its meaty shoulder.

The hound's counterattack was anything but feeble.

Dar cried out as the hound's two uninjured heads converged on him. One set of jaws crushed down on his right arm, pinning *Valor* and savaging the limb through his protective greaves and leather. But even as the bone of his forearm was crushed through the pressure, the hound's other head engulfed his shoulder. The dragonhide scales held, but the ribs beneath could not, and blood exploded from the fighter's lips as shards of bone pierced his lung.

"Pathetic," Maphistal said, pointing at Allera and calling upon its magic once more. Before the demon's power the healer's spells collapsed like fragile glass beneath an iron boot. Her *holy aura* winked out, and more significantly her *repulsion* field collapsed. Undead and demons surged forward, eager to bring the battle to a rapid end.

Chapter 324

A BLOODY MESS

Allera had fallen to her knees when the demon's *blasphemy* had struck her, reducing her strength to that of a small child. But now the purging power of healing energy flowed through her like a torrent, a torrent that she cast outward with the precision of her mental strength and training.

The *mass heal* spell found its targets unerringly, purging them all of the aftereffects of the demon's utterance, and healing their wounds. It also struck the charging undead like a hammer, ripping through them with grim efficacy, blasting them to the brink of destruction. Behind their ranks Saracek hissed as the spell impacted against the skeletal warrior's spell resistance, which barely withstood the force of Allera's magic.

Varo's last summoned girallon, battered to the edge of death by the undead clerics, was given a new surge of strength from the healer's spell. It roared as it laid into the undead all around it, smashing one with every blow from its four arms. A zombie tried to rush past it, but the ape lunged and bit the top of its head off with a powerful crunch of its jaws. The zombie managed a few more staggered steps forward before it toppled over, finished.

As Allera's healing power flowed into his broken body, Dar yanked his left hand free of the demon hound's jaws and smashed it into one of the eyes of the head pinning his right arm. The eye squished under the impact from the armored fist, and its jaws opened, releasing him. Its other head lunged at him, seeking to regain its prize, but Dar swept *Valor* in a blinding arc that sliced off a significant hunk of the hound's snout. Revirax roared in real pain, now, but before it could muster enough rage to renew its assault Dar stepped in once more, and drove *Valor* two handed into the beast's chest. The axiomatic sword found a gap between the monster's ribs and slid home, the sword singing as the steel grated off of hard bone. Blood exploded from the wound as the tip of the sword found the hound's heart; a quiver shook its entire body, and then it collapsed in a mangled heap.

Dar staggered back from the bloody remains. Once again a stabbing agony pierced his head, and once again he barely fought off the mental probes from the mind flayer. The distraction cost him as one of the hezrou demons leapt onto him, and he was only barely able to keep from being seized up in its claws and thrust into its huge maw. The other demon hurled another *chaos hammer* at the other defenders, and followed that with a rush that took it straight toward Allera.

"Amusing, but ultimately futile."

As the demon's words sounded in their minds, Maphistal raised a clawed hand, and invoked a *fire storm*. The flames rushed up in a violent surge of orange and yellow, engulfing the companions. Maphistal's power overwhelmed the spell resistance granted by the *holy aura* still protecting Dar, Letellia, and Varo, and blasted them with hot flames. Letellia lived only by the virtue of the *resist fire* she'd cast earlier, and even with that protection the exposed flesh on her face and hands was blackened by the flames. Allera, shorn of her wards, suffered terrible burns, while Varo cooked in his armor. His girallon's fiendish resistances allowed it to weather the *storm*, if badly, but even as the flames died Saracek strode forward and smote the creature with a powerful stroke of its sword. The skeletal warrior's blade bit through flesh and muscle and bone, and the

girallon was dissolving back into nothing even as it fell onto the scorched black stone of the chamber floor.

The armor of Mailliw Catspar protected Dar, at least to some extent; the hezrou he'd been battling suffered more, but not enough to force it to disengage. It came again at the fighter, but Dar brought *Valor* down squarely into the center of its skull, crushing through into the mushy core. The demon, gibbering, fell to the ground and disappeared.

Allera screamed as the last hezrou seized hold of her. She wasn't strong enough to fight it off as the demon lifted her into its gaping maw, which killed her cries as her entire head and upper body vanished into its mouth. Her legs continued to kick violently as it kept pushing more and more of her inside it, its gullet swelling to accommodate her.

Dar turned to intervene, but found himself confronting Maphistal, which had finally elected to join the fray in close quarters. Its coming shook the ground, its body massive and heavy despite the almost skeletal appearance the demon presented. Its deadly mace, held in one hand, trailed low beside it; Dar already knew the terrible power of that wicked bludgeon. If he turned to help Allera, the thing would take him down before he managed two steps.

There was nothing he could do but attack. He waited for the demon to lift its weapon, then surged forward, aiming a cutting stroke at its knee. *Valor* hit even as pain exploded in his side from the demon's counter. He'd put a lot of strength behind the blow, and his aim had been true, but the stroke slid off the demon's *unholy aura* like water on oilcloth.

The same could not be said for the demon's blow. Dar felt like he'd been hit by a battering ram; he nearly lost his footing entirely, and actually came a full foot into the air before gravity dragged him back down onto the ground. Pain exploded through him, and he could feel his bones locking together as the fell power of the mace worked through his body.

"You cannot stand against me," Dar heard in his mind, and he knew that the demon's words were not bravado, but rather simple truth.

Chapter 325

REUNION

Confronted by the awesome power of the demon Maphistal, Dar could see his own death shining in its terrible red eyes. Protected by its *unholy aura* and a hide that was deceptively dense, he suspected that even *Valor* would have little effect upon it. His second attack was more precise, abandoning sheer strength for more finesse, and this

time he felt the edge of his sword bite into the demon's flesh, just below the angular protrusions of its ribs. His sword was as eager as he was, but neither blood nor ichor issued from the foot-long gash, and the only indicator that the demon had felt the hurt was a sinister hiss that sounded from deep within the hollow of its skull.

He aborted any follow up and instead drew back, hoping to lure the monster after him and avoid a full attack. But Maphistal did not need a full flurry of blows; it merely stepped forward and drove its mace down hard toward the fighter's head. Dar brought *Valor* up to parry, but the demon's attack hit him with the force of an avalanche. Pain crushed through his arms, and *Valor* clattered to the ground as both hands went numb and loose. The fighter nearly followed the weapon, trying to fight the twisting agony as the bones of his arms knit together.

Behind him, his companions were hard-pressed, and unable to come to his aid. Varo stepped up to the hezrou that was thrusting Allera deeper into its gullet, delivering a *harm* spell through a gentle touch to its flank. The demon choked as black blood poured from a dozen wounds that opened all over its body, and as it staggered back Allera fell free of its jaws, collapsing to the ground in a bloody and battered heap. The last two ju ju zombies, though greatly weakened by Allera's earlier *mass heal*, nevertheless pressed the attack, leaping at Varo and hacking at him with their weapons, forcing the cleric to defend himself.

Saracek had selected Letellia as its target, and even as the sorceress staggered to her feet, recovering from the paralysis of Maphistal's *blasphemy*, the undead knight laid into her with a powerful two-handed stroke from its unholy blade. The blow would have cut her in half had it not been for her magical protections, but even so the blade bit deep, and blood arced through the air as the young woman screamed and fell back against the wall. The skeletal lord stepped forward, lifting its weapon again to finish her.

Dar reached down to pick up his sword, but his fingers were clumsy and failed to obey his commands, and he could only fumble at the hilt. Not that it would make any difference, not with the demon standing above him, but he wanted to die with his sword in his hand.

A dark streak caught the corner of his eye, and he saw something appear out of the corridor to the right, moving incredibly fast. It was overkill, really, as the charging form, clad in black garments that swirled and shifted around its form, came rushing toward him. His attention was focused more on the demon right in front of him, which lifted its mace to deliver another crushing blow. His questing fingers finally locked around the familiar hilt of his weapon, and as Dar lifted *Valor* in another futile attempt to block, he heard himself scream a deep, guttural cry of defiance up at it.

Then Maphistal shifted, and Dar realized he'd been wrong in his assumption, as the newcomer sprang suddenly into the air, rising without apparent effort almost to the height of the ceiling. It bore a long spear, a weapon with a shining silver head that Dar recognized with a start of surprise. The spearhead flashed as its owner drove it into

Maphistal's side, sinking deep into the demon's gaunt body with a solid thunk. At that moment the light of their torches penetrated the newcomer's cowl, revealing the features inside, but Dar had known who it had to have been the moment he'd recognized the spear. Even so, the sheer unreality of it drew an exclamation of surprise from his lips.

"Shay!"

The demon roared and turned to face the new threat, but its tormenter used the impact of the spear to push off, shifting the arc of her jump to land just outside of its reach. As the scout feet hit the ground she yanked the spear free, the weapon trailing after her as she kept running past. Maphistal's counter was well late, the mace slicing through only empty air. The mind flayer scurried out of the way in alarm, but the newcomer paid the creature no heed, spinning and shifting the grip on her spear to bring the head back up toward the foe as her momentum ebbed. The head of the spear hissed with some trace of blackness; she had managed to draw blood where Dar had failed.

Shaylara was not alone; a small knot of dark-clad figures appeared out of the tunnel mouth in her wake. In their van was Talen Karedes, armored in a dark breastplate of blacksteel, with the shimmering sword of Mailliw Catspar gleaming in his hand. He pointed, and the five scraggly figures trailing behind him hooted and screeched as they leapt to assault the demon's allied forces. Saracek turned to meet three of them, his long blade slashing out to catch the first with a solid blow across the body that knocked it sprawling. The other two came in heedless of concern, hacking at the skeleton with short swords that clanged hard off of the dead knight's ancient armor.

The other two of Talen's followers attacked the crippled hezrou. Their crude weapons, a long-handled wood axe and a jagged-edged scimitar, were not able to penetrate the fiend's resistances, but they certainly got its attention. A few feet away, Varo was withstanding the attacks of the last two zombies with aplomb. His heavy plate armor, likewise of blacksteel, turned their blows, and their bodies, broken by holy power, were not strong enough to lay hold of him. He stepped away from the pair and began incanting another spell. One of the zombies turned toward the fallen healer, seeking perhaps easier prey, but that assumption proved utterly false a moment later as Allera unleashed a *mass cure critical wounds* spell. Both zombies were utterly vaporized by the healing magic, even as life poured into the bodies of the healer and her companions. Allera pulled herself to her feet, her clothes tattered and ruined from her brief stay in the hezrou's gullet. As she gathered her bearings she cast about for Dar, and as she saw him, her heart froze in her chest.

"You're mine, demon!" Talen shouted, as he charged toward Maphistal.

"**You dare, slave?**" the demon responded. It met the fallen knight's rush with a blow from its mace that crashed down upon his left shoulder with devastating force. Talen bore no shield, and the impact would have crippled a living man.

But Talen Karedes was no longer a living man.

The vampire shrugged off the hit and darted inside the demon's reach with impressive speed. Catspar's sword knifed up through the demon's *unholy aura*, piercing its side just above its left hip. The demon clearly felt the stroke, backed by the unnatural strength that was a product of Talen's transformation.

But the demon was stronger yet by far. As Talen started to tear his blade free, Maphistal reached down and seized the vampire's arm at the elbow, joining them in an embrace linked by muscle and steel. Talen tried to break away, but Maphistal held him in an iron grip, and the demon brought down its mace in its other hand, smashing it hard into the side of the fallen knight's head. Talen's halfhelm crumpled like an eggshell, and with it half of his skull.

"Talen!" Shay yelled. The spearhead caught the light as the scout leapt into another charge.

Dar felt power flow through *Valor* as he laid into the demon with a furious barrage of attacks. Allera's latest spell had healed the worst of his current injuries, but his bones still clacked together, and his strokes felt awkward, each turned away by the potency of the demon's evil aura or by the incredible durability of its hide. Almost casually, Maphistal released Talen, who clattered to the floor in a heap, and then spun, driving the haft of its mace into Dar's face. The nose guard of his helm shattered, and he screamed as the jagged end of the weapon's haft plunged into his left eye.

The fighter fell, his face a bloody ruin.

Shay's legs were a blur as she rushed toward the demon. But this time, Maphistal saw her coming, and in the instant before the silver head of her spear reached his chest the demon's hand shot out, and seized the weapon a foot below the head. Shay's momentum carried her forward, sliding up the length of the weapon. She abandoned the spear and reached for the sword at her belt, but before she could draw she met the demon's dark gaze. Maphistal's power seized her, and she was flung bodily across the room, smashing into the far wall with enough force to crack the ancient stone. She hung there for a moment, and then fell hard to the ground ten feet below.

"**The Master comes,**" the demon intoned, its voice hissing like water striking fire. "**The doom of your world is as inevitable as the creeping touch of death.**"

Chapter 326

THE INEVITABILITY OF DEATH

“As inevitable... as death...”

The words were followed by a harsh, rasping noise that might have been laughter. It came from Talen Karedes. The knight pushed off of the ground with his left hand, and rose into a kneeling stance with his sword scraping along the rough stone of the floor. His crumpled helmet still covered his head, but through the opening in the front his smashed visage was partially visible. His right eye was gone, and dark matter oozed down the side of his face from his shattered temple. Mercifully, the helmet obscured the rest of the damage.

As Maphistal turned back toward him, Talen shifted his other hand to the hilt of his sword, and slashed it across the demon’s body once more. Again the enchanted steel bit on demonic hide, but again the blow did little more than scratch the monster.

Maphistal did not bother with the mace this time, and instead merely reached out and seized the fallen knight by the throat, yanking him up into the air until their faces were just a few feet apart. “No, slave... yours will be an eternity... an eternity of suffering.” The demon tightened its grip, and bones cracked beneath the iron pressure of its fingers. But Talen merely laughed, a sick sound that hissed out between his lips as a weak wheezing.

Varo struck the demon with a *greater dispel magic*. Its *unholy aura* dissolved, but Maphistal merely shot a contemptuous glance in the direction of the cleric. “You waste your powers, priest. I can restore that with a thought.”

But Varo’s effort had opened a small opportunity, one that was exploited a moment later as Allera unleashed another *mass heal*, and in its aftermath Corath Dar leapt at the demon, *Valor* blazing bright in his hand.

The fighter *smote* the demon, and this time the axiomatic steel bit hard and deep, cutting Maphistal’s right arm through corrupt flesh and muscle and rot until it carved the hard bone beneath. The demon shrieked and turned on Dar, but he was not yet done. Coming up under the demon’s sweeping, stricken arm, he thrust *Valor* up into its body, the point of the sword piercing its torso just under the protruding ribs and sliding a foot up into the hollow beneath them. A foul issuance of corruption slid from the wound, and for a moment the demon actually faltered, suddenly unsteady on its feet as it staggered backward. But the moment was over swiftly, and Maphistal recovered within the space of a heartbeat, malevolence and hate radiating from it like the light of a bonfire.

Talen had taken advantage of the distraction to escape, transforming himself into a cloud of mist that drifted back to the floor before reforming into a solid form, materializing in a catlike crouch. And as the knight rose, his followers formed up behind him. Saracek had succumbed to Allera’s second *mass heal*, the spell weakening it to the point where Talen’s followers could hack it to pieces. One of the vampires had claimed the skeletal lord’s greatsword, which pulsed with evil potency in its hands. On

the opposite side of the chamber, Shay was bending to recover her longspear. The mind flayer had apparently fled; the creature was nowhere to be seen.

"This changes nothing," the demon told them.

Varo came forward. "Tell your master that the words of the *Codex* will come to fruition."

Maphistal's response was a look of terrible power, which the cleric withstood without flinching. Talen and Dar started toward it in the same instant, but before they could close to again strike at it, the demon twisted reality around it once more, and it vanished from the chamber in a surge of black energy that flared once and then left them alone.

Dar held his ground as Shay walked around him, taking her place at Talen's side. Now that the battle was over, it was instantly obvious what she was from the pallor of her flesh, even before she smiled and revealed her long fangs.

"Shay, by the gods, no," Allera said. Behind her, Letellia and Varo came up to join Dar, facing the vampires.

"So," Talen said, his eyes fixed on Dar. "We meet again."

Chapter 327

AN UNCOMFORTABLE PARLEY

Talen handed his sword to Shay, and reached up to pull off his ruined helm. It took some effort, but when the battered metal finally tore free to reveal the ruined head beneath, even Dar's mouth twisted in disgust. The entire right side of Talen's head was a gory mess, his right ear dangling where the base of his jaw had been before. Almost reflexively, Allera stepped forward, a blue glow forming around her hands, but Talen's followers hissed at her, and the fallen knight laughed.

"Have you forgotten what I am, healer? Keep your powers at a distance from myself and my men, if you please. I will be well enough in a few moments." And indeed, they could see his flesh slowly knitting together again, as the dark powers of his unlife worked to restore his flesh.

"Looks like you've made a few new friends," Dar grunted. His wounds had been healed by Allera's healing spells, but the socket of his right eye gaped open like a pit, raw and empty. Allera started to come to him, but he forestalled her with a subtle gesture, prodding her behind him with his free hand.

“And it looks like you’ve found a few old ones,” Talen shot back, with a hard eye at Varo. “I knew that you would not be able to keep from intervening,” he said.

“The question is, why are *you* here,” Varo asked. “Or was it the call of your Master that drew you here?”

“I call no one or nothing master!” Talen hissed. With an obvious effort, he calmed himself. Shay moved into the nook of his arm, slipping his sword back into his hand. “We do not serve Orcus,” she told them.

“You are undead,” the cleric replied. “The choice may not be yours to make.”

“We have free will!” Shay insisted. “I chose to join Talen... it was my own decision to make.” She drew closer to him, but a troubled look passed on the fallen knight’s face. It was difficult to look at him for long, as the flesh on the side of his face crawled and shifted as the bones beneath knit back together.

“What about your companions?” Varo asked. “Did they have a choice?”

“Why not ask them?” Talen returned. He turned to his followers. Four of the five were crude sorts of men, their base origins obvious even through their transformations into undead. They had hard, feral looks about them, and their armor and garments were stained with dirt and old blood.

Talen ran his gaze over them. “Well? Drudge, Utar, Needles, and Hedder were bandits when we found them, and a pretty desperate lot, too. They made their choice when they elected to assault us. At least their fate was better than that of most of their compatriots. No?”

“As you say, master,” the first bandit replied.

“What about the girl?” Allera asked.

The last vampire was a slender, almost emaciated figure of a woman, in her late teens by the look of her. She was swathed in dark robes that wrapped her entire body, save for the oval of her face, hidden deep within a cowl. Talen looked at her, and she shrank a bit under his scrutiny.

“We found Calla on the brink of death,” Talen said. “The rest of her family, the other steads... all were dead, taken by pestilence and hunger. She would have joined them, had we not saved her.”

“Ah yes, saved her from a reunion with her family at the side of the Father in the next life, in favor of an eternal existence in unlife,” Varo said.

Talen's gaze was cutting. "I do not have to justify myself or my actions to *you*, priest of Dagos." He lifted his hand, which tightened into a fist. "I am no longer shackled by the weight of guilt and responsibility that hung about my neck like a yoke while I lived. When Orcus stole my humanity, he sought to make me a slave. But in reality, he set me free."

"Free to live an existence in the shadows," Varo said, "to never again feel the warmth of the sun upon your skin. Free to hide your face from men, never to savor the glow of true feelings, of love..."

Talen laughed, but there was an edge to it. Behind him, his servants tensed, the hunger in their eyes as obvious as the noses on their faces. "I'd almost forgotten how damned annoying you can be, cleric. Do you know how many times I've wanted to kill you, Varo?"

"Enough of this," Dar said. "Get in fucking line." The fighter had not returned *Valor* to its scabbard, and blue flickers danced up the length of the blade as it caught the light of Allera's torch. "We asked you a question, before. What the fuck do you want here, Talen?"

Talen's eyes blazed with intensity. "I am here... I *choose* to be here, to bring down Orcus."

"I would have thought that a world populated exclusively by undead would be appealing to you," Letellia said.

"My score with the demon lord is... personal." His arm tightened possessively against Shay, who pressed closer against him, but did not look up.

"Surely you can understand why we are wary of trusting you," Letellia said. "Even now, your flunkies can barely restrain themselves from throwing themselves upon us."

"It is not a matter of trust," Talen said. "Without us, you would already be dead, or worse; Maphistal was on the brink of taking all of you when we arrived. Without us, you will have no chance whatsoever against the Overmind."

"The Overmind?" Allera asked. Dar glanced at Varo, and noted the absence of surprise in the cleric's expression.

Talen smirked; he'd seen it too. "A powerful entity. Not quite alive, not quite dead, it is a collective intelligence of the harvested brains of elder mind flayers. Its mental powers are... considerable."

"You seem to know a great deal about it," Letellia said.

“Indeed. I have visited its lair. Why not?” he said, as the companions betrayed their surprise. “I am undead, a vampire, surely I must serve Orcus?”

“You are immune to its mental powers?” Letellia asked.

“Another benefit of my... transformation.”

“We’re not here to take on evil brains,” Dar said.

“We may not have a choice,” Varo said.

“The bodies of your friends are in its lair, by the way. They have been animated as undead; the elf in particular makes a quite fetching zombie. And my sword. Careless of you to lose *Beatus Incendia*, Dar. There are stairs leading down to another level, but even we were not allowed to pass by the Overmind’s servants.”

“Servants?” Allera asked.

“Mind flayers and grimlocks.”

“They could stop you?” Letellia asked.

“We chose not to press the issue,” Talen replied. “Once we saw the others, and heard the tale of the ambush, we suspected that we might find the rest of you somewhere around here.”

Varo pulled Dar aside slightly. “Did you give Alderis my ring?” the cleric whispered.

“This is not the place or time, Varo,” Dar began, but the cleric cut him off. “It is vital! Did you give him the ring?”

After a pause, Dar nodded. “Then there may still be a chance,” the cleric said, more to himself than to the fighter. “You would assist us in defeating the Overmind and its guardians?” Varo asked Talen.

“If you will help my companions and I get to Orcus,” the vampire replied.

“Wait a minute,” Dar said, stepping between them. “Doesn’t it seem likely that he’d just lure us into another ambush?”

Talen smiled, showing his pointed teeth. “We could kill you right now if we wanted, Dar.”

Allera lifted a hand, which became rimed with a bright blue glow. “If you tried, you would burn,” the healer said.

Talen laughed again. "It seems I am not the only one to have grown fangs! So noted, Allera." He extended a hand toward Dar. "So... allies of convenience?"

Dar snarled and turned, Talen's mocking laughter following him as he stalked away.

Chapter 328

THE OVERMIND

The chamber was vast by any measure. The smallest sounds echoed off the sheer walls, distorted and twisted as they bounced across the huge underground space. A pair of massive iron braziers, easily ten feet across, illuminated the room with a flickering, bluish light that died well before it reached the edges of the chamber. The center of the room was dominated by a ring of thick pillars of black stone, around which the light seemed to gather and shine with a cerulean aura. In the center of that gathering there was a broad stone basin, easily twenty feet across. A thick, briny stink filled the air, accompanied by a stale hint of decay.

Around the pool stood nine illithids. They faced inward, silent and motionless, sunk deep into some torpor of communion with the entity that occupied the basin. There were other things in the chamber, grimlocks that huddled beyond the pillars, and still others further out, shadows that stood immobile in a row along the north wall, awaiting command.

Another dark form materialized on one of the staircases that ascended into the chamber under the struts of the iron braziers. This one had the form and shape of a man, and strode forward without concern for the place's guardians or the unholy blue glow around the pillars. A pair of grimlocks moved to intercept him, but the newcomer let his hand drop to the rod he bore at his side, and the creatures recoiled, letting him pass without challenge.

He entered the circle of the pillars, a simple feat beyond the capability of most living men. But the newcomer, though once a man, was no longer living.

One of the mind flayers turned to address him. Its tentacles flared around a mouth that hissed unaccustomed sounds; it was not used to normal speech, but the newcomer's mind was impervious to its intrusion. "Speak, warlock."

Zafir Navev's mouth twisted slightly; perhaps some part of what he had been still remembered the revulsion that the illithids inspired. "Maphistal launched an assault upon Corath Dar and his companions that survived your ambush. Somehow, the Camarians have been reinforced; they were able to drive off the demon."

The mind flayer's alien features betrayed nothing of its reaction to the news. "Yes, we know," it finally said. "Talen Karedes is with them, and Licinius Varo."

The undead warlock did betray surprise at the announcement. "But... Karedes serves the Master, now."

"His collar is not as firm as the one you wear, warlock."

Navev bristled; flickers of black energy flashed around his fists as they clenched. The mind flayer did not react, and the other eight had not so much as stirred since he had arrived. "They will likely come here, to recover the bodies of their fallen friends."

The mind flayer's face remained inscrutable. "Yes. They are coming." The creature turned away from him, rejoining the circle around the basin. Navev looked into it for a moment, at the foulness within, but felt nothing. Apparently his earlier reaction to the illithid had been only fleeting. The only emotions left to him, it seemed, were hatred and anger.

And pain. Yes, he could still feel pain.

The undead warlock left the circle of pillars, drawing his power close around him. Destruction was still within his purview. Maphistal had not invited him to join in the assault upon the fugitives. He had spent the time after the initial ambush in a tiny room, alone, convulsing in agony as power had surged uncontrollably through him. Orcus's varied legions had all fallen before his erstwhile companions like wheat before the farmer's scythe, but he was still here. His powers had grown beyond any reckoning he might have made when alive, but that was not enough to fill the gaping emptiness that existed within him like a vast chasm. It sucked at him like an open wound.

All he could do was try to fill it with more hatred and anger. He hated his Master, but was powerless to do anything to vent that fury. If anything, Talen's defiance only stabbed at him like a sharp knife, widening the wound inside.

But there was something he *could* strike at. Those who had brought this upon him, who had left him to die in this accursed place, and then had left him behind to fall into the grasp of the dark powers of Rappan Athuk.

Corath Dar and Licinius Varo, at least, could pay. Would pay.

Zafir Navev lifted a hand, pressed it into a fist. Black power surged around it, a crackling nimbus that felt raw, pure, potent.

Chapter 329

CHILLED TO THE BONE

They came in speed and silence, dashing up the stairs. The bright glow of *holy auras* surrounded the living contingent of the team, and other wards were layed under that protection; *stoneskins, death wards, bear's endurance*. Letellia was surrounded by a bevy of *mirror images*, and all of them moved with the unnatural speed that was an obvious hallmark of the *haste* spell.

As they reached the top of the stairs, and started to spread out, Varo tossed the stone holding his *silence* spell away, and the noise of clattering armor and booted feet rushed into the quiet.

The enemy was waiting for them.

A biting chill exploded in their midst, sucking the heat from their bodies. The sudden icy freeze in the air was accompanied by black flashes from the floor. Long thick tentacles sprouted from the stone where the flashes occurred, twisting into the air, seeking targets to attack.

They found no shortage of victims. Allera and Letellia were grasped by tentacles that swirled around their torsos, tightening before either could slip free. A few feet away, Varo was likewise snagged by a tentacle that caught his left leg; the cleric tried to break free, and had nearly tugged his way out of the tentacle's grasp before two more seized his arms from behind.

Off to the left, the vampires were snagged with equal efficiency. Shay, moving faster than the others, nearly leapt free of the danger area, but a tentacle lashed around her right ankle, dragging her down to the floor. The five vampire spawn were all trapped, lifted off their feet by the probing tentacles.

Only Talen and Dar avoided capture in the first few moments of the invocation's effect. Dar tore free of two tentacles and turned back to help Allera. Talen, conversely, glanced back at Shay, but instead of returning he rushed forward, escaping the radius of the invocation without further incident.

The vampiric knight saw that the defenders of the Overmind were already approaching. Directly ahead he could see the black pillars that surrounded the bowl. Blue flickers of light were flaring around the bowl, casting long shadows outward from the pillars. As Talen cleared the edge of the *chilling tentacles*, he saw seven grimlocks detach from those long shadows and rush toward him. The grimlocks were mindless thralls of the illithids, but they were strong, and their mental state did not hinder the smooth, deadly grace with which they moved. He laughed; this would be interesting.

Dar hewed at the tentacle holding Allera, but the rubbery substance of the thing withstood even a blow from *Valor* without apparent damage. "You cannot sever them!" Varo shouted, struggling in the grip of several tentacles. "Go... we will manage!"

Dar hesitated for a moment longer, but Allera nodded in agreement with the cleric. "Corath... go!" she yelled, grimacing as the tentacle tightened its grip around her body.

Three more tentacles were already probing at Dar; the fighter thrust them away and rushed for the edge of the spell's effect. He saw Talen engage the grimlocks, which quickly moved to encircle the vampire. Normally Dar would have been worried, but he'd seen the vampire fight, and knew that Talen was now as strong as he was, if not stronger. And indeed the first grimlock fell back, its torso hacked open from shoulder to navel from a powerful blow from Talen's keen sword.

Dar was more worried about the mind flayers. He could see strange lights and shifting within the ring of pillars, and he started in that direction. But out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement to his right, approaching out of the darkness that blanketed the far expanse of the room. He recognized the shambling movements and knew the identity of the new threat even before the figures entered the radius of the light shed by the huge iron brazier.

Still, it was a shock to see them. Zahera, matted brown hair surrounding a black opening in the left side of her skull. Alexion, his torso splayed wide open where the abyssal hound had eviscerated him. Marcus. Nelan. Alderis. They still wore the remains of their armor and clothing, and some still carried their weapons, although *Beatus Incendia* was nowhere in view. The zombies saw, or rather sensed, his presence, and started toward him.

Dar realized that his jaw had clenched so tightly that he could feel the grinding pain down to the base of his skull. "Fuck you to the hells," he muttered, turning back toward the pillars. The blue glow had intensified, and weird sounds had begun to issue from within that ring. Talen had said that no living man could withstand the power of the Overmind, but Dar was of a mind to prove them wrong. He lifted *Valor*, and turning from the slowly-approaching zombies started forward.

He managed two steps before the *eldritch blast* arced out of the darkness and smashed squarely into his chest. He'd been hit by Navev's bolts on several occasions now, but the sheer power of this one caught him utterly by surprise. Knocked off his feet, the air was blasted from his lungs even before he hit the ground on his back and skidded to a halt more than thirty feet from where he'd been standing. He groaned, and shook his head to clear it of the ringing that sounded inside it like the huge bells in the steeple of the Great Cathedral in Camar.

He looked up to see the zombies standing over him, their dark eyes staring down at him almost accusingly.

“Fine, you want it, I’ll give it to you,” he said, as he tried to get up.

Tried, because two thick black cords had twined around his arms. Navev’s *eldritch blast* had knocked him back to the edge of his *chilling tentacles* invocation. As he struggled to get enough leverage to pull free, his former companions fell upon him, tearing and hacking in a violent frenzy.

Chapter 330

ENTANGLEMENTS

“Allera!”

Letellia’s exclamation came out as little more than hiss; one of the *chilling tentacles* had twined around her neck, and as the sorceress struggled it continued to tighten inexorably, cutting off her supply of air. But Letellia grimaced and managed to stretch out an arm toward the adjacent healer, who in turn tried to fight off her own clinging tentacles to reach her.

Their fingers brushed, only for an instant, but Letellia used that moment to unleash her magic. Her concentration wavered but held, and even as her vision began to swim out of focus, she opened a *dimension door* and transported the two of them out of the radius of the invocation.

Letellia collapsed to the floor, sucking in desperate breaths of air. “Are you all right?” Allera asked, bending over her.

“Yes... yes...” she managed, forcing herself to stand.

“Varo cannot get out,” Allera said. Letellia looked up and saw that the cleric had been all but wrapped up in tentacles, holding his legs, arms, and body immobile. In his heavy armor they could not hurt him seriously, but the draining effects of the cold were no doubt affecting him.

“I will get him,” Letellia said. “Help the others!”

Shaylara’s imprisonment had only lasted a few seconds. As the tentacle had tightened its crushing grip on her ankle, the vampire scout merely focused her will, dissolving into a column of vaporous mist that drifted easily out of the reach of the grasping tendrils. The other vampires followed her lead, and as they rematerialized she was already running toward Talen.

The fallen's knight's sword flashed about him in a blur, but surrounded as he was, he could not keep the grimlocks from getting to him. His armor was dented where he'd absorbed several telling hits, but he seemed barely affected, and as he lashed out another grimlock went down, oozing blood from several deep gashes in its torso. Shay lowered her spear as she rushed to his aid, but before she could reach him he turned and pointed his sword across the room.

"Get the warlock!" he commanded.

Shay veered off, and the six remaining grimlocks pressed their attack, fighting without care or concern about their own lives. One got in a two-handed strike that smashed hard into the small of Talen's back. The blow would have likely paralyzed a living man, but Talen merely grunted and spun around, delivering a blow that disintegrated much of the grimlock's jaw. The creature fell back, but only for a few seconds, as blood fountained down its chest from the grievous hurt.

The vampire spawn came on now to the fallen knight's aid, but Talen again forestalled them. "Destroy the mind flayers!" he shouted, the command reverberating with power. All five vampires responded at once, shifting their course to rush toward the pillars. The blue glow surrounding them had intensified, and shifting forms were beginning to take shape between them, as the energies coming off the stone basin were directed through the living minds of the illithid attendants of the Overmind.

Four of the grimlocks fighting Talen sought to disengage, to intercept the vampires and protect their masters. Talen ran one through, thrusting the full length of his sword through its body. As it slid off his blade he flicked it out in a full extension, slicing the hamstring of another. The grimlock nearly fell, but it somehow was able to remain vertical, dropping its axe and leaping at Talen in a desperate effort to seize his swordarm.

The other two grimlocks rushed the vampires, but the girl, Calla, stepped away from the bandits to meet them. She did not reach for the small sword at her waist, instead slamming her tiny fists into the first of the grimlocks. The blows struck like hammers, and the grimlock staggered, its life force drained by the hit. The other one tried to get by her, to stop the others, but she shot out a leg as it passed, tripping it and sending it to the floor.

Dar snarled as blows rained down on his body, unable to do much to protect himself with the tentacles holding his arms tight. Zahera seized his leg and nearly tore off his right boot; yanking free, he smashed the zombie's face so hard that he could feel its skull cracking. The dead woman stumbled back a few steps, but once it had recovered its balance it came forward again. Alderis—the damned *elf*, of all things—thrust a silvered knife into the meat of his leg just above the knee, and he grimaced at the sudden pain. Apparently the damned wizard was a better fighter in death than he had been in life. Dar had other matters on his mind, however, as Marcus, Nelan, and

Alexion loomed over him, hands clawing at his armor as they sought out a soft spot to start tearing.

And then blue fire erupted all around him.

Allera had to remind herself that the zombies were no longer her friends, just empty husks. Still, it was disquieting to see the familiar forms spasm and collapse as the healing energies of her *mass cure* ravaged them. They were stronger than typical zombies, but her spell was more than powerful enough to destroy all five of them. She channeled more of the power into Dar, and to her other companions nearby, easing their hurts and restoring the warmth stolen by the chilling effect of the tentacles.

She was not especially surprised when a black bolt streaked out of the darkness toward her. Her *holy aura* flared as the *eldritch blast* struck it, and while she could feel the tumult of energies swirling in mad chaos around her, she was not harmed by it.

Turning toward the undead warlock, she again summoned her power.

But before she could unleash another healing spell, a sudden flash of light drew her attention around. The nimbus surrounding the pillars had strengthened to a wild, surging aura, which coalesced into tendrils of liquid energy that now came together into more substantial form. Between the pillars nine forms took shape, figures of blue light and psionic energy, roughly man-shaped, although none stood less than nine feet in height. As they stepped out of the glow of the pillars they took on a more solid aspect, and the trembling of the floor under their feet indicated that these new foes were all too real.

Chapter 331

A KICK IN THE ASTRAL

With a yell, Dar tore free of the tentacles holding his arms, and staggered to his feet. "What in all the hells are those things?"

"They are not undead!" Allera yelled, her attention split between the appearance of the new foes and Navev, who was falling back along the wall of the room. Shaylara was rushing toward him, her longspear coming down as she picked up speed. She spared barely a glance at the summoned giants, even when one turned and started to lumber after her.

Varo and Letellia materialized together a few feet away, the sorceress shivering from her renewed contact with the penetrating cold aura of the *chilling tentacles*. "They are

astral constructs, entities fashioned out of psionic energies,” the cleric said. “I have never before seen any this large before. Be wary; they are as strong as they look.”

“Wonderful,” Dar said, stepping forward to meet the onrushing constructs. With one of them heading off toward Shay, half of the remainder shifted left to face Talen’s charging vampires, while the other half started toward the living companions. Between the two groups, the *chilling tentacles* continued to mindlessly twist and seek, but all of them were now safely out of their reach.

Navev turned, intending to remedy that by invoking its power anew. Shay was still too far away to stop it, but Allera lifted her hand and hit it with a targeted blast of healing energy. The warlock screamed as positive energy ripped through its undead body. It lifted a hand, dark energies forming between its fingers, but it hesitated; its last *eldritch blast* had faltered against her *holy aura*, and Navev was not certain that it could withstand another *mass cure* of that magnitude.

Shay’s yell brought its attention around. The warlock summoned its powers again, and there was a brief flash of energy around its form. Shay snarled and put on a last burst of speed as the spearhead drove unerringly toward Navev’s breast. But the magical weapon only passed harmlessly through empty air; Navev had transported away, leaving only another illusion behind it.

Shay barely had time to jerk the spearhead aside before it struck the wall behind with the full force of her momentum behind it. She glanced back; the astral construct was closing fast, a thick white arm coming up to strike.

The vampiric bandits leapt at the larger constructs with reckless abandon, hacking at the white forms with their short blades. Talen had not equipped his troops with magical weapons, however, and despite the considerable strength behind the vampires’ blows, their initial assault had little effect upon their foes. Only Drudge, armed with Saracek’s magical greatsword, was able to inflict significant damage in that first assault. The constructs, likewise, possessed no silver to use against the vampires, but they more than made up for it with the sheer power behind their attacks. The vampire spawn withstood the initial exchange far better than mortal men would have, but even so all four took devastating hits that knocked them roughly about like ninepins.

Dar was tougher still than the vampires, but he too found himself in some difficulty as the constructs reached him. Their reach gave them advantage, and he took a pair of hits across his shoulders that felt like sledgehammers. Dar stepped into the reach of the nearest and smote it across the body with *Valor*. The hit was solid, and it cut through the sticky white substance of the monster, but as Dar watched in surprise, the outline of its body began to shift and change. The transformation took only a second, but when it was done the construct had taken on more definition to its form, the substance covering its torso and legs thickening until it looked almost like the thing was wearing a suit of plate armor.

Dar struck it again, and found that the stuff resembled armor in another way, as his stroke was turned away. And then he had to fight for his life, as the second creature smashed him hard across the side, and he had to fall back to avoid being crushed between them.

With Dar fully engaged by two of the creatures, the other two split around them, coming toward Varo, Allera, and Letellia. The cleric, lost in a complicated casting, paid them no heed, but Letellia fired off a *lightning bolt* that arced through one of the constructs before it clipped one of the pair battling Dar. The electrical discharge visibly scorched the creatures' pale bodies, but neither appeared to be seriously damaged.

The one Letellia had blasted first stopped its charge. Its form rippled and shifted, but this one, rather than growing armor, took on a form that was eerily similar to that of the sorceress. The construct lifted a hand toward Letellia, and a bolt of electrical energy lanced from its palm, blasting into her. The bolt penetrated her *holy aura* as though it was not even there, but her *shield* turned at least some of it, saving her from the worst of the blast.

"They are adapting in response to our attacks!" Allera exclaimed. Her foe was still coming toward her, picking up speed as it bypassed the melee around Dar. Fully engaged by the first two constructs, the fighter could do nothing to stop it.

Allera glanced toward the twisting field of tentacles, weighing her chances if she tried to lure the construct within their reach. Her *repulsion* spell had been spent, and her remaining powers were defensive in nature, of little use against a monstrosity such as the astral construct. But a loud trampling noise behind her announced the arrival of reinforcements. A pair of fiendish rhinoceroses summoned by Varo charged headlong into the fray; one impaled the construct facing Allera, driving its horn deep into its thick body, while the other struck the one that had just blasted Letellia with a glancing blow, spinning both rhino and construct around from the force of the impact.

As another grimlock collapsed, blood fountaining from the deep gashes in its torso, Talen started to move to the aid of his warriors. The last grimlock he faced was mortally wounded, but still it leapt at the vampire knight, spending the last of its life in an effort to delay its foe. Talen knocked aside its axe with a look of contempt and drove his sword through its body, almost to the hilt. The grimlock flapped at him as it fell, blood splashing all over its foe. Talen had the look of a butcher, his black garb soaked with crimson from the creatures he had violently dispatched.

His army was having difficulty. The bandits, compelled by the will of their master, pressed their assault, but it was clear that the constructs had the upper hand. The vampires had abandoned their ineffective weapons in favor of slam attacks, but the constructs had no life-force to drain, and their efforts were just as futile. Drudge was picked up by a construct and hurled across the room, bouncing off the hard floor several times before finally sliding to a stop almost fifty feet away. Hedder leapt at a construct's head, only to be intercepted in midair by a hand that snapped down around its ankle like

a steel shackle. Another construct reached over and grabbed the vampire's head; between the pair they tore the hapless bandit to pieces. The vampire dissolved into mist as the constructs sought out new adversaries. Utar and Needles fought on, but were driven back, absorbing bone-crushing blows from the astral constructs.

"Shay, look out!" Allera warned, but the scout had already sensed the threat lumbering toward her from behind. She snapped up her spear and spun it around, jamming its end into the intersection of wall and floor a split second before the full weight of the onrushing construct struck the gleaming steel head. The astral construct impaled itself on the spear, its momentum driving the weapon through its chest and out its back. The wound would have been fatal had the creature been mortal, but the construct merely took the hit, continuing to surge forward toward the scout. Its arm twisted and elongated, taking on a form similar to that of the spear that had run it through, its fingers coming together in the shape of a blade. It swung at Shay with that newly-fashioned weapon, but she rolled with the impact, and took only a minor hit across the shoulders. Her sword hissed from its scabbard as she came up into a crouch a few paces distant, while the construct turned ponderously, her spear still stuck in its body.

The battle had dissolved into a chaos of melees. Dar exchanged titanic blows with two of the astral constructs; he withstood a pair of slams that nearly took him to the ground, and which would have ended him if not for another *mass cure* from Allera. Both constructs were damaged, but both were now protected by the armor that had grown around their bodies in response to the fighter's attacks, and he had to resort to more precise attacks to damage them. Each hit he took drove him back, and within a few moments he was once more on the edge of the *chilling tentacles* effect, the tendrils probing eagerly at his back, just out of their reach.

"Blast it! Get to the mind flayers!" Talen shouted. Utar and Needles tried to obey, but the constructs laid into them as they rushed past. Utar's jaw was pulverized by a blow that laid him out upon the cold stone, while Needles was seized by the cloak by another and hurled around, sliding thirty feet back into the *chilling tentacles*, which immediately fastened upon him.

The other two came at Talen, who darted between them, taking hits but avoiding their grasp. And then he was through, headed toward the pillars and the stone basin within their circle. On the far side of the room, Shay likewise heeded his command. She ran between the construct's legs, hacking at the back of its left knee with her sword as it passed. The blow had little effect, but it was slow in coming around, and by the time it had turned to pursue her, she was twenty feet away and running full-out toward the pillars.

Varo brought down a *flame strike* into the center of the room, at the source of the blue glow. But the column of flames flickered out as it struck the sapphire aura within the pillars, and the spell had dissolved utterly by the time it neared the ground. Annoyed, Varo immediately began casting another spell.

His rhinos were likewise being countered. The construct on the left had been impaled through the gut, and the summoned beast was continuing to drive forward, thrusting the horn deeper into the monster's body. But the construct adapted; it reached down and seized the rhino's head, while its head twisted and reformed, a long white horn emerging from its forehead. With an impressive display of sheer strength, the construct tore the rhino's horn free of its gut, and yanked the rhino's head back until the thing was nearly standing upright. Then, predictably, the newly-horned head came down, and it drove its implement into the rhino's exposed throat. The fiendish creature let out a mewling noise as it toppled over backward, blood fountaining from the terrible puncture. The construct made quick work to finish it, diving forward and ripping the rhino's exposed belly open from neck to tail. The summoned monster dissolved rapidly, leaving behind only a greasy black smear to advertise its existence.

The other rhino was struck at point-blank range by another electrical bolt from the construct that had copied Letellia's form. The blast savaged the creature, which lunged at the construct again, driving its horn through the monster's leg. The construct reached down and placed a hand over the rhino's skull; blue and white energies exploded from the touch. The construct rode the rhino down, blasting it until black smoke surrounded both in a toxic haze.

Letellia came forward to lay down a *wall of ice*, intending to separate off at least some of the astral constructs from the raging battle. But as she looked for the best place to create the barrier, she caught sight of movement from within the ring of pillars.

A cascade of mental energies radiated out from the center of the room, as the mind flayers appeared in the spaces between the pillars. The vampires were not affected by the *mind blasts*, but the same could not be said for their living companions. Varo and Allera, their considerable wills bolstered further by the *holy auras*, withstood the mental assault.

But both Letellia and Dar were overcome. The timing was particularly poor for Dar, who was stunned right as one of the constructs was lunging forward to attack. The fighter took the hit square in the middle of the chest, and was knocked backwards, flipping head-over-heels before he landed in the soft embrace in the *chilling tentacles*, which immediately lashed around his arms, legs, and throat, tightening once more their deadly embrace.

Chapter 332

PLENTY OF PAIN TO GO AROUND

It was impossible to tell what was going through the illithid's mind as Talen roared and descended upon it with the fury of a raging inferno. But the creature did not flinch, holding its ground as the knight charged to meet it.

Only at the last second did it shift, extending a slender arm to touch the attacking fighter. But Talen's blade gave him reach, and before the creature could do something unpleasant to him he cut through its skull, driving the blade down through its head and body, exiting under its right armpit.

There was surprisingly little blood as the pieces of it slid to the ground.

Two more flayers came at him from the left and right. They knew their mental powers could not hurt them, but they clearly had something in mind. He feinted left with his sword, keeping the illithid at bay for a split second while he pivoted and snapped the sword around to his right. Clammy flesh parted and thin bones crunched, and the flayer staggered back, crippled by a terrible wound that gaped open in its side. Air hissed from its punctured lung.

Talen was already shifting to face the other, but it came in too fast, and brushed his arm. Talen felt a sudden twist of vertigo as reality swirled around him. Hatred and anger filled him like a weapon, and he barely resisted the illithid's attempt to *plane shift* him into the Abyss.

He raised his sword to strike, but never got a chance to counterattack. A long white arm slashed down, and thick fingers locked onto his skull. And then he was flying, arcing across the room. At the apogee of the arc he nearly brushed the ceiling, thirty feet high.

Landing hurt less than it would have, before, but it still hurt.

Shay charged into the ring of pillars opposite Talen, only a few seconds after his initial arrival. Another mind flayer faced her, its tentacles moving in a pattern as it awaited her rush. She too expected a counter, and so when it lunged for her she shifted subtly, sweeping her blade up with a flick of her wrist, under its reach as she slid past it. The sword bit deep, but even with her augmented strength she was not Talen, and the illithid drew back, injured but hale.

She could not spare time for the one she had injured as the others were upon her in an instant. Evading, she was grazed by one that attempted to *plane shift* her, and like Talen she experienced a surge of disorientation that faded as her innate will, augmented by the amulet she wore around her neck, enabled her to shrug off the flayer's power.

But even that brief moment of vulnerability cost her. Even as she felt the lumbering thud of the astral construct's tread behind her, something hard smashed into the space between her shoulder blades, and she was flying forward. The bull rush smashed her

forward into the edge of the stone basin, and as she pitched forward a bright blue flash erupted around her, and everything vanished in a haze of pain.

Allera rushed forward, flinching as forms much bigger than she clashed and flailed about the battlefield. One of the astral constructs had dissolved into nothing, although Allera could not see what had destroyed it. The three that were left, while all damaged to some degree, remained a dire threat. Varo had summoned more allies, a trio of giant centipedes that had launched into the astral constructs at his command. One of them crashed hard to the floor not three paces from where she was running, and as she pressed forward the construct that had smote it reached down and tore its head off. It was obvious that Varo's helpers weren't going to last for very long, but for the moment they were engaging the constructs and keeping them busy.

Allera's attention was focused on Dar, who was struggling feebly in the grasp of Navev's *chilling tentacles*. Stunned by the flayer *mind blast*, he had no chance of escaping the deadly constriction of those thick black cords. Heedless of her own tired body, the healer thrust herself into the circle of grasping tendrils, reaching for Dar. Three tentacles seized her, but not before she had gotten close enough to grab his left foot, and unleash a *heal* spell into him.

Clarity returned to Dar's eyes in an instant, and with a roar he started tearing himself free of the grasping tentacles. One of the constructs, attracted by Allera's mad rush, came in after them, ignoring the tentacles that entwined its legs, reaching out to deliver solid blows to both the healer and the fighter. Allera cried out and tried to escape, but the tentacles had already snared her.

Talen was rejoined by Drudge and Needles as he headed back toward the pillars. He'd dropped his sword when he'd hit the ground, and as he paused to recover it, he scanned the chamber. The four astral constructs that had pursued him to the center of the room had reformed into a line, and were coming toward them again. Utar had joined Hedder, stomped by one of the constructs, reduced to a gaseous cloud that drifted aimlessly off to the side of the room. Calla, off to the left, was rising from the corpse of the last grimlock fighter. Her face was bloody, and the smile she flashed at him was crimson. Irritated, he gestured for her to join them.

He could not see Shay, but as he looked to the right, he saw that his companions were having a great deal of trouble dealing with the constructs on their side of the room. Somehow Dar and Allera had managed to get themselves entangled in the *chilling tentacles* again. One of the constructs had followed them in, and was engaged in beating on them vigorously. Varo thus far had hung back, throwing more summoned creatures into the meat grinder.

"You want me to help them out?" Needles asked him.

“No,” Talen said. His voice was level as he watched the oncoming constructs. “Needles, Drudge, spread out to the left and right and make like you are trying to get past them. Calla, you’re on me.”

As the vampires moved forward to engage the constructs, a column of liquid fire descended onto them from above. The *flame strike* caught three of the four, inflicting what looked like generous destruction upon their artificial bodies. As Needles and Drudge broke off, a construct turned toward each of them, moving swiftly to block their route toward the pillars in the center of the room. The other two kept on coming forward. Talen walked forward calmly, the diminutive Calla trailing in his wake.

Talen picked the one that looked to be most damaged, and as he entered its reach, he lunged forward with surprising speed. It smashed a huge fist down across his back, but he merely took the hit and drove his sword down into its body with a cry that shook the chamber with its intensity. His blade, backed by potent magic, bit deep into its substance, opening a gash that continued to widen until the thing split in two and dissolved into nothing.

The second constructs came at Talen from the side, but even as he pivoted to meet it Calla leapt onto it, smashing at it with her tiny fists. The construct seized her and threw her down to the ground, but before it could anything worse Talen laid into it with a full attack, and it too came apart, dissolving into nothing within seconds once its cohesion had been shattered.

Dar tore free of the *chilling tentacles* yet again, his face twisted into a paroxysm of rage as he drove forward. The astral construct was securely held in place by no less than four tentacles twined around its legs, but it could still reach Allera, and it lifted an arm to deliver another punishing blow. The healer was in dire condition, the icy chill in the tentacles sapping life from her body, and she could do nothing to evade the assault.

Dar lunged forward and met the descending fist with a violent swing of *Valor*. His blade caught the astral construct’s arm just above the wrist, and it took off the entire hand, which flew off into the swarming tentacles. The construct lurched forward, off-balance but unable to fall with the tentacles holding it.

The construct started to twist its body to bring its intact arm into play, but before it could attack again a stream of liquid fire blasted into its torso, followed a second later by a second. The damaged construct could not withstand the licking flames, and as its substance charred black it came apart under the tearing tentacles.

Dar was at Allera’s side in an instant, fighting to rip the tentacles off her body. “Go on... leave me...” she managed weakly.

“Not a fucking chance,” he said. This time he didn’t bother trying to cut the magical bindings, but slid *Valor* back into its scabbard and went to work pulling them off her with sheer strength.

The last of Varo's summoned centipedes succumbed to the devastating pounding of one of the astral constructs. The two astral constructs bore damage, but their wounds were minor. Letellia, recovered from the mind blast by virtue of Varo's *heal* spell, directed the last of her *scorching rays* into one of the constructs, and it turned toward them, joined a moment later by its companion, treading through the black wisps of Varo's dissolving summons.

"Can you stop them?" Letellia asked the cleric.

"We shall see," Varo replied, lifting his wand and calling down another *flame strike*. The holy fire obscured the constructs as it enveloped them, but as the spell ended both reappeared right in front of them, their bodies blackened and scorched, but still deadly. They proved that as they charged into Varo and Letellia, both of them taking solid hits that knocked them violently backwards.

Shaylara shook her head to clear it, and looked up to see several mind flayers looming over her. One seized her arm, and again she felt a wave of disorientation seep through her body as it attempted to yank her out of the Prime Material. She tore free, but knew that she could not rely on resisting those touches for long. Her will had been boosted by her transformation into a vampire, and the amulet she bore protected her against evil spells, but the power wielded by the illithids was ancient and potent, and behind her the part of her mind that was still capable of feeling emotion could sense the roiling potency of the Overmind, trying in vain to gain hold of her consciousness.

Two more mind flayers lunged at her. She sprang up, leaping high into the air. Her strength had likewise grown considerably, and augmented by her magical boots she surged high above the illithids. Her target shifted as she reached the arc of her leap and began to descend, but she was still able to plant her feet on the shoulder of the astral construct, and push off as it lifted its spear-hand to strike her. It was impossible to apply any finesse or control to the second jump, but it carried her past the ring of pillars, and as she landed she was able to turn her shoulder and come up into a crouch, her sword at the ready.

The astral construct came pounding after her, and she was forced to dive to the side to avoid being impaled by its lance. The edge of the weapon grazed her side, but the wound was not serious, and she was able to draw back, giving her more space to recover her stance.

The mind flayers, she noticed, had come to the edge of the ring of pillars, but they did not pursue her. *Interesting*, she thought, as understanding whispered in the back of her mind.

But there was no more time for pondering, as the construct whirled around and came at her again.

On the far side of the room, Talen's forces were suffering setbacks. Needles had nearly gotten past the construct pursuing him; the bandit tried to lure it toward the *chilling tentacles*, but the entity's long reach foiled his escape. Its fist twisted and reshaped into a pair of long blades, each almost a foot long. It drove the blades through the vampire's skull, impaling him. Needles kicked out a few times, his legs jerking in a brief spasm, then he went limp. The vampire dissolved into mist, joining Utar and Hedder.

Drudge did not last much longer. The vampire tried to dart between the construct's legs, but as he shot through it smashed a fist down onto his back, knocking him prone. The former bandit tried to get up, but the construct seized his ankles, and lifted him into the air. It smashed its prisoner down hard into the floor. Drudge actually survived two of those impacts, but on the third, his head cracked, and he too was reduced to a trailing hiss of insubstantial mist.

Talen, meanwhile, strode forward. His eyes were on the mind flayers that had formed up at the edge of the ring of pillars, watching him. He did not shift his gaze or his measured pace as the constructs that had slain his troops charged in at him, but as the first lunged to strike, sweeping at him with those deadly blades, he pivoted and slashed his sword up, deflecting the powerful blow. He came in under its reach, trusting to Calla to keep the other one off his back. The construct tried to push him away with its other arm, but the fallen knight easily avoided the thrust, and his counters dug deep furrows in its torso. Behind him Calla cried out as she was hit hard and hurled aside by the second construct, but he kept his attention focused on the first, finishing it off with a cut that took off its left leg at the hip. As it dissolved he turned and met the other, as it stood over the fallen girl.

"Dance with me, cocksucker," Talen said, stepping forward to challenge the construct. The thing, mindless though it seemed to be, recognized the greater threat—or perhaps the master holding its strings did. He laughed as it smashed him across the chest, a blow that would have knocked the wind out of him, at the very least. But he no longer had any "wind" to lose. He stepped forward, and with Mailliw Catspar's blade set to work.

Allera sagged against Dar as the fighter dragged her out of the field of *chilling tentacles*. With their escape, the invocation seemed to have finally run its course, and the sinuous black tendrils dissolved into nothingness. Dar held her up. "Are you all right? Allera, c'mon, we need you with us here."

The healer groaned, but she summoned a reserve of energy from somewhere within, and blinked. "I... I'm all right. Just... a moment..." She closed her eyes, and drew upon her powers for another *mass cure* spell. She could feel the fluttering flickers that were the life forces of Dar, Letellia, and Varo, and she channeled the power into them. She could also sense the dark loci that were the vampires. She knew better than to extend her magic to them. Not now, anyway.

As she completed her spell, she sensed another mental intrusion slide off of her defenses. Blinking, she realized that Dar was no longer beside her.

She felt a cold chill as she saw him walking toward Talen, *Valor* blazing in his hand.

Chapter 333

OLD FRIENDS

Talen grunted as his follow-through sliced through the body of the last astral construct, destroying it. He'd taken a beating, but his body was already restoring the physical damage he'd suffered, and there was no threat to his mind; he perceived the mental attacks of the illithids and their Overmind as a dim buzzing on the edges of his perception.

He glanced down at Calla, who was slowly getting up. Her jaw moved but only odd sounds came out; the construct had smashed her hard across the face and shattered bone in half a dozen places.

She would recover. Talen turned and started walking toward the pillars again. The mind flayers were still there, watching him, but there was nothing they could do to stop him.

He caught the flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, heard the familiar clank of metal. Once more he did not appear to take notice until the last minute, when he spun and whipped his sword around in a blazing arc.

Metal clanged hard on metal once, again. Dar was incredibly strong, and Talen could feel the hatred radiating from *Valor*, but *he* was the stronger, now, and it was the human fighter who gave ground in the initial exchange.

"You weak-minded fool," Talen said.

Dar's only response was a violent attack. Again the magic swords clashed, and this time both combatants took wounds. Talen grimaced as *Valor* bit into his side under the edge of his breastplate, while red blood poured down Dar's arm from a long gash just below his shoulder.

"Dar, no!" Allera shouted, running up behind him. She tried to grab him, but he thrust her away, not taking his eyes off of Talen as he moved into position for another assault. Blood trailed from the elbow of his wounded arm, forming patters on the ground in his wake.

“Can you clear his mind?” Talen asked, likewise adjusting.

“I can break the enchantment... but the spell takes a full minute to cast...”

“Well then, hopefully you can resurrect the corpse,” Talen said, meeting Dar’s attack with a visceral eagerness shining in his dead eyes.

Swords blurred and bit, crunching through armor and flesh. Talen ducked a blow that might have cut his head off had it connected, countering with a thrust that punched through the layered armor protecting Dar’s flank. Dar brought *Valor* down hard onto Talen’s shoulder, crumpling the plate there and savaging the joint beneath. Talen nearly lost his grip on his sword, but he lashed out with his other hand, smashing Dar across the face. The fighter staggered back, stunned for a moment. Talen used the interval to reassert his grip on his sword.

“To think, I was once impressed with your skill.”

Dar snarled and started forward again, but before the two could collide once more, Allera leapt in front of Talen, facing Dar. “If you wish to strike him, you will have to kill me first,” Allera said to the *charmed* fighter. Talen started to thrust her away, but she would not relinquish her position.

“You take a grave risk, healer,” he said, his eyes locked on Dar’s.

Dar lifted *Valor*, and Talen tensed. But then he froze, the blade quivering in his hand.

“I cannot... hold... they are in... my mind...”

“Go!” Allera yelled back at Talen, rushing to Dar. She turned him away from the vampire and the pillars, grasping his head, pouring what healing she could into him.

Talen did not linger longer. He saw that Shay had her foe well in hand, darting in and out of its reach, tumbling out of the way of its spear-hand, delivering sweeping blows that left long gashes in its substance. He couldn’t quite make out Varo and Letellia clearly; the far side of the room where they’d been was thick with smoke from the cleric’s summonings and evocations. He could hear the sounds of violence, which suggested that at least one of the two was still alive.

But his attention was focused ahead, on the mind flayers. There were still a lot of them left, a half-dozen at least. They watched him in silence, no doubt working their dark powers on his human allies.

“They do not leave the protection of the pillars!” Shay yelled at him, ducking under another thrust from the construct. She leapt into the air and kicked off its chest, her sword lashing out to carve a deep runnel across its face. As it started to come apart, she reached down and recovered her spear.

Talen paused some fifteen paces distant. The buzzing noise in his head intensified, but he easily thrust it aside. "Your pathetic powers cannot protect you from the likes of me," he said. He gestured to Shay, who came over to join him. Calla crept up from behind, giving Dar and Allera a wide berth.

"Give me your bow," Talen said to Shay. He took the weapon, a compact Legion bow with a strong pull, and calmly set the string.

His first shot caught a mind flayer solidly in the chest. The creature staggered back, but made no sound.

A pulse of psionic energy filled the room. Dar screamed and crumpled. Letellia's cry followed on his. Allera clutched her head, trying to fight off the power that surged over the mental walls of her will.

Talen ignored it, loaded another arrow, and shot a second flayer in the shoulder. Shay, laughing, drew out her throwing axe and buried it in the gut of another illithid.

Suddenly the mind flayers surged forward, abandoning the protection of the pillars to attack. They closed the distance quickly; one dropped as Shay lowered her spear and impaled it, but the others came on, their almost skeletal claws extended to attack.

Calla started forward, but Talen held her back. "Wait for it," he whispered.

The illithids staggered as a group as power tore through them. *Varo's mass inflict serious wounds* spell was devastating, and while their innate resistances and strong will protected them to some degree, six of the seven remaining illithids suffered grievous wounds that opened all over their wretched bodies.

Still, they came on.

Talen's sword flashed, taking off the head of the first illithid. The next lunged forward to touch him, but his follow-through smoothly severed its arm at the elbow. It crumpled. Two more leapt over the bodies of the first pair, but Talen met them with a blur of steel. One did manage to touch him, but he resisted its power, and a few seconds later ended it with a blow that sliced off half its skull.

Calla and Shay made short work of the others. None of the illithid attacks had succeeded.

Talen was already walking forward over the bodies, toward the pillars. A wall of flickering energies was starting to coalesce between the pylons, but as Talen reached it he lashed violently down with his sword, and the barrier parted before it could take on solid form. The vampire thrust himself through into the space beyond.

The buzzing noise in his head had become a crescendo. He thought he could hear voices in it, now.

Whatever the Overmind had to say was of no importance to the vampire. He strode forward, toward the basin, lifting his sword.

Blue fire flared outward, engulfing him. The Overmind's power caught him up like a child's doll, and he was flung back, landing hard at the edge of the circle of pillars.

"This may not be as easy as I thought," Talen said, as Shay helped him up. His skin was covered with electrical burns where the energy discharge had touched him.

Those burns got worse a moment later as a bolt of lightning streaked out from the far side of the room. Shay dodged out of the path of the bolt, but Talen was struck full on, and was blasted back against the nearest pillar.

"The sorceress!" Shay hissed in warning, as Letellia materialized out of the smoke. Her clothes were torn and blackened, and she moved with a jerky, hesitant motion. But there was no doubt that she had been the source of the attack.

"The big guy's coming again, too," Calla said, drawing their attention back behind them. Dar was coming steadily closer, and they could see the vacant, empty stare in his eyes. This was no mere charm; their companions were thralls to the Overmind, their bodies enslaved by the grim entity that occupied the pool in the center of the room. If they needed confirmation of that fact, it came when they saw Allera lying on the ground behind Dar, her face covered in her own blood.

Chapter 334

THRALLS OF THE OVERMIND

"Shay, keep that bitch busy," Talen said, grimacing as his blackened skin cracked with his movement. As the scout hastened off to confront Letellia, he turned to face Dar, who was approaching slowly. The fighter too moved somewhat awkwardly, as if he was resisting the Overmind's touch. Or maybe it was just that the vat of dead brains was not used to controlling human bodies directly. Either way, Talen knew that nothing short of death was going to stop his foe, this time.

"So be it," he said.

"The Overmind is our foe," Varo said, seeming to appear out of nowhere as he approached from the left. The cleric was in poor shape, limping slightly and with char

covering the clothes on the left side of his body. He drew upon his magic, and healing power flowed into him.

Talen acknowledged him with a nod. "Can you stop him?" he said, indicating the approaching fighter.

"I will try," Varo said. But he merely stepped forward a few paces, stopping in the path that Dar would have to take to get to Talen. The cleric clutched his divine focus, and calmly drew upon the power of his patron.

Talen glanced at Calla. "If he gets past the priest, do your best to delay him."

"Yes, master."

Talen turned and headed once more for the Overmind.

Allera groaned, and lifted her head from the cold stone. The taste of blood was in her mouth; her own blood. Memory came back; Dar had struck her, hard, but not before she'd seen the change in his eyes. He'd fought off the mind flayer's charm, to protect her, but this was different; the hand that had struck her had not been his to control. She was lucky that she been so close to him; had he had room to swing *Valor*, she might not have woken at all.

She'd been healed; she recognized the aftereffects of a *cure wounds* spell as well as she knew her own name. Varo... she saw him now, facing Dar, who was closing the distance between them quickly. The cleric met her eyes briefly, and she saw something there, a silent message that she somehow was able to understand. One word flashed in her mind: *duty*.

She pulled herself to her feet, and started moving.

Shaylara screamed as a streak of hot fire blasted her side. She threw herself forward, and the second *scorching ray* passed harmlessly past her. Letellia was tracking her movements, and the third blast caught her on the leg, crinkling the gray, lifeless flesh under her armor. Shay grimaced, but came up into a run, finishing the curving arc she'd taken in her charge toward the enthralled sorceress. Letellia was casting another spell, but Shay was too close, now. Her spear shot out, piercing the woman's shoulder. But Letellia was still protected by her *stoneskin*, and the wound, while serious, was not enough to take her down quickly.

Shay was ready for the woman's next gambit, and when the *scorching rays* came again, the scout was diving to the side. She avoided the first two blasts, and the last caught her only a glancing blow, searing the flesh of her left ear, and scorching the surrounding skin. And then she was clear, and leaping. Letellia tried to draw back, but Shay was on her before she could escape, dropping her spear as she seized the smaller woman in a neck hold.

“Yield, spell-weaver.” But Letellia did not stop fighting. Shay remembered at the last moment Letellia’s particular talents in escaping holds, and she clasped her hand over the woman’s mouth to keep her from invoking her magic. Letellia was protected with a *death ward*, and Shay could not drain her life energy through the grapple. But she was far stronger, and Letellia could not break free. Still she fought, scratching at Shay’s arms and head with her nails.

Shay dropped her jaws to the woman’s neck, but Letellia’s *stoneskin* foiled the vampire’s bite. Shay chuckled, and tightened her grasp on the woman’s neck, cutting off her supply of air. She maintained the hold until the woman went limp in her grasp, unconscious.

Dar barely seemed to notice Varo until he was almost atop the man. Varo did not try to reason with him, bringing up his shield in a defensive stance. Dar swung *Valor*, and the cleric grunted as the blade smashed against his shield, hard enough to dent the magical steel. The axiomatic sword rebounded and started to come down again, this time aimed at the cleric’s throat. But Varo was faster, reaching in and placing his hand upon the fighter’s chest. Magical energy flared, and Dar staggered as the cleric’s *dispel evil* spell brought lucidity back to his eyes.

But only for a moment. “I cannot fight it,” Dar said, his body trembling.

“I understand,” Varo said. He reached down and seized *Valor*; the men’s eyes met, and Dar released his grip on the sword. Varo did not hesitate, hurling the weapon across the chamber.

Dar cried out and seized the cleric, hurling him roughly aside. Varo went down, sliding on the smooth stone. The fighter started toward the pillars, but the willowy, black-clad girl appeared in his path.

“No you don’t, big man,” Calla said. Her jaw had healed enough for the words to be clear, but she still looked ragged.

He walked forward, but the lithe girl blurred as she lunged at him, her lips drawn back to reveal her long ivory fangs. But for all the vampire spawn’s unnatural speed and agility, Dar was faster. He whipped his hand back and unslung his club in a single smooth motion. The heavy weapon smashed hard into the junction where her neck met her left shoulder, and she crumpled to the floor, clawing at the bare stone as she struggled unsuccessfully to rise.

Talen screamed as the blue glow protecting the Overmind threw him back once more. This time he’d gotten close enough to look into the pool, where lumps of corrupt matter floated in a dense slick of black fluid. Even in his unlife state he could sense the potency that blazed off it like the light of a sun. He was not sure how he could hurt a thing like this, a soulless entity that lacked flesh and muscle and bone.

Still, he tried.

He hit the ground and rolled, grimacing as the tendrils of blue energy danced across his back. He could get no further, and the blue glow protected it against magic.

Then he saw Allera step into the ring of pillars. The healer's face was tight with concentration, and Talen could see beads of sweat mingling with the blood that slicked her face. Her *holy aura* had faded, and he knew that the full force of the Overmind's will had to be smashing against her mind.

Talen heard a noise to his left, beyond the pillars, and saw Calla go down. Dar no longer held *Valor*, but he was clutching that damned big club of his, and it was pretty obvious what his objective was. As he glanced back, he saw that Allera saw it too. She held his eyes with a surprising strength of focus.

"Swear to me, that you will not kill him."

Talen's mouth started to twist into a smirk, but there was something in her that gave him pause. He was no longer a knight, or even a man; what meaning did his word have now? But she would not release him, and he realized that the words, while meaningless to him, were necessary for her to go on.

"So be it," he said, sliding his sword back into its scabbard. He turned to the pillars to face Dar, flexing his fingers within his gauntlets. Behind him, Allera turned and plunged into the blue glow that surrounded the basin of the Overmind. He waited for her to cry out, to see her driven back as he had been, but she vanished into that aura, and did not return.

And then he had to focus on Dar.

"I swore to let you live," Talen said to him. "But I made no promises that you would not hurt."

The fighter swung the heavy club as soon as he was within reach. For a moment it looked like the blow would crush Talen's left arm against his body, but the vampire had been ready for the attack, and he stepped back smoothly, and the club flashed through empty air. Talen slid forward in its wake, and smashed the fighter across the front of his helm, hard enough to snap his head around to the left. Dar stumbled back a step; his helmet had absorbed only a little of the force of Talen's strike.

"Done already?" Talen asked, chuckling as he stepped forward to finish him off.

Dar came up with surprising speed, driving the head of his club into Talen's side with enough force to crack the bone. Too late, Talen realized that Dar had been feigning more serious injury to lure him in. The knight tried to grab the weapon, relying on his

superior strength to pry it free of Dar's grasp, but the fighter shifted and smacked the end of the haft hard into Talen's forehead. Now it was the vampire that staggered back, and he could not defend himself from a third blow that caromed solidly into the center of his breastplate, driving him back into the nearest pillar with enough force to crack the ancient stone. His vision blurred, and for a moment the only thing he could hear was the omnipresent buzzing of the Overmind's power.

And then his senses cleared, just in time for him to see Dar's club descending toward his skull.

Chapter 335

THE POWER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Allera lost all sense of sight and surroundings as she pushed deeper into the ring of fire. Blue flickers danced along her arms and legs, burning her flesh. They stabbed into her cheeks, and tortured the skin around her eyes. She could not see; for all she knew, she had been blinded.

Power smashed into her like a battering ram, missiles hurled from siege engines crafted of mental potency and dark evil. The Overmind was... awesome, the strength of its will greater than that of the demons she'd battled, stronger than the clerics of Orcus, stronger even than Maphistal. She knew that if she faltered, even for an instant, that power would sweep away everything that she was.

But she had power of her own, and the healing flowed through her body at her command, easing the pain of her wounds even as the blue crackles burned new ones into her flesh. Her *holy aura* had faded, the protective ward expired, leaving her only with her own inner strength. But that strength had carried her through terrors darker than any nightmare, and had forged her own will into a suit of armor that withstood the Overmind's assault.

It could not hold forever, she knew.

Awareness other than sight made her know when she was there. It was the thing before her, floating in a black brine of concentrated corruption. It was dead and not dead, but wholly throughout she could feel the negative energy coursing through its substance.

Well. That, she could fight.

The first flickers of power faded as they reached tenuously from her into the blue fire. The Overmind was strong, and she was just a mortal woman, for all her magic.

No. That was not the way, a whisper from it to undermine her, to bring her low.

And if she failed, they would all die. Dar, already thrall to it, his life snuffed out like those of her friends...

She bent forward, and thrust her hands into the foul liquid that filled the basin.

Pain. It made the earlier blasts feel like soft caresses. This was pure, vicious, penetrating into her body and through it into her brain like icy needles. One not trained to withstand it, one not conditioned to the suffering of the flesh, could not have withstood it. Allera was nearly driven mad in that one instant.

But who she was, *what* she was, anchored her, and once more she called upon her power, letting it fill her before she poured it into the basin in a violent deluge.

Talen thought he was at his end, as Dar's club came down in a blur toward his head. His body continued to repair the damage it had suffered, but he'd taken too much damage in the course of the battle, and the multiple hits he'd withstood from the fighter had been too much even for his improved body to withstand. He no longer feared death, but it was galling, to be undone by *him*. And, of course, the Overmind's victory would spell an end to his dreams of revenge upon the Demon.

But then, power flooded into him, a sweet, delicious surge of... *life*. He laughed as it filled him, and he straightened as his lassitude fled like a breath of wind. Dar's club still struck him, crashing down hard into his shoulder, but the pain from the impact was just a fleeting weakness.

Dar immediately lifted his club to strike again, but Talen got to him before the blow could land, seizing the club. The two fought for it for a long moment, Dar's muscled thews fighting against the unnatural power in Talen's unliving body. But finally the vampire won, and he hurled the fighter to the ground as he tore the weapon from his hands.

"My thanks," Talen said to Varo, who'd been standing behind them. He adjusted his grip on the club, until his hands were tight around the thin end of the weapon. Dar was already getting up. He was moving slower now; perhaps he'd been hurt more than Talen had first assumed.

"He does not control his own actions," Varo said, as Dar fumbled for the punching dagger riding at his hip.

"Do not fear, priest, I will let him live. I gave my word." He laughed as Dar came forward, his punching dagger clutched tightly in his right hand.

Talen lifted the club to bring him down, but the blow never landed.

Allera kept pouring healing power into the pool. The punishing nimbus of energy that surrounded the Overmind melded with the glow of positive energy that she summoned, flaring out from around her like a bright azure sun. Within that radiance, Allera felt her grip on consciousness fluttering like a trapped bird. Her head pounded with the mental shrieks of the entity she was attacking, and the flares of energy that continued to lash at her cut into her flesh like knives. Her hands, immersed in the pool, had gone numb. But she spared only a tiny fraction of the healing she worked for herself, focusing the majority of it into the pool, cleansing the corruption that filled it.

Dar screamed and clutched his head, his dagger clattering to the floor as he fell to his knees. Talen checked his swing but remained wary of another trick. But a moment later a massive explosion of light and energy erupted around the pool, enveloping all of them.

“What’s happening?” Talen yelled. He drew back, blinded by the display.

“It’s Allera!” Varo replied.

The display ended abruptly, along with the blue glow, leaving the area within the pillars utterly dark save for the flickers of the *everburning torch* thrust through Dar’s belt. The fighter had collapsed, blasted into unconsciousness by his ordeal. Varo rushed toward the pool, and after a moment, Talen followed him. Allera lay against the edge of the basin, slumped over the rim, and as Varo reached her she fell back, groaning. The cleric eased her to the ground, summoning a healing spell. Her skin was... devastated, black marks covering her arms, face, and neck. Her hands were blackened claws, blood oozing where the skin had cracked.

“Is it destroyed?”

Varo looked up at Talen. Shay had joined him. Behind them, the cleric saw Calla, still grievously injured, drift over to where Dar lay insensate upon the floor. Talen followed his eyes, and looked back. The girl’s face was still a ruin, but Varo could see the feral, hungry look in her eyes. Of Talen’s four bandits there was no sign; the gaseous remnants had departed.

“I sense nothing at all,” Varo said. Talen turned back to face him. His stare was cold, utterly cold, and Varo tensed for a moment. But then the fallen knight made a slashing movement with his hand, and the vampire girl drew back from the unconscious fighter, slinking over to a spot behind her master. “Is Letellia all right?”

“She’s still breathing,” Shay said.

Talen glanced down at Allera. “Aren’t you going to heal her?”

Varo unclenched his hand; it had been holding his divine focus tightly enough to leave marks upon his fingers. Summoning his power, he trickled life-giving positive energy

into the healer, while in the basin, the inert chunks of matter that had been part of the Overmind drifted aimlessly in the black murk of the pool.

Chapter 336

ON THE CUSP OF OBLIVION

Alderis's chest rose, and a cough shook his fragile frame. Allera, looking almost as wasted as the elf, leaned back. The healer's hands remained clenched around the shaft of the white rod that she'd used to *resurrect* the elf. Her own reservoir was empty; she'd held nothing back in her battle with the Overmind.

"I hope it was worth it," Dar said, looking at the vampires, who were engaged in quiet conversation near the pool where the Overmind had rested.

"We need him," Varo said, kneeling beside the elf. The ring that Varo had given the elf, through Dar, was in the cleric's hand. It was useless now, the large black gemstone cracked, but it had served its purpose, preserving the elf's life force. When Alderis's brain had been consumed by the illithids, killing him, his soul had been drawn into the magical matrix within the gem. A similar ring had saved Talen's soul once before, sheltering him from the consuming power of the Sphere of Souls. Once Varo had broken the enchantment anchoring Alderis's soul to the stone, Allera had been able to use the rod to bring him back to life.

Unfortunately, the others had lacked any such protection. Allera had already tried to *resurrect* Nelan, but the spell failed, unable to locate the priest's soul and draw it back into his broken body.

"We destroyed that fucking sphere," Dar had asked. "Why won't the spell work?"

"The power of the demon has grown," Varo had replied. "The dead are his. Orcus has them, now."

The elf's body had been repaired, but the wiry, muscular body of the "Mad Elf" was long gone, replaced by an emaciated frame that looked barely capable of sustaining life. By the look of him, the elf had aged a hundred years in a matter of months. Through the confusion and weakness that accompanied his transition back to life, however, there was an intensity about him that burned like a fire.

The elf tried to get up, but Varo forestalled him. "You have experienced a serious trauma. You will need time to recover."

The elf looked up at him. There was something haunted in his eyes. "Varo?"

“Yeah, it’s a real fucking reunion,” Dar said. “Ask him about that rock stuck in his chest.”

Alderis looked at the fighter, and blinked, confused. He reached down and grasped the edge of the cloak that they’d draped over his bare torso.

There hadn’t been much left of the elf’s body after the battle. His once-fine gray robes had been foul, soaked in blood and stinking of filth and rot. Dar and Varo had carefully removed them, aware of their magical properties, and laid the elf out upon the floor for Allera and Varo to work their magic.

They’d found most of their companions’ magical items, at least, including both the ring that sheltered Alderis’s soul, and the holy sword *Beatus Incendia*. The sword, ring, and a number of other items of power had been immersed in the briny fluid that had hosted the Overmind. Letellia had posited that the entity had probably drawn power from items infused with magic; they’d found a number of other potent objects in the pool, in addition to those items borne by their slain companions. The more fragile items, including Alderis’s spellbooks, had been found discarded in a heap in a corner, forgotten as irrelevant.

Alderis pulled the cloak aside. The light of their torches cast a ruddy hue upon his pale flesh.

And glimmered brightly on the crystal that jutted from the center of the elf’s chest.

Varo helped him this time as he pulled himself up, his eyes fixed on the crystal. It wasn’t especially large, about the size of a robin’s egg. It was a deep violet, almost as dark as a starless night, and the flames of the torches danced in its many facets.

“Gods,” Alderis whispered. “Gods, oh gods, oh gods...”

“What the fuck is wrong with him?” Dar asked. Allera tried to help him, but Alderis rolled away from both her and Varo, curling into a fetal position, strangled noises issuing from deep in his throat. Letellia picked up the cloak that had covered him, and helped Allera tuck it around his thin body.

Varo rose. “Do what you can for him, healer.” The cleric met Dar’s eyes, and nodded for him to join him.

“What’s happened to him?” Dar hissed, when they were a few paces distant. “That fucking rock wasn’t there before, when we rescued the elf from the first temple. I would have remembered... that.”

Varo’s expression offered no answers. “Perhaps, perhaps not,” was all that he said. “Right now, we have a more pressing issue to consider.”

Dar looked up to see Talen, Shay, and Calla approaching. "The elf, is he all right?" Talen asked.

"You had your head cracked open like an egg, and were brought back," Dar said. "You tell me."

Varo stepped in before Talen could respond. "What of your followers?" the cleric asked. "Will they be able to return?"

Talen shrugged. "Who knows. When we first got here, we built coffins using the construction supplies on the second level of the dungeon, and hid them in one of the unoccupied rooms. But we're a long ways from there... and they might not be able to reach them in time."

"Your concern for your men is touching," Dar said.

Talen smiled, revealing his teeth with the long fangs jutting down. "It would seem that we have come full circle, Corath Dar, you and I. Now you are the commander, while I am the heartless bastard."

Dar shifted slightly, his hand stealing to the hilt of *Valor*. Talen's smile did not ease, but there was a subtle change in his stance as well, a challenge there. Varo placed a hand on Dar's arm.

"We need to withdraw," Varo said. "Our powers are significantly depleted. There is a pervasive aura of evil that lies over this entire level of the dungeon; I suspect that neither Allera nor myself will be able to recover spells while here."

"Retreat will give our enemy a chance to reinforce his defenses," Talen said. "And as for rest... I would not count upon it. In case you have forgotten, demons can *teleport* at will, and Maphistal is still out there, somewhere."

"We have no choice," Varo said. "Alderis needs time to recover, and Allera's healing powers are utterly depleted."

"What of you, Dar?" Talen asked. "Do you need time to recover?"

"I am here to see to the end of a demon, and nothing more."

"It would seem that we agree on one thing, at least." He turned back to Varo. "Very well, priest. It would appear that our fates are intertwined, at least for now. Lead on in flight, Shay and I will follow."

Letellia and Allera had gotten Alderis to his feet, but the elf still looked as though a strong wind would blow him away. He held the cloak tight around his body.

“We’re getting out of here,” Dar said.

“What about the others?” Allera asked, indicating the row of corpses behind her. Their faces were covered, but that could not obscure the memory of those ravaged bodies, or the litany of names. Marcus. Alexion. Zahera. Nelan.

“There is nothing we can do for them now,” Varo said. There wasn’t even enough left of them to fear reanimation again; Allera’s healing fire had done a very thorough job.

Dar reached down and hefted a cloak that contained some of the items they’d recovered. “Let’s get out of this fucking place,” he said, his voice weary.

The seven of them left the way they had come, leaving the huge chamber of the Overmind silent and empty.

Chapter 337

WORDS OF WISDOM

The flickering torches shed a light that pressed back the darkness in the large cavern. The air was cold and damp, and the flame from the torches was but an illusion; they shed no warmth. The companions had no fuel to make a real fire, only a tiny stove that Varo had brought with him. Allera promised to create a *heroes’ feast* after their rest, but for now, just being free of the oppressive air of the dungeon level known as the Gates of Hell was enough for the battered companions from Camar.

They ate in exhausted silence. Talen and Shay left the camp for a while, stating that they were going to scout out the area for threats. The others watched them go; there was not much in the way of trust there, but as Varo had quietly noted, there wasn’t much they could do about the vampires in their current condition.

Allera looked about ready to collapse, but after they’d eaten she got up and walked over to Calla. The girl had watched them from the edge of the firelight, the dancing flames flickering in her dark eyes.

“I know that you do not need to eat,” the healer said. “But is there anything I can do for you?”

The girl did not acknowledge her at first. Allera knelt beside her. “There may be something I can do... to help you...”

At that, Calla did look up, and there was something terrifying in her eyes. “The only thing that keeps me from tearing out your throat right now and feasting upon your blood is the will of my master,” she said. There was no emotion in her voice.

Allera started to draw back in alarm. The girl rose, menace in her pose, but then a quiet voice came out of the darkness, and she froze.

“Talen wants you, Calla.” The girl smiled at Allera, bearing her long fangs, and then turned and vanished beyond the reach of the light.

Allera turned to see Shay approaching, a dark shadow in the flickering light. “Do not blame the girl. She has no choice.”

“We all have a choice, Shay.”

The scout stopped a few paces away, turned slightly so that the light of the torches did not quite penetrate the depths of her cowl. “You know a great deal, Allera, but about this... nothing.”

“I want to understand, Shay. Why?”

“Like Calla, I had no choice.”

“But we might have been able to do something for him...”

“Tell me, Allera. If you had to choose between your life and that of Dar, what would you choose?”

“But he... Talen did this to you. Dar would never hurt me...”

Shay laughed, a short, strangled sound. “I told you that you didn’t understand” She lifted her head, so that the eyes, liquid and cold within the cowl, fixed upon hers.

“He didn’t do anything, Allera. Talen fought me; after I freed him, he tried to drive me away. *I made him take me.*”

“Oh, Shay...”

The scout made a sharp cutting gesture with her hand. “Spare me your pity, or rather, save it for those who need it still.”

“Is everything all right here?”

Allera started as Dar’s voice reached her. The fighter’s heavy tread steadied her, and she could imagine Dar’s hand dropping to the hilt of his sword without even turning to look. Shay merely laughed, and walked away.

Dar's hand settled protectively on her shoulder. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, willing that he not see her fear. *We walk upon the dagger's edge*, she thought.

"You should get some sleep. Stay close to Letellia and Varo. I will keep watch."

She knew that he was as exhausted as the rest of them, but was not about to suggest that they entrust their rest to the vampires. "Be wary," she whispered. "Do not meet their eyes."

He nodded, and escorted her back to the camp.

Alderis and Letellia was already asleep, and within moments Allera joined her, wrapped within two of their heavy cloaks. The vampires were not visible, but Dar could almost feel eyes upon him from outside the ring of light shed by their torches.

"They are there," Varo said quietly, confirming his thoughts. The cleric was examining a ring of black metal that they'd found in the pool of the Overmind. They had taken several items from the basin, including a wand of polished graphite and an amulet made of interlocking platinum rings.

Dar walked over to him, seating himself on a rocky protrusion that gave him a clear view of the camp. "I have questions for you."

"I will do my best to provide answers."

"Why the elf?"

Varo sipped tea from a small metal cup. They hadn't found Letellia's *pouch of holding*, but fortunately the cleric had been carrying extra supplies in his *handy haversack*, so they were not short of necessary gear, like the cups and the portable camp stove that heated the cleric's tea, and strong coffee for those on watch. Dar accepted a cup of the latter as he settled himself, adjusting the scabbard of *Valor* so that the hilt did not stick into his side. "Why did I give you the ring for him, you mean," the cleric replied.

Dar managed to keep his voice quiet and level, but it clearly took an effort. "You know that's what I mean. Damn it, Varo, you *knew* that Nelan was going to die. Why didn't you give him a ring? Fuck, you could have given him mine."

"You want the truth."

"I want a straight answer, for once. And if you don't give it to me, then we are done, demon or no."

Varo nodded. "I told you before, about the *Codex Thanara*."

"That book of prophecy, that's how you know what is going to happen."

"Not precisely." The cleric let out a sigh. "I am not trying to mislead you, Dar. I do not fully understand it myself. The *Codex* is a map, but it is a map without key or legend, lacking scale or clear references."

"What use is it, then?"

"It is a double-edged sword, but it was what first alerted me to the threat posed by the return of Orcus."

"Return?"

"The *Codex* reveals a reality that is a cycle. Rappan Athuk has been here for a very, very long time. This is not the first time that these events have played out."

"You said that before, to Talen. It makes my head hurt to think about it."

"There are many times that I have felt the same."

"What does this have to do with Nelan and the elf? Don't bullshit me, Varo. You warned me that the priest would die."

"Actually, I believe that my instructions were to break the amulet *if* Nelan should fall."

"Don't fence words with me, priest. You had this all set up from the beginning."

"I am not the master of events that you imagine me to be. Like you, I am a mere mortal, buffeted by the rough winds of fate. I have done my best to fight against what I believed was coming, to prepare for the confrontation that I knew might come."

"You once called Rappan Athuk a 'proving ground.'"

"It is that. Look at yourself, Dar. A few months ago you were a mercenary fighter, tough enough in a scrap, to be sure, but no different than any of thousands of armymen found in any army, warband, or fighting-house in any city in the world."

"I never claimed to be any different, or any better. I know what I am, priest."

"What you *were*," Varo said, with surprising intensity as he leaned forward, the torchlight flickering on the edges of his face. "Now, you are a living weapon, one of the most deadly fighting men of your age. You have battled dragons, demons, monstrosities from nightmare made real. Some of it is skill, mastery through constant struggle against

terrible dangers, some of it is the strength that was always inside you, but there is more, something intangible, something that has grown inside of you.”

Dar shook his head. “Swinging a sword is no mystery...”

“You know it is more than that. Look at Allera. When we met, she could save a man’s life, ease a fever, purge a body of toxins. Now... her healing powers are more potent than any of her order, living or dead, in twenty generations. She is rapidly approaching the point where the rules of mortality will be utterly transcended; already she has the power of life and death in her hands. There are only a handful of priests with that kind of power, and I cannot think of any who achieved it when as young as Allera, back to the days of Camarius.”

“And what about you, Varo?”

“I am the most powerful cleric alive in the world today. The power of Dagos flows through me like a spring torrent flooding a narrow gully. It rages wildly, almost beyond my power to control it.”

“What about the elf? You still have not answered my original question, just told me what you’ve already said before, at one time or another.”

Varo nodded. “It was necessary, to make you understand. As much as what is happening to us can be understood.”

“Varo, just cut the bullshit and tell me straight out, why the elf is so important. You’ve hovered over him like a mother ever since we found him in that first temple, bound up over the lava pit.”

“There is a prophecy within the *Codex*,” the cleric said, his voice so quiet that Dar had to lean forward to hear him. “It speaks of how Orcus can be defeated. There are three that must be there, to confront the demon. Three who must sacrifice that which they hold most dear.”

“The elf. And you, I would guess. And the third?”

“‘The general.’ At first I thought it was Tiros, or Talen. But now I know it is you, Corath Dar.”

Dar snorted. “General is only a word, a title. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“The word means little, but the man behind it is key.”

Dar looked at him intently. “Why me?”

“Because you are the weapon that can harm the demon.”

Dar glanced down at *Valor*, in its scabbard at his side. His hand started toward the hilt almost of its own volition, but he held it, clenching the fingers into a fist. "I swore I would cut that fucker's head off. But I do not put much stake in prophecy, priest."

"I do not ask for you to believe anything. But even you must agree that we are the best hope for defeating the demon before it is strong enough to yoke our entire world to its corrupt will."

Dar's gaze shifted out over the camp. "What about Allera?"

"I do not know. Truly, Dar, I cannot see the future. It is... frustrating, to have only bits and pieces, and not be able to see what they mean."

"And this 'sacrifice'?"

"I do not know that either. Only that it must be paid, if the demon is to be defeated."

"Nelán, and the others? Were they also required sacrifices?"

"Do you think I wanted them dead? Do you think I wouldn't have done everything I could to save Nelán, or Marcus, or Serah? Do you think it is easy, to have just enough power to make a choice, to shift the scales a certain way that some *might* survive?"

"Yet you made that decision."

"Yes. And I have been wrong. You know what it is like, general."

"I never asked for that responsibility."

"Neither did I. I did not ask for my life to be torn apart, to give up everything on behalf of a world that didn't want to hear about the darkness that was coming."

Dar looked down at the cleric. In that moment, the man looked old. For a moment, there was silence between them.

Finally, Dar spoke again. "I do not trust you, Varo."

The cleric nodded, almost to himself. "Then you have learned wisdom after all. I need to rest. Do not turn your back on the vampires, but do not try to challenge them; their will is far stronger than yours, and they fight their instincts to remain with us."

"I am not a fool."

"No, I suppose not."

Varo walked back over to the camp, careful not to make any loud noises. He stripped off his gloves and greaves, but left his breastplate on, wrapping a blanket around his frame as he leaned back against a sloping stalagmite. Within a few moments he was asleep.

Dar remained on solitary vigil, staring out into the darkness, the hilt of *Valor* clasped in his fist. His jaw tightened as he looked down at the sleeping healer. A word whispered in his mind, repeatedly. "We shall see," he said, his eyes shining in the flickering light of the torches as silence descended upon the camp in the cavern.

Chapter 338

BACK THROUGH THE GATES

The intruders moved single-file through the complex, retracing the same steps they had taken the day before, returning along the path of their retreat through the quiet, sinister halls of the Gates of Hell.

Their numbers had been augmented; Talen's vampiric bandits had rejoined them a few hours before the spellcasters had woken from their sleep. Drudge, Utar, Needles and Hedder looked none the worse for the pounding they'd taken from the Overmind's astral constructs. Dar had spent the entire rest period on watch, and by the time that the casters woke he looked truly grim, with puffy black circles under his eyes, which were shot through with red. The fighter had refused to delay them any longer to let him catch up on his sleep, instead taking a *restoration* spell from Allera to dispel the effects of his exhaustion. The spell had left him alert, but anything but fresh.

The same could be said of all of them, at least the five living members of their company. They had washed the blood and dirt from their bodies and clothes, and had tended to their other gear as best they could, but the long hours they had spent in the Dungeon of Graves was wearing hard upon them. Allera's *heroes' feast* had helped, at least somewhat, fortifying their bodies against the trials that no doubt awaited them below.

Alderis had recovered enough to study his spellbook, and clad in his gray *robe of the archmagi* he looked almost mortal again. But the elf's eyes still hid dark shadows, only spoke when directly addressed, and then often had to be prodded several times before he realized that someone was in front of him. Talen made a few comments about the elf's effectiveness, and neither Varo nor Dar could respond with an effective counter. Alderis looked... *broken*, but his powers were still too great to turn away.

Letellia had waited in vain for Honoratius to make an effort to contact her. At her urging Varo had attempted a *sending* to Velan Tiros, but he had received no acknowledgement or reply. The sorceress walked alone in the middle of their column, a distant look on her

face, the faint gleam of her multiple magical wards occasionally visible as a slight distortion in the air when the light of their torches caught her at a particular angle.

Allera and Varo walked alongside each other, engaged in quiet conversation. The healer looked decidedly uncomfortable, but she did not pull away from the cleric as they made their way deeper into the complex. Varo had pulled her aside shortly after the casters had awoken from their rest, and spent several minutes talking to her in hushed tones that did not carry to the others nearby. Talen had looked at them and smirked, and since then had made no effort to acknowledge that either of them even existed. His slaves gave both the healer and the cleric a wide berth.

The complex was deserted. As they passed through the chambers where the mind flayers and their allies had ambushed them on their first visit, they saw that the bodies, detritus of battle... even the blood had vanished. The stale stink of the Abyssal hounds still permeated the place, but there was no sign that anything else had ever occupied these chambers, or that a battle had taken place here not two full days before.

They grew wary as they approached the cavern of the Overmind once more, but here again they arrived to find the place utterly deserted. The blue flames in the giant metal braziers continued to burn, obviously reliant upon some sort of magic or other unconventional fuel. But the carnage they'd left here was likewise nowhere to be seen, and the pool that had contained the Overmind now held only a slick of brackish, befouled liquid that clung to the ancient stones.

"Too quiet," Dar said, even that soft statement sounding uncannily loud in the quiet expanse of the vault. Their footfalls echoed off the distant walls, giving the place the somber sepulchral air of a cathedral, or a tomb.

"Don't knock it," Shay said, moving ahead to check out the far stair. Varo looked at Allera once more, then walked after the scout. The light of the torches the others carried created a long shadow that stretched out ahead of the cleric, until it merged with the one coming off of the far brazier. The air was cold and stale; they could still smell the blood, even though the stone at their feet was bare.

"Well, shall we?" Talen asked, smiling at Dar. The fighter did not respond, following the scout and cleric toward the staircase.

The air grew cooler as they descended, and they could detect moisture as well. The stairs continued down for perhaps forty feet, depositing them in a tunnel that continued forward with a slight, almost unnoticeable slope downward. Shay kept a brisk pace, forcing the others to hasten to keep up. The only sound was the noise of their boots on the bare stone, and the faint clatter of armor from the warriors.

The passage ended with a low overhang that led into a large cavern beyond.

"Impressive," Letellia said.

The cavern was massive. While it was perhaps not much larger than the chamber where they had battled the Overmind, its high, natural ceiling gave the place a sense of far greater scale. In addition, while the light from the braziers in the former place had died before it reached the walls, here they could see the entire expanse of the cavern, illuminated by phosphorescent growths that clung with determination to small cracks and crevices in a thousand places along the walls. Those decorations, and the deep crimson hue of the pale light they shed, combined with the uneven shape of the place, gave the illusion of being within the gullet of some huge monster.

The center of the place was dominated by a small mountain. That feature rose almost to the ceiling, its truncated summit looming over sixty feet above them. The top of it had been sheared off, as if it had been trimmed to fit in this place. Its flanks were almost sheer, promising a difficult ascent.

Difficult for most of them, perhaps. As Shay walked forward, she began to dissolve into a plume of mist, which rose effortlessly into the air above them, rising toward the ascent. Talen sent his bandits around the edges of the room to scout, but their eyes kept returning to that high peak, which waited for them with seeming inevitability.

"I suppose that's the way?" Dar asked, turning to Varo. But the cleric didn't respond; his eyes were focused upon the summit, but his stare seemed to be focused on some distant place, a point beyond any of their perceptions. The fighter did not press him, instead joining the others as they walked forward toward the base of the great mound. As they approached they could see that their initial sense of scale was not far off; the mound was easily over a hundred feet wide across its base, and possibly half again as much.

"Shay's coming back," Talen said. The living companions peered into the vague light but could not clearly discern the scout's vaporous form until it began to take on definition, solidifying until she took on substance, dropping the last fifteen feet to land in an easy crouch before them.

"Report," Talen said.

"It's a caldera, a big open bowl. Full of water up to about twenty feet or so below the inside rim. There's something in there; couldn't make it out clearly, but it's big. Tried to tease it out, but it wasn't having any of it."

"There weren't any other exits?" Allera asked.

Shay shook her head. "If there are, they're underwater."

Dar looked at Varo. "You are certain?" At the cleric's nod, Dar looked back up the almost vertical slope. "Then we'll have to climb."

"I can transport all of you up there with me through a *dimension door*," Letellia said. "But be aware, my reservoir of magic was diminished with all of the *stoneskins* I cast earlier; I only have a limited reserve of fourth-order spells remaining." One of the results of their discussions that morning in camp was to share the sorceress's magical protections with more of them; currently Alderis, Allera, and Varo were all protected with both *resist energy* and *stoneskin* spells, although Letellia's supply of the diamond dust needed for the latter spell was nearly depleted.

"If you feel you can make the climb, then it may be best to conserve your magic," Varo suggested.

Letellia nodded. "How do you intend to get through the water? Some of us, at least, have to breathe."

"Leave that to me," Varo said.

The ascent proved easier for the fact that they had the vampires to lead the way. Transforming again into gaseous form, the seven undead drifted up to the summit, where Shay secured several ropes. The lines, tossed down, didn't quite reach to the cavern floor, but the base of the mound had a slightly gentler slope and plenty of hand and footholds, so none of them had any difficulty reaching the ropes. Alderis avoided any effort at all by muttering the words of a spell, and then rose into the air, drifting up toward the top while the others started their climb.

Varo took one rope and started climbing, grunting with the effort of lifting himself and all his gear up the cliff. Dar motioned for Allera to follow Letellia up the second line. He waited below, unwilling to strain the ropes by adding his own considerable weight to either. But Varo made it to the top with surprising speed, while Letellia was still a good twenty feet below the summit. Dar started up the line that the cleric vacated. Allera had almost caught up to Letellia, who was having some difficulty. The ropes were knotted to ease climbing, but the sorceress, while young and healthy, lacked the upper-body strength of the others. The healer encouraged her, while Dar slid over horizontally to move nearer to them. With his strength, he was almost to Allera as Letellia approached the top of the cliff.

"If you cannot manage, use your magic!" Dar urged her.

"No, I can do it!" the sorceress said. Her face trailing sweat from exertion, she grimaced and reapplied herself to the rope, pulling herself hand-over-hand up the last stretch of cliff. The vampires had offered no assistance thus far; Dar looked up to see Talen standing on the cliff edge to the right, watching their progress.

Letellia's revitalized effort carried her up the last ten feet of cliff almost as fast as Varo had done before her. Behind her, Allera kept pace. The sorceress was about to reach the top when a head suddenly appeared right above her: the ugly visage of the bandit Hedder.

Startled, the sorceress lost her grip on the rope. She screamed as she fell backwards and down. Her shoulder clipped Allera hard as she fell, knocking the healer off the rope as well, and sending both women plummeting down toward the jagged rocks some sixty feet below.

Chapter 339

GRAVITY'S A BITCH

Dar kicked off with both legs and lunged. His hand snapped around Allera's wrist like an iron shackle, arresting her fall and swinging her in an arc that came back to the rope dangling below him. The healer grabbed onto it with her other hand, taking the weight off him.

Letellia would have had a much more unpleasant end to her trip down had it not been for Alderis. The elf, floating above, cast his *feather fall* spell on the sorceress, which arrested her descent about halfway down toward the base of the cliffs. She still landed awkwardly, bouncing off the slope as the base of the hill jutted out from the near-sheer face of the cliffs higher up, but the injuries were trivial compared to a full-force impact, and her *stoneskin* protected her from any scrapes that the sharp rocks would have inflicted.

Once he had verified that Allera had a good grip, Dar pulled himself up the last remaining feet to the top of the cliff. Once he had helped Allera up to join him, he turned on Talen.

"What the fuck was that?"

Talen shrugged. "Hedder was trying to help the sorceress; he did not mean to startle her." The vampire bandit, standing behind his master, smiled and shifted slightly, but he looked anything but abashed.

There was a tense moment as the two—man and vampire—faced off on the narrow ridge at the mound's crest. Finally Allera took Dar's arm, and he turned to look down to where Letellia had recovered below.

"Just tie the rope into a sling, I'll pull you up!" Dar yelled down to her. But Letellia had apparently lost all interest in rock climbing; a moment later she vanished, materializing next to them as her *dimension door* closed behind her.

"So much for conserving our resources," Calla said.

“You will be silent, unless I seek your counsel,” Talen said. The girl vampire shot a malevolent gaze at him, and stalked sullenly off, treading the narrow and treacherous lip of the crest as though it was a broad boulevard. Of course, she did not have to fear falling.

“I am sorry I did not help,” Varo said, coming up from a stone outcrop that jutted down and out over the water. There was more space to stand there, and Shay and two of the vampire bandits were perched on its edge, looking up at those on the crest. “I was distracted by the next problem.”

The cleric’s words drew their attention into the crater, where the surface of the small lake within glistened brightly in the light of their torches. The pool was over ninety feet long and sixty feet across, and if it extended as far down as the exterior of the mountain, it had to be over forty feet deep. There was no sign of the creature that Shay had spotted, but the water still seemed anything but inviting.

“Well, cleric, time to call upon your god,” Talen said. Varo ignored him, walking back down to the edge of the outcrop. Shay held her ground, but the vampire bandits took a step back as Varo lifted his divine focus from the chain around his neck, and held it out over the water.

“*Dagos invocatus*,” the cleric said, his voice pitched low, “*Custodis divinus*, open the way.”

The lake obeyed his command. The *control water* spell seemed to push the waters down and away, first one foot, two, and then more quickly, five feet, ten, fifteen, twenty. As the waters receded, they could see the steep inner slope of the caldera, slick with crusted growths and clinging moisture.

They also saw the lake’s inhabitant.

“Big sucker,” Needles said, his voice breaking off into a mad cackle. Talen shot a hard look at the former bandit, then back down.

The thing *was* big, over twenty-five feet from head to tail. It was a fish of some sort, its hide an ugly mottled gray, uneven and broken. At first they got only a quick look at it before it sank again below the water, but as Varo’s spell continued to press the surface down it emerged again, this time enough to recognize the distinctive fins protruding from its back and sides.

“A dire shark,” Shay said.

“It is not alive,” Allera said. As the body of the creature peaked above the surface they could see the truth of the healer’s words; there were great swathes along its body where the flesh had parted, revealing bones underneath. But the great shark continued to move, animated to serve as a guardian for this place.

Varo let out a tired sigh as the *control water* ended, leaving the level of the lake over thirty feet lower than where it had started. The lake had shrunk to a fraction of its original size, and was now barely large enough to hold the shark. It thrashed about in the limited space, revealing different parts of its body as it rose and fell beneath the reduced surface of the lake. As it lifted its head, they could see its milky white dead eyes, and jaws big enough to swallow a man whole without difficulty.

“All right, let’s kill that fucker,” Dar said, unlimbering his heavy bow. He’d lost his magical quiver, but he still had a small bundle of arrows he’d stashed in his pack.

“Arrows will not do much good,” Varo said. “It is a zombie; it will have to be hacked apart.”

The vampires, however, were already attacking, taking up large rocks and hurling them down upon the zombie. The undead bandits hooted in derision at the creature, and while most of the missiles splashed loudly in the water or glanced harmlessly off the flanks of the creature, at least one in the initial barrage scored a significant hit, sinking hard into the shark’s snout with enough force to crack the spongy cartilage.

Alderis lifted a wand, and started firing *magic missiles* into the creature. The glowing bolts streaked unerringly into the monster’s body, blasting pits into its rotting flesh. The elf’s expression seemed utterly absorbed, and he kept uttering the command word to the device, firing more and more of the magical darts into the caldera.

The shark, unable to escape, simply absorbed the barrage. Dar lowered his bow, and turned to Talen, who watched as his minions continued their attacks. Drudge and Utar nearly followed a boulder that they dislodged and rolled down into the pit; both vampires laughed as they pulled themselves back up from their precarious position. The boulder clattered loudly into the caldera, bouncing off of the cliff walls several times before it splashed loudly into the water adjacent to the shark’s tail.

“Any enemy within ten leagues is going to know we’re here, if they don’t already,” Dar said.

Talen laughed. “Let them have their fun. Do not fear; you will be fighting for your life soon enough. It is rare to face a foe in Rappan Athuk with an advantage such as this. You should savor the opportunity.”

Dar turned back as Hedder thrust past Allera, carrying a rock twice the size of his head. The vampire hurled it out over the pit; the ungainly missile plummeted down and hit the shark squarely in the center of its spine. The water around it cushioned the force of the impact, but they could see the stone jutting from its back, embedded in the battered frame of its body. More *magic missiles* blasted into it; at least a dozen blackened spots covered its body where Alderis’s shots had struck it.

Allera watched with a look of disgust; it was not clear whether her feelings were directed more at the vampires, or the undead monstrosity below. At one point she looked up to see Varo staring at her; the cleric nodded at her meaningfully.

Talen surprised them with a sudden yell. All of them spun to see the vampire knight draw his sword, and their surprise was eclipsed yet further as he leapt forward, out into pit. The armored vampire plummeted like a stone; below the shark, perhaps sensing the approach a foe within its reach, reared up, its clenching jaws turning the water around it into white froth. Talen struck it in the head between and above its eyes, and as he sank into its wasted body he brought his sword down in a blinding arc. There was a blur of movement, and then Talen was flung away. He hit the caldera wall hard, but landed on his feet, balancing on a steeply slanting rock shelf before gravity could pull him down and forward. Water sprayed over him from the shark's frenetic thrashings. Half of its face had been shorn clear away; the entire upper part of its jaws were gone, and only one eye remained, clinging to a jagged strip of flesh. A few more rocks hit it, and a final blast of *magic missiles*, but it was clear they marked only the dénouement of the scene, as the zombie shark's struggles were already fading. Finally its movements ceased, as the unholy force that had animated it fled.

Talen leapt down into water that swirled up to his chest. The shark carcass had sunk into the water, but it was clearly draining away, revealing more of the creature as it receded. Talen splashed around its body, finally stopping near a black slab sunk into the surrounding rock that became more visible as the waters fell. The slab was cracked, either by the shark's death throes or by one of the boulders hurled down from above.

Talen laughed as he looked up at the others gathered around the caldera's edge, fifty feet above. "Come on down," he shouted up at them. "The water's fine."

Chapter 340

QUESTIONS OF LOYALTY

The first stretch of the tunnel under the mountain was the worst. There had to be some sort of crevice or other drain that allowed most of the water to seep away, or the entire route would have been flooded. But the first thirty feet of the passage beyond the broken black slab had still been inundated to within a few scant feet of the low ceiling, and in two places they had to duck under low overhangs that had left only a few inches of air between the water and the rock. The vampires, of course, had no difficulty; they no longer had the burden of breathing.

But the companions pressed forward, and after that initial stretch, the tunnel began to ascend gradually. The bare black rock remained slick with moisture, and slime soiled

their clothes when they brushed against it, but at least they could see clearly and move easily. The ascent grew steeper but still manageable even with the slipperiness of the floor, and they soon saw a large chamber open up ahead.

The place turned out to be another irregular chamber, with smooth black walls that rose up to a rounded ceiling some twenty feet above. It rapidly widened beyond the range of their lights, and bent around to the right, extending for a considerable distance from the way the sound of their footsteps returned hollowly from ahead. Shay set out unbidden along the left wall, while Drudge and Hedder moved out to the right at a gesture from Talen. The others moved forward out of the entry, spreading out to give them room to maneuver. The vampire Needles, close behind Letellia throughout their trip through the tunnel, jostled her as he bounded forward into the chamber. The sorceress glanced back at the creature with disgust.

“Tell your spawn to keep its distance,” she said to Talen.

“Do not take his attentions personally,” Talen said. “In life, he had a preference for stabbing young women with those little knives he carries.”

“Sharp little needles,” the bandit cackled. But he withdrew as Allera stepped up next to the sorceress, and lifted a hand that flared briefly with blue energy.

“Needles, go with Carra and keep Shay company,” Talen commanded. The vampires moved to obey, swallowed up by the darkness as soon as they left the radius of their torchlight.

“Your control over your minions seems to be growing tenuous,” Dar said.

“Their will belongs to me,” Talen said simply. “Do not concern yourself; they will behave, until it comes time to collect my revenge.”

“And then what?” Allera asked suddenly.

The question seemed to catch him off balance, but just for a moment. He chuckled. “Let us see if we survive the Demon, first, and then we can talk of the future.” He turned and walked out toward the middle of the room, where they could see Shay returning, the head of her longspear catching the light before they could detect the sleek shape of her black-clad form.

“He is mad,” Allera said to Dar.

“We are all mad,” Varo said. “But that does not change what must be done.”

Talen turned back toward them. “There’s a door on the far side of the chamber, nothing else. Let’s get moving.”

The other vampires rejoined them at the door, a slab of heavy gray granite that stood out clearly from the adjacent black stone. The door was set deep into a lintel carved from the surrounding walls, and looked as tight as a cork that had fallen into the stem of a bottle of old wine. It proved as tough to open, but they had no shortage of raw strength, and finally Dar and Talen were able to grind it open, revealing the black mouth of another passage.

The tunnel was irregular and dank, the darkness retreating almost reluctantly from the light of their torches. The companions pressed on. A scent of decay suffused the air. While it did not trouble the vampires, the mortals found themselves covering their faces in a vain effort to filter out the worst of the stench. Alderis coughed, his breath rattling in his chest like a trapped animal. Allera helped him as best she could.

“The elf looks like he is about to keel over,” Dar whispered to Varo. “Could be that your book was wrong about him.”

“He is stronger than he looks,” the cleric replied. “Look, the scout has found something.”

The torches revealed Shay, standing under a broad arch of ancient gray stones. Beyond the arch a pair of statues, or rather the remains of them, warded the corridor forward. There was just enough left of the dark obsidian shapes to hint at what they had been, representations of things that had been in no way human. Debris lay strewn about the floor, amidst which lay the occasional bone, starkly white in the light shed by their brands.

“If this isn’t a trap, I don’t know what is,” Dar said.

“Agreed,” Talen said. “Calla, go in there and check it out.”

“No!” Allera interjected, coming forward. “She’s just a—”

The healer trailed off as all of the vampires turned to face her, including the girl. “She knows exactly what she is,” Talen said. He turned back to her. “Go.”

The lithe vampire darted forward into the room, moving among the bone fragments and obsidian shards, barely disturbing even the dust on the floor with her steps. She slipped across the room like a mouse, and prowled around both of the statues, poking at the remnants before returning to the arch.

“Clear,” she said.

At Talen’s gesture Shay led them forward again. Talen shot a glance at Dar and Varo, as if to confirm his earlier comments about the loyalty of his servants. Neither man responded, but Dar’s expression darkened, and his hand slipped once more to the hilt of *Valor*. Talen saw the gesture and smiled.

The passage continued on the far side of the room, passing under another arch. This corridor was much straighter than the one they'd just traversed, constructed of large stone blocks with deep gaps at the seams. It appeared to open onto another much larger chamber a short distance ahead.

Shay had barely entered the passage when they heard a soft click, and then the air was full of spears, erupting from the crevices in the walls.

Chapter 341

TRIALS OF ALLEGIANCE

Shay leapt back, but she was struck by at least four of the long shafts. One pierced her shoulder, striking with enough impact to fling her across the tunnel. The head of the spear, penetrating all of the way through her body, hit the far wall with enough force to embed itself two full inches into the stone. The scout slumped down, additional spears dangling from her left side, left hip, and right arm.

Allera started forward at once, but Talen blocked her with a raised hand. "What are you going to do? She's fine, and there may be another trap waiting."

And indeed, the scout was now straightening, still pinned to the wall. There was no blood. Moving jerkily, she plucked the spears out one by one, finally seizing onto the one impaling her shoulder, awkwardly pulling herself down the length of the shaft, until she was able to fall forward off its length. Straightening, she turned back to them. "Thanks for the help," she said dryly. She seemed to be growing stronger with each passing second.

"Are there any more traps?" Talen asked.

While Shay searched the corridor, Varo picked up one of the spears that had ricocheted out into the room. "Poisoned," he said, indicating the greasy brown smear on the end of the bent steel head. "I do not recognize the type, but it is no doubt unpleasant."

"Lucky for you that one of us was in the lead, and not one of you," Talen said.

After a few minutes, Shay reported the passage free of additional traps, and they moved forward into the next chamber. This one seemed smaller than it was, due to the presence of a considerable structure of stone slabs that had been erected in its center.

The building, if indeed it was that, rose up nearly thirty feet above the level of the floor. Each of the walls they could see was covered by garishly colored paintings of Orcus,

surrounded by a fell collection of minions and slaves. Within those decorations was what looked like a door, but which on closer examination proved to be part of the painting itself; the walls themselves were free of openings or portals that they could see. Thick pillars of smooth black stone stood at each corner, giving the structure the look of a small keep or fortress.

"This is the gateway," Varo said.

"All right, check it out," Talen indicated. His vampires split, Needles and Drudge going left with Shay, while Calla accompanied Utar and Hedder to the right. Their search did not take long, as the structure was the only thing of note in the chamber. The vampires reported that all four walls of the building were painted similarly, with a different gate featured on each. One wall bore a barred gate, another a door of iron-bound wood, the third a portal of dark stone, and the last a formidable-looking iron door. The common feature on all four walls was the demon god, looming over them like a gargoyle. The eyes of the demon seemed to follow them as they walked, adding a certain creepy air to the already tense circumstance.

"Damn it, it's just a wall, there's nothing behind all this paint," Shay said, checking the wall nearest the entry in more detail.

"What are those markings?" Allera asked, raising her torch to indicate the tortured scribbles that were painted above the depicted door.

"The writing is in the Abyssal tongue," Varo said. The cleric had unslung his *handy haversack*, and was taking a garment of folded, tattered fabric from within. "One word on each wall. Together they read, in the common tongue of man, 'Abase Thee And Enter.'"

"Fuck that," Dar said, at the same moment that Talen said, "I'll not kneel before..." The two men trailed off and shared a sharp look.

"Maybe we can blast through," Letellia said. "The stone cannot be that thick..."

"The barrier is more than mere rock," Varo said. He unfolded the garment, which the others now recognized as a ragged clerical vestment. Even in its current condition they could identify the markings of the cult of Orcus across its face. They had certainly killed enough clerics bearing such a robe to know it well.

"What are you going to do with that?" Dar asked, suspicious.

"I am going to open the way," Varo said. He put on the vestment, and knelt before the design of the iron door.

"I do not like this," Allera said quietly, leaning up close to Dar, careful not to obstruct his access to his weapon. Even the vampires seemed a bit uncomfortable, withdrawing from the cleric.

Varo lowered his head, and began to incant. His words were spoken in a thick, terrible language, syllables that scraped like fingernails on slate to the hearing of those present. He spread his arms wide, the gesture extending the vestment and highlighting the sigil splayed across his chest.

"Perhaps it is not *my* loyalty with which you need to be concerned," Talen said to Dar.

Varo's words rose to a crescendo that was almost painful; Allera raised her hands to her ears. The cleric raised his head, and they could see trails of blood running down his face, trickling from his nostrils and from the corners of his eyes. The cleric seemed tiny, insignificant before the monstrous figure that rose high above him on the wall. Here, in this place, even a painted image of the Demon seemed more powerful than their weak mortal shells.

But something was happening. The painting of the iron door began to glow, rimed in an unearthly red light. It brightened as the door opened... and then it was not just a painting, an image in pigment and ochre, but a real doorway, a portal into a space beyond.

Varo pulled himself up, haltingly. Allera came to him, reluctantly it seemed, but he waved her away with a hand. The blood trailing down his face gave him the look of a fresh corpse. He reseated his helm, and stepped forward, through the door. The others followed behind, slowly.

The space within the structure seemed oddly larger than the exterior, and more than one of them shot a wary look back at the door leading outside. The place was lit by a diffuse ruddy light that seemed to emanate from the very walls. The chamber was occupied by only one feature, a huge stone sarcophagus set upon a step in the center of the place. Varo was already there, heaving at the lid. The thing had to weigh hundreds if not thousands of pounds, and Talen and Dar started forward to assist, but then the cleric let out a fierce noise, and the slab slid aside, thumping hard on the floor as it gave way.

Wary of a guardian, the fighters edged forward, hands on weapon hilts. But the inside of the tomb was empty, save for a narrow staircase that descended into shadow.

Dar looked a question at Varo, already knowing the answer.

"We go down," the cleric said, his voice hollow within the confines of his helmet.

They proceeded in single file down the stairs, the sounds of their feet strangely muted. They descended for sixty-six steps, before the shaft opened onto another large chamber.

This one was different than the last. The walls, floors, and ceiling alike were fashioned of seamless white stone. The place was spacious, perhaps sixty feet wide and forty feet across. A pair of large doors were set in the opposite wall, flanked by two thick pillars that ascended to the ceiling twenty-five feet above. The doors were carved with the now-familial scenes of demons, interrupted by runes of silvery mithral that seemed to glow with a soft inner light of their own. The pillars, too, bore carvings, forms of skeletal demons bearing greatswords that lifted almost to the ceiling. Some debris was scattered around the perimeter of the place, mostly bones and piles of rusted metal, but otherwise it was clean, as though even dust was reluctant to intrude here.

“There is so much... too much...” Letellia said, lifting her hands to her head.

“What is it?” Dar asked. Alderis, too, looked to be in discomfort, his eyes shooting back and forth as though seeing dangers lurking on the edges of their perception.

“Magic... evil... chaos... so strong, everywhere!” the sorceress said. Allera rushed over to her, but she held up a hand, swallowing as she took several deep breaths. “It’s... I’m all right. There are times when *arcane sight* can be more a hindrance than a boon,” she explained.

“I suspect that many of our powers may be restricted in this place,” Varo said. “It is shielded, even stronger than the level above.”

Talen and Shay had walked out into the center of the room, flanked by their entourage, who seemed to huddle in their wake. “What do those words say?” Talen asked, indicating the mithral runes set into the doors.

“Beware the crossing, for those who disturb the Master’s rest, gain only eternal torment,” Varo said. He barely looked up, and the words seemed like they were dragged from within him against his will. The black plate of his armor seemed especially incongruous in the pale surroundings of the chamber. With all of them clad in muted garments, their hands and faces stained with sweat and dirt, it was almost as though all color and life was leached away in this strange and alien place. When Varo stepped forward, he left a spot of blood on the floor that drew the eye.

Talen muttered something to himself, and started forward toward the doors. He made barely three steps before a ghostly figure materialized directly in front of him. The vampire knight fell back into a ready stance, his sword hissing from its scabbard, but the spectral form did not immediately attack. Instead its outline wavered and then took on more substantial definition. It remained incorporeal, its undead nature instantly obvious, but they could now recognize the identity that the ghost had possessed in life.

It was Nelan.

Chapter 342

FALLEN ALLIES

For a moment, the Doomed Bastards merely looked at their former companion, who regarded them with a deeply melancholy expression.

Allera started forward, but Dar blocked her with a hand. He'd drawn his axiomatic sword. "Nelan, what are you doing here?"

"I guard the Way," the cleric said, his voice thin and hollow. "I am sorry, friends... the Demon... it is too powerful, it claimed me..."

"There is no shame in it," Varo said.

Talen, who had mastered himself after his initial moment of surprise, chuckled. "Easy for you to say, deceiver, given your culpability in his fate." The vampire turned to Nelan. "Stand aside, cleric. I bear you no ill will, but you cannot stop us."

Something flashed in the dead cleric's eyes. He looked at Dar and Varo. "You are making a mistake, allying with the likes of these. They will betray you..."

Talen laughed again. "You have a lot of gumption, ghost, to speak of betrayal. Now stand aside, or make whatever feeble move you are capable of. No doubt you can wrinkle the spirits of my mortal companions, but your powers are of no use against one such as I."

"You are wrong, commander. And I am not alone."

The air behind him wavered, and several other ghosts materialized. Their faces, too, were familiar—Marcus, Alexion, Zahera. Like him, they bore the arms and armor they had carried in life, although their weapons were as insubstantial as the rest of them, and it was not clear what damage they could wreak against corporeal flesh. Having dealt with ghosts in the past, however, the companions were wary. Varo glanced at Allera, fixing her with his stare for a moment before essaying a subtle nod. The healer's jaw tightened, but she was already ready with what might have to be done.

"So not one of you could resist him, eh?" Talen said, walking casually in front of them as if they had not just threatened to attack him. Behind the ghosts, the others could see Shay, a barely visible shadow, moving into position near the double doors.

“There was no resisting,” Marcus said, the dead cleric’s voice thick with inner torment. “He is too powerful.”

Talen spun and confronted the ghost. “/ resisted it. / felt that call, that compulsion... but / fought it!” He shifted his attention to Alexion and Zahera. “What you are saying, is that you were weak! I chose you to serve Camar, but your oaths were nothing, in the end!”

The two dead knights did not respond.

“Talen, what purpose does this serve?” Allera asked, coming forward despite Dar’s caution. She glowed with a soft golden light, a *holy aura* cast in anticipation of a confrontation. The glow extended around Dar, Varo, Letellia, and Alderis, but she did not include the vampires in its protection. Likely Talen was right, and they did not need it; could the power of undeath harm those already dead?

“You are right,” Talen said, without turning. “It serves nothing.” He focused on Nelan. “So, cleric, are you going to step aside?”

“I cannot.”

“So be it,” Talen said. He lifted his sword.

“No, wait!” Allera shouted.

But it was too late, as several things happened at once. Nelan, his face tinged with regret, lifted his arms, and... *changed*. Black tendrils of power twisted through his incorporeal form, and his face transformed into a visage of unnatural terror. The power of his new master surged outward, the *horrific appearance* of the ghost stabbing into the life energy of the living foes that confronted him.

Behind him, the other ghosts unleashed their own power, their *corrupting gazes* striking like daggers at the vitality of the companions.

But these attacks were not the final sum of the gateway’s defenses. The unnatural carvings on the pillars that flanked them on either side twisted and took on life, bulging and growing as they stepped away from the rock that encased them. The skeletal figures that had decorated the pillars were replaced by a pair of glabrezu, their hulking masses looming large over the smaller enemies recoiling before them.

Chapter 343

GUARDIANS OF THE GATE

Bolstered by Allera's very timely *holy aura*, Dar weathered the attacks of the ghosts well, although he could feel the icy touch of their power along the fringes of his soul, like the chill of a wintry breeze. He heard Letellia cry out, and turned to see the sorceress stagger back, the skin of her face and hands crinkling like the skin of an old apple.

That was enough for Dar. He knew that ghosts were hard to hurt, but *Valor* would serve, if necessary.

But then the glabrezu appeared, and the equation changed.

Talen's vampires needed no urging to attack. Even as Talen had raised his sword they had swarmed forward, hacking at the ghosts. But their weapons passed harmlessly through the incorporeal undead, and the former bandits staggered through their vague forms, which were utterly unaffected. The ghosts proved that the reverse was not true a moment later, as Alexion raised his pick and drove it into the side of Drudge. The ghost-weapon pulsed with black power, and it bit deep into the solid flesh of the vampire, tearing open an ugly wound despite his considerable resistances to most forms of attack.

"Attack the demons!" Talen shouted at them, as the huge glabrezu emerged from the pillars, their long pincer-arms giving them an easy reach to attack any of them. Ignoring the ghosts, he rushed at the nearer of the two fiends. But as he rushed past Nelan, the priest reached out and touched him. The vampire was caught off guard as positive energy tore into him, and he screamed as it pierced him like a hundred arrows, tearing deep into the corrupt core of his being.

"How?" he cried, as he staggered back, trying to recover.

"I serve a new Master," the cleric said, his eyes reflecting the vampiric knight's torment.

Varo had been ready with the power of Dagos, and even as the ghosts released their power he countered it with his own. Nelan's *horrific appearance* nearly overcame him, but Allera's protective ward gave him enough strength to resist it. The attacks of the lesser ghosts were no real threat, nothing against the swelling surge of power he commanded. But his attempt to rebuke the ghosts failed. He knew that this place bolstered undead through the dark potency of Orcus, but even so the sheer intensity of it caught him by surprise. The power of this place that had nearly overwhelmed the sorceress's senses was like a solid wall a hundred feet high, against which the might of his divine patron pounded as uselessly as a crashing wave. He recognized the subtle attempt to undermine his will, and angrily he shook it off. He reached out again, this time drawing in his power for a potent summoning spell. Once again his effort failed, as his magical calls vanished into the chasm between realities, blocked by the power of Orcus.

The demons, however, had no such difficulty. Upon their arrival, each of them immediately set upon conjuring aid, and unlike Varo, their summons were answered. Sick ripping noises accompanied by a visual distortion in the air above as reality twisted, and a pair of vlocks appeared, flapping their wings as they surveyed the scene of developing carnage.

The few seconds it took to complete the summons gave Dar the initiative as he stepped forward to engage the first demon. Such was its size that the fighter had only to take a few steps to attack, but even so the demon's superior reach gave it an advantage. It stabbed one of its pincer-claws at him, trying to snap his neck in its grip. Dar batted it aside with *Valor*, shearing off the lower half of the demon's claw with the blade. *Valor* sung with potency as it fulfilled its purpose, and the demon was given pause by the power it recognized in that weapon. For a moment, it considered a temporary withdrawal, to prepare defensive wards and a better tactical position.

But then Dar opened his mouth.

"Is that the best you got, you fucking dog?"

The glabrezu roared in rage, and unleashed a full attack upon the diminutive wretch. Its damaged claw could no longer grasp, but it could still hit, and the demon smashed the little man across his helmeted face with a backswing. Before he could recover, it snapped its other claw down hard. It tried to seize him by the waist, but managed to get only a leg, clamping down just below the hip. Still, that was enough to lift the human up high enough for the demon's smaller claws to reach him, and they tore at his chest, reaching up under his helmet in an attempt to crush his scrawny throat. Finally, the demon lunged forward and bit at the man's wrist, seeking to end the threat of the magic sword once and for all—which would make a fine prize to take back to the Abyss.

The assault would have left most men broken and dying. Unfortunately for the demon, it had picked probably the worst possible man in all of Camar with which to tussle.

The glabrezu had his leg good, but it hadn't yet gotten a solid purchase on his neck, and Dar was able to tear his arm free of its bite. The pincer-claw was perhaps the greatest worry, so he sliced down with *Valor* and took the entire arm off at the elbow. Its weaker fore-claws were not enough to hold him, and he fell, wincing as his damaged leg stabbed needles of agony with the impact. The demon roared in pain, but its head was way up above him now, out of reach. Dar decided to rectify that and smashed *Valor* down into its left knee. He'd intended to cripple the joint, but managed to score a critical hit, severing the leg entirely. The glabrezu toppled to the side, now in serious trouble. It tried to call its magic to flee, but before it could concentrate through the pain of two severed limbs it felt the human leap onto its back, a moment before two feet of axiomatic steel entered through the base of its skull, putting a sudden end to it.

The other demon wasn't exactly having a good time on the far side of the room. Shay had engaged it as soon as it had appeared, rushing at it and thrusting her longspear

deep into its armored side. The demon had ignored her until it had summoned its vrock, and then turned to face her. It yanked the spear out of her grasp as she tried to draw it back, but she avoided getting snared herself, dodging back out of its reach as Talen's vampires leapt upon it in a violent frenzy. Their attacks were almost futile against a creature of the demon's power, but it was forced to take them seriously, especially when the little Calla struck it across the back of one leg, sucking life energy out of it into herself.

While the demons engaged with the warriors on the fringes of the battle, power flared back and forth through the center of the chamber, as the ghosts and spellcasters contested. Allera unleashed a *mass cure* that ravaged the ghosts. Their incorporeal existence protected them to some degree, making even odds that she could affect them at all, but she caught Marcus and Zahera in the first attack, the blue fire opening ghastly rents in their misty outlines. Zahera responded with an arrow that proved all too substantial when it hit, the hazy black shaft piercing her *holy aura* and biting deep into her flesh. The healer responded with equanimity, yanking out the shaft and firing off a second *mass cure*. The black arrow vanished into nothing along with the ghost of the woman knight, and this time both Nelan and Alexion felt the power of the spell as well. Nelan had been fencing with a much warier Talen, but as the *mass cure* wrought damage upon him he turned and hurled a *flame strike* into the midst of Allera, Letellia, and Varo.

The summoned vocks had held back thus far, taking the time to ward themselves with *mirror images*. But they were quick to take advantage of Nelan's *strike*, and one dove forward in the wake of the flames. It uttered a devastating shriek that stunned Alderis and Letellia, and then landed in the midst of the casters, ready to rend and destroy. The second one saw a juicy target in Allera, and dove onto her, bearing her down under a flurry of cutting claws and tearing beak. The healer screamed and tried to get away, but the demon, surrounded by a flickering field of *mirror images*, engulfed her in a shifting swarm of violence.

Chapter 344

FORWARD THE RECKONING

The remaining glabrezu summoned its power and conjured a ring of *reverse gravity* around it. Talen's vampires went flying up to the ceiling, smacking into the smooth white stone. They weren't really hurt by the sudden ascent, but the glabrezu had cleared the space around it, and protected itself from further encroachment.

Or at least that was what it had assumed. It was caught off guard as Shay charged it, her longsword glowing in her hand. She shot upward as she entered the *reverse gravity* field, but her momentum carried her forward, and as she shot past the glabrezu's head

she sliced out with the blade. The sword clipped the dog-demon hard, shearing off one of its ears. The demon roared and tried to grab her, but the *reverse gravity* still held her, and she landed easily in a crouch on the ceiling, upside down.

She was twenty-five feet off the floor, but that wasn't enough to take her out of the demon's long reach. The glabrezu snarled and lunged up at her, careful not to blunder into the effect of its own magic.

Talen growled in frustration as he sword passed through Nelan again without effect. The ghost cleric had been distracted to cast his *flame strike*, but now he turned back to face Talen again, and the vampire knew that another blast of holy energy of the magnitude of the first might destroy him. Or at least render him helpless, which may as well have been the same thing. He wasn't going to get another chance at Orcus.

Nelan saw it, too. The cleric drifted forward again, power flaring around his extended hand, a *mélange* of black tendrils and the familiar blue glow of healing magic. Did the use of healing spells injure the ghost as well? Talen did not know, but he did know that the cleric's touch was going to be a world of pain. He darted back, cursing himself for being too slow as Nelan closed the gap between them.

And then blue fire exploded around the ghost, and with a soft shriek the ghost of Nelan came apart.

Talen turned to see who had aided him, but it wasn't immediately obvious who had cast the spell. Vrocks were everywhere, although he recognized that most of them were images cast from the pair that the glabrezu had summoned. Varo was fighting off another ghost... Marcus Felix, it appeared, although Talen couldn't clearly distinguish him from behind. Talen would have put money on the inevitable outcome of that clash, but as he watched Marcus laid into the priest with his sword, and it was Varo who staggered back; the ghost was stronger than it looked, and their weapons seemed to have no difficulty affecting corporeal opponents.

He glanced back and saw the glabrezu battling his vampires, most of whom were on the ceiling, caught up in a *reverse gravity* field. He watched as the demon delivered a crushing blow to Shay, who narrowly tore free before it could seize her in its pincer. The scout was still in the fray, darting forward like a snake into the hole in the gravitic aura, falling directly onto the demon's shoulders. It tried first to knock her free, then snapped at her with its jaws, but she was quicker, smashing her fist into its left eye. The demon roared and staggered back, and then both of them, demon and vampire, were flung up to the ceiling, where they continued to struggle.

Well, Shay seemed to have matters well in hand there. Talen turned and leapt into the shifting mess of illusory vrocks.

Allera felt as though she'd fallen into a tornado; the vrock bashed and buffeted her. Thus far the *stoneskin* that Letellia had placed on her had protected her from both the

vrock's mundane attacks and the burrowing spores that tried to penetrate her flesh. But there was nothing she could do to defend herself, but try to get away.

She slipped out of the vrock's grasp as it tried to grasp her and draw in against its body. Staggering back, she hurled another wave of positive energy out from her: not an attack at the demon, but rather directed at her allies, and against the ghosts she could sense like spots of black against her perceptions. Fortunately she could distinguish them from the vampires, although at the moment she felt well tempted to destroy them as well, as Nelan's warning echoed in her thoughts.

She couldn't see the results of her spell, as the vrock rushed in and seized her again. This time its claws locked onto her upper arms, and it yanked her roughly into its embrace, its beak locking on her throat. The thing was very strong, and she thought she could feel Letellia's magic weakening. Once the ward was depleted, she knew that the creature could tear her apart in a matter of moments.

Then the creature shrieked and dropped her. The healer hit the ground rolling, ignoring a stabbing pain through her right arm as the fall smashed her elbow. She looked up to see Talen and Dar double-teaming the demon. She wasn't sure which one had struck it down, but its images were all but done, and as it tried to leap into the air, its wings beating furiously, Dar sliced his blade across its lower torso, eviscerating the thing.

The other vrock had enjoyed a brief moment of advantage against Letellia and Alderis, smashing the stunned spellcasters with its claws and knocking both roughly to the ground. But both were likewise protected with *stoneskins*, and as they recovered they quickly countered the vrock with potent attacks of their own. Alderis sheared away its *mirror images* with a *dispel magic*, and Letellia hit it hard with a *disintegrate*. The beam failed to vaporize the creature, but it certainly got its attention, and it adjudged the sorceress the greater threat, leaping onto her and crushing her arms against her body as it enfolded her in its muscular grip. The vrock started to pound its wings and rose into the air, perhaps intent on taking its prize somewhere quieter for private consideration. But it underestimated the powers of its victim, and a moment later Letellia successfully *dimension doored* out of its grasp, materializing on the far side of the room by the doors. That left it open to Alderis's *cone of cold*, which blasted it with devastating effect.

The glabrezu had finally gotten a good grip on Shay, and it hurled her from it, tossing her halfway across the room. But as the demon tried to rise it found itself assailed from all directions by hungry vampires. For the most part their attacks failed to penetrate its heavy protection, but it took another hit that drained yet more life energy from its faltering body. The demon, deciding enough was enough, tried to *teleport* away, but its magic, drained along with its life, faltered and failed. It tried to get up and away, knocking vampires off it with its still-potent claws. But before it could escape the effect of its own *reverse gravity* Shaylara reappeared below, clutching her longspear once again. The highly-enchanted head of the weapon bit into the demon's head just above the armored carapace that covered its back, sliding deep into the muscled flesh. The

glabrezu thrashed wildly, sending vampires flying in every direction, and then it tumbled forward, plummeting hard to the ground below, narrowly missing crushing Varo as it struck.

The battle was already over by the time that the demon landed. Varo had destroyed Marcus's ghost with a final pulse of healing energy, and the last vrock failed to escape as Letellia hit it with a barrage of *magic missiles* that cut through its spell resistance like small knives through fabric. As a summoned creature, the vrock dissolved into greasy black smoke as it expired, unlike the two massive glabrezu that lay like mounds of rubble in the center of the room. Black ichor spread across the white floor like slicks of tar, and as the rush of battle departed it left the stink of death and destruction in its wake.

Chapter 345

A TENSE AFTERMATH

The companions, blooded and weary, gathered as Talen's vampires leapt down from the edge of the *reverse gravity* effect. Allera drew out her wand of *lesser restoration*, and started treating those who had been affected by the ghosts' draining attacks. They were in pretty good shape overall, thanks to their defensive wards and Allera's *mass cures* during the battle.

"Well now, that wasn't so bad," Talen said. In fact he still felt drained, empty, but his natural regenerative powers were quickly restoring the vitality that had been destroyed by Nelan's *heal* spell. Apparently Talen's slaves felt the same, from the hungry looks on their faces as they watched their living allies, their eyes lingering on the spots of blood on their clothes where the vrock had managed to cut them through their *stoneskins*. Hedder and Drudge even started sidling toward Letellia, who looked alarmed until Dar stepped in front of her, his hand on the hilt of *Valor*. Annoyed, Talen ordered his vampires to guard the door.

"This was just a preliminary test," Varo said. "To force us to deplete our resources."

"What else can we expect to face?" Shay asked, wiping the demonic ichor from the head of her spear before the caustic gunk could sear the blade.

"The demon Maphistal still bides his master's call," Alderis said.

"And it just wouldn't be a full day in Rappan Athuk without Navev showing up to hit us with those fucking blasting spells of his," Dar said. "I swear it, the next time we meet, that bastard's head is going to be shoved so far up his ass that he'll have to fart to speak."

“What else, Varo?” Talen asked.

“Whatever you least expect,” the cleric said enigmatically, meeting the vampire’s gaze squarely, despite the danger there. It was Talen who finally turned away first.

They were distracted by a flash and a loud noise, a deep thump, from the double doors. They turned to see the vampires falling back from the doors in alarm. Or at least most of them; a flare of black light was already dissolving around what was left of Utar, a greasy charcoal smear on the white stone. One of the doors was ajar, only slightly, but enough to identify them as the likely source of the disturbance.

Talen got there first. He didn’t bother to ask what had happened. Instead, he looked at his remaining minions with a cold stare.

“I’d often wondered which of you lot was the most stupid; each day one of you has done something new to take the top slot. Now, however, I know for certain.”

As the others watched, he and Shay applied themselves to the doors, and pulled them open fully, revealing a long hall beyond.

This place was starkly different than the white entry chamber, yet no less remarkable. To the right, the floor was covered in white bricks, separated by only the tiniest of seams. The wall was covered with an intricate mural, so well-crafted that they could not see any missing stones or gaps in its construction. The scenes depicted there were gentle, peaceful, pastoral settings occupied by figures clad in white tunics and flowing robes.

To the left, the hall was quite different.

The bricks there were red, and the scene upon the wall was the antithesis of that on the right. Armies crept along that surface, and men and beasts died in a rage of violence. The workmanship was such that even individual drops of blood could be seen, spraying from the sundered victims of the chaos.

The two sides of the hall were separated by a strip of greenish metal, perhaps two feet wide, that ran from the entrance at their feet to the distance ahead, as far as they could see.

“More writing,” Shay said, indicating the floor. The message, engraved in thin lines of silver, was clearly comprehensible, written in an archaic script form of the common language.

Alderis was standing some distance back, and did not have a clear view of the runes. But the elf spoke the words, his voice oddly thick, as if he’d taken ill.

*"The struggles of life for the good are many
For the evil are few and dictate the path chosen
War and peace, one and the same
To fail in war is to lose peace, and war the way
To win it. 'Tis a fine line the good men walk."*

"What does it mean?" Allera asked.

Varo opened his mouth to say something, but he didn't get a chance to respond. Hedder had been pushing forward to get a better look, and as the healer asked her question, the vampire stepped over the threshold of the door, onto the red tiles to the left.

There was a flare of power, like an invisible wind that raised goosepimples across the flesh of the companions. A noise that sounded like the braying of warhorns echoed around them, the source everywhere and nowhere at once, or maybe only within their own minds.

But the change that occurred by the mural was anything but imaginary. The scene of war and conflict shimmered and shifted, and for a moment the scene was alive, bodies twisting as they were pierced and shorn and crushed.

One tiny figure within that vista stepped *out* of the mural, onto the ruddy stones of the hall. A few inches in height when it first emerged, it was somehow a full six feet tall when its boots landed on the floor. Its face was familiar; in fact it was a precise copy of Hedder, down to the yellow teeth and tangled nest of matted black hair.

The duplicate yanked out its shortswords, exactly copied of the ones that Hedder carried, screamed, and charged.

Chapter 346

WAR AND PEACE

Varo had been unable to get a warning out in time to stop Hedder, but he made up for that now. "Do not step onto the red stones!" he shouted.

His caution almost came too late, as the other vampiric bandits moved forward reflexively to meet the rush of the duplicate of Hedder. Talen's fist shot out and smacked hard into Needles' chest just as the vampire's foot was crossing the threshold of the hall, knocking him onto his back. Hedder, already standing on the red tiles, looked around confused, but his gaze was drawn back to the copy of himself that was rapidly closing the distance between them.

“Back!” Dar yelled. “Draw it into the room!”

The companions fell back, forming a rough semicircle around the entrance of the hall. The duplicate ignored all of them save Hedder, springing into a high leap that ended with it stabbing both of its blades into the vampire’s chest. Hedder was driven back and fell backward, nearly colliding with Calla as he came down.

The duplicate was on him again in a flash, but before it could strike again the other warriors were there to intervene. Dar and Talen struck within moments of each other, their magical blades cleaving the dead flesh of the duplicate. The thing came apart as the powerful blows carved apart its torso, dissolving into nothing before any part of it could reach the floor.

Talen looked down at Hedder, who was still lying on his back. The rents in his armor were clearly visible, but as before there was no blood, and his vampiric abilities were already working to restore the damage he had suffered.

“Fortunately for you, your stupidity was less costly than Utar’s.” The other bandits helped their companion to his feet, and they followed after Talen and Shay as they returned to the doorway.

“I presume we take the middle path,” Talen said to Varo.

“Yes. Even a single step upon the red or white stones may prove calamitous.”

“What does the white side do, do you think?”

“I do not know. But I doubt it is as benign as it looks.”

“That is true of many things,” Talen said, breaking a smile as he glanced at Calla.

Shay led them forward again, carefully treading upon the narrow path of green-tinged metal plate that bisected the hall. The broad corridor continued for quite some distance, but Shay identified another pair of doors at the end well before the light of their torches revealed it.

There was one other incident upon the walk. They were nearing the doors when Allera let out a warning and pointed toward the white wall. They turned to see Calla walking there, peering closely at the pastoral mural, close enough to reach out and touch it.

“Calla! Get back here, now.” Talen’s voice had the tone of a command, and the girl complied, although she returned without haste to the green line. “What in the hells do you think you were doing?”

“Looking for peace,” she said.

“Do you feel all right?” Allera asked her.

“I didn’t find it, if that’s what you’re asking,” the girl snarled at her.

“Shut up. Keep moving; I don’t want to get trapped on this tightrope,” Talen said.

They reached the doors without incident. It was difficult to open them while remaining on the narrow path, but Shay was able to manage it, using her spear as a lever. They filed through the opening in the doors into another huge chamber.

This place was truly massive. It was round, with a ceiling covered in a flattened dome that was buttressed by several dozen pillars several feet thick. A diffuse golden light suffused it, so they could see clearly across to the far side, some two hundred feet distant.

The chamber’s dominant feature was instantly visible. A huge portal stood in the center of the place, rising up some twenty feet, a freestanding circle that seemed precariously balanced upon the stone floor. The portal was a disk of pure black, like a window onto a scene of pure night. There was a squat stone platform before the portal, an altar of some sort decorated with items not clearly discernable at this distance.

Without speaking, Talen gestured them forward, using sweeps of his sword. They spread out as they warily approached the portal, the vampires to the right, the mortals to the left. They were hyperalert to the threat of another ambush, but nothing stirred, and the diffuse light allowed them to clearly see across the breadth of the chamber, save for behind the portal and the pillars. The place seemed to absorb their presence, their lights blending into the omnipresent glow. Even their bootsteps and the gentle clink of the warriors’ armor seemed muted.

“The black gate,” Alderis said, his voice startling them out of the quiet. “It’s here, the end, the calling, the sacrifice.” He clutched at his chest, where the crystal growth lay under the fabric of his robe.

“For the gods’ sake, keep it together, elf,” Dar growled. But he held *Valor* naked in his hands, and he had the look of a coiled spring in his stance as he crept forward.

As they passed the first of the pillars, they could see that they were covered in familiar designs of souls in torment. At least they appeared to be mere decorations at first, until they got close enough to see the twisted figures *moving*, trapped within the black stone.

“By the gods,” Allera whispered, drawing back in revulsion.

“There is nothing that can be done for them now,” Varo said.

As they drew near to the altar they could see that it was slathered in blood, old and dry. There were a few crude knives layed out upon it, and several odd lumps of what might have been porous stone. The surface of the altar was covered in runnels that culminated in three silver bowls set into one side. There were also markings on the altar, spidery runes that crawled around the edge of its surface.

“What do these runes say?” Shay asked, moving closer to investigate, while giving the altar a comfortable berth.

Varo looked at Alderis, but the elf was silent, staring at the portal. “They are instructions,” the cleric said. “For opening the portal. The ritual involves cutting yourself upon the altar, and then covering yourself with your own blood. *‘To pass the portal of oblivion, one must cover themselves for the dark god, in only a coat of his own crimson.’*”

“The hell we will,” Dar muttered.

“In any case, it will not work. The door above could be fooled by chicanery, but this portal will not open without the express desire of Orcus. It must be forced.”

“Now that is a strategy I can get behind,” Dar said. He started forward, but Varo forestalled him before he could reach for his club.

“No. It is not physical might of which I speak. The way must be opened by...”

But he did not get a chance to finish. Several of them shouted warnings at the same time, and they drew back in alarm as the black surface of the portal came alive. Dark ripples surged within the substance, and a violet corona striated with pulse of black and red erupted from around the edges of the disk.

“Maybe Old Goat Horns is going to save us the trouble!” Dar shouted. Allera invoked her second *holy aura*, while Letellia and Alderis each cast warding spells about their persons.

But it was Maphistal, not Orcus, who stepped through the portal a moment later.

“IT ENDS HERE,” the demon said, its voice pounding with potency within their minds.

Chapter 347

MAPHISTAL

It may have been something in this place, or the ascendant power of its dark lord, but Maphistal seemed bigger, stronger, more steeped in power. The demon's skeletal, monstrous appearance was somehow magnified, and the echo of its mental declaration pulsed through their minds like the rumblings of an earthquake.

Demonfear rolled over them like a flooding torrent, but bolstered by Allera's *heroes' feast*, the companions were able to resist its effects. *Valor* seemed almost alive in Dar's hand, trembling with steel rage.

The demon was surrounded by a black aura of power that was distinct from the energies still radiating out from the portal. It looked like an *unholy aura*, but as they watched they could see... *things* orbiting within that nimbus of darkness. As the demon exulted they spread outward, twining around its arms. It bore its deadly skullcrushing mace like a scepter.

"Undead," Allera warned the others, indicating the black shapes clinging to Maphistal, while Varo added, "Greater shadows." The other companions stood tensed, ready, but they hesitated, waiting to see what other surprises might be coming through the portal in the demon's wake.

"It ends here for you!" Talen shouted back, stepping forward. "You will not stop us from getting to your master, demon!"

Maphistal's gaze turned slowly to confront Talen. "You arrogant little fool. Do you think you can deny the power of your Master? He who made you what you are!"

Talen's lips drew back into a snarl, and he took a step forward. But power flashed in the demon's eyes, and the vampire knight staggered as if struck. The bandits and Calla screamed and collapsed upon the floor, abasing themselves before Maphistal. Shay dropped her spear and clutched her head, swaying back and forth, while Talen grimaced and somehow held his ground. He lifted his sword. "I defy you, Maphistal! I defy you, Orcus!"

The demon's lips twisted in what might have been a hint of a smile. "You shall have an eternity to repent those words, slave. Do you think that little amulet you wear can protect you from the will of a god?"

Dar whispered to Varo, "Shouldn't we be attacking this motherfucker, while it's distracted?"

"Wait," the cleric said. He had slid his hands under his armor, clutching something on a throng fixed around his neck.

Talen screamed and tried to press forward, but his legs refused to obey his commands. Again Maphistal's words crashed through the minds of the living companions, even though the force of it wasn't directed at them.

“KNEEL, SLAVE.”

And Talen knelt. Behind him, Shay and the other vampires were already on their knees, their faces pressed against the floor.

“You may have cowed him, demon, but you won’t bend our knees quite so easily,” Dar said.

Maphistal turned back to them, and laughed. **“It is your very strength that will make your souls so sweet to my Master. Do you think it is happenstance that you are here? You were allowed to live because you were still useful; the Overmind had grown... truculent. Now that it has been disciplined, any need to keep you alive has disappeared.”**

“All that has transpired, since your first arrival at Rappan Athuk, has been in accordance with my Master’s plan for your frail little world. Yours will be but the first souls that he shall consume. And once your world is dead, a shriveled husk drained of life, then he will return to the Abyss, and reshape it to his will. Thanatos will reign unrivaled in the multiverse! The dark shadow of unlife will extend across the planes, undeniable!”

“Yeah, yeah, we know all that shit,” Dar said. “Let’s skip ahead to the part where I chop your fucking limbs off.”

“So be it,” Maphistal said. The demon waved a hand, almost casually. **“Claim them.”**

The shadows surrounding the demon detached and surged toward the companions in a black wave. At the same time, the vampires sprang up and leapt at their former allies, led by a raging Talen Karedes, who brought his sword down upon Corath Dar in a powerful two-handed arc.

Chapter 348

IT HELPS TO BE PREPARED

As their allies turned on them, and Dar swung to meet the blind rush of Talen, Varo turned, looked at Allera, and nodded.

The healer closed her eyes and let the power she’d been holding course through her. Maphistal tried to intervene, striking her with a wedge of magical power, but Allera had been ready, and the demon was too late to stop her as the *mass heal* spell blasted outward from her. The spell, designed to provide succor to the injured, was instead a weapon of destruction against the undead that swarmed at them.

She did not need to see to direct the spell, gently directing the power into each of the undead creatures that grated like an abscess upon her senses. A few of the eight greater shadows, protected by Maphistal's *unholy aura*, were able to resist her magic, but the majority were riven by the healing fire. The vampires were engulfed by blue flames, turning into pyres as the holy energies blasted away their corrupt and unliving flesh. The spell could not snuff out their existence entirely, but it left all of them critically damaged.

At least until Varo followed Allera's discharge of power with his own *mass cure serious wounds* spell.

The second pulse of healing power, following immediately upon the first, had a devastating impact. Varo's magic was far weaker than Allera's, but her spell had weakened the undead to the brink of destruction, leaving them crippled and vulnerable.

Six of the shadows came apart, dissolving into nothing. So did Hedder, Needles, and Drudge, followed a second later by Calla, who fell screaming to the ground, crumbling into gray ash. Shay tried to get away, turning and fleeing before the divine magic, but this was an attack that she could not dodge. She staggered and fell as the blue surge blasted her into nothing.

Somehow, Talen survived both attacks, but as he faced Dar his visage was a blackened, ruined mess, his skull clearly visible where his gray flesh had been scored away. His eyes, lips, and hair had been burned away, but somehow he could still sense the presence of his enemy, and words hissed from him as his jaw twitched and worked.

"You... must... finish... it..." he said, even as he lifted his sword and swung at the fighter. Weakened as he was, Talen's attack was feeble, and Dar easily deflected it. The vampire staggered forward, off-balance, and tried to reach for Dar, to sap life from his body.

Dar spun and with a single cut from *Valor* cut the vampire in two.

Letellia, recognizing that she had little chance of harming Maphistal, *disintegrated* one of the shadows as it darted toward them. Alderis started to cast a spell of his own, but before he could finish his magic, the elf's body clenched, and he clutched at his chest, a terrible scree hissing from his throat. The last shadow dove at him, sensing a vulnerable foe, but its claws passed harmlessly through him, unable to get past the *death ward* that Allera had placed upon him earlier. The shadow, already seriously damaged by Varo's *mass cure*, suffered further from a series of *scorching rays* from Letellia that bore through the protective ward around it and pierced its unholy substance.

Varo reached drew out his hand from under his breastplate and formed a fist, lifting it high toward Maphistal. Something sparkled between his fingers. His other hand

clutched his divine focus, and another object dangled from that wrist, the small silver torch he'd taken from Serah, not so long ago.

"The relics of a dead god will not save you, cleric!" Maphistal roared. But Varo had clearly gotten the demon's attention. It charged forward, moving with insane quickness, closing the distance between itself and the cleric in a matter of strides.

But its path took it past Corath Dar, and before it could unleash a blow upon the priest, the fighter shouted a battle cry and *smote* the demon with *Valor*. The axiomatic blade cut through the demon's *unholy aura* like a hot knife through butter, and it bit deep into the thick hide covering the demon's torso. Maphistal had to outweigh Dar by a factor of at least five or six, but the blow still twisted the demon around, diverting it from its rush.

But that brought its rage down fully upon Dar. Maphistal's mace came around, its head a blur. Dar's attempt to block was utterly overwhelmed, and they could all hear the crack as his right arm was crushed from the force of that blow. The fighter went flying, and *Valor* shone in mid-air for a good second or two before caroming off one of the nearby pillars, and clattering to the floor. Dar followed it a moment later, screaming as he landed on his broken arm, blood spraying from his lips as shards of broken bone worked their way deeper into his lungs.

That obstacle removed, Maphistal turned back toward Varo.

Chapter 349

THE WILL OF THE GODS

Dar's sacrifice had bought only a few seconds, and Maphistal's mace whipped around like a serpent's head, coming down toward Varo's skull.

But those seconds had been all that Varo had needed. White fire erupted between the fingers of his clenched fist as he extended it toward the demon, and this time, the words he spoke shook off the very walls of the chamber.

"IN THE NAME OF THE GODS OF MAN, I COMMAND YOU TO BEGONE!"

Maphistal shrieked as the lines of white light pierced it. The demon's *unholy aura* dissipated before those penetrating rays, and as space twisted around it the demon's form became distorted, elongating as it was dragged backwards into a tiny opening in the fabric of reality.

And then it was gone, and quiet returned to the chamber.

Dar got up, with Allera's help, her *heal* spell restoring his body even as he grimaced and straightened out his damaged arm to let the purging magic flow. "What just happened?"

"He *banished* the demon back to the Abyss," Letellia said. The sorceress seemed none the worse for wear, although Alderis still seemed somewhat disoriented behind her.

"I seem to recall you trying something like that the last time we fought that bastard," Dar said. "It didn't work quite so well then, and the demon seemed stronger, if anything, this time."

Varo nodded. He unclenched his hand, and a fine white powder fell from between his fingers, trickling down to the floor. "I drew upon an additional resource this time."

"What? Remember, no bullshit, Varo."

"The Drusians call them the *Tears of the Gods*. They are potent devices that augment spell power, but do not ask me more about them; assume that anything that is said here echoes in the ears of our adversary."

"Is it gone for good?" Allera asked.

"I do not believe it will be able to return soon enough for it to make a difference," Varo said. "But we should not linger long."

Dar looked back at the spot where Talen had fallen; there was nothing left of him. "What about them?"

Varo shrugged. "Vampires are difficult to destroy. I did not see any sign of their gaseous forms during the battle, but that does not necessarily mean that they were annihilated. In any case, Talen Karedes is no longer a factor in our mission."

"You knew he would betray us," Dar said.

"I knew it was a likely possibility. I planned a contingency with Allera, should this happen. I would not touch that, not yet."

The last sentence was directed at Alderis, who had started walking toward the black portal, haltingly, as if being dragged against his will. "This is why we are here," the elf said.

"Yes," Varo said. "Our enemy lies on the far side."

"So why aren't more demons pouring out of it?" Dar asked.

"Maybe he's saving them all on the other side," Letellia ventured.

“We can only deal with what we can see and understand,” Varo said.

“The demon stepped through it easily enough,” Dar said.

“The Portal of Darkness is a sundering in the barrier between realities,” Varo replied. “It is not like a conventional door.”

“You said we had to force our way through,” Allera said. “That you, Dar, and Alderis were the key.”

“Yes. It will not be easy, and success is by no means certain. The Demon will oppose us with his full strength; he is not yet ready to enter fully into our world, and will not seek a confrontation that is not of his own choosing.”

“What about what Maphistal said?” Letellia prodded. “He said that this was all part of Orcus’s plan.”

“Orcus knows what is in the *Codex Thanara*, and likely understands it better than any of us. He has tried to use us, and when that has failed, to destroy us. But ultimately, the choice we make here will be ours.” The cleric looked at both Dar and Alderis as he said the last words.

“So we are doing this, then?” Letellia asked. “The five of us, against a demon prince. In his own lair.”

“It is that, or accept the death of our world,” Varo said. “Orcus will grow stronger as we delay, and by the time that the armies of Camar and its allies arrive, it will be too late. We have driven off Orcus’s lieutenant, and inflicted serious damage to his legions. Now is the time to strike.”

“Do we have a chance?” Allera asked quietly.

Varo’s look at her was almost gentle. “Ultimately, all we can have is faith.”

Dar snorted. The fighter removed his helmet, and fixed the full force of his gaze upon Varo. The cleric faced that stare with equanimity. For almost a full minute, the two stood there in silence.

Finally, Dar turned back toward the black barrier. “All right. What do we have to do?”

Varo walked forward. Alderis was already standing at the portal, almost eager, his body trembling. The elf’s hand rose up to his chest, rubbing at it through his robe. Dar looked down at *Valor*, the steel blazing in his hand. He slid the weapon into its sheath. He looked back at Allera, doubts blazing in his mind. The portal rose up before him like a battlement, a slice of darkness that reflected their lights like a black mirror.

The cleric removed one of his black gloves. "As one," he said. As the other two took up position next to him, Varo lifted his hand toward the blackness.

"It's cold," Dar said, as his palm rested against the surface of the portal. "And solid," he added, thumping it hard with his flesh. Opposite him, on the other side of Varo, Alderis flinched as his slender hand pressed against the black.

"A toll will be exacted," Varo said. "The sacrifice must be made, to open the way."

Letellia and Allera watched as the three men stood there, hands pressed up against the portal.

"Nothing is happening," Dar muttered.

"Faith," the cleric said. And then, as if his word had been a trigger, their hands started to sink into the barrier. Dar started, and Alderis paled, but none of them faltered.

"Remember, the fate of our world relies on..."

But Varo's words faded into black.

Chapter 350

THE ELFLORD'S SACRIFICE

The place felt... *old*.

Alderis looked around. The vault was not large, and his magical light penetrated easily to each of its corners. Ancient buttresses covered in faint spiderweb cracks rose up to support a ceiling fashioned into a reverse-step pyramid that reached a pinnacle some twenty feet above the floor. An empty stone bier lay in the center of the room, each of its corners fashioned into the shape of a humanoid figure of indistinct identity, crafted in such a way that they seemed to be holding up the slab.

He had no idea of how he had gotten here. One moment he had been pushing through the dense substance of the portal, the next he was here, alone. He turned, and saw behind him a massive block of black stone, set into the wall. Deep-etched runes that seemed to leak a faint, diffuse light sprawled across its surface. By some facility that he could not identify, he *knew* that this was the exit, but likewise that same sense whispered that it would not allow him passage until he had satisfied whatever condition had brought him to this place.

When he turned back toward the center of the room, he was no longer alone.

“You are an illusion, a simulacrum,” Alderis said, stepping forward. There was a twinge in his chest, where the crystal now continuously reminded him of its presence. It was like an old wound that never fully healed, like an old soldier paying for a moment’s lapse in some long-ago battle.

“As you wish,” Sultheros said. The elf stood beside the bier, which was now covered with an array of familiar items. Alderis’s old friend was worn in the familiar robes of the Conclave, although he had retired from that body more than sixteen years ago. The sight of them was another reminder of how much he had lost.

“What is all this?” Alderis asked him, identifying the materials atop the slab.

“Do you not know them?”

“I do. My books, the old ones... these artifacts from my laboratory... ah, the spellweave matrix, where did you secure that? Destroyed in the explosion... gods, we were fools, then.” He let out a little gasp as the crystal pulsed in his chest, and he rubbed it with a hand.

“We were young, and eager, and full of our own power and potential,” Sultheros said. “We were going to redefine how magic was wrought in our world.”

“I remember. It was a long time ago.” *And I am not the man I was*, he thought.

“None of us are unchanged,” the other elf said, as if he had heard the unspoken comment.

“You are a projection of my own mind,” Alderis said to him. Sultheros merely shrugged, as if to say that the answer did not truly matter. “Why are you here?”

“To guide you. You face a choice.”

“The sacrifice.”

“Yes. It is the reason why you are here.”

“Why? Why me?”

Sultheros made a subtle gesture, indicating Alderis’s heart.

No. Not his heart. It still beat there, within, but Alderis knew that it was not alone, that each beat was echoed in the symbiotic shard that was growing within him.

“Must I continue to pay for a moment of foolishness?”

Sultheros's expression was sad. "You know the answer to that question already, old friend."

"Yes. Yes, I do." He turned and looked at the relics of his life, spread across the bier in an ordered fashion, as though he'd laid them out himself. "I do not suppose that these are real, either."

Sultheros did not respond. After a moment, Alderis looked up at the other elf. "What is required of me?"

"You know the answer to that as well."

"No. No, I cannot. You ask too much."

"Then a world dies. I am sorry, Elegion. I cannot undo what has been done."

There was a long silence. Then, finally, Alderis spoke, his words a soft whisper.

"Do it. Quickly, before I... before I weaken."

Sultheros's words were gentle blanket. "I can do nothing, old friend. You must make the choice."

Alderis's body shook. When he looked up again, he was alone again. The bier was empty.

The elf turned, and walked toward the door. The runes brightened, as if to welcome him.

Alderis summoned his magic.

Chapter 351

THE GENERAL'S SACRIFICE

It was dark, and he was alone.

A hiss of steel on leather, as *Valor* erupted from its scabbard.

Normally, the axiomatic sword's glow was subtle, not enough to see by. But here, the blue radiance blazed around the steel like the light of a torch, filling the room with an eerie pale light.

Dar sucked in a breath.

The light from his sword revealed two others in the vault with him. Lying on a stone bier in the center of the room was Allera, unconscious or asleep—or worse. And standing behind her, was Marshal Velan Tiros, clad not in the robes of the Tribune, but in the old armor of his legion days, back when he'd won a reputation as Camar's foremost military commander.

Dar was moving forward toward Allera at once, but Tiros interrupted him. "She lives. She is not truly here, not as you are. You cannot help her now."

Dar ignored him, bending beside the bier, touching her face, gently shaking her. She felt warm, but did not respond to his touch. "Allera. Allera."

"What have you done to her?" There was steel in his voice, and *Valor* seemed to brighten incrementally in response.

"I have done nothing. She is only here as a representation, as am I."

"You sound like Varo. Speak your piece then, and get it over with."

"The way out lies there," Tiros said, pointing. Dar turned, and saw a black stone slab behind where he'd first appeared. Runes glimmered faintly, flaring as the light from his sword spilled across them.

"Then that is where I am going," Dar said. He started to pull Allera into his arms, but suddenly, with a blink, he was standing and she was back on the bier.

"You cannot take her with you," Tiros said.

"Fuck you, marshal." He turned and headed for the stone block warding the exit. There was no seam, no handle, no keyhole. He smashed his hand against it; it was solid, the pain shooting up his arm from the impact.

"Orcus resists your efforts to enter his realm," Tiros said. "Only through sacrifice can you break through."

"Go to hell," Dar said, as he continued his search. He started to reach for his club, but realized that none of his other weapons were on his person. Only *Valor*, which pulsed in his fist.

"The people of Camar... all the world! Rely upon you, Corath Dar. You have a duty..."

Dar rounded on him. "Fuck you and your duty! I didn't ask for this, marshal! I didn't ask for any of this! Damn you and Varo, and all your gods, and this entire fucking place. I didn't ask for any of it!"

Tiros did not shrink before his fury. “None of us asked for it, general. But we can only live the life that is given us. Who and what we are comes from how we confront the trials that are inflicted upon us.”

“I will die before I allow any harm to come to her.”

“If Orcus wins, then she and all of the others will suffer. There are some things worse than death.”

“She is just a vision... this is not real...”

“In some ways, this is more real than your reality. You have your sword. If you strike her down here, then the gods will have their due. It will be painless, and Orcus will not have her.”

“I will not...” Dar lifted his fists, one still clutching his sword, up to his forehead. “I will not!”

A voice, distant but familiar, drifted into his mind. He could not tell if the words were from Tiros, or Varo, or himself. He had heard them once before, in a dream.

To confront the demon... the the apostate, the general, and the elflord... must sacrifice that which they hold most dear... and only thus... may the world of man be spared...

Dar screamed. He spun, and with the full force of his strength, he slammed *Valor* down into the black stone slab blocking the exit. There was a scream of power, and a noise like the breaking of the world, that enfolded him and tore him away into oblivion.

Chapter 352

THE APOSTATE’S SACRIFICE

Varo noted the details of the vault almost absently. He was alone, but that did not really surprise him. There did not appear to be any exits; he glanced back and saw the black portal, recognized it as the way back, but did not bother any more with that.

When he looked back toward the center of the room, he was no longer alone.

“I should have figured it would be you that would be sent to test me.”

Serah looked almost as she had when they’d first met, but she was clad in a simple robe rather than armor. “I am not here to test you, Licinius Varo.”

“No?” He walked forward, his heavy armor clanking slightly. He was still not accustomed to its bulk, even though the blacksteel was barely heavier than the breastplate he used to wear. She waited for him, until they stood together in the center of the room, separated by the stone bier. “So, you are not real?”

“I am real as I need to be.”

“An enigmatic answer.”

She shrugged. “As was the question.”

“I know that I will be asked to sacrifice. But to be honest, I do not know what I have left to give. My life, I suppose, but that I have always expected to be forfeit.”

“Without hope, life has no meaning.”

“One can hope for others.”

“Is there nothing else you have left?”

“What have I not given up? My youth? The satisfaction of a career? The respect of peers and friends? Family?”

“Love?”

“Even if you are just a shade of myself, do not mock me.”

“I am not trying to mock you, Licinius.” She took a step along the edge of the bier, but did not come closer to him. “Do you blame yourself for my death?”

“I would like to believe that you knew what you faced, what we all faced. That you came of your own free will.”

“Ah, free will. That is an interesting one, wouldn’t you say? To what extent are our lives governed by free choice... and to what extent are those choices forced upon us?”

“I do not seek absolution for my own choices, Serah. I made them freely.”

She looked at him with such sadness that for a moment he flinched. “I know, Varo.”

“If you can, tell me what I must sacrifice. I am ready.”

She came around the bier then, close enough so that he could smell her, the fragrance of newly washed hair and skin with a faint hint of flowers. It sent a pang through him, in a way that he’d thought long since burned away.

"Is this difficult?" she asked him.

"Yes. But it does not matter."

"It does," she told him, taking his hand in hers. "For what is asked of you is that you give up the very things that have carried you this far."

"I don't understand."

She turned his hand slightly, and touched the symbol that dangled from his wrist. "You carry my focus."

"It is a powerful weapon."

"Is that all that it is?"

"Serah." He closed his eyes for a moment. "I know that you are not real, that you are here to challenge me. But still..." He opened his eyes, met her gaze. "I wish that there could have been more. I do. But with a world in the balance, all other desires must fade."

"No, you do not understand. In such times, those other things *are that much more important*. Look at Dar and Allera. Do you consider them weak, for their love?"

Varo frowned. "It may make it harder, or even impossible, for them to do what must be done. Talen, and Shay..."

"Do not use them as an excuse, it does not change the basic question."

"What do you want from me? What I must give, I will."

She stepped forward again, until they were almost touching. She was several inches shorter than he, and slight against his metal-clad frame, but somehow she seemed to loom over him. Her eyes swallowed his in their brown depths.

"Certainty. Doubt. Those you must give up."

"But... they are opposites."

"No. No, they are not, Licinius Varo. You are driven, and you are as hard as a sword. But a sword will break, when struck by a hammer. And sometimes, a sword is not enough."

"I do not know what to do."

“That is a start. Remember, that there is truth, and there is Truth.”

He swallowed. He could not turn away, and as he stared into her eyes, understanding came in a gentle wave. He was overwhelmed, and would have fallen to his knees, if she hadn't taken her in his arms.

“I...” he could not speak. *I do not know if I can.*

I know.

Darkness enfolded him.

Chapter 353

A SLICE OF THE ABYSS

“He's coming around.”

“Varo, can you hear me?”

The priest blinked. It took him a moment to recognize Allera, looking down at him, strands of hair protruding from around the edges of the leather cap she wore. *She is still alive...*

“Varo. If you can understand me, say something.”

He felt a deep emptiness inside of him, but quickly recovered enough to speak. His throat was tight, and he felt as though he had gone a hundred days without a drink of water. “Where... where are we?” he croaked.

“Where we are is well and truly fucked,” Dar's voice came from a short distance away.

Varo tried to get up. After a moment's hesitation, Allera helped him to a seated position, where he could look around at their surroundings.

They were on a platform of pale white, featureless substance, not stone or wood or earth or any other material he could identify. The “sky” above them was a wild medley of chaotic whirls and vague distortions; one moment it looked almost like a solid roof a few dozen feet above their heads, and the next it seemed to go on forever. The platform dropped off at its edges into sheer drops that descended into utter blackness. Noises rose up from those depths, echoes of cries and fearsome shrieks and other noises unidentifiable except to clarify that he did not want to go in that direction.

Looking out along the horizon, he saw that the platform connected to a maze of twisting pathways that extended out as far as he could see. It looked like the maze extended in only one direction, but in that way it branched and forked at least a dozen times. There were no walls, and some of the pathways seemed close enough for a man to leap between them, but something quiet whispered in his mind that such a course would be exceptionally hazardous.

“Well. You’re awake.”

Varo blinked and looked up at Dar. “What... what happened?”

Dar lifted his sword. Or rather, what was left of it; *Valor* now ended a few inches above the crossguard, the blade ending in a jagged tear of metal.

“Your sword...”

“Ruined. The sacrifice I had to make.” He looked at Allera, and Varo felt the meaning there, although his mind was not yet sufficiently unscrambled to make full sense of it. The memory of what he had experienced beyond the gateway was too fresh, and it had torn away all of the assumptions that had brought him here.

“Alderis?”

Dar jerked a thumb, and he saw the elf, lying awake but stunned on the far side of the platform. Letellia was talking to him. Varo could see his body shaking from here.

“What...”

“His magic. All of it, he said. He can’t even manage a freaking *magic missile* now, not even from his wand. He’s a bit... upset. You knew, didn’t you? You knew that this would happen.”

Varo shook his head, still rather overwhelmed. “No... no, I didn’t...” He glanced at Allera, and for a moment Dar’s expression darkened, and his fist tightened so around what was left of his sword that Varo would have retreated, had he seen it. But when the cleric turned back to the fighter, Dar had regained control, and the rage had retreated back to a cold anger.

“What did you have to give up, priest?”

“I... I don’t know for sure, yet...”

“Yeah, right. So, do you have any ideas, about how we’re going to face Orcus, now that our most powerful weapon is useless, and our strongest wizard is barely able to throw rocks? And if you say, ‘faith’ again, I swear by the gods that I will toss you over that fucking edge right now.”

"I do not think the gods can hear us, in this place," Varo said. But even as he spoke the words, he felt something twist inside him, and he had to stifle a sob that threatened to overcome him.

"I can still feel my magic," Allera said. "There's a... a *power* that shadows everything here, but I can still heal."

"That's good," Dar said. "Because I think we're going to need it."

Varo rose, again with Allera's help. Dar went over to Alderis and Letellia, and while Varo could not overhear what was said, the elf got up, shuffling forward with the sorceress behind him.

"Let's get moving," Dar said. He took the lead, stepping out onto the path that led into the maze. He put the remains of his sword away in his pack, and drew out *Beatus Incendia*. The holy sword burst into flames, but even though it was not that dissimilar in size from his own weapon, he held it uncomfortably, as though its fires could burn him as well.

Behind the fighter, the others followed, still dazed and tired, but driven forward by some reserve of determination to see their quest through to its end.

Chapter 354

THROUGH THE GAPING MAW OF UTTER DESTRUCTION

"How long have we been here?" Letellia asked. The sorceress's face had a bleak look, but she kept on moving, pushing one foot after another to keep up with Dar's steady and unrelenting pace.

"Ten, twelve hours?" Allera ventured. "Not a full day... I think." The healer looked up at the sky, but the chaos-scape offered no clues, and there had been no change in the intensity of the light that diffused through the air here.

Which was not to say that they had not encountered changes in their environment. The place was suffused with chaos, eddies of which had found them in their journey through the maze. Unpredictable changes in temperature, sudden gusts of wind, even a mini-tornado that had nearly swept up Alderis before they could stagger out of it, Dar all but dragging them forward as a group. And there had been enemies. No sudden onslaught of demons, as Dar had feared, but they'd already battled three groups of shadows, including an assault from five of the stronger, bigger variety that rose up out of the dark pits flanking the path, attacking them before they even realized they were there.

Fortunately Allera had still had a stronger *mass cure* available to her, or that encounter might have been devastating.

There had been corporeal foes as well; a knot of dretch that they met on one of the paths, and which had surged forward to destruction at the blade of *Beatus Incendia*. A vrock that had appeared out of nowhere. Luckily the demon had seemed as surprised as they were, and they were able to blast it before it could marshal its magical powers against them. At one point they saw a glabrezu, deeper in the maze, but the creature did not appear to detect them. At least it did not come their way. Varo had suggested that the chaos in the maze interfered with the demons' natural teleportation abilities. But he could offer no explanation of what this place was, or what recourse they had save to go forward, and seek out the end.

Allera had treated each of them with her wand, easing their exhaustion. There was no talk of stopping to rest, not here. She used it twice on Alderis, depleting the wand's power completely. The elf was flagging, but Dar had refused to slow, moving forward with a dire certainty of purpose, *Beatus Incendia* a beacon in his hands.

"We need to rest," Allera finally said. Dar stopped, but Alderis kept going for a moment, until he was adjacent to the fighter. "There is something ahead," the elf said, the first words he'd uttered in hours.

"Is there anything else you can do for them, Allera?" Dar asked. When Allera shook her head, he said, "Five minutes for food and drink."

They mechanically consumed victuals from their supplies. Everything they carried had taken on a bland, empty taste, but they ate to keep their bodies sustained. When they were done, and Dar had tossed the empty wrappings into the abyss, they pressed forward again, toward that which the elf had spotted.

As they drew nearer, they could all see it, a gaping opening that rose up ahead of them on the path. It was like a cave mouth, suspended in mid-air upon the path. It bore more than a passing similarity to a gaping mouth, complete to the jagged rocks that might have served as teeth. The path vanished down its gullet, fully twenty feet wide.

Dar glanced at Varo. "This is the first likely route we have seen," the cleric said.

The fighter turned back to the lead. "Stay alert," he told the others, needlessly.

The tunnel proceeded forward for about fifty feet before it opened onto a ledge that overlooked a large chamber. The place extended for over two hundred feet square, and looked to be hewn from a dull black rock that drank up the light from their torches. Bones were strewn about the floor, and clung to the walls in random patterns, affixed by some sort of resin that filled the place with a sick stink of rot. The ledge stood some thirty feet above the level of the floor below, toward which a staircase descended along the wall to their right. They could see vague details by the light that filtered down

through the tunnel behind them, but most of the chamber was sunk within deep shadows that became utter blackness that gathered in the place's corners. The only sound was the quiet clink of their gear and the raspy noises of Alderis's breathing.

"It's quiet," Letellia said.

Varo took his torch, shining with a *continual flame*, and tossed it out over the ledge. The brand flickered as it arced across the chamber, landing in the approximate middle of the place. The torch formed a lonely circle of light, and the shadows shifted in response, but the edges of the room remained deep within shadow.

"All right, let's go," Dar said, starting toward the stairs.

They descended slowly. The rough stone was slightly sticky, and faint sucking noises accompanied their steps. The stairs were broad enough to ride horses down two abreast, but they lingered near the wall, close enough to touch the ancient bones that jutted from the pitted stone.

"There's nothing here," Allera said quietly, as they reached the bottom of the steps.

"There could be anything in those shadows," Dar pointed out. "Stay close; I don't like the feel of this place."

He started forward, but had barely covered three paces when Alderis staggered and nearly fell. Letellia held him up as his fingers clawed at his chest, his expression a mask of agony.

"What is it?" Allera asked, starting back toward him. Varo held his ground, peering into the darkness that enfolded them.

"They... are... coming..." the elf hissed.

Dar lifted *Beatus Incendia* into a ready stance, just as two mariliths *teleported* into the chamber.

The demons materialized at the far edge of the circle of light cast by Varo's torch, in the middle of the chamber. The half-light only intensified their terrible, alien features, an amalgam of feminine humanity and demonic potency that bespoke their great power. Each was over twenty feet long from head to tail, and gold and jewels sparkled on their arms and torsos. That finery was matched equally by the deadliness of the six swords they carried, long hacking blades that glowed faintly with crimson energy.

The demons were clearly prepared for battle; the dark energies of *unholy auras* protected them, and they were quick to unleash their spell powers upon the companions.

Varo actually struck first, but while his *flame strike* bracketed the demons, blasting both with divine fire, the demons seemed barely injured by the potent display. One conjured a *blade barrier* that stretched across the chamber at the foot of the stairs. Letellia let out a shriek as the blades started cutting into her and Alderis, who were standing in the midst of the *barrier* at it appeared.

Dar snarled and started toward the demons, but the second lifted a hand and with a desultory gesture snared the fighter with *telekinesis*. Dar was flung up into the air and roughly backward. Allera reached for him as he shot past, but could do nothing to stop him as he flew into the raging storm of the *blade barrier*. The effects were predictable, even before he hit with a grinding crash and a spray of red droplets that hung in the air for a moment, before splattering to the ground. Dar kept on going, hitting the wall fifteen feet above the floor, and hanging there for a moment before he toppled forward and landed hard face-down at the base of the stairs.

Chapter 355

THE HANDMAIDS OF ORCUS

Allera had gone after Dar, but she could not reach him through the *blade barrier*, and a more immediate need confronted her as Letellia staggered forward out of the wall of spinning blades. Her *stoneskin* spell had protected her from being torn to pieces, but blood seeped from numerous rents in her arms, legs, and face, staining her clothes with bright spots of red.

The sorceress, half-dazed, turned away from Allera. "Alderis... he's still in there!"

Allera could see the elf's lean form, half-obscurd by the blades. He was upright, but appeared stunned or confused, and he didn't respond to their calls to escape the stationary *barrier*. Allera realized that he would be shredded in seconds, and she had two choices: try to heal him faster than the blades killed him, or go in and drag him free herself. The latter option, of course, would expose her to the devastating effects of the spell.

She did not hesitate, and rushed forward. But before she could reach Alderis, something happened.

Within the storm of blades, Alderis stood shock-still. He could no longer distinguish the pulsing in his chest from the beating of his own heart. Razor-sharp lines of force blurred all around him. He could feel them slicing into his robe, but he felt only an odd tingling as they touched his flesh.

Is this what dying feels like? he thought.

He heard someone yell his name, and he looked up. Allera was there, clearly coming toward him, but before he could yell for her to stay back, something happened.

Varo hit the mariliths again. His summoning spells were of no use here, so he channeled the power of one into a *mass inflict serious wounds* spell. His potent magic pierced their *unholy auras* like a hot knife through butter, but he cursed silently as the negative energy of the spell faltered against the innate resistance of one of them. The other one shrieked as the spell's power ripped into her, but even a hundred feet away Varo could tell that the creature was far from crippled. One of them tried to hit him with a spell, but his will was an armor that protected him far more securely than any suit of steel plate. The other demon, the one that he had hurt, lifted its swords and started forward. Varo glanced back but saw that his companions were in no position to help. He started to turn back to face the oncoming demon, but then something happened, and he stood there, surprised.

Allera and Letellia staggered back as the pitch and speed of the *blade barrier* suddenly changed. The wall of deadly knives started to collapse upon Alderis, the magical blades mere blurs as they sliced in a violent, collapsing orbit around the elf. Alderis stood there, his face frozen into a scream, his arms stretched out and behind him, as thousands of tiny swords of arcane force tore into him. The blades cut his robe as they converged upon his chest, but there was no blood, nothing at all as they vanished into him. It took a fraction of a second, and then it was done; the *barrier* was gone, and the elf sagged, dropping his arms to his side.

As the *blade barrier* collapsed, Dar pulled himself to his feet, leaving splatters of blood splayed upon the cold floor from the dozens of gashes that the magical blades had torn in his body in his hasty passage through it. A low growl built within him as he strode forward, picking up speed as he approached the oncoming marilith. The demon turned from Varo and shifted to face him, dragging several of her swords along the floor, scraping up rows of sparks and filling the room with a din like the scream of a doomed soul. The second demon was approaching behind it, a grim echo to the first, overkill in the face of their sheer power and deadliness.

Allera and Letellia cast spells, imbuing themselves and their companions with power. Allera's *mass cure* closed the wounds that Dar and Letellia had suffered from the *blade barrier*, while the sorceress's *haste* spell infused them all with supernatural speed.

Dar put that added boost to good use. As he approached the first demon, it gathered its long body underneath it, rising up to its full height. One of the black swords lashed out, and Dar caught it on *Beatus Incendia*, deflecting it to the side, the edge glancing off the side of his helm as it passed above him. The blow failed to penetrate the hard steel of his helm, but his head felt as though it had been struck by a ram; the creature was phenomenally strong.

The marilith's other arms converged upon him, but Dar was already surging forward, the holy sword blazing a trail through the air. He slammed it into the marilith's torso, the blessed steel biting deep into the leathery substance of its body. Black blood sprayed across his body, his clothes hissing as the caustic substance burned the fabric.

The blow was telling, but he paid for it.

The last time he'd faced a marilith's full attack, he'd been left bleeding out his lifeblood upon another cold floor, looking at the severed wreckage of one of his arms lying a few feet away. Since then he had fought and learned, but even the skill of one of the foremost masters of arms ever to have lived in Camar could not withstand the fury of the demon's assault.

Steel whistled through the air as the demon carved him with its blades. The weapons, forged with dark power and infused with the potency of demon magic, found every gap in his armor, and only his desperate evasions kept serious wounds from becoming mortal. The demon was putting a considerable part of its strength behind each attack, eschewing defense to hit harder, to make certain that this foe would go down.

And yet, somehow, Dar did not go down. Blood poured down his arms and legs, and pulsed out from under his breastplate where a steel edge had pierced through and opened a deep gash between two ribs. The marilith's hissing filled his helmet, and swords seemed to fill the air around him. He almost didn't see the demon's long tail coming around as it twisted its body, coiling around him to come at him from behind, snapping down like a thick whip to trap him. But some sixth sense, some instinct, warned him at the last instant, and he spun and brought *Beatus Incendia* around in a blur. Once again holy steel carved demon flesh, and the marilith screamed again as the last four feet of its tail went flying across the chamber, leaving a bloody trail as it bounced across the ground to a stop. Driven to a mad fury by this human that had stung it so, the demon surged forward to finish him with another devastating full attack.

But Dar met it with a fury of his own. Its first stroke went wild astray, its sword falling to the ground, its severed fist still clenched around the hilt. He brought the sword up to block another pair of strokes, then down into another, caroming off the clash of steel on steel to drag his sword once more across the mottled scales of its body. This wound was not as serious as the first, but *Beatus Incendia* flared with holy power, and the marilith felt *that* energy pierce into the core of its being.

Now it was the demon that gave ground, as it tried to fall back before the fury of this madman's assault. But it was too late; Dar followed it back, and before it could summon its magic for either flight or defense, Dar smashed through its guard, and slammed *Beatus Incendia* down through its body, cutting from left to right, severing it from just above its left shoulder down under the pit of its lowest arm on the right. The demon deflated like a wineskin hit by an arrow, the two halves of its body shearing away in a vile, bloody mess.

Dar staggered back from it, splashing in the blood that poured from the marilith's remains. He was already looking for the second one, but his companions had rallied, and as he watched, the demon, standing near Varo about ten paces distant, *teleported* away.

Allera was at his side a moment later, touching him with a healing spell at the ready to seal the bloody wounds that covered his body. "Are you all right?"

Dar sighed and stretched his arms as the potent *heal* spell completed its work. "I am now, angel. Thanks."

Varo glanced down at the dead marilith. "You fared better against this one than the last such creature we faced," he said.

"What happened with the other one?"

"It attempted another spell without effect, and then closed to join the other in melee. I was able to delay it with the threat of a *harm* spell; I had already penetrated its spell resistance once, so it could not dismiss me as a threat. It was quick to withdraw; I suppose that it had been placed here as another factor to wear down our strength, and to get us to deplete our resources."

"You're hurt."

Varo glanced down at a fresh trail of blood that seeped from the gaps in the armor at his left hip. "It is not serious. I elected not to get close enough to open myself to a full attack." Allera started toward him, but he shook his head, drawing out a slender wand from a pocket in his cloak.

"Yeah, well, sometimes there's no substitute for an old fashioned brawl."

Alderis and Letellia came forward, the elf leaning heavily upon the slender sorceress. "What in the hells is wrong with him?" Dar asked.

Alderis lifted his head, that small gesture alone seeming to drain a huge amount of energy from his reserves. His face looked shrunken, deep hollows in his cheeks and under his eyes, and for a moment even Dar was taken aback. Then their eyes were drawn down to his chest. His *robe of the archmagi* had been all but shredded across his breast, and hung from his body in tatters. They could all see the angular shape protruding from his body, bulging out from his skin like a crude breastplate.

Allera came to his aid at once, but once again her healing magic gave no succor to the elf, who hung between the two women like an old coat on a rack.

"What is happening to him?" Dar said to Varo.

“The thing that is buried in his body is reacting in some way to the demon magic, to this place. It is growing. I suspect that it disrupted or absorbed that marilith’s magic, earlier.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t feel all that disrupted when that bitch tossed me through those razors.” Dar walked forward to join the others. “Is he all right?”

Allera’s look told him all he needed to know. “Nothing I do seems to help him. He needs to rest.”

“We cannot stop here,” Varo said. The cleric walked out to the center of the room, and recovered his *everburning torch* from where it lay sputtering upon the floor. They watched him as he returned, the glow forming a bright halo around him in the near-darkness. “We are close, very close. He knows we are here.”

“Why aren’t we being swarmed by demons, then?” Dar asked.

Varo’s eyes, deep within the recesses of his helmet, blazed with an inner fire. “We are through with the preliminaries.” He shifted his stare to each of them in turn, ending with Alderis, who was shaking like a tree in a storm. “Now it is time for each of us to confront our destiny.”

The cleric’s companions shared a long look. Varo did not wait for comment, but headed toward a dark alcove in the corner under the ledge above. As he walked in that direction, his torch drove back the shadows, ultimately revealing a broad tunnel that descended into utter darkness. Each of them, staring at that opening, felt a cold, terrible feeling stir in the depths of their souls.

Varo stopped a short distance from the tunnel mouth, and waited for them.

“I cannot believe we are doing this,” Allera breathed. She leaned into Dar, who looked at the tunnel with a dark look on his face. *Beatus Incendia* flared brightly in his hand, as if the sword were eager to proceed.

It was a sentiment echoed by none of those present.

Letellia touched a hand to a small amulet at her throat, and whispered soft words that none of them could distinguish.

Alderis just stood there, staring. An incoherent noise bubbled in the back of his throat, and he kept rubbing his chest, his nails scratching on the hard crystal.

Finally, one by one, they moved to join the priest. They stared into the darkness together for a long moment, and then Dar led them forward, until the tunnel swallowed them up within its depths.

Chapter 355

INTO THE LAIR OF THE MASTER

The tunnel continued straight ahead without notable features, the floor and walls worn smooth. The darkness seemed to press in around them, their torches dimming until they seemed barely as strong as candles. Even *Beatus Incendia's* white flames began to flicker, the glow of the holy sword struggling against the dark. By the time they had taken fifty steps into the tunnel, they could barely see ten feet ahead of them, and they pressed closer together within the narrowing ring of light.

They did not falter, and pressed on. Through some unknown agency, as the light withdrew some facility of vision began to extend, and things began to take on shape within the black, vague outlines that shifted and crept across the walls ahead of them. They clutched their weapons and magical devices, alert for an ambush, but when the light finally caught up to their perceptions, it revealed only bare stone, and more empty tunnel.

They began to hear things as well, faint whispers that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at once. Letellia, bringing up the rear, spun several times and lifted her magical torch to illuminate the way behind them, but each time the light revealed nothing. The sorceress seemed to glow, and as they kept moving forward they could all see pale outlines around all of them, visible reflections of the various magical wards that protected them.

"Is this... real?" Allera asked, waving a hand in front of her. The thin, pale flesh of her fingers left faint trails in the air before fading away.

"It is the reality as conceived by the Demon," Varo said, his voice a hollow dirge as it sounded within his helm. "Remember who you are, what you are."

"The tunnel opens up ahead," Dar warned. "A room, maybe... tough to tell." He lifted his sword, willing it to brighten, but the darkness persistently resisted his efforts, and if anything, tightened around them.

"It is time," Varo said quietly.

Allera began spellcasting, touching each of them in turn, imparting a magical ward that flickered slightly around their bodies as it took hold. Letellia refreshed her own defenses, while Varo cast a potent defensive spell of his own. A look of doubt briefly passed across his face as he touched his divine focus, but the magic came at his call, and faint runes flickered around him in twirling bands for a moment, hovering protectively around him as though unrolled from a long, invisible scroll.

Once she was done protecting the others, Allera closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She uttered a word of simple, pure clarity, one that for a moment burned away the confusion that hung over them like a cloak. When she opened her eyes, there was a glow within them, a deep flickering like the light of a dozen stars.

“Are you all right?” Dar asked her. “What did you do?”

She looked at him, and while there was something distant in her eyes, the love she had for him was still there as well. “It is a protective ward, a power that gives me insight into the immediate future. It is... strange,” she said. “I have never felt anything like it.” She looked at Varo, who nodded meaningfully. The cleric had drawn out a pair of scrolls from his bag, which he removed from their cases and tucked into his belt for easy access.

Alderis was now out in front of them; while they had made their final preparations the elf had taken a few halting steps toward the end of the tunnel, as if drawn forward by an invisible tether. Dar shot a wary look at him, but the elf had finally stopped, and did not seem inclined to wander further ahead for the moment.

“Why does he not take action against us?” Letellia asked.

“He is waiting for us,” Varo said, moving forward to stand beside Alderis.

“Let the fucker wait,” Dar said. He turned to Allera, and for a moment the pair embraced, saying what needed to be said without words. When they were done, they joined the others, and the five moved forward into the chamber at the end of the tunnel.

The walls drew back around them as they left the confines of the passage. The place was massive, and the tread of their boots upon the stone vanished into the distance, without a returning echo. With each step, their perceptions expanded, until they could begin to grasp the nature of the reality of this place.

It was grim.

The floor began to crunch under their tread, and as they looked down, they saw bones embedded in the rock, ancient shards smashed and cracked by the passage of time. As their perceptions extended to the walls, and to the ceiling that rose up high above them, unsupported by any pillar or bastion that they could see, they realized that it was all bones, thousands, millions of them, an architectural sculpture of death and ruin. The empty eye sockets of skulls of all sizes and shapes gaped empty at them. Whole forests of long leg and arm bones ran up the lengths of the walls, interrupted by small mounds of intact rib cages, the dangling fingers of whole hands. Bones were crushed together in weird and unpredictable combinations, forming entire new species of creatures, and there were some so odd that they could not even guess what manner of

thing their owner had been in life. The entire chamber was a graveyard, given shape and substance by the will of the dark master of this place.

“Gods,” Letellia whispered, her face paler than the white dust and cracked shards that they trod beneath their boots.

The wall of darkness ahead of them continued to retreat as they moved forward, and the chamber kept getting larger, the walls spreading farther apart with each step they took. By the time they had counted a hundred paces into the chamber, the place stretched almost a hundred and fifty feet across, and the ceiling had risen to almost fifty feet above them. And everywhere, still, bones, both intact and in fragments. They could see an almost intact skeleton of some massive creature embedded in the wall to their left, a thing that would have rivaled the Ravager, or an adult dragon perhaps, in life. Bones crunched under their feet as they walked, and gray-white dust clung to their legs almost up to their knees from the dust they’d disturbed.

“There is only death here,” Allera said.

“Perhaps with my *arcane sight*,” Letellia began, but Varo interrupted her with a raised hand.

“I would not recommend it. The power concentrated here is overwhelming, stronger tenfold than what we felt out in the maze.”

“It’s here, it’s here, it’s here, it’s here,” Alderis began to chant, his limbs shaking. They could see that his fingers were bloody, where he had dug into the crystals encrusted upon his chest. The elf was staring into the darkness, and no longer seemed to realize that they were there. Allera tried to calm him, but he ignored her.

Dar stepped forward, and lifted *Beatus Incendia* high above his head. “Orcus! We have come for you! Show yourself, demon!”

Dar’s shout vanished into the darkness. There was no echo.

Something stirred. They could *feel* it, a current that rose up and crept across their skin, piercing their bodies and chilling them to the core. A terror that threatened their sanity swept over them, threatening even through the magical protections of their wards and Allera’s *heroes’ feast* consumed that morning.

“Remember who you are,” Varo’s voice came, steadying them.

They still could not see into the darkness, but there was *something*, a tremor in that part of the mind where nightmares begin. And then a pair of red embers appeared within the darkness.

SO. AT LAST, YOU HAVE COME.

The darkness fell away like a shroud pulled back from a coffin. The entirety of the chamber was revealed to them, extending for hundreds of feet into the distance, an almost endless mausoleum.

And ahead of them, the objective of their quest waited for them.

Orcus sat upon a throne composed of thousands and thousands of bones, built massive to withstand the weight of its bloated frame. The throne shifted continuously under the demon lord, the bones grinding ponderously together, and as the demon revealed itself, the skulls set into the great chair began to moan, a terrible noise of misery and suffering.

The demon was huge, even seated; standing it would have been over fifteen feet tall. Its body was fat, bloated, but its thick arms and legs were also muscled, and none of them doubted the considerable physical strength bespoken by the demon's size. In its right hand it clutched its terrible rod, a black shaft topped by a huge skull, surrounded by a palpable aura of destructive power. Its face, known to them from the hundreds of depictions that they had seen in Rappan Athuk, was a hundred times worse in person, a hideous amalgam of goat and demon and man. Worst of all were those eyes, red flares from the deepest pits of the Abyss, which held them with a grim promise of their fate.

They were ready for it, had expected it, but even so the reality of Orcus's presence blinded them for several moments to the presence of the others. Oddly it was Dar who recovered first, blinking and lifting his sword; he did not remember dropping it to his side.

A marilith stood to the side of the Prince's throne, its long tail coiled around its squat base. The demon looked little the worse for wear from their earlier encounter, although black scorch marks covered one side of her torso where Varo's *flame strike* had seared her.

And behind the throne... undead.

Dozens, Dar thought at first. But then, as his gaze spread wider, he revised the assessment. There were arrays of corporeal undead gathered in chaotic masses around and behind the throne, skeletons and zombies and ghouls and ghouls, the least of the undead, creatures that the Doomed Bastards had faced and destroyed by the thousands. But then Dar's stare traveled upward, to what he thought had been wisps of fog hovering about the Prince like a plume of smoke caught in the wind. But no... they were undead monsters, shadows and wraiths and spectres, orbiting their Master, bound to its slightest whim.

But all of it, the handmaid, the undead, the creepy throne, the massed death gathered in this place, all of it paled before the sheer power that resided in the center of this place. Objectively, they knew that the avatar of Orcus had been weakened, that their

destruction of the three temples in Rappan Athuk had diminished it. They knew what Varo and Honoratius had told them, that Orcus still lacked the power to effect a physical translation into their world. They knew little of the demon lord's hidden agendas, the politics of the Abyss, the dark litany of events that had ended with this creature poised to invade and destroy their world. They only knew that they stood in the presence of a being that was, if not a god, the closest thing to one that any mortal of Camar had ever faced in the flesh.

Orcus let the moment of realization and revelation stretch on for moments, minutes; time no longer seemed to matter. The mortals that had come here to confront the demon felt frozen, as though the slightest action would collapse this détente and begin the chaos that they knew had to come. The demon seemed to swell as it drank in their fear, and then, finally, it spoke again.

LONG HAVE I WAITED. I HAVE DRUNK DEEP OF YOUR WORLD, BUT YOU FIVE ARE SPECIAL. I HAVE MARKED YOU, MARKED YOU EVEN BEFORE YOU FIRST ENTERED MY DEMESNE, MY RAPPAN ATHUK. YOU MORTALS, SO POWERFUL, SO RICH WITH LIFE. I WILL FEED, AND YOUR POWER, YOUR SOULS WILL OPEN THE WAY. I WILL CONSUME YOUR WORLD, AND THANATOS WILL RISE AGAIN.

"A nice little plan, goat-face, but there's one little problem," Dar said, brandishing *Beatus Incendia*.

"We will never allow you to destroy our world!" Allera shouted.

Alderis let out a terrible, mewling noise.

Orcus let out a grumbling noise of laughter. **YOU HAVE CARVED A SWATH THROUGH MY MINIONS, AND GAINED POWER. YOUR ASCENDENCY HAS BEEN IMPRESSIVE, BUT ULTIMATELY FUTILE. YOU ARE MINE, NOW.**

Without further warning, Orcus hit them with a devastating wave of power. The blackness came rushing back in, but this time it brought with it a suffocating potency that smothered them with dark claws of mental energy. Several of them screamed as the darkness enveloped them, but the sounds faded into the black, leaving only the malevolent laughter of Orcus, which escorted them into oblivion.

WEARING DOWN

The darkness was all encompassing, swathing them and muting their lights, their voices, and their life energies all at once. The power was incredible, stronger than anything they had faced before in Rappan Athuk, for now they faced the source of the corruption within the Dungeon of Graves, dark energy in its purest form.

And yet, within that enfolding black, there was a flicker of light, a pulse that slowly brightened. That faint glow brightened, shone until it became discrete, separating into five spheres of illumination around which the darkness roiled. In the center, a white spear of light flared and stabbed out into the dark, cutting it away like a knife.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the darkness vanished, and the five companions from Camar stood once more in the chamber of bones, wavering and dazed, but intact.

The Demon watched them from its throne. Something that might have been anger smoldered in its eyes. **YOUR RESISTANCE IS IMPRESSIVE, BUT YOU ONLY DELAY THE INEVITABLE.**

Orcus made a small gesture, barely a shift of a finger. The marilith lifted her swords and let out a sibilant hiss, and the undead gathered around Orcus surged forward as one, their focus upon the five mortals that defied their master.

Allera and Varo threw up layered *repulsion* auras almost at the same instant. Here, the normally-invisible barriers appeared as pale, translucent globes of green energy, one embedded within the other, their surfaces crawling with a shifting skein like that of a soap bubble.

The charging undead splayed against those barriers, their phalanx splitting around it as it struck, seeking in vain for a way inside. Fully half of the undead were halted by the outer barrier, almost a hundred feet out from the five companions. The second barrier was much closer, less than thirty feet across, and the undead descended upon it, the flying undead diving down from above as their corporeal comrades surged forward on foot. Most of the weakest undead lingered at the outer barrier, but many of the others, including ghouls, ghouls, wraiths, and spectres, were able to push through, their own will augmented by the terrible power that radiated from their patron and its grim throne.

More of the undead were arrested upon the inner barrier, hissing and shrieking in frustration as they clawed in vain upon the shimmering green obstruction. But twenty incorporeal undead and twice as many physical creatures pierced this one as well, their cries forming a wall of sound ahead of them as they rushed at the defenders.

Orcus seemed content to watch, for now. The Prince's handmaid and general slithered forward behind the legion of undead, penetrating the outer *repulsion* aura with ease. The marilith hurled magic into the center of the circle of defenders, but nothing happened.

The companions formed a ring around Alderis, who remained lost in some reverie, seemingly unaware of what was going on around him. He stood stiffly, bits of crystal protruding from the gaps in his shredded robe, jutting out from under his collar and the tears where his arms met his body.

Dar glanced back at Allera, but the healer was looking at Varo. The cleric stood calmly ready, holding his divine focus tightly in a mailed fist.

Dar spun to meet the charging undead horde. The leading wedge of the charge, comprised almost entirely of ghouls and ghouls, were almost upon him when a brilliant white plane of ice materialized ahead of him. Letellia's spell delayed the physical undead, but the incorporeal ones simply drifted over it, coming down on the companions from above. A pair of wraiths dove at Dar, but most of them focused upon the spellcasters, their claws extended eagerly to suck away their life energies at the behest of their Master.

Allera felt a slight pressure against her defenses as three shadows swarmed over her. Fortunately her *death ward* still held, and their attacks had no effect upon her. She glanced again over at Varo, who was being swarmed by half a dozen undead creatures, which likewise appeared stymied thus far. The cleric could not see her from within the chaotic swirl of dark forms, but she could see enough to realize that he had not lost the iron control that had characterized the man ever since she had first met him, deep within the bowels of Rappan Athuk.

She felt a twinge of awareness, as her *foresight* spell gave her an instant's warning before Orcus acted.

Watching the developing fray atop his throne, the Prince of the Undead was clearly not pleased. Orcus waved a hand and dug a fraction of its power from deep within, hurling it into the midst of the companions. The power visualized as a spear of black energies that materialized and stabbed forward from the demon. As it penetrated the *repulsion* auras, they popped as though they were soap bubbles. The undead gathered along their borders surged ahead. Orcus's *greater dispel* also tore through Letellia's *wall of ice*, and as the barrier dissolved, the companions looked up to see hundreds of undead rushing toward them in a wave.

Chapter 357

ORCUS STIRS

As soon as she felt Orcus's power wash over her, collapsing the defensive barriers that held his undead forces at bay, Allera knew that it was time to act. She saw Dar meeting the charge of ghouls and ghosts, slicing down one, two, and then a third with *Beatus Incendia* before the others swarmed upon him, almost dragging him down through sheer numbers. Letellia shouted something, but she couldn't hear it over the violent noises of the onrushing charge, overlaid with the ongoing noises of suffering that rose from Orcus's throne. She could see the marilith, rising up behind the farthest rank of undead, her swords lifted high like the petals of a flower.

She held her power, but waited another second, two, even as Dar fought for his life, and a ghost sprang upon Varo, and at least a dozen claws extended toward her as the enemy charge swept around Dar and came straight toward her, Letellia, and Alderis. The elf still had not moved from his position, and he continued to stare ahead as though looking at something a thousand leagues away.

Then, finally, she unleashed her *mass heal*.

The energies of the spell spread outward like an invisible explosion. Blue fire erupted around the bodies of the nearest undead, and then those behind, and onward until every unliving foe within thirty feet of her had been seared by that potent flame. Even shrouded within the presence of Orcus, the undead could not escape the sheer destructive potential of pure positive energy. Allera felt purged as the power coursed through her, restored her, cleansed her spirit.

Varo, waiting for just that moment, followed her spell with a *flame strike* that descended onto the ground directly in front of them. The spell cleansed the space of undead, blasting the ravaged creatures into fine dust. It engulfed Dar as well, but the fighter, protected to some degree by his armor, weathered it far better than his foes.

Only a handful of undead remained, those in close quarters with the spellcasters, and thus not caught within the *flame strike*, and a few zombies that had been too slow in their charge to reach the radius of the blast. That number declined further as Letellia blasted three critically weakened wraiths and two spectres with *magic missiles*, dissolving all five of them.

"We'll defeat anything you can throw at us, goat-face!" Dar shouted, cutting apart a wraith that had evaded the *flame strike*. The other wraith had been consumed by the flames, and there was nothing left of the huge mass of ghouls, ghosts, and skeletons that had mobbed him except for gray dust.

But Dar found a more immediate threat to deal with first, as the marilith slid forward to meet him in battle.

"Now?" Allera said to Varo.

“Not yet,” the cleric replied. He tossed his wand aside, its power depleted and useless. Two shadows, their black forms rent by healing power, hovered around him, unable to affect him through his *death ward*. He ignored them, and said to her, “Be ready.”

Dar stepped forward boldly to engage the six-armed demon. Each was wary of the other, having just witnessed the destructive potential each possessed in the last battle in the outer chamber. The marilith had the advantage in strength, speed, reach, and sheer number of attacks, but Dar had *Beatus Incendia*, and a determination that could not be reduced to easily quantifiable terms.

Once again the demon’s swords lashed out as the human entered its reach, and once again Dar took the hits and stepped up close to deliver his own assault. Bright red blood and black ichor alike flew through the air, each spraying the other with their own fluids as their blades carved through armor and flesh and bit deep into the bodies beneath.

After that first full exchange of attacks, the marilith started to turn away, sagging as ichor continued to trail down its body. One of its arms hung limply at its side, and a deep gash ran down from one breast to where its hip would have been, had it been a mortal woman.

As he had with the first one, Dar stepped in to finish it. But even as he lifted *Beatus Incendia*, the marilith’s tail lashed around, the turning of its body allowing it to lash the long appendage up and around like the head of a whip. Dar turned, but just a fraction too slow. The tail smashed down hard across his back, staggering him, and it curled around his torso, tightening like the closing of a fist around the hilt of a sword. Before he could effectively react, the demon reversed its turn, twining more of itself around him, crushing his left arm against his body, and squeezing his torso hard enough to crack his ribs even within his armor. Dar cried out as he was lifted off his feet, firmly imprisoned within the demon’s deadly coils. He still held *Beatus Incendia* in his right hand, but the demon remained out of reach, and in his current position he could not get an effective angle to hew at the parts of it that held him secure.

Allera and Letellia tried to come to his aid. The sorceress struck the marilith with the pale green beam of a *disintegrate* spell, but the demon’s resistances far outpowered Letellia’s strength, and the ray dissipated without effect as it struck her. Allera was torn between Varo’s mandate and fear for her lover, and as the demon tightened its grasp, it was not clear in any case what healing alone would do here, except to postpone the demon’s victory.

Before she could make her decision, a loud noise drew her attention around. The throne’s protests rose to a crescendo, and bones cracked and shifted as Orcus lifted himself to its feet. The demon seemed to rise up above them like a titan as it stood, the power washing off of it disproportionate to even its considerable size.

Orcus said nothing, but Allera could feel the pressure of its stare, could feel the sheer malevolence in that gaze. Its intent was instantly clear, as it lifted its dread wand and strode forward to deal with them itself.

Chapter 358

DESTINY

Dar thought that the marilith's swords had hurt, but the burning pain of the gashes in his thigh, forearm, side, neck, and shoulder paled before the crushing grip of its coils as they tightened around his body. He could not even manage the breath for a cry of pain as his left arm gave with a nasty pop, and he could almost feel his ribs bending toward the point where they would snap en masse, crushing everything they protected.

He looked up at the demon, which seemed amused at his predicament. He knew he could try to cut at the coils that held it, but without leverage or position, he doubted that he could do more than scratch it. He also knew that in a few seconds it would be moot, as he would lose consciousness.

So with limited options, he lifted his arm and hurled *Beatus Incendia* directly into the demon's face.

That clearly caught the marilith off guard; it reared back and brought up a pair of swords to deflect the missile, but Dar had been too close, and the holy sword slammed hard into its chest just above its left breast. The demon shrieked and fell, slamming Dar to the ground as its long body twisted and flexed violently. The fighter, as battered as its foe, was punished further as the marilith's struggles intensified. Its screams sounded painfully, accompanied by metallic scraping and clattering as its swords skittered across the floor, the weapons now forgotten in its suffering.

Orcus's approach took it within five paces of the crippled demon. As it passed, the Prince looked down at its handmaiden, and spoke a word of power. The demon's noises and struggles ceased at once, and it crumpled, instantly dead. Orcus held its dread wand over its supine form, and they could see tendrils of black substance rise up from the marilith, through the wand, and into the body of the demon lord. The demon sucked in a deep, greedy breath and trembled slightly as it absorbed the stolen potency of that last fleeting vestige of life.

Then it turned to the companions. It ignored Dar, still struggling in the now-loose folds of the marilith's body. As it approached the spellcasters, it seemed to swell ever-larger in their perceptions, until it seemed to almost scrape the ceiling high above. It was an optical illusion, but there was nothing illusory about the power wielded by this monstrous being.

“VARO!” Allera hissed.

And then Orcus was right there, and there was no time for anything as the demon prince lifted its wand, and a black fire exploded around the head of the artifact.

EMBRACE DEATH, MORTALS.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl. Dar, staggering to his feet, *Beatus Incendia* hissing as its flames burned off the demonic ichor covering the blade, screamed something that was lost in the chaos. Allera tried to summon her power, but the energies flickered and twisted in her grasp, as though the magic had been placed behind a curtain that she could not quite penetrate. Varo just stood there. Letellia screamed and clutched her head with her hands.

And Alderis. The mad elf of Rappan Athuk, Malerase, Elegion Alderis, Archmage of the Elven Conclave of Aelvenmarr, he was the only one who seemed able to react as the *Wand of Orcus* swept down toward them. The elf’s scream was one of madness, but also held rage, and frustration, and loss, all bound together as one as he sprang forward, arms outstretched. The pathetic remnants of his robe gave way, parting to reveal the huge crystalline mass that clung to his chest, extending from his neck to his arms, and down to his hips.

As the artifact struck him, a note like the shattering of a thousand windows pierced the chamber. And then, chaos chased darkness into a chasm of utter oblivion.

Chapter 359

AN ACE IN THE HOLE

Allera stirred.

Consciousness returned like the light of the sun, glimpsed through a dense bank of morning fog. It flittered for a moment, drifting in that gap between nothingness and awareness before it finally took hold, and she woke fully. But awareness was accompanied by pain, and she groaned. She shifted, and bones crunched beneath her weight. Memory came a few heartbeats later. She tried to get up, but her body remained weak, and she only managed to paw at the floor. Her muscles were unwilling to fully bow to her commands as of yet. An urgency she couldn’t quite define pressed at her, but it alone wasn’t enough to dissolve the lingering fog of confusion that filled her mind.

Magic. She had magic. She stopped and forced herself to take a deep breath, to gather herself. The fog clouding her thoughts cleared slightly, and she drew upon her power, casting her last *mass cure serious wounds* spell.

The blue glow filled her, steadying her. But even more reassuring were the faint presences she felt around her, the familiar signatures that comprised the life-energies of her companions. It was almost reflex now, the way she cast out and directed the power of her spell into those distant pinpricks of light within the darkness. She could not see them, but she did not need her vision to recognize them, as they drank up the flows of positive energy she released and controlled. Dar. Letellia. Varo.

But there was one that was missing.

Alderis...

She was now able to move, and while her arms and legs still felt wobbly, she was able to get them under her enough to lift her up into a sitting position.

She almost wished she hadn't.

She was lying on the floor of the great vault of bones. She blinked, uncertain for a moment. The hulking throne of Orcus was farther away than it had been a few moments before. Before Alderis had thrown himself at Orcus, intercepting the power that the demon had prepared to unleash upon them. She saw, off to her left, indistinct lumps that had to be Varo and Letellia. She knew they still lived, but other than that, could not determine their status in more detail. There was no sign of Dar, but she recognized the collapsed form of the marilith. Its body... *glistened*, and Allera realized that there was a faint, sparkling glow over everything. She glanced down, and saw tiny bits of crystal embedded in her skin, flickering slightly as they caught the faint light of their dropped torches.

But all of that was trivial to what rested between her and the throne. For a moment, a wild, insane moment, she thought that it was dead, a small mountain lying not far from the sinuous corpse of the marilith. But then she realized that Orcus was already stirring, its head coming up over the bloated ridge of its protruding gut as it pulled itself up to a sitting position, facing her across that black, empty gap where Alderis had sacrificed himself. Its eyes burned with an unholy fire, and Allera heard a moan dragged from her lips as the power and fury in that stare transfixed her.

She gained a respite of a moment as the demon shifted its eyes to its right hand. Or rather, what was left of it. The muscled fist that had held the *Wand of Orcus* was now just a blackened, ruined stump, equipped with a few protruding bones and the ruins of what had once been a thumb and finger dangling beneath. Of the artifact, there was nothing, not even a shard of bone or a fragment of black stone to indicate that it had ever existed at all.

The demon's roar shook the chamber, and Allera found herself screaming, as though that could somehow counter the relentless assault upon her senses. For a moment she thought that the ceiling was going to collapse and bury them all; shards of bone drifted down from above and from the walls, and clouds of bone dust rose from the floor. And then she saw the massive hulk rising up off the ground, the twin points of red fire blazing within the half-light. Orcus was still a bit unsteady, weakened by the destruction of its signature artifact, but the demon lord was far better off than any of them.

"Corath!"

Her cry was lost within the noise filling her head; she could not tell how much was real noise, and how much was just the pounding echo of the power surging off of the enraged demon. Impelled to action, she pulled herself to her feet, but her legs wobbled under her, and it was all she could do not to fall.

Orcus reached back, and extended its good hand toward its throne. Bones creaked and shifted in protest, and as Allera watched the entire right side of the unholy construction tore open, vomiting a black shape that shot out into the demon lord's waiting palm. As it turned back, the healer saw that it was a sword, an obviously magical weapon with a dark blade. Thin tendrils of black smoke trailed through the air in its wake, coiling up around the demon's wrist and forearm like insubstantial serpents. The sword was slightly larger than *Valor* had been, but it looked tiny in the demon's huge fist. The noises of torment that had come from the throne from the moment of Orcus's appearance abruptly ended.

If Orcus was discomfited by the loss of its hand, it did not show it in any way that Allera could discern. Its earlier weakness was passing, as fresh power crept into the void left by the backlash from the *Wand's* destruction. The demon's rage rolled off it like the heat of a bonfire. A black aura had surged up around it, its edges flaring out like a cloak caught in the wind. Allera could not identify its nature, but even fifty feet away she could put a name to it: Death.

"Allera!"

The sound of her name penetrated the violent storm inside her skull, and she turned to see Varo, conscious now, bent over on his hands and knees. His black helmet had fallen free, and his skin was a stark white, almost as pale as the bones shattered under his knees. Blood trickled down from the corner of his left eye, trailing a slash of crimson down the side of his face. For once, his iron self-control seemed to have cracked, and there was something almost akin madness in his stare as he caught her eyes.

"Now! Allera, do it now!"

Allera's body shook, whether from the aftereffects of being smashed back by the destruction of the *Wand*, or the power surging from Orcus, or just from sheer exhaustion and strain, it did not matter. She felt like a prisoner that had been kept awake for days

as torment. She wanted to sleep, to surrender, to let the blackness that was crashing against her slender thread of consciousness to claim her. But she also knew that this was the moment to which all of this had been building, ever since she had first accompanied Talen Karedes down the Well into the bowels of Rappan Athuk.

Opening her arms and her mind, Allera drank in all of the power that she could reach. For a moment, her skin blazed with a white glow as positive energy suffused her. In that moment, she was more alive than any mortal had ever been.

And then, she opened the *gate*.

It started as a tear in the very nature of reality, a vertical white slash that ripped outward, forming an opening that swelled into the shape of a perfect disk, hovering in mid-air before her. Through it, she could see Orcus, but at the same time, she also saw through into another reality, one so poignant and alien that she felt a sudden stab of feeling that cut through the despair all around her like a knife. In that brief, passing instant, she understood things that she had never even conceived of in her life.

But then Orcus lifted his ruined hand. **YOUR GODS WILL NOT SAVE YOU, NOT HERE. THIS PLACE IS MINE!** The demon lord made a motion with its stump like the slashing of a blade, and the *gate* collapsed, crumpling in upon itself like a parchment scroll tossed into a roaring flame.

Chapter 360

VARO

Varo stopped time.

As Allera had opened her *gate*, Varo had drawn upon his own power, the raw and powerful energies of his patron god. The spell was the most powerful he had ever cast, granted to him only that morning, a power that Varo could not have imagined in the hands of a mere mortal even weeks before. With that power, he could do almost anything, but he had kept that potential close within, had not shared anything of it with his companions, for fear that Orcus would divine his intent.

But now, as the demon almost casually disrupted Allera's spell, a magic of equal potency to his own newfound power, he felt overwhelmed by doubt.

Within the *time stop*, everything around him took on an indistinct, almost surreal quality. The visual traces that surrounded magical auras in this place filled the air with subtle streaks in dozens of colors, bright around the companions, dark around Orcus and its minions. He saw a pair of zombies that he hadn't noticed earlier, frozen as they lunged

toward Letellia, who was herself locked into immobility in the midst of dragging herself up to her knees. Allera's face was frozen in a look of horror behind her collapsing *gate*, now just a bright circle barely two feet across. It was continuing to shrink even now, closing slowly despite his spell, and Varo knew that he only had a few moments to act.

The cleric half walked, half stumbled toward the *gate*. He spared only a glance for Orcus, enough to see that the demon was moving too, slowly, ever so slowly, but coming right for them. He thought he could feel an awareness in that ruby stare, that a part of the demon was aware of him even within the bubble of accelerated time. Varo could believe it, from the power he had witnessed already within this chamber.

Seconds, precious seconds of relative time. Too long... and then he was there. The *gate* was only a foot across, now. It would collapse the moment the *time stop* ended. Varo did not hesitate, extending his hand and his awareness toward the remnants of the planar portal.

Instantly, he could feel the barrier that Orcus had described, the blockage that had defeated Allera's attempt to bring divine aid to their cause. It was more than the demon's will, although that was a part of it, a thick, cloying film that held him at bay. This place, all of it, was part of it as well, the chaos of this constructed reality an unbreakable obstacle. Their plan had been foolish, a mad dream. In a few seconds, Orcus would destroy them all, and the last hindrance to its plans for Camar would come to an end.

And then, he remembered the words of the Serah-apparition, in the alternate reality that had been the gateway to this place.

Certainty.

Doubt.

Truth.

And a word he had used often, himself, come back to him. *Faith.*

There was no time for hesitation. The cleric drew out his other hand, clutching the bag that had pressed against his chest, under his armor. He stabbed it at the gate, at the barrier, and as it hit Varo drew upon the last of his power, and summoned a *miracle*.

Magic coursed through him. As his hand touched the barrier, the spell shattered the seven crystals, the Tears of the Gods, that he had won at high cost from the tomb of Amar-Sina. Each crystal held divine potency that Varo had painstakingly infused into them, stored spell power that now joined with his own divine magic to smash into the barrier, *through* it, breaking the unbreakable with the force of a sledgehammer. Almost at once there was a backblast through the portal, and Varo felt the same sudden intensity that had almost overcome Allera a moment ago. His hand passed through the

closing *gate* into the space beyond, unlocking the opening between this realm, his consciousness straddling the space between this place, and the one beyond.

In the same instant, Varo realized two things. The first was that Orcus had been right about one thing; while he had forced his way through the *gate*, nothing beyond could use that breach to come through. The plan he had suggested to Allera would not work; no god would step through to fight their fight for them.

The second realization was the truth, the *truth*, of what Serah—or whoever, whatever she had been—had been trying to tell him.

Time returned to its normal rate as Varo's *time stop* spell ended, and the cacophony of chaos and activity resumed around him. Varo stood there transfixed, his arm vanishing at the elbow, caught within a ring of white fire that raged against a gathering blackness that stormed in from all directions. The tear in realities did not close completely, but the powers of this place were actively fighting him, threatening to tear both him and the gateway apart. Tears streamed down the cleric's eyes, and agony twisted his face as he fought to do... *something*...

Orcus's burning stare fixed upon the cleric, and some dark realization flared within the demon as well. Orcus hurled magic at Varo, a devastating column of dark energy conjured from the very fabric of this place. The black streamers materializing from the nether almost enveloped the man, and they had an obvious effect, piercing his body like long needles. But Varo did not fall, and within the smothering black the demon could see the white fire *through* the man, flickering but intact.

The demon lifted its black blade and charged, moving at a blinding pace, the ground shaking with its coming. Varo, caught within a prison of warring powers far greater than his own, could do nothing but stand there, transfixed, as the demon descended upon him, the chamber of bones trembling with the force of its coming.

Chapter 361

JUST A MOMENT'S DELAY

With Varo unable to master the raw power he'd unleashed through the planar gate, Orcus charged forward to personally put an end to him. The Demon had been battered, its *Wand* sundered, but it seemed no less awesome and terrible as it charged in its full fury across the gap to where the cleric stood in a blazon of white light and black fire. Nothing, it seemed, could stop such a monstrosity.

But something tried.

Corath Dar's cry was primal, all of the fury and violence of Man bundled into a single shout as he leapt out from the ruins of the dead marilith and hurled himself into the path of the Demon. *Beatus Incendia's* brilliant flames seemed weak and fitful, in this place, but there was no dedication lacking in the man that held it. Its attention focused on what was happening to Varo, the Demon nevertheless perceived the threat rushing at its flank, and as Dar entered its reach it smashed down hard with its good hand with an almost desultory blow. Dar came in under the sweep of the black sword that Orcus carried, but as it struck him the pommel jammed down hard into Dar's shoulder, bruising him even through his armor. The sheer strength of the Demon drove a painful jolt through his entire body, and he fell almost to one knee, staggering free before it could follow up with a second strike. He still showed the signs of the beating he'd taken earlier from the marilith, and even with Allera's *mass cure* spells he was barely able to stand after absorbing that hit.

But Dar did not hesitate, lunging forward and swining the holy sword into the Demon's side. The fighter felt a cold chill pierce him to his very soul as he passed through the black aura surrounding the fiend, threatening to snuff his life force out like a candle's flame. But the drive that had carried him through the deadly perils of Rappan Athuk withstood the power of the *dread aura*, and he felt the sword bite on *something* through that black cloak, even as a sudden backlash of released power drove him back a step. Several dark droplets sprayed out in the air in his wake; one struck his arm and sizzled into the armor of his bracer, eating away at the metal like a strong acid. Even the blood of Orcus was death.

The Demon had not been seriously injured by the fighter's desperate attack, but he had gotten its attention. Orcus turned and lifted the black sword again. Dar tried to circle around behind the Demon, to shift his face toward its damaged side, but he was just a bit too slow, his foe just a bit too quick. Knowing he was going to take a hard blow, he raised *Beatus Incendia* in both hands in a desperate attempt to block, or at least turn, the attack.

The black sword struck the holy blade six inches above the crossguard. A terrible sound crashed through the chamber, and then, oddly, was followed by a strange silence that crept up and lingered for almost a full second. Then, finally, it was broken by the clatter of steel on stone as the pieces of the sundered holy sword fell to the ground.

Dar stood there, looking up into the burning stare of the demon prince. The connection between the two lasted for another second, and then the Demon yanked its sword from where it had finally lodged, deep in Dar's sternum, having cut through the dragonscales of his breastplate, then leather, cloth, flesh, clavicle, muscle, rib, and lung on its way. Blood fountained up from his chest as the sword departed, hissing as it touched the black steel of the weapon. And then Corath Dar fell back, the light in his eyes fading even as he touched the cold ground, droplets of bright red blood falling around him to stain the shards of bone scattered around his corpse.

Chapter 362

SACRIFICE

Varo was dying.

Allera could see it, the black surge of energy surrounding him like a million tiny threads of death, slashing and tearing at his life force. Somehow, Varo had stopped her *gate* from collapsing, and she could sense the golden-white blazons of power radiating within, all but obscured by the reactive black cloud that enveloped both it and the cleric. She was not sure what Varo was doing, but it did not seem like he was in control of that power, and it looked as though the death-energy was winning out.

And that was not even considering Orcus. The Demon was coming closer, although Allera could not see it clearly through the waves of distortion surrounding the tiny remnant of her *gate*.

Allera's decision was born of reflex, and she flung herself forward, into the outer radius of that black nimbus. She cried out as the outermost tendrils brushed against her arms, each opening a tear as the skin died and gave way. Her *death ward* had either expired while she had been knocked out by the blast coming from the destruction of the *Wand of Orcus*, or the release of energies had disrupted her protections in some way; she had only her own inner strength and force of will as a defense. She did not know how Varo withstood it; he was utterly overwhelmed with those surges of power, and while she could not see his face clearly through the black storm, she could feel the pain rolling off of him like a wave. Death closed on him like a surging tide.

Against that, Allera had only one weapon: life.

The healer wrapped her thoughts into an armored wedge, and strode forward into the devastating aura. The pain hammered at her as wide swaths of skin on her arms and body crinkled and died, turning first gray, then black, then red as the decay spread to her tissues, and blood spurted from broken vessels into the gaps. Life filled her, but she did not channel it into herself, even as her injuries grew more serious, and the black tendrils began to lash at her face. She closed her eyes and thrust forward, to the core of the blackness, and unleashed the fullness of her power, the awesome potency of pure, golden *life*, into Licinius Varo. The *true resurrection* spell cut away the darkness around him, and the black surges fell back with an inhuman, unnatural scream.

Allera stumbled back, her body covered with gruesome wounds. She tried to cast a spell, but the healing power felt burned out of her. She fell to the ground, clinging desperately to consciousness. Her vision was damaged; one of the black tendrils had carved through her right eye, killing it, and a blood vessel had burst in the other, clouding her vision and giving everything she saw a garish red tint.

She was able to raise her head just in time to see Orcus strike down Dar. She reached out a hand toward her lover, and tried to push herself up, to speak, to summon her magic. But all of her efforts failed, and she could only watch as Orcus turned back toward them, the evil black sword pulsing in its hand as it continued toward Varo.

It had all been for naught. The healer sobbed, blood oozing from the rents in her skin with every breath she took, each one dragging her closer and closer to the inevitable.

Chapter 363

TRANSFORMATION

Varo had clung to the *gate* with every last reserve of determination that he had possessed. The deadly power raging around him had savaged his body, but he perceived it only a distant distraction, focused on what he was feeling through the connection he had forced through the barrier into the reality beyond. In some ways, the jarring adjustment had been more devastating than the tangible attacks upon his person, and he had quailed before them as his fundamental understanding of everything shifted to a new paradigm.

He was dimly aware of Allera, his other companions, Dar and Letellia, of Orcus and it all, the violence of the resistance that the constructed demiplane and the Demon's power was unleashing against the intrusion that the *gate* represented. For a moment he teetered on the edge of oblivion, unable to fight both battles at once, and was nearly torn apart by the tearing of his consciousness under the strain between his physical existence and that of his new alternative perception.

And then Allera touched him, and drove away the darkness. In that instant, clarity came. He understood *truth*.

Orcus surged forward. The Demon had taken swift action to collapse the *gate*, but it had not recognized the full depth of the threat until now. Orcus moved with surprising speed, covering the twenty feet that separated them in just a few massive strides. The black sword it bore was no ordinary weapon, but an artifact in its own right. The Demon lacked the bond it had possessed with its *Wand*, but the *Sword of Kas* represented a power almost as great. The weapon was both intelligent and willful, and it struggled against the Demon's will, but Orcus was able to master it, even diminished as it was. The black blade had tasted the blood of a powerful foe when Orcus had slain the human fighter, and now it hungered for more, for the utter destruction of these mortals that had dared to defy a god.

Through the *gate*, Varo received an offer. For the first time in over twenty years, he felt no doubt, no hesitation, and accepted.

Orcus reached the cleric and brought the black sword down in a devastating arc. A guttural, animal noise issued from its inhuman jaws.

There was a flash of golden light, and a clarion sound like the ringing of a great bell pulsed through the chamber as the black sword struck *something*. Orcus, caught off guard, actually took a step back.

When the flare had faded, the Demon faced off against a transformed opponent.

The *gate* was gone. Licinius Varo was surrounded by a soft golden glow, an inner light that formed a bright nimbus around his entire body. A blazing, almost insubstantial sword of golden light shone in his right hand, and the wounds that had covered his body were gone. His eyes had become two golden orbs, which glittered as they stared upon the Demon. He seemed to swell as the man and demon confronted each other across the field of shattered bones, growing as the power filled him, until he stood almost ten feet tall. The Demon still loomed well over him, half-again his size and many times his weight, but somehow the two seemed almost akin as they faced off.

SO. THE LORDS OF HEAVEN HAVE CHOSEN YOU AS THEIR CHAMPION, VARO? YOU HAVE FOUGHT WELL, AND YOUR STRUGGLES HAVE CHALLENGED ME AS FEW HAVE BEFORE. BUT IT IS ULTIMATELY IN VAIN. EVEN AS A PARAGON, YOU REMAIN MORTAL.

Varo spoke. His words were quiet, calm, but they carried easily, resounding in the mind of the Demon almost as its own words had carried their own mental echo earlier.

“I am only what I am, demon. And you, too, are not invincible. The essence of what you are may survive your destruction here, cast back into the Abyss, perhaps to regenerate into another form in a thousand years. But know this; if you then return, in a thousand years, or a thousand thousands, those mortals that you hold in such contempt will stand together to resist you, and to cast you back down once more.”

Orcus's lips drew back into a feral snarl. **YOUR KIND HAVE BEEN MY TOOLS FOR A HUNDRED GENERATIONS. MAN IS A WEAK, TREMULOUS THING, DRIVEN BY RAW NEEDS THAT CAN NEVER BE SATISFIED. YOU SCURRY ABOUT FOR YOUR FEW YEARS, IN A TERROR AT THE MORTALTY YOU KNOW IS INESCAPABLE. YOU INVENT MYTHS TO JUSTIFY YOUR**

FEEBLENESS, TO JUSTIFY THE EMPTINESS INSIDE THAT IS YOUR CONSTANT COMPANION. YOU PREY UPON EACH OTHER AND EVERYTHING ELSE WITH WHICH YOU COME INTO CONTACT. YOU ARE A CANCER UPON YOUR WORLD, AN EMPTY SHELL, FIT ONLY TO SERVE AS THE PATHETIC PLAYTHINGS FOR BEINGS SUCH AS I. I AM THE SHADOW IN THE NIGHT, THE FEARS OF MAN MADE MANIFEST. I AM ETERNAL. I AM A GOD.

Varo's gaze was almost pitying. "You are a demon, an exile seeking to recover a lost realm. You may have once been powerful, but you are weakened, your home stolen from you, your temples broken, your precious wand sundered. Where are your legions? Why do you not open portals to bring more demons to your cause? Are a pair of sickly old mariliths the best you can do? Where are the countless undead you profess to rule? When I saw that your defenders included skeletons and zombies, I knew that your powers had been pressed to their limit in your war against my people. Your desperation is revealed in each attack you make upon Camar, for it is only in our destruction that you can preserve what you are. You *need* to win here, and win decisively. Falter here, and even without our victory you will be dragged down by your rivals, to serve for aeons untold in a state of penury and servitude. You are, in the ultimate reckoning, a sorry thing, a sad wretch of a being, with neither purpose nor pleasure in your existence."

Orcus's lips drew back into a feral snarl. **YOUR DESTRUCTION WILL MARK THE DEATH OF YOUR RACE!**

Orcus lunged forward with surprising speed, lashing the black sword down in a long arc that trailed lines of vaporous dark energy through the air in its wake. Varo brought up his own weapon, and the sword of light struck the dark with a loud clang and flash of energies. Orcus shifted at once, driving the sword down in a potent overhand stroke, but again the cleric shifted and parried it, stepping away from the cutting swath of the weapon. Varo did not counterattack, instead shifting back and recovering his defensive stance. The cleric moved with a calm economy of motion, his movements only slightly encumbered by the bulk of his heavy armor, his enhanced speed matching the sheer power of the Demon.

Orcus took a moment to recenter as well, gauging its opponent. But that interval lasted only a fraction of a second, and before Varo could deliberate further, it was attacking again. This time Orcus opened with a spell-power, hurling a dark cloud of magic at the paragon cleric. The fell magic dissolved against the golden aura that surrounded him, but it distracted him for a moment, allowing Orcus to get within reach and unleash another violent series of attacks with the black sword. Again the blades clashed in a frenzy of energetic surges, noise and light and power flaring around the two combatants. This time, each inflicted damage upon the other. Varo managed a

counterattack that drew a bright line across the Demon's torso, opening a shallow gash that oozed a thin trail of pustulent ichor. Orcus, however, took advantage of the cleric's attack, smashing its sword over the guard of his shield, hitting hard against his shoulder-guard in almost the same place he had struck Dar a few minutes previous. The blow had a telling effect, but the golden aura surrounding the cleric provided some obvious degree of physical protection, for while it drove him back, the dark blade failed to penetrate his armor.

Orcus feinted another attack, forcing Varo into another defensive stance before it paused to draw upon more of its magic, bolstering its own protections. The dark aura of death that hung about the Demon had no effect upon Varo, while likewise the golden radiance surrounding him did not hinder his foe. Their respective powers, one innate, one gifted, seemed roughly matched, and likewise their potent weapons were balanced with a nearly equal potential for wreaking destruction upon the other.

The two foes came in again, dealing devastating blows in a frenetic exchange of attacks. Varo's strength had grown beyond that of a giant, and the sword he bore opened long gashes in the Demon's bloated body, its divine potency proof against the corrupt nature of the arch-fiend. But the cuts were shallow, and Orcus's stamina seemed inexhaustible as drops of black ichor fell from the wounds to hiss violently upon the floor around them.

Orcus's counterattacks were not lacking in effect. The Demon was even stronger than Varo, a massive strength deceptively concealed within its distended torso and thick limbs. The black sword it bore cut through the paragon cleric's defenses, flaring with small explosions of black energy and golden light as it ripped through his aura and tore into his plate armor. That suit, enchanted to great potency, withstood several attacks that would have otherwise killed him, but the pounding he took was driving him steadily back, as the exchange of attacks continued. Both of them were regenerating, Varo's aura feeding him with new strength, while the wounds covering Orcus's body slowly knitting shut as the Demon's own black radiance swirled around it. But the beating they were dishing out was inflicting new hurts faster than their respective powers could restore them. Varo lunged for the Demon's arm as it mashed its blade hard into Varo's already-mangled shield, trying for a disarm, but Orcus smashed its damaged right hand into Varo's face, hitting him solidly and forcing him back several unsteady steps. Blood was visible under the front of his helmet; the crude but powerful punch had broken his nose.

YOU GROW WEAK, HUMAN, Orcus pronounced. **SOON, YOU WILL BE MINE.**

Varo snarled and rushed forward, driving his brilliant sword deep into the Demon's body. Orcus screamed as the holy light riming the blade seared its flesh, but the demon did not draw back, and too late Varo realized that he'd been lured in. He brought his shield up just in time to meet the black sword. The magical steel, already sorely battered, crumpled, and as the straps parted the shield was flung down, narrowly

missing his foot as it smashed onto the ground and bounced away. Within the protective aura of his transformation Varo was shielded to some degree from pain, but he could not ignore the demon's almost instantaneous follow, which came crashing down onto the now-exposed arm just below the shoulder. Somehow his armor held, but the greave crumpled, and the bone beneath cracked loudly as it gave way.

His face twisted into a mask of determination and anger, Varo pushed harder on the hilt of the embedded sword with his good hand, thrusting it deeper into the Demon's body. Orcus roared again, but like the cleric, the Prince of the Undead could take pain, and it had not yet used up its cache of surprises.

The Demon thrust at Varo with its damaged hand, forcing them apart. Varo maintained his grasp on his sword, which sputtered with demonic ichor as it slid out of the terrible wound in Orcus's torso. Orcus started to turn away, and Varo lifted the sword to strike again, aiming for its suddenly exposed left knee. Orcus seemed to hesitate, giving the cleric a free attack. But as the golden sword sliced down, Orcus unleashed its own attack, snapping its body around, and lashing its hook-ended tail into the cleric's chest. The deadly, poisoned barb at the end of the tail pierced Varo's armor just above his right breast, and as it jerked back a trail of bright crimson glistened on its black head.

Varo staggered back, his attack aborted, as the Demon's virulent toxin wracked his body. His enhanced constitution was enough to keep him alive, but the assault cost him a precious few seconds of distraction, a diversion that Orcus put to good use as the Demon brought down the *Sword of Kas*. The black sword crashed into the brow of Varo's helmet with enough force to dent the magical steel, and Varo was driven roughly to the ground, his protective aura flickering desperately around him.

The Demon's laughter swelled around it as it stepped forward to put an end to it. Varo, stunned, clutched at his sword, but his fingers slipped around the hilt, and he could do little more than watch as Orcus loomed high over him, lifting its sword high above its head.

Chapter 364

RUNNING OUT OF TIME

Letellia's first realization of awareness came with a zombie clawing at her skull.

The sorceress, still dazed, screamed as the undead monster's filthy claws dug bloody channels in the flesh of her scalp. Her *stoneskin* had faded, leaving her defenseless save for the meager benefits provided by the magical augments she wore about her person. She tried to pull away, but the zombie had gotten a grip on her hair, and she

felt a harsh pain as it ripped a swath of it out from the roots; enough to hurt, but not enough to leave her free.

Something crashed hard into her back, a few inches to the left of her spine. Another enemy, although she could not currently turn to confirm her suspicion.

Instinct flared, along with something else deep within, and power flowed through her body as she lunged up with both hands and thrust them into the rotted gut of the zombie. Blasts of sonic energy tore through the creature, and it all but came apart around her, collapsing in a spray of decayed flesh. She rolled over onto her back and saw the second zombie reaching for her; another blast caught it in the face, which disintegrated under the force of her spell.

Breathing heavily, Letellia spared only a second or two to collect herself before she was able to drag herself up into a crouch. Looking around, she saw that the situation had devolved quickly from bad to worse. Allera and Dar were down, and while Letellia could not discern any noticeable wounds on the healer, the huge open cleft in the fighter's chest told the story of his fate in an instant. Varo... yes, somehow it was Varo, enlarged and transformed by some mysterious power, was battling Orcus, the two exchanging violent blows with magical swords of golden light and blackest darkness.

Letellia had lifted her hand to intervene when she realized two things.

The first was that nothing she could throw would have any chance whatsoever of harming Orcus.

The second was that she had unleashed sonically-substituted *scorching rays* at the zombies.

That ability to alter the energy properties of spells was one that she had never possessed, until now.

Somewhat stunned, Letellia could only watch as the cleric and the Demon Prince met in another series of violent clashes. Both were hurting each other, that much was instantly evident, but she could not tell who was winning. There was so much happening here that she did not understand...

There was one way to find out more, but it carried a significant risk.

Swallowing back her fear, Letellia opened up her mind, and invoked the power of *arcane sight*.

The flood of sensation almost overwhelmed her in the first instant; even with her eyes closed it followed her into her mind, battering at her awareness like a warhammer. She cried, or screamed, or maybe just sat there insensate; she was no longer conscious of

what her body was doing, as she struggled against the fist clenching down upon her mind.

But then a familiar presence whispered into her thoughts, overlapping the chaos surging in from without. It was the same presence that had been with her ever since the death of her parents, steadying her, helping her both to understand and control her gift, and to come to grips with her place in the world. It wasn't the same as when her uncle had placed his consciousness within her body, using the *transposition*; the *Web* was damaged, and Honoratius had made no effort to contact them since the disruption of their connection in the illithid ambush that had claimed the lives of several of their companions. She had thought him dead... and yet that subtle sensation felt so... *real*, as if he was standing over her shoulder once more, providing direction, support, and... love.

The young sorceress opened her eyes.

She was accustomed to the distorting effects of *arcane sight*, but nothing could have prepared her for what she saw now.

The entire chamber was alive with auras, all of the forms of magic that she knew interwoven with strange, unidentifiable threads of power that seemed to flow and connect in a dizzying and unpredictable array. She perceived the barriers that had limited their magic earlier, recognized something of the nature of this place, rooted in the Will of its master. Many of her spells would not function at all here, and those that would work could not realistically hinder the Demon.

Her gaze was drawn to Orcus, and as her spell pulled away the veil surrounding the ancient fiend she gained some true understanding of its power. It commanded epic magic, that much was instantly obvious. She saw the wounds caused by Varo's burning sword as bright gashes in the dark aura around it. With her enhanced perceptions, she could see that it was drinking in a source of power from somewhere outside itself, healing itself, replacing the energy hacked away in the confrontation with its foe.

Her eyes were watering, and it felt like knives were stabbing into her head, but she continued her viewing, honing her concentration like a blade as she sought out the source of the power bolstering the Demon. She was only dimly aware of the course of the battle, of Orcus turning away, luring his foe in so that it could strike hard with the deadly poisoned barb of its tail. Her attention was on the tendrils of black energy that connected Orcus to the huge throne of bones; she followed that trace from the Demon to the chair, and sucked in a breath as she realized the nature of that unholy construct, and the true source of the creature's stolen power.

Varo was stabbed by the Demon's barb, and a moment later suffered the crushing blow to his head that knocked him sprawling to the ground. Orcus, exultant, stepped forward.

And Letellia, summoning every last bit of power she had, *disintegrated* the throne.

Chapter 365

BACKLASH

There was a surge of power, accompanied by a dull roar that sounded everywhere at once, then faded without any lingering echo. Bones flared green and vanished as Letellia's spell carved a huge empty gap through the center of Orcus's throne. What was left was little more than a shell, fragments of interlaced bones that fell outward and came apart as they hit the floor. There were other things within the throne as well, a collection of items that were briefly visible before they fell into the clatter of broken bones.

The impact of the throne's destruction was instantly visible, as the black aura surrounding Orcus dissolved, and the Demon staggered to the side, caught off guard by the unexpected attack. It turned and snarled at Letellia, and uttered a word of power. A globe of black energy materialized in the air in front of it, blasting out toward the sorceress before she could effectively react. She lifted her arms and tried to summon her magic, but Orcus's sphere smashed through her defenses and caught her up, hurling her roughly across the chamber to smash into the far wall a good sixty feet away. Bones embedded in the wall were crushed by the force of the impact, and then she fell hard, limp, onto the floor below.

A flare of golden light drew the Demon's attention back around, but Varo was already on his feet, retreating out of the long reach of the black sword. He'd yanked off his ruined helmet, revealing a long and ugly gash across his forehead that oozed blood. The golden sword still blazed in his right hand, but his left arm still hung limp at his side. Orcus's eyes narrowed as they followed the human priest's withdrawal.

YOUR POWERS ARE WEAKENING, the Demon rumbled.

Varo grimaced, but the expression turned into a slight smile as he looked up at his foe. "So are yours, demon."

Varo's retreat had carried him about twenty-five feet away; thus far the Demon had made no effort to pursue. **YOU CANNOT ESCAPE THIS PLACE, HUMAN, AND YOU CANNOT HOLD THAT MUCH POWER FOR LONG.**

Varo's smile deepened. "I have no intention of escaping." He came to a stop, maybe thirty feet from Orcus, and straightened. The golden glow surrounding him had grown stronger, and he cast a spell, fortifying himself further. Within his aura he still looked

pale, diminished by the violent beating he'd taken and the virulent poison from Orcus's sting. But his expression was serene, the calm underlaid by a purity of determination. Licinius Varo felt no doubt, even as his deadly foe came forward once more.

Orcus approached the augmented cleric, but it was clear that the Demon, having lost the additional power channeled through its throne, was being cautious. Orcus summoned another protective ward about itself, but this one was a familiar *unholy aura*, and not the raging black death-cloak of epic power that had surrounded it before. Its wounds had closed, leaving ugly scars crossing its torso, but its right hand remained useless, and its approach was deliberate now, the floor trembling with each step it took.

Varo waited for him, and as the Demon loomed over him again he raised the glowing sword with both hands. The blazing energy of the weapon flared as Orcus slammed its black blade down into it. The blow should have simply crushed the cleric despite the successful parry, but Varo held his ground, and it was Orcus who ultimately gave way, drawing back and shifting into a follow-up backswing that came in low under Varo's guard. But the cleric met that stroke as well, countering with a swing that glanced off the Demon's blade just below the crossguard.

The two resumed their deadly dance, attack and block and counter, and new wounds resulted as the two powerful foes exchanged blows. Varo's armor, already battered and dented under the protective auric glow that surrounded him, started to come apart under the punishment it was withstanding, and the black sword began to trail droplets of bright red blood as it came away from its impacts. There was no way that an ordinary man could have withstood even one of those hits, and despite the power that filled the cleric, it was quickly becoming obvious that even as a paragon there was only so much abuse that he could take.

But Orcus was showing signs of suffering as well. Bright golden slashes blazed under the *unholy aura*, and those wounds were no longer healing of their own accord, leaving the demon's body criss-crossed with ugly, oozing wounds. But none of the attacks had penetrated deep enough to cripple the arch-fiend, and while it had slowed noticeably since its initial assault, its stamina seemed otherwise inexhaustible. If anything, the Demon seemed to draw deeper from some reserve of strength as it roared and unleashed another full attack, a whirlwind of cuts and slashes that drove Varo back violently. It aimed now for the cleric's unprotected head, and nearly caught him with a sudden backswing that came in under his guard before he could shift his parry. Varo thrust up his left arm and barely turned the blow, his wrist-guard crumpling and coming away along with a long strip of shorn flesh that extended almost down to his elbow. Blood spurted from the nasty wound, but the golden aura brightened around the injured limb, staunching the flow and slowly restoring him.

But Orcus gave him no respite. Now all but fleeing before the demon's rush, Varo took another hit hard across his body that spun him half around, and then another that smashed down hard into his shoulder, ripping away the already battered plate

protecting the joint. It was as if the Demon was content to shear away his protections one step at a time, each blow driving him closer to the inevitable killing strike.

Varo, however, did not remain still to receive that strike, instead giving ground, forcing the Demon to pursue. Orcus tried to herd him toward one of the corners of the room, but Varo refused to be corralled, taking a hit that crushed into his left hip before he slid past the Demon and retreated back toward the center of the room. He caught sight of something in the wreckage of the throne of bones, but carefully avoiding betraying his interest, instead spinning to face the Demon as he continued to give ground. The black sword whistled through the air, but it missed him by a clear margin as Orcus turned and followed him. The Demon seemed to have lost interest in parley, and offered no more threats or comments. It left black splatters in its wake, as trails of ichor continued to drain from the wounds in its body. But it looked neither winded nor weakened.

Varo's course took him back toward the center of the room. Orcus kept pace with him easily, overtaking him without much effort. It almost casually swung the *Sword of Kas* at his head, forcing him to duck and weave as he gave ground. The two swords met with another loud flare of energies, and once more Varo broke away and fell back, shifting his angle toward the chamber's exit. Orcus adjusted its course to maintain the pursuit.

Varo's strategy, to avoid all-out attacks while he regenerated the worst effects of his wounds, was a sound one, especially since Orcus could no longer do the same. But the power he had borrowed was finite, and he could feel it already beginning to ebb, the golden glow around him slowly fading. Orcus had sensed the same thing, he knew, explaining the Demon's suddenly casual pursuit. He now saw that underneath the violence and passion of his foe lurked a cunning mind, filled with the experience of millennia of war and plotting. The Demon would keep the pressure on until his power was fully expended, not giving him the chance to cast spells or otherwise utilize his abilities for advantage or escape. He'd hurt Orcus earlier, but not enough, and he could not close to strike without giving up his ability to escape, and thus exposing himself to another devastating full attack from his powerful foe.

Another attack swept lazily in, and as he lifted the sword to parry, Orcus shifted and lunged under his guard, crunching the blade hard into the armor under his right arm. The golden aura faltered, and he felt a blaze of white pain as the distended plate crunched, along with the ribs it protected.

He desperately staggered back and tried to recover to avoid the inevitable follow-up, but no attack came. He paused, and looked up to see the Demon looming over him.

In those fiery red eyes, he saw his fate written as clearly as words scribed upon a parchment. Orcus waited, letting him steep in the message.

Varo could feel the power filling him start to drain away, like water in a punctured skin. He tried to hold onto it, but in the end, Orcus had been right; he was but a mortal man. His gaze fell, and the blazing sword flickered in his right hand.

He felt rather than sensed the Demon's attack. The cleric sprang forward, a wild, chaotic yell brewing up from inside him. Orcus's swing overextended but came down hard onto his back, narrowly missing his skull. Varo ignored the hit and thrust upward with all his strength, driving the full length of his sword into the Demon's fat gut. The sword flared and sang with power as it penetrated, and black foulness spurted out over his hands and upper arms, sizzling as it burned at his clothes, gauntlets, and flesh.

Orcus reached down with its ruined hand. It seized the cleric by the throat, yanking him around, tearing his hands from the hilt of the glowing sword, now all but obscured by the fountain of black ichor. Varo struggled but it was clear that his power was fading. The golden aura flickered, dying, and the cleric's stature was already diminishing as the flood of blessed might he had absorbed through the *gate* drained away. The magical sword likewise disappeared, leaving the vicious wound to pour out more black gunk upon the floor. Already a pool of it had collected around the Demon's feet, burning away the stone with angry hisses of smoke as it dissolved the bone matter embedded in the substance.

Orcus brought his other hand down, still clutching the sword, and it crushed it against the other side of Varo's neck. It lifted the man up into the air, until his face was only a few feet from that of the Demon Prince. Now wholly a man once more, Varo could do nothing, could only dangle there as he fell, stared, backed by the full power and horrible majesty of the fiend, bored into him. Black power flared around the Demon's clawed hands, entering his body, violating him.

But even in that last instant, Varo refused to give in. He withstood that assault upon his consciousness, clinging to the core of what he was.

His gaze drifted to the side, and he smiled.

Orcus turned and glanced down to see a slight human woman standing fifteen feet away, behind it. Letellia looked even more beaten than Varo, her legs sagging under her weight, blood smeared across her face and dripping from the wounds in her torso. One arm hung at an awkward angle, obviously broken. She supported herself with an iron-shod staff of deep red wood, covered in glowing runes of silver and gold that crawled up and down its length.

Realization flared in Orcus's eyes as it recognized the treasure taken from the wreckage of its throne. Its arm blurred as it dropped Varo and stabbed down with the *Sword of Kas* to eliminate the threat.

Letellia, however, was ready, and just the smallest fraction faster, as she invoked the power of the *staff of the magi*, and drove it into the floor, sundering it in a *retributive strike*.

Chapter 366

FINAL AFTERMATH

Allera stirred as a gentle breeze slid across her flesh.

The healer blinked as consciousness returned, slowly clarifying through the haze of one who has woken from a deep sleep. For a long moment she had no idea of where she was, or even *who* she was, then memory came crashing back into her like an icy mountain stream. She shivered as the sudden rush of awareness nearly overcame her. Then another soft gust brushed her skin, and she felt a warm glow suffuse her, driving back the ugly moment.

She rose into a sitting position, and looked around. She was in a meadow, long stalks of soft green grass rustling slightly in the faint breeze. The sweet scent of flowers stirred in her nostrils, and there was a faint buzzing noise that might have been bees somewhere nearby. The meadow was ringed by a stand of majestic trees. The sky above... that gave her a start, for there was no sun, no clouds, no familiar blue; just a vague and diffuse brightness that cast everything at her level into a stark and welcome clarity.

She tried to stand and was surprised to find out that she could. Faint aches faded away, memories of wounds suffered. She was whole, intact.

Then she saw the lumps lying half-buried in the tall grass, and her heart froze.

She hastened toward the nearest, and nearly stumbled over something lying in the grass. It was a longsword with a black blade, its length slick with blood. The grass around it had already started to blacken, and faint wisps of noxious fume were rising from the ground around it.

Allera gave the unholy weapon a wide berth, and rushed over to the body.

It was Dar. He was dead, that was much was instantly obvious, although she checked anyway. Her body shook as she turned him over, revealing the terrible wound in his chest that had killed him. His face was covered with matted blood. She rubbed at it, tears pouring down her face.

Then she remembered, and checked his hand, all but tearing off his gauntlet.

The ring was there, the black stone flickering slightly.

“His soul is intact, and can be returned to his body,” a voice said from behind her.

Allera spun around, and her eyes widened in surprise. “Nelan!”

The priest looked as he had in life, although he was clad in a simple robe of white homespun cloth instead of armor. His holy symbol glimmered on his chest, dangling from a slender silver chain.

“Is this... is this real? Where... what happened...”

“It is real enough,” the cleric of the Shining Father replied.

“But you died... we saw your ghost, Orcus had your soul captive...”

“I, along with many others, were freed when you overcame the Demon.”

Allera looked around in confusion, then her eyes settled on the other body, lying a short distance away. “Varo.”

Nelan turned and looked at the dead priest. Allera rose, gently resting Dar’s body back upon the grass, and walked over to join him.

The body of Licinius Varo bore the marks of violence. Even standing over him she could see that his left arm was broken in several places, and there was a terrible wound in his head, deep enough so that she could see a protruding ridge of white bone under the ravaged and bloody flesh. His armor had been utterly ravaged, what was left hanging about him in wreckage. His skin had been blackened by some sort of explosive blast, but she could still see the look of calm that had been on his face as he had died.

“He is at peace, now,” Nelan said, bending to close the dead cleric’s eyes. “He is home.”

“I do not understand,” Allera said.

“A lot of us did not understand,” the cleric said. Allera was going to ask more, but others had arrived; a pair of tall, muscled figures had come into the clearing. They looked like men, clad in white robes, but cowls hung down over their faces, obscuring all but the lower halves of their jaws. They came over to Nelan, who nodded respectfully in greeting.

“Excuse me a moment,” the cleric said. He walked over to where the evil sword lay upon the grass. The patch of blackened growth had already spread to form a circle

some five feet across around it. Nelan drew out a piece of white fur, and used it to carefully take up the sword. The weapon seemed to pulse in his hands, before he wrapped the fur around it and handed it to the nearer of the two newcomers. They turned and departed. Allera followed them with her eyes, and as they reached the trees at the edge of the meadow, they simply melted away, abruptly gone.

The healer looked around her. She could see that there were a few other small depressions in the grassy meadow, scattered items like the black sword, but nothing large enough to be another body. "Where is Letellia?"

"She is not here. At the end, she unleashed a *retributive strike* that overcame the Demon. It is possible that she might have survived, blasted into another Reality, but we have been unable to locate her."

"So she might have been utterly obliterated, like Alderis..."

"That is possible, I am afraid."

"And Orcus... destroyed?"

"The avatar of the Demon was annihilated, and the demiplane it had created collapsed with its end. But the core of such a being is resilient. With Thanatos occupied, and few places in the Abyss that will welcome it, it is not clear where it will go, or what will become of it."

"Then it was all for nothing."

"No, Allera. The threat to Camar has been ended. What was Orcus may reconstitute itself into something new, someday, but the Demon that we faced is no more. Its power upon the Prime is broken, and its followers will no longer be able to draw upon divine energy to wreak their havoc. Camar is safe, thanks to the sacrifices that you and your friends made."

Allera's gaze drifted back down to Dar's body. "So what happens now?"

"You have the power to bring him back, and to return to your home. You may remain here as long as you need, and may take back with you whatever you find here. There are a number of potent artifacts among Orcus's horde; the Demon used them to anchor its demiplane and fuel its power. Ultimately that proved to be a costly stratagem, for it gave its enemies a weapon to use against it."

"So all the others... the knights, Serah, Marcus, the other clerics... they are here now, with you?"

"Some, yes. Others have gone on to their final destination, as befits their nature, and their faith. The souls that Orcus had enslaved were freed with its destruction. But those

that were consumed by the *Sphere of Souls*, and those others that Orcus devoured to fuel its evil scheme to power, those are truly gone.”

“Talen? And Shay?”

Nelan shook his head slowly. “Their souls remain upon the Prime. They are bound to their unlife, and will not willingly relinquish it.”

Allera’s expression hardened. “We will find them, and set them free.”

A gust of wind penetrated the ring of trees, ruffling the grass within the meadow. “I have to go,” Nelan said. The cleric started to turn, but Allera forestalled him. “Wait! I have so many questions...”

The cleric’s smile was benevolent, but there was something wry in it as well. “I do not have the answers, Allera. Maybe you can find them, someday.” He glanced down at Varo, and Allera followed his eyes to see the slain cleric’s body dissolving away, leaving just his battered armor and other bits of gear behind. He looked back at her. “Tell Patriarch Jaduran that I was wrong; one man *can* make a difference.”

And then the wind gusted up again, and the cleric simply faded away.

Allera stood there for a long minute, soaking up the brightness of the artificial “day”, and letting the breeze gust through her hair and her tattered clothes. It was not cold, but she folded her arms tightly against her body, and shivered. Then she turned and went back to Dar, kneeling beside his body, and took a lifeless hand in both of hers.

Chapter 367

REFLECTIONS

The door to the chapel swung open quietly, and Corath Dar entered.

The fighter looked a good deal different than he had in Rappan Athuk. His clothes were new, layered garments of wool and linen of muted and practical design. The terrible winter had finally broken, but the air was still chilly, and it felt as though summer would be a complete miss for this year. The suit was devoid of markings or insignia, and he bore only a long dirk for a weapon. His face was creased with hard lines, and he looked like a man a good decade older than his thirty-four years.

The only other man in the room looked up as Dar entered. The Patriarch of Camar did not look surprised to see him. Dar came up to where Jaduran stood near the altar, but

said nothing; the two men merely stood there for a moment in tranquil silence, as the weight of events sorted themselves out for both of them.

“Has there been any word from the Tribune?” the Patriarch finally asked.

“I imagine you’d know before I would,” Dar said, his words a bit clipped. But when Jaduran’s placid expression did not change he shook his head. “No, nothing. I think he’s going to pardon Kyros Livius, though.”

“You disagree with that course?”

Dar shook his head again, more violently. “No, damn it, the people need peace, after all that Camar’s been through. But that bastard put us through a lot, and he deserves a blade in the gut more than a pension and a stern finger-wagging.”

“As you said, Camar has been through a great deal. From what I understand, the people of Dalemar did not weather the winter well.”

“Yeah, well, that’s one reason why they’re talking, instead of gearing up for a spring campaign.”

“At least matters are quiet in the south.”

“Yeah, it’s been placid enough since Gravorr’s dwarves cleaned out the region. But the fucking council vetoed my suggestion to establish a permanent base at Southwatch. They’d rather write off the whole south, and try to forget any of this ever happened.”

“Camar has lost a great many men, Dar, even in the areas not directly assaulted by the Demon. It will take decades even for the core provinces to recover. And you cannot fault people for not wanting to resettle the southern marches, not after what happened.”

“Maybe so, but in ten years, that entire region’s going to be a wildlands. Wouldn’t surprise me if the orcs move down out of the mountains as well, now that our forts along the frontier are empty.”

“You may be right. But we will face that challenge when we come to it.” The cleric started changing out the depleted candles in the altar display. Without looking up, he said, “I heard that you refused the permanent appointment to the council.”

Dar snorted. “I am not a politician. If I had to sit through any more of those meetings, I’d probably end up in a noose after throwing that fat fuck Eutropius through a wall.”

“I heard that Tiros offered you the command of the Dragon Knights as well.”

“Yeah, well, I’m no knight.” Dar ran a hand through his hair, scratching at his scalp.

“Have you decided what you and Allera are going to do?”

“I’m tired, Patriarch. I’ve had not one, but two swords broken; I think it’s a sign that I shouldn’t push my luck. There’s a little place, a community not far from Highbluff; it got emptied out during the war but the survivors are going to go back, try to make a go of it. Allera thinks she could open up a hospital there, maybe train some more teachers.”

“Helping others is always a worthwhile way to spend one’s time, regardless of where it is.”

“If you want that armor back, I can bring it by before we go...”

Jaduran shook his head. “No, keep it. I hope that you will never need it again, but on the frontier, you never know.”

The suit in question was a full set of *plate mail of brightness*, one of the magical treasures that they had recovered from Orcus’s throne. Dar had worn the armor, with a breastplate engraved with the blazing torch of Soleus, during the mopping up operations that had followed their victory at Rappan Athuk. They had also brought back with them a *book of infinite spells*, and an assortment of lesser items, including those that had been the property of Alderis and Varo.

“What about the dagger?” Dar asked.

“It has been secured somewhere very safe,” Jaduran replied. Dar nodded. Both men knew that the significance of the three mithral blades went beyond the value of their inherent magical powers; they were keys, very important keys, to a place that had to be kept secure at all costs. Unfortunately they’d only recovered the one, the dagger with the yellow stone in the hilt, which had been among Varo’s possessions. The other two daggers had been lost in the mind flayer complex under Rappan Athuk. Attempts to magically divine the location of the two missing keys had failed.

“Are you going to wait until Tiros returns?” Jaduran asked him.

“No, I don’t think so. I’m sure I’ll see him again before too long.”

Jaduran extended a hand. “I wish you peace in the Light, Corath Dar.”

Dar shook the extended hand. He started toward the exit, but hesitated, and Jaduran turned back toward him, waiting.

“Varo,” Dar finally said.

“Allera told me what Nelan said to her, in the Celestial realm.”

“I don’t pretend to understand any of it. I was dead when all that crazy shit started happening, and Allera was barely conscious, and completely out of it by the time that Orcus bought it. Yet somehow, he and Letellia did it.”

“Faith can be a strange thing,” Jaduran said, lighting the fresh candles with one of the older ones that had nearly burned down to the nub. The glow from the tiny flames brightened his face, and cast a tiny sparkle into his eyes. “You know, I tried to read that book of his, the *Codex Thanara*.”

Dar grunted. “And?”

Jaduran finished, blew out the scrap of candle, and put it down on the tray that held the now-empty box of fresh ones. “I could not make any sense of it, to be honest. It just seemed like... chaos. Maybe it’s my training; my mind has been conditioned to seek things in orderly paths. But if someone hadn’t come along who had been able to see the warning in the book...”

“Someone crazy enough, you mean.”

Jaduran shrugged. “If that is so, perhaps we are the ones who are mad. In any case, we are entering a new era for religion in Camar. You have seen the new church that is being built in the Docks Quarter?”

“Yeah, well Varo got that, after all. Never thought I’d see a church of Dagos in Camar, not in the open, anyway. Though that guy Alzoun is about as crazy as Varo was.”

“I may go down and listen to a service. Perhaps our faiths are not so dissimilar as some have believed. You know, there are some old scholars who wrote that Soleus and Dagos are both aspects of the same god, a branching that enables a reconciliation of the necessary duality of order and chaos in a way that mere human beings can understand.”

“You’re shi—you’re kidding me. You believe that?”

Jaduran shrugged. “Why, it is heresy, of course. But an interesting concept, nevertheless.”

The two men faced each other in silence for a time. Finally, Dar’s mouth twisted in the approximation of a smile. “Well, like you said, ‘new era’ and all. So long, Patriarch.”

Jaduran inflected his head in a bow. “Good fortune, Corath Dar.”

The fighter left, the heavy wooden door to the chapel swinging shut behind him. The leader of Camar’s predominant religion stood there for a long minute, watching in silence, then turned back to the altar, and starting picking up the rest of the spent candles.

Chapter 368

THE SURVIVOR

Rain pattered down on the stark hills surrounding Rappan Athuk. The day was cold, but not excessively so, and the barren sides of the hills had begun to give way to tender shoots of new growth that might someday turn the brown into green. It would take time for the region to recover; such was the way of things.

In one of the shadowed dells that nestled between the rises, choked by layers of tangled brush, there was a stirring of movement. The disturbance was unusual, as no animals had yet returned to the dead zone that extended for at least a league around Rappan Athuk. But as the source of the noise crawled up from a black crevice in the ground into the stale light of the afternoon it became clear that it was no beast, but a man.

Or at least, something that looked like a man.

It was clad in the remnants of a garment that was no longer identifiable. Tattered strips of cloth clung to it, offering little in the way of modesty or protection. What lay beneath was an ugly, mottled landscape of ruined flesh. The sad creature's hide was blackened to char in some places, bloated and dangling in strips from others. Its entire right hand was a skeletal claw, two fingers dangling like curios by shreds of ligament. Its face was a mask of utter horror, the pale white of bone visible where the flesh sagged down off its mooring under the eyes and jaw. The thing was mostly bald, although scraps of hair hung here and there in a haphazard arrangement.

Rain pattered down on the unholy wretch's face, and as it won clear of the clinging bushes, it turned its eyes up to the gray sky above. A noise came from its throat, an incomprehensible sound of torment and fury. There was nothing remotely human in that sound.

There was nothing remotely human left, in Zafir Navev.

After an interval the creature reached under a fold in its ruined garments and drew out an object it had kept close against its body. It was a small pouch, sealed with a metal clasp. Moving awkwardly, it managed to get the thing open, and reached deep inside with its left hand. The container was obviously magical; its arm penetrated inside halfway to its elbow.

Finally it found what it was looking for. It drew out a cloth wrap, bulging with the bulk of something secreted inside. The bundle came apart as the creature fumbled with it, and two objects fell to the ground at its feet.

Navev bent low over them. The rain intensified, but the creature ignored it, focused on the two objects that lay in the dirt in front of it.

The two items were almost identical, mithral wedges, their long edges as sharp as knives. Set into the base of each was a large gem, a bright ruby on one, a brilliant star sapphire on the other.

Navev looked at the mithral blades for a long time. Then it drew them up, clumsily wrapping them back in the muddy cloth before slipping them back into the pouch. Then, securing the pouch once more, it rose and began shambling away to the west, deeper into the maze of hills that extended for leagues across the blighted landscape.

THE END OF "THE DOOMED BASTARDS IN THE DUNGEON OF GRAVES"

The Doomed Bastards: Reckoning (Book 6)

Chapter 369

PROLOGUE

In an underground complex far under the arid plains of Drusia, a battle raged.

Cries of battle and pain echoed through the dark halls, through chambers that had been old when the first Drusian emperors had walked the world above in fire and blood. The combatants on both sides were men, Drusians for the most part, but otherwise wholly dissimilar. Lean monks in flowing tunics and armed with simple staves and clubs battled hard men in black robes that covered armor of layered leather and mail, fighting with ugly spiked maces and long curved blades. Magic coursed through these encounters, and dark things were dragged up from the nether pits in service to the men in black. But the monks did not falter in the face of such monstrosities, and as the battle continued they drove their foes back, into the deepest chambers of the complex.

The noises of battle sounded distantly behind them as a small party made its way down an ancient tunnel. There were five of them, led by a wizened old man wearing a simple brown robe, leaning heavily on a crooked staff of old ash wood. The old man's companions were mere boys, in their early teens by their faces. Two of them bore torches, which they thrust into the small annexes that they passed, pushing back the darkness. They looked around nervously, and jumped as loud cries reached them through the twists of the tunnels.

The old man sighed. "In staring at the storm on the horizon, the foolish man often stumbles on the root at his feet."

The youths, abashed, drew their attention forward. They rounded a turn in the tunnel to reveal a larger chamber up ahead, lit by a faint red light. One of the boys opened his mouth to ask a question, but the old man raised a hand to silence him. They moved forward, to the edge of the chamber. The place had a recessed floor, and two steps led down from the threshold into the center of the place. The light they had seen came from a tall iron brazier set under a mural along one wall, filling the place with a faint but lurid illumination.

They were not the first to arrive. Bodies lay sprawled upon the floor. The light from the torches revealed their identity; three monks, their blood still oozing from terrible puncture wounds. A fourth man lay nearby, clad in a black robe, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle.

There was one other figure in the room, a well-built man whose robe could not conceal the bulk of the armor he wore. He was bent over the dead man in black as the monks

entered, but as the light of their torches spilled into the room he rose to face them. His cowl was drawn back, revealing a rough face marked with both scars and the swirling lines of tattoos that ran down his face from his right eye to his jaw. He bore a morningstar that dripped red blood down onto the floor. The corners of his mouth twisted into a wry smile as he regarded the five that faced him.

“Are the Vigilant Fists out of men, that they now send boys and old men to face me?” the tattooed man said. His voice hissed in his throat, as though he’d suffered some wound to his throat in the past.

The five youths had assumed the Pliant Willow, the standard defensive stance, but the old man calmly stepped forward, forcing them aside. “Go and notify Selaht at once of our finding,” he said, his staff tapping the floor as he navigated the steps.

The boys hesitated. “But Master...” one of them ventured.

He spared them a quick glance. “Do as I say, young Surucipe.” His level tone had not changed, but there was a hint of command in his voice that transcended his advanced years.

The youths bowed and obeyed, darting back the way they had come.

The tattooed man stood waiting as the old man turned back to face him. He used the delay to cast a spell, touching the inlaid sigil of a seven-pronged claw etched onto his breastplate to infuse himself with *divine power*. He smiled as he finally recognized his opponent. “So. Setarcos himself stirs from his lair to face me. I will enjoy this, old man.”

Setarcos did not return the jibe, he simply waited, leaning on his staff, as the evil cleric strode forward to meet him. He did not move until the priest lunged, and then he twisted to the side, bringing up his staff to deflect the course of the heavier weapon. The force of the impact—the priest was far stronger—drove the monk roughly aside, but he spun with remarkable dexterity on the ball of one foot, falling back into a ready stance in the center of the room.

The cleric snarled and attacked, and again the monk gave way. The priest had obvious skill at arms in addition to his divinely-augmented strength, and on the third attack Setarcos dodged just a hair too slow, and the head of the morningstar ripped through his robe, the long spines grazing the flesh of his torso. The old monk grimaced but recovered quickly; his staff shot out and drove into the cleric’s armpit, widening the separation between them before the priest could follow up with a backswing.

“My weapon is still thirsty,” the cleric cackled. The wound he’d inflicted had been minor, but the morningstar seemed to be infused with some dark power of its own, and he had been noticeably weakened by the hit.

“Even if you strike me down, you will not leave this place alive. The power of your foul cult is broken, servant of darkness.”

The cleric laughed and feinted another attack; for a moment the two negotiated for position in the center of the room, the cleric pushing the monk slowly back toward the corner. “Hah, your brains are in your fists, monk. You are already too late.”

With the last word he leapt into another attack. Setarcos parried the blow with his staff, but the old wood had taken too much abuse, and it snapped in two. The monk did not hesitate, snapping the longer segment into the cleric’s wrist. The morningstar went flying across the room, landing in a clatter near the far wall. The cleric hissed a curse and seized the monk by the shoulder, unleashing an *inflict wounds* spell into him. The old man staggered as bloody rents materialized in his flesh, and he nearly fell as he retreated back into the center of the room.

“I do not need a weapon to finish you off, old man!” He did not give the old monk any respite, charging after him into the middle of the room. He drew upon his magic once more, and thrust his hand forward to seize his throat and end it.

Except that the monk was no longer there. Setarcos pivoted and ducked under the cleric’s powerful but cumbersome lunge, coming up at his left flank. The monk’s foot shot out, smashing into the cleric’s left knee from behind. Caught off-balance by his own momentum, the priest fell into a kneel. He twisted his body and tried to deliver his touch attack, but Setarcos had already moved behind him. Forming his hand into a knife’s edge, he drove the tips of his fingers into his right armpit, bypassing his armor and pulverizing the nerve joint there. The cleric cried out and tried to stagger to his feet, but Setarcos was on him before he could rise, latching one arm around his throat. The cleric seized the arm, blasting the monk with more negative energy, but Setarcos withstood the devastating surge, and refused to loosen his grip. Keeping the cleric off-balance, and unable to stand, he leaned his shoulder against the cleric’s head, and with his free hand got a solid grip under the man’s helmet, and pressed his weight into the hold. The leverage was inexorable, and after a moment a loud snap indicated the breaking of the cleric’s neck.

Setarcos held his foe for another few moments, until the cleric’s struggles stopped completely. Then he dropped the man to the floor, breathing heavily. Limping away, he spared a rueful glance at his broken staff.

A few seconds later, several monks burst into the room, accompanied by the four boys that Setarcos had sent away. They took in the scene at a moment’s glance, and one of them offered his staff to the old monk, nodding in respect.

The sounds of conflict in the background had faded. Setarcos looked a question at one of the monks, who said, “Selaht has found something that you should see, Master.”

Setarcos directed two of the monks to check the fallen, and see if anything could be learned from the dead priests. Moving once more like an old man, leaning on his new staff for support, he and the boys followed the last monk deeper into the complex. They passed a number of monks in the main corridors, most of whom bore fresh wounds that showed signs of recent magical healing. They all made way for Setarcos and his retinue.

Their guide led them through a twisting maze of passages that ultimately converged on a chamber of considerable size. Massive stone pillars buttressed a vaulted ceiling some thirty feet high at its apex. The place was clearly a gathering hall of some sort, and the accoutrements of unholy ritual were scattered about, from silvered summoning circles etched deeply into the floor to racks of unnatural components pressed into niches along the walls. A half-dozen *continual flames* flickering in open bronze tubs filled the room with a relatively bright level of illumination. It looked as though the cult members had made their last stand here; the bodies of at least a dozen priests lay strewn about the place, along with several monks, the latter covered with squares of cloth. Another dozen monks were collected here, along with a young priest of Eos, who was tending to their injuries using a healing-rod. One of the monks stood out from the others; his fists were surrounded by a nimbus of bright orange flame, which licked around his flesh without causing him apparent harm. He looked up as the new group entered, and immediately walked across the room to welcome them.

Setarcos barely noticed him; his attention was drawn to the massive mural that decorated the far wall of the chamber. The work was obviously of recent creation, the garish colors starkly bright in the magical light. The thing depicted there filled almost the entirety of the wall, up to where it met the ceiling high above.

The monk with the burning hands came up to him. As he bowed, he unclenched his fists, causing the magical flames to flicker and die, but the expression on his face was no less serious. "We found no trace of the High Priest, Master."

Setarcos nodded, though he did not shift his gaze from the huge mural. "I battled his Second in one of the side-chambers. Before he died, he indicated that we were too late."

The tall monk glanced up at the mural. "What does it mean, Master?"

Setarcos did not respond for a long moment. The massive figure of a six-legged beast, its skin the color of blood, stretched across the wall. Its jaws were open wide, and people screamed as they were cast into its fanged jaws, into its gullet. Around it, depicted in surprising detail in the background, they could see scenes of destruction. People dead or dying, towns and villages in ruins. Flames. Blood. Despair. The monk's gaze was finally drawn to a subtle depiction in the foreground, in the shadow of the monstrous thing. A shadow, at first glance, but staring at it the old monk could see more, much more. With an economy of tiles, the mural depicted a vast pit opening in the ground, with a squat green building standing nearby.

The others waited in silence. Finally, the old man turned away, and looked up at the tall man standing beside him.

“What it means, Selaht, is that we must go to Camar, at once.”

Chapter 370

A MAN AND HIS CART

A dense, moist fog hung low over the hilly plains of southern Camar, clinging to the earth even as the morning deepened. It was still far enough from spring for the morning chill to fog the breath and suck the warmth out of a traveler's bones, but the worst of the winter storms were already past. This far south, snow never landed on the lowlands, or at least it hadn't since that terrible winter twelve years back. People still talked about that grim year, when the world itself seemed to be coming apart around them, and the unending winter was just one of a series of crises that plagued the people of Camar.

A wagon pulled by a team of two drays clattered and clacked down one of the weathered roads that wound through the south. The fog muted the sounds made by the wagon, but the road was in poor enough shape that the noise of its wheels jumping in and out of the ruts was almost constant. A boy barely in his teens sat on the board of the wagon, directing the team, while a man walked alongside the horses, wary of the deeper canyons in the ill-kept road that might jeopardize a wheel, or even one of the axles of the wagon.

The man was clad in the plain and serviceable raiment of a farmer, but there was something in the way he carried himself that spoke to something more. He was well into his middle years, in his forties by the look of him, but his warm coat and fur-lined breeches could not fully conceal his considerable muscles, even if the slightest hint of a paunch bulged out above the thick leather belt wrapped twice around his torso. He was armed with a long dirk that rode on his left hip.

“Are we quite nearly there?” the boy asked, tending the reins carefully for all that the horses seemed to know the route, and the man in front was doing most of the work guiding the team.

“The road's the same length coming back as it was heading out,” the farmer replied. But then his expression softened, and he glanced back, adding, “Still a good two leagues to go, Cael. We'll be home just after noon, and if we're lucky there will be some stew left in the pot for us.”

“Will you tell me another of your stories? About the wars, I mean.”

The farmer had turned his gaze back to the road ahead. “Stories are fine for around the hearth. But this here’s still the frontier, and you’d be well-served keeping your mind on the road, and the team.”

“Aw, I’ve ridden this road a dozen times.” But the boy’s protest was weak, and he seemed chastised as the pair resumed their passage in silence. At least for a few minutes.

“So, do you think—”

The boy did not get a chance to finish his thought, as the farmer suddenly stopped the team, pulling both horses to a stop with a tug on their harness and a soft click on his tongue.

“What is it?” the boy asked, staring into the fog.

“Cael, get back into the wagon, and get down behind the barrels.”

“But—”

“Do it, boy.”

The farmer hadn’t turned around, but his voice held a note of command that could not be challenged, so the boy did as he was bid. But he took shelter in a position that allowed him a clear view of the road between two of the large barrels of beer that rode in the center of the wagon, so he could see what happened next.

They materialized out of the fog like ghosts, but Cael could see that they were men, a rough lot of them, clad in the rugged garments of the frontier. There were seven, all but one afoot, the last riding in the saddle of a ragged palfrey that Cael could see even through the fog had seen better days. A long-handled axe hung from the rider’s saddle. One of the men had a crossbow, and the others were armed with a variety of other weapons, long knives and hatchets for the most part, although one had a short Legion spear slung over his shoulder.

The man on the horse pulled back his reins; his companions came to stop around him, blocking the road. “Ah, I thought we had the road to ourselves, this morning,” the rider said. “You’re the first hint of civilization we’ve seen yet this day.”

“You’ll make Alderford by early afternoon, if you keep a good pace.”

“Good to know.” He jerked his thumb back down the road behind him. “Nothing but damned tiny villages for leagues and leagues back thataways, no fun to be had in such places. Bound for Highbluff?”

“One of those damned tiny villages, rather.”

“Ah, I see. Thought you might be selling.” He scanned the wagon. “Looks like a fairly prosperous trip.”

Watching from his point of vigil, Cael saw the farmer standing stone-still, his back to him. The ruffians had spread out, forming a half-circle in front of the team, with the rider in the center.

There was a tense moment of silence, then the farmer finally spoke. “One of the things I’ve learned about the frontier; you often don’t know what in the hells you’re going to get from one day to the next. I’ve got a few more leagues ahead, so if you don’t mind, I’d like to be on my way.”

For a moment, Cael thought that was going to be that, but then the next words from the rider’s mouth caused his gut to clench.

“Well. You’re clearly ex-Legion, mate, and I appreciate the warning, but fact is, times is tough all around, and me and my boys have a long trek ahead of us as well. So we’ll take the wagon, and your horses, but you’re free to go on your way. You can even keep that dirk and your boots, as one veteran to another.”

The farmer did not move. “You are making a serious mistake. I don’t usually offer two warnings, but...”

He was interrupted as the crossbowman lifted his weapon to his shoulder and fired.

Cael must have cried out, for several of the men turned to look at him in his hiding place. But his eyes were fixed on the farmer. The range was so close, there was no way he could have missed... and yet, somehow the farmer had shifted to the side, and the bolt merely grazed his arm, glancing off to the side as it clipped his coat. The crossbowman cursed and lowered his weapon, snagging the string with his beltclaw to reset the mechanism.

He never got a chance to finish, as the farmer drew his dagger and threw it in a single smooth motion. The long blade sank to its crossbar in the man’s throat. He stood there a moment, a surprised look on his face, and then sank to the dirty ground, gurgling as blood welled out from the deadly wound.

The rider looked impressed. “A damned fine toss, friend, but you’re a fool to disarm yourself.” He gestured to his remaining men. “Kill him.”

The five men came forward quickly, blades or cudgels appearing in their hands. The farmer stepped forward to meet them. The horses, at his back, shinnied nervously at the smell of blood, but they did not break.

The bandits acted like men who knew how to use their weapons, but most of them did not have the cohesion of men trained to war. The first lunged at the farmer with his long knife, but his target sidestepped the thrust easily, and the blade did not even come close to connecting. He grabbed the bandit's arm and spun, using the attacker's own momentum as a weapon as he hurled him into his onrushing companions. The collision sent three of them to the ground in a tumble of arms and legs.

The man with the spear was more adept. His weapon was a short *pilum*, balanced for throwing, but he used it as a thrusting spear, keeping well out of the other man's reach. The head of the weapon caught the farmer in the shoulder, drawing blood through his heavy coat, and might have done serious damage if he'd had a chance to drive it deeper into his body. But the farmer moved fast, too fast, seizing the haft just above the iron point, yanking it out of the wound. The spearman grunted and tried to pull his weapon out of the farmer's grip; he had leverage, but the spear would not budge. The farmer was distracted as the last bandit leapt at him, a hatchet in each hand; but before either could connect he drove his left fist into the man's face. The bandit crumpled in the dirt, unconscious.

The farmer twisted and pulled hard on the spear, forcing the spearman to either let go or come to close grips. The bandit chose to let go, but the decision did not avail him much as the farmer jabbed the end of the haft into his chest. The spearman cried out and fell, spitting blood.

The rider had unlimbered his axe and had started to urge his mount forward to ride the farmer down, but on seeing the rapid dismemberment of his little cadre he apparently changed his mind. Pulling hard on his reins, he charged around the wagon, almost riding down one of his men as he staggered to his feet. He got almost around the back of the wagon before the head of the *pilum* exploded out from his gut, having penetrated through his back. His horse's charge carried him forward a good forty yards before he toppled off from the saddle, landing in a bloody heap in the dirt of the road.

One of the surviving bandits foolishly pressed the attack, coming at the farmer with an axe. The farmer merely stepped into the swing, seizing the haft of the weapon and tearing it from his grasp. The bandit snarled and tried to tackle him, but quickly learned that the farmer's strength was far greater than his. A twist and a crack of bone announced the breaking of his arm, and then a short upward course of the axe brought a more decisive end.

The last two bandits had clearly seen the lay of the land, for as they got to their feet they started running full-tilt back down the road. The farmer watched them run, and calmly lifted the bloody axe, weighing its heft. He lifted the awkward weapon, clearly intending to throw it...

Then he glanced over and saw Cael watching him, his eyes wide.

He lowered the axe, and let the pair escape.

“Damn it,” he said. “Your mother is going to flay me alive when she finds out about this.”

“You... you...”

“Close your mouth, you look like a fish. Go get that horse... stay clear of the rider, he may have some life left in him. Well, go on, boy!”

As the boy clambered down out of the wagon, the farmer checked the bandits. The crossbowman and the one he'd hit with the axe were dead, as was the rider. He dragged both bodies off the road, but paid no more heed to them. The spearman and the one he'd punched were still alive. The spearman, unable to rise, paled as the farmer came up to him, still holding the bloody axe.

“Please... please, don't kill me...”

The farmer's eyes were like cold steel. “Seems you weren't all that intent on the concept of mercy, a few minutes back.” He looked consideringly at the axe, then shrugged. “Damned if you haven't gotten me into a fix. I'm not going to drag your sorry carcass all the way back to Highbluff for a trial.”

“I... I served... Second Legion...” The injured man tried to say something else, but it was swallowed in a fit of bloody coughing. The blow he'd taken had crushed a rib or two, and had probably ripped a lung. He was having difficulty breathing. The farmer sank to one knee next to him, the axe propped up next to him.

“Yeah, don't bother, I've heard it before. Fucking sob-story, times are tough, blah, blah, blah. You're not the only former soldier who was scrubbed out for one reason or another, and hit hard times. Well, you're a fool, and I doubt you'd have spared a thought for your victim if you hadn't been the stupidest, gods-cursed bandit in the fucking world, and drawn me.”

The injured man's eyes suddenly grew wide. “You... you're... general... Dar...”

The farmer held his gaze for a long moment. “Yeah, that's me, or at least it was.”

If anything, the man's panic intensified. He tried to get up, but he could not manage it. Dar regarded him for a moment, then looked up over his shoulder. Cael was there, holding the reins of the horse, his eyes wide. It was immediately clear that he'd heard everything.

Dar bit off a curse. “All right, legionary, I guess you and your fucking brawler friend are coming back with me. Your career as a bandit is over. I strongly recommend that you shut the fuck up and don't cause me any more trouble. You understand?”

The man nodded. The farmer lifted the injured man with hardly any effort, drawing a groan of pain, and deposited him in the back of the wagon. After a moment, he did the same with the unconscious hatchet-man. Cael followed mutely, and at a direction from Dar tied the captured horse's reins to the back of the wagon.

"Bind this one's hands," he said, indicating the unconscious man.

"Yes, sir." The boy's earlier startlement had faded somewhat, and now he rushed off to obey the orders, recovering some leather straps from the front of the wagon that he used to tie the unconscious man up.

The injured man's groans were growing weaker, but he was still conscious. "I'm dying," he managed to say.

"Gods, I've taken hurts worse than that and still beat the shit out of a fucking demon," Dar said. "When you've had your fucking arm ripped off by a six-armed snake-woman from Hell, then you can bitch." He glanced again at the boy, who was watching the scene with an almost dazed expression, fumbling with the leather straps as he tied them around the limp man's wrists.

"Damn it, boy, you make those too tight, that bastard'll lose his hands. Not that he doesn't deserve it, mind you, but it will make more trouble for the both of us when we get back."

The boy jumped and focused anew on his work. But he kept glancing over at the man dying on the bed of the wagon a few feet away.

Dar looked up at the sky. The fog was finally starting to clear. "Damn it all to hell," he said finally. He drew out a small glass vial from a pocket in his coat, and bent over the injured man, uncorking the container and forcing its contents down his throat. The results were almost immediate; the man's breathing eased at once, and he lay there, blinking in surprise, instantly restored to full health.

"Better tie this one up as well," Dar said to Cael. Dar shot a warning look at the spearman, but there was no fight left in him, and he submitted without challenge. Muttering to himself, Dar walked around the wagon, picking up discarded weapons and tossing them into the space behind the seat. No sense in leaving them lying around for some other would-be bandit to find.

He recovered his dagger, wiping the blade on the dead crossbowman's jacket. There was blood all over the weapon, soaked into the leather wrap that protected the hilt. There was blood on his hands, and he'd seen it on Cael's, too; he was going to catch hell for that too, no doubt.

He returned to the wagon and calmed the horses; they were still skittish around so much sudden death, but they had held their ground. Cael had thought to hit the wagon break, a point in his favor.

Dar looked down at the bloody axe he was still carrying in his hand. With a sudden growl, he hurled it away. The weapon flew end-over-end across the road, burying itself deep into the bole of a tree some fifteen feet away, twelve feet off the ground.

"I am getting too old for this shit," Dar muttered, as he pulled himself onto the wagon's seat, and took up the reins. "Keep an eye on those two," he said to Cael. "Anyone of them give you a squeak, you let me know."

But there were no squeaks, as the wagon lurched into motion, continuing past the scene of carnage along the quiet frontier road.

Chapter 371

HOPE

The village of Hope still looked new, and by the standards of most towns it was, the first buildings having been built there only twelve years past. The place was off the beaten path, a good hour off the main road that connected Highbluff with the scattered settlements to the south, but it was otherwise well situated. A stream wound around the western edge of the town, and there were several forests nearby for food and fuel. The village itself sat upon a small rise, adjoining a low ridge of exposed limestone that acted as sort of a shield wall to the north. A lookout tower sat atop that ridge, along with the foundations of what might someday become a small keep.

Despite its isolation, the village itself had grown steadily in the decade since its founding, until now almost three hundred people called it their home. The wall that extended in a half-circle out from the trailing edges of the ridge had been extended outward twice, and already a number of structures had been constructed outside of that shelter, including a sawmill and grain mill along the stream.

Perhaps the single greatest reason for the steady growth of Hope was its largest structure, a sprawling three-story stone building, roofed in expensive red tiles, situated on the original commons within the center of the old wall in the shadow of the ridge. This building was of sound construction and looked older than it was, even with the recent construction of two new wings that had added maybe a dozen additional rooms to the structure. The building's white-painted walls caught the light of the sun that had finally burned through the persistent morning fog. Despite the martial precautions evident in Hope's walls, and the tower above, this structure was a place that had clearly not been built for defense, with huge windows, most of which had real glass set into

their casements, and several skylights cut into the sloping roof to boot. A balcony ran along part of the second story in the main wing, connecting several patios with comfortable chairs and overhanging eaves to protect against the rain. Several people of varying ages and colorations were seated there, wrapped in blankets against the lingering chill. They were attended by men and women garbed in white, and several others in similar raiment were visible about the grounds, attending to various private tasks.

Allera Hialar Dar was just coming out of the herb-drying shed when a loud whistle from the tower above drew her attention. She looked up reflexively, and then turned toward the road that emerged from the forest to the south. The sloping rise on which the village was perched gave her a vantage over the long stone wall that joined with the ridge to form a protective ring around the settlement, so she could just see the wagon that was emerging from the woods into the light of the day.

Others had seen it as well, and by the time that the wagon had reached the outer gate, a small group of men, women, and children had gathered. Allera trailed along behind the company, and a smile came to her face unbidden as she saw her husband on the wagon's raised seat.

The smile evaporated a moment later as she noticed that something was wrong.

There was a bit of hubbub as Dar said something to the men, and number of them gathered around the back of the wagon. Allera came forward, deliberately not hastening, although her heart had elected to speed up somewhat despite her attempts to present a calm face. She knew from experience that village people could be excitable, especially those who chose to make a living out here on the frontier, where the threats were real and ever-present.

Dar wasn't helping matters. Allera could read the thundercloud in his expression. And the blood on his coat...

A woman pushed past her, rushing toward the wagon. "Cael! CAEL!"

Allera followed in the woman's wake, as she shouldered through the small crowd to the wagon. The boy, standing atop the stacked cargo at the back of the wagon, looked over as she surged up, and Allera could see that there were traces of blood on his clothes as well. He did not seem to be injured, but Allera knew that Illyeni's wrath was not likely to be abated by that.

Dar had gotten down off the wagon, and was directing the men as they lifted two bound figures from the back of the wagon. He turned as Illyeni reached him. "The boy's fine, Yeni..."

He didn't get a chance to finish, as the woman—who had to crane her neck to look into his eyes, slammed a fist into his shoulder. Dar grunted, and a look of pain flashed on

his face. "Don't you dare give me your bullshit, Corath Dar! I *told* you that something was going to happen on that road... Damn me for a fool, to listen to your stupid promises!"

Cael jumped down from the wagon's bed, and started to protest, but only managed a few words before his mother enfolded him in a tight embrace. Allera used that distraction to approach Dar. Once next to him, she could see why Illyeni's punch had scored such a reaction. "You're hurt."

"Somebody tried to stick a spear in me."

"Looks like they succeeded." She pressed a hand against his shoulder, and unleashed a healing spell into him. He took a deep breath and let it out as the magic flowed through him. "Thanks, angel."

"I seem to remember giving you a healing potion, before you left."

"I didn't want the boy to see a prisoner die in front of him."

Allera nodded in understanding. Her hand lingered on his chest. "Those men, bandits?"

"Yeah, on the south road. Amateurs, really." He looked back at the two prisoners, who were being handled none-too-gently toward the nearby inn by a dozen men. "We'd better make sure that the sentencing of those two doesn't precede the trial."

"They're likely to hang anyway," Allera said, as they made their way toward the inn.

"Yeah, well, they made their choice."

They were interrupted as another whistle from the tower atop the ridge drew their attention back to the road. A single rider, pressing a destrier at a full gallop, emerged from the forest. The two men on guard duty at the gate had lowered their spears before they recognized the rider's colors, and the sigil etched onto his breastplate.

Dar and Allera recognized it as well, and they were there to greet the man as he rode through the gate into the open space near Dar's wagon.

"Kiron!" Dar hailed. "What news from Camar?"

The young man, clad in the armor of a Dragon Knight, saluted them as he reined in his winded stallion. "Ill news, unfortunately, general. The First Citizen is dead, and I am bid to bring you to Camar at once."

Dar and Allera shared a look, and the healer pressed herself under the crook of his arm, wrapping her arms around him. "I'm sorry," she said.

Chapter 372

A GATHERING IN DARKNESS

A brisk wind blew in off the ocean one night, whipping the tops of white-capped waves that forged a constant drumming against the rocky coastline. The wind blew inland, stirring the dry brush and blowing up sheets of dust from the rocky hillsides beyond the coastal cliffs before eventually dying out further inland. The occasional lonely seabird rose up on those currents of wind, but their presence only added a sense of grim isolation to this desolate shore. The moon was just a sliver in the clear night sky, but the light of a thousand stars cast the faintest glow over the landscape.

The only signs of man's habitation of this region were the wreckage of long-past days. Bits and pieces of timber that had once been ships could occasionally be seen strewn across the gray sand beaches that infrequently broke the line of cliffs, and in places there were piles of stone visible atop the cliffs that might have once been part of deliberate constructions, rather than accidents of wind and sea and time. It was difficult to say for sure, even when standing among those crumbling sentinels.

But on an island situated a few miles off that long and lonely coast stood a ruin that was obviously a former habitation of man. The remnants of stone walls upon the island were truly ancient, forming the outlines of what might have once been a citadel. There were faint hints of more recent settlement, but the resurgent jungle had reclaimed clearings and grown through old campsites among the ruins. The island boasted a lagoon sheltered by reefs on the leeward side, a natural harbor. The wreckage of two large ships lay smashed against the rocks on the windward side of the island, blackened hulks reduced to little more than skeletons of broken beams and jagged spars, their crews long since consumed by the deep.

A dark figure materialized out of the night sky, high above the island. It was too large to be another seabird, but the darkness muted its black form. It descended upon huge wings that caught the air and steered it toward the center of the ruins. It landed in the shadow of a long, crumbling wall. The big black wings folded into its back and disappeared, leaving only a slight form that crept soundlessly forward. The darkness covered it like a cloak, and for several long minutes it was as if it had disappeared entirely.

But the black figure reappeared on the edge of a depression in the center of the ruin, a hollow lined with stone. Stone steps descended from the rim into the hollow. The intruder paused to examine the steps. The omnipresent growth was not evident here; the steps were covered in black char, and the stone itself was slick, fluid, the steps uneven as though the stone itself had started to melt.

There was something else; a smell rising from below. It was a familiar stink, the odor of death, old enough so that the edge was gone, but not old enough to have lost that sharp smell of decay.

After a few seconds the figure rose again and descended.

The hollow turned out to be a huge chamber. Once, perhaps, it had been the cellar of a huge fortress that had dominated the island. Now it was just an empty cavern, open to the sky above.

Something crunched softly under the intruder's feet as it reached the base of the stairs. It was a shard of bone, one of many scattered about. There was more char here, black streaks that marred the surrounding stone. Part of the place was collapsed, and much of the rest looked like it was about to.

The dark figure walked silently through the rubble to the far side of the place, where a massive stone archway in a sheer stone face accessed another chamber that was fully underground. The intruder paused for only a moment on the threshold between the soft half-light that filtered down from above, and the total darkness within. Then he headed inside.

A light suddenly appeared, on the far side of the room, as a curtain was drawn back from a narrow opening in a deep alcove. It revealed that the room was cluttered with rubble, and showed the dark figure to be a man, clad in dark leathers and a long black cloak. It also well as something else: the source of the smell of death that hung over the place.

The man in the black cloak glanced over at it. There was not much left save for bones and skin, but that was more than enough to identify what it had been in life.

A dark-skinned giant of a man stood in the open doorway, holding back the curtain. He said nothing, just stood there waiting. The man in the cloak walked over to him.

"Ah, Jasek, good. You are the last to arrive," came a voice from the room beyond the curtain.

The large black man stepped back, giving Jasek room to move past him through the narrow doorway. The curtain, a heavy segment of dense gray cloth, had been affixed to spikes driven into the ceiling, and it slid back into place behind him as he entered.

The chamber was small and mostly intact, save for a gouge in the far wall surrounded by a bit of rubble. The features of the place had worn away through time, leaving no clue as to its original purpose. It now served as a council chamber. A stone slab served as a table in the center of the place; there was no hint as to how it had gotten in here, as it was far too large to have fit through the doorway. The light came from a

small lamp at the center of the slab, that produced a too-bright flame that was almost certainly magical. The stone table was surrounded by four folding camp chairs, the sort that soldiers used on campaign.

Three of the chairs were occupied. The man who had greeted him sat at the far end of the table. He was a short but broad-shouldered Drusian, with languid features that belied a considerable sharpness in his dark brown eyes. He wore an unusual suit of armor fashioned of metal scales that covered his entire torso and upper arms.

The man seated to the Drusian's right was obviously a magic-user. He wore a comfortable suit of well-made clothes in violet and black, rather than a robe, but Jasek could almost taste the shifting magical auras radiating off of him. His eyes were those of a hawk as they slanted over the newcomer.

The man to the Drusian's left, however, sent a chill down Jasek's spine as soon as he turned his gaze. It was a man, or at least it looked like one; it was swathed in faded, almost tattered robes that covered its body, including a cowl that shielded its face from the light of the lamp. But as Jasek felt the man's gaze seize his, a cold pit gaped open inside him, and he froze, shaking. His mind screamed warnings, but he could not move.

"It will pass," the Drusian said, lifting an open hand in what might have been reassurance. "It is not an attack, but rather a property of our... companion. Wait a few moments, and you will regain full use of your faculties."

"It takes some longer than others," the mage said, his lips twisting in a faint approximation of a sneer. But Jasek could tell that he too was ill at ease with the man in the cowl. If it was a man.

He mastered himself in what he thought was a reasonable interval, and stepped forward. He avoided looking at the cowled man again, but noticed that there was another person in the room, who he'd overlooked in his momentary paralysis. That figure, another Drusian, was clad in simple, almost peasant, clothes. His head was shaved, and he was attending to something on a folding table in the back corner. That mystery was answered a moment later as the man came forward bearing a small tray, which held a cup of steaming liquid.

"You have had a rigorous flight, no doubt, and must be weary," the armored Drusian said. "I hope I was not presumptuous in my selection of beverage."

The servant offered the cup, which Jasek accepted. He did not hesitate for more than a fraction of a second before drinking; if any of these others had wanted him dead, it was unlikely that they would have arranged for him to come all the way here. His eyes widened slightly in surprise as he sampled the draught; the caff was Razhuri, prepared in the thick, almost syrupy style favored by the aristocrats of that nation. He nodded incrementally at the seated Drusian, and took the cup with him to the last seat at the

table. The black man, he noticed, remained near the curtain, a guard to keep watch while the four held their conclave.

“The dragon outside, an adult red?” Jasek asked as he sat down.

The armored Drusian nodded. “We attempted to convince Aragnak to join our cause, but were unsuccessful.”

“Not a trivial feat, killing one such as that,” Jasek said, taking another sip from the tiny mug before putting it down on the slab in front of him.

The Drusian nodded. “As you are the last, Jasek, we may now begin.”

“The last, Ghazaran?” the mage asked. “Then I take it that your embassy to the Nightlord was unsuccessful?”

Ghazaran shrugged slightly, taking a second cup of caff as the servant brought it to him. The mage waved him off when he looked at him; he did not bother to inquire of the cowled man. None of the others seemed concerned by the presence of the servant or the guard within their meeting, so Jasek did not raise the issue.

“My emissary did not return, which is response enough,” Ghazaran said. “The chance was extremely slight, in any estimation.”

“A pity,” the mage said. “He and his consort have more power than the rest of this gathering combined.” Jasek saw the cowled figure shift slightly, but it said nothing. Jasek could detect a faint smell now that seemed to be coming from the other’s direction. The odor was not unlike the faint hint of decay he’d smelled before, or the stronger smell that had accompanied the carcass of the dragon.

Ghazaran’s reply was a subtle smile. “Perhaps you underestimate us, ser.” He rose from the chair, and placed his hands palm-down upon the edge of the slab.

“Gentlemen. I have spoken with all of you at length prior to this day, but each of you may not know the others. If you will permit me, I will make the introductions, and then get to the key purpose of this meeting.”

The others did not dissent. He turned to the mage. “The Seer has provided invaluable arcane aid to our cause. In particular, your divination abilities have been vital to advancing our plan. We will rely heavily upon your knowledge of our destination, as well.”

The Seer raised an eyebrow slightly, but did not otherwise respond.

“What does he get in exchange?” Jasek asked.

“Knowledge,” the Seer said. “Of ancient secrets lost to the knowing of man.”

Ghazaran added, "Our agreement was that all arcana, spells, tomes and treatises, those spell-items only of use to a wizard, and all materials of a historic or eldritch significance that are found within the vault are his to claim."

"So long as it does not conflict with *my* claims, I have no difficulty with that."

The Drusian nodded. "Indeed, Jasek Haddar. Your talents will be vital to the securing of the third device necessary to access the vault. Your skills, and the properties of the weapon you bear, that is. You have already received the first installment of your reward, and your claim upon the mineral and magical treasures of the vault is agreed upon, insofar as those items do not fall within the specific remit of the Seer. And, of course, you will have payment for the wrongs that the Camarians wrought upon you."

"Fine," Jasek said. "That's fine. And him?" he added, with a nod at the cowled figure.

The cowl shifted, and once again Jasek felt the cold weight of that unholy stare. Ghazaran laughed, but Jasek knew that it had to be cover; no one could be so easily calm in the presence of such a thing.

"Zafir Navev's role in our little scheme is vital in more ways than one. And he has more reason to hate Camar than any here."

Navev's hand moved, and for a moment Jasek caught a glimpse of a emaciated stump of a hand, wrapped in withered, crusted strips of parchment or leather. He recognized the two blades that clattered onto the table, even before the light caught the gemstones embedded in their hilts, one blue, one red.

"My associates are Falah Naj, at the door there, and Parzad, providing our refreshment," Ghazaran was saying, although everyone was still looking at the daggers. "All you need to know about them, for now, is that their loyalty to me is unquestionable, and they will play vital roles in our plan."

Jasek looked up at that, not bothering to hide the doubt in his expression. "And what of you, priest? You are the leader of this merry little band, but your motivation in this plan is not entirely clear to me."

Ghazaran's benign expression did not change, but a sudden sharpness appeared in his eyes, until Jasek felt as though cold daggers were being thrust against him by that stare. "Like each of you, I have an interest in Camar's suffering. For ten years, I have worked toward this day we now face. When we unleash the Ravager, you will see."

A SOMBER CONCLAVE

The mood in the conference chamber was muted, the small knots of conversation taking place around the edge of the great stone table forming a collective quiet murmur that didn't carry far beyond the open chamber doors. Even the palace servants reflected the collective air, their livery covered with black shawls, silent as they moved in and out of the room. A sideboard had been placed out with various cold meats, pastries, and beverages, but few of those present had taken advantage of the offered food.

Dar piled several pieces of sliced ham onto a small roll, and took a big bite out of it. Allera, standing nearby, turned to greet two men who approached while he was thus distracted.

"Commander Octavius, Councilor Koth, it is good to see you again."

Octavius nodded. "If only it were under better circumstances." The former guardsman, now clad in the crisp uniform of the commander of the City Watch, accepted her hand and lifted it in a gesture of respect.

"Velan Tiros spent a lifetime in service," Sukat Koth said. Age had softened the Emorite hunter only slightly; he stood several inches taller than Dar, and while he'd added on a bit of a paunch, he still looked as though he could break a cow in two with his bare hands. His garments, while of fine make, reflected his frontier heritage, with dense northern furs trimming both the long cloak and the broad belt he wore. Like Dar, he looked a bit uncomfortable without weapons about his person.

"It is good for you to have returned so quickly," Allera said to Koth. "I had heard that you were on your way to Emor when it happened."

The hunter nodded. "The business of the Council has left me little time to see my homeland over these recent years, but the marshal deserved no less honor."

Dar joined them, still chewing the remains of his sandwich. "We just got here ourselves," he said between swallows. "Saw Thullian's placards posted everywhere. So he's still pushing for the convening of a popular assembly?"

"We have heard that the People's Faction is planning a large gathering in the Docks after the service," Octavius said. "No doubt to take advantage of the First Citizen's death to press for an abolition of the Council."

Koth nodded. "And Gallo Eutropius's money is behind it, as always."

"I should have put my boot up that fat bastard's ass when I had the chance," Dar said. Allera put a hand on his arm, but he shook his head. "Tiros believed in giving the people a say in the rule of Camar, but Thullian's scheme is just a way for the Guilds to

sew up control over the government. As if they didn't already hold enough of the levers of power in Camar."

Octavius nodded. "When the Council was just a few people, right after the Duke went down, the Guilds held a lot of sway. The Duke had protected their prerogatives, and most of them were in bed with the older aristocratic families anyway. In the immediate aftermath of the Duke's overthrow, the Council was careful not to provoke things with too many changes. But with Tiros's reforms after the Demon War, they've lost a lot of their traditional privileges, and there's been a lot of discontent among the leadership of some of the more powerful concerns."

"We take down one band of fucking parasites, and another steps forward to take its place," Dar grumbled. "First the nobility, and now these gods-damned merchant lords."

"But the merchants do promote prosperity, which helps everyone," Allera pointed out.

"I'm not talking about the small trader, or craftsman, or even the owners of the costers. It's selfish pricks like Eutropius, carving out little empires with hundreds or even thousands of people who answer to him first, and to the well-being of Camar second. Hells, I've seen more armed men in the livery of the trading companies since I've been in Camar, than I've seen your guardsmen, Octavius."

I had no idea you'd become such a radical, general," Octavius said. Allera's mouth twisted in a slight smile, but Dar merely growled something unintelligible. "And we're on top of the mercenary situation," Octavius replied. "With many outlying settlements still vacant since the war, the trade roads to the provinces are still a bit wild, and there's a high demand for caravan guards. But the law has a strict cap on private armies, and most of what you're seeing is the bigger houses putting on a show, to demonstrate their power to their rivals. We don't mind that; as long as they're at each others' throats, there's less chance of them causing trouble for us."

"It might help sway things, if you would agree to stay for a few weeks after the service, talk to the Council, and the people," Koth said. "The name of Corath Dar still has a great deal of influence in Camar. And you as well, Allera; almost half of the healers working in Camar today received training at your hospital."

Dar looked as though he'd tasted something foul, but Allera responded for him. "We'll do what we can to protect the First Citizen's legacy, of course."

"Ah, the Patriarch's arrived," Octavius said, drawing their attention around to the door.

Decius Jaduran had been old when he taken on the mantle of the head of the church of the Shining Father. Now he was ancient, a withered husk of a man, relying heavily on the arm of the young woman helping him along at his side. But those watching could sense the power that filled him, for Jaduran was the most powerful priest of Soleus left in Camar, and the god's might flowed freely at his call. There were some who had

worried that the scandalous fall of Gaius Annochus during the Demon War might have meant an eclipse of the power of the great and ancient church. Jaduran had calmed most of those fears, although there were still many individuals who were uncomfortable with the newly ascendant heterodoxy that had followed the end of that conflict. Temples to both the Earthmother and Dagos could now be found within the walls of Camar, which would have been an utterly unlikely development only twenty years ago.

Every face in the room turned to greet the leader of Camar's most popular faith. He was flanked by a pair of armored guards, temple soldiers, the sigil of the burning torch threaded in gold cloth across their white tabards. The old man started slowly toward them, but the foursome moved to meet him, reducing the distance he had to walk. Kiron Tonneth, the young Dragon Knight who had brought Dar and Allera to Camar, brought a cushioned chair from the conference table and placed it where the Patriarch could settle into it. He met the eyes of the old priest's female companion for a moment, and flushed slightly before withdrawing. The knots of people in the room gathered around to hear the Patriarch speak.

"Thank you all for coming, friends," Jaduran began. He swept his gaze around the circle of gathered people, lingering for a moment on Dar and Allera. "It is good that you have come to honor our departed friend."

"To the First Citizen!" one of the notables said, lifting his glass in tribute. The toast was echoed by those gathered, and there was a pause as they drank to his memory.

A servant offered the Patriarch a glass of wine, but the old man waved her away. He sagged in his seat as the tribute faded, and the attention of the room returned to him.

"The service for Velan Tiros, marshal and tribune, First Citizen of Camar, will be held in three days, at Highsun." He paused and looked them over again, his dark eyes weighing them. "Friends," he said, pausing to cough briefly. "Friends, we have lost an important leader, but we must carry on. Camar yet faces tough challenges, and it requires your service, and sacrifice. Fortunately we will have the example of the First Citizen to guide us, as we seek to walk in the Light."

His brief speech concluded, the aged priest indicated that he wished to depart. His assistant helped him out of the chair, while the audience broke up, their conversations resuming as they weighed the Patriarch's words and the prospects of the memorial service. Given the stature of the dead leader, it would likely be as much pageant as ritual, and all of those present here would be expected to be present in full panoply.

Jaduran started to leave, but as he passed through the doorway he paused, gesturing to Allera and Dar. More than one eye watched as the pair followed the priest and his escorts into the anteroom that adjoined the conference chamber, but no one followed them.

The priest made a strong gesture to his guards, and they withdrew a short distance off. His assistant started to join them, but he held her arm. "No, Maricela, you may remain; you need to hear this as well."

Jaduran did not waste time in idle greetings as he turned to Dar and Allera. "I am glad you are here. My earlier words were not mere salves; something of dire import is coming to Camar. I have had... disturbing dreams."

"Dreams?" Dar asked.

"I cannot be more specific; they fade like vapor when I wake, but the disquiet lingers. I suspect they are a message. There is darkness, and great power, and more: visions of a place that is familiar to you, I know."

Dar's expression darkened. "Rappan Athuk."

"Have there been any reports of stirrings to the south?" Allera asked.

"No, but I have asked General Velius to reinforce his patrols in the region, and I have sent three clerics to assist them."

"They have verified that the valley is dead, the seals intact?"

"Yes."

"Have you *communed* with the Father?" Allera asked.

"I have tried divination, but other than to confirm that there are those who would wish Camar ill, I have not been able to pinpoint the nature of the threat."

"I hope that you asked about... him," Dar asked.

Jaduran nodded in understanding. "Yes. He still exists. I tried scrying both of them again, recently, but wherever they have gone, they lie beyond the sight of men and gods."

"My *discern location* revealed nothing when we last tried it, years back," Allera said. "They must have access to powerful magic indeed, to cloak themselves so."

"I have never liked the idea of the two of them out there, somewhere," Dar said, his hands tightening into fists.

Jaduran's eyes fell. "If only I had been stronger, I might have been able to help him, before..."

Allera placed her hands on his. "You have been strong enough for all of us, old friend. Your vigilance has allowed so many of us to live our lives in peace and security."

"I fear that the sands left in the hourglass of my life are dwindling. It will fall to others to carry one, once I am gone." He patted the arm of Maricela, whose eyes had widened to saucers over the course of their conversation.

"Have you spoken to the Knight Commander?" Dar asked.

"Commander Darius is still in Dalemar. Young Tonneth, here, is his deputy." Maricela flushed slightly at the mention of the knight, which did not escape Allera.

"Kiron? He's young," Dar said.

"No younger than we were, once. But he is gifted, and the blessings of the Father are with him."

"What do you want us to do?" Allera asked.

The old priest frowned. "At this point, I am not certain. But I wanted you to be ready. We will speak again, after the memorial. Come, Maricela, the hour grows late, and I am weary."

Leaning on his assistant, the old cleric departed, leaving Allera and Dar to share a look of growing concern in his wake.

Chapter 374

A DAY OF FAREWELL

The sky was a glorious swath of blue unbroken by clouds, the brilliant orb of the sun blazing high above as it ascended toward its zenith. Despite the brightness of the day, there was a chill in the air, augmented by the breeze that blew in off the adjacent bay, bringing with it a salty tang.

The cold did not dissuade the thousands that thronged Camar's streets. The crowds, clad in dark, heavy clothes that they wore thick around them against the wind, followed the course of a procession that had made its way slowly through the city since midmorning, passing through the Docks Quarter along the waterfront, then up into the Trades Quarter, down avenues with usually-busy shops and craftshalls that now stood shuttered and quiet. The procession was preceded by fifty men and women of the City Watch, their uniforms pressed and spotless, who were followed by fifty soldiers of the First Legion, holding their standards high above their heads. In the center, drawn by a

team of eight large horses, rode the coffin of Velan Tiros, First Citizen of Camar. The wagon bearing him was flanked by two dozen men and women on foot, the members of the council that ruled Camar. A small marching band comprised of Legionaries, accompanied by the famous bard Gelian Sinar, filled the air with a mournful song of sad notes that nevertheless left its listeners feeling a faint afterimage of hope.

As the Highsun hour approached, the meandering procession entered the Gold Quarter, and the massive open square that dominated the district. The ominous Wall of Regret that had once bordered the square had been destroyed over a decade earlier, but its other prominent feature, the huge Cathedral of the Shining Father, loomed high over the multitudes gathered here. The church had been full almost since dawn, but the great doors stood open, and criers stood perched throughout the square to relate the words of the Patriarch to those gathered. For all the emotions of the people collected here, the mood was surprisingly restrained. Maybe it was the feeling that *he* would not have wanted disruption, or that a fuss be made on his behalf.

In contrast to the press in the square on the front side of the cathedral, the walled courtyard at its rear, part of the complex of buildings that formed the administrative structure of Camar's primary church, was relatively deserted. A few white-clad priests made their way hastily under a variety of errands, and a handful of guards stood watch at their traditional posts, but other than that the area was fairly quiet.

A small, recessed door in the rear of the cathedral, almost invisible from more than a few feet away, opened to discharge Maricela Uliedes. A tall figure appeared almost at once as she turned from closing the door, and she nearly leapt into the air in sudden startlement.

"Kiron! You nearly killed me with fright!"

The knight's expression shifted into a grimace, and became a shade more crimson. Clad in a suit of heavy armor polished to a brilliant sheen, his surcoat bearing the sigil of the dragon in silver thread, he was resplendent. But one look at him was enough to reveal that his heart had already been pierced by an arrow against which there was no defense.

The young priestess saw the young man's distress, and took his hands in hers. "I'm sorry, I only have a minute or to to spare. The ceremony will start as soon as the procession reached the cathedral, and I must be there to help the Patriarch."

"Even if it is only for a minute, I will thank the gods for that chance to see you," the knight replied. "It kills me to be apart for you for these days. I haven't seen you since that night at the palace, and then we could not speak, with the Patriarch and those others there."

“I know, I feel the same.” She pulled him into the alcove, away from the door. “I meant to tell you. That night, the Patriarch mentioned you by name, and praised your abilities to General Dar himself!”

“The General is retired,” he said, but he was clearly impressed by the compliment.

“The Patriarch said that you were blessed by the Father. You see, he knows of your gifts! You could petition to join the church, if you wished. We could be together in our service...”

Kiron’s expression darkened subtly. “You know that I cannot, love.”

Maricela’s nod told that she knew his reasons. “I... I do understand. But what happened to your brother... it is not all that the church is. You love me... and I am part of it.”

He took her chin in his hand and lifted it so that her eyes met his. “I do love you. And I know, in my mind, that what you say is true. But sometimes my mind has a tough time convincing my heart. And that is a good thing, or perhaps I might have never believed that a priestess of the Shining Father could love a common knight of ordinary birth...”

Her cheeks flushed, and she started to lean into him, but a group of servants carrying bundles came past at that moment, and she drew back, reddening further.

“Will I get a chance to see you after the ceremony?” he asked.

“I will have duties...” she began, but on seeing the look on his face, added, “I will, if I have to sneak away and jump over the walls of the rectory! The usual place?”

He nodded. They kissed then, briefly but intensely, and then parted, the woman opening the door with a key, and then vanishing inside before he could say anything more.

The knight turned and headed back toward the gate that led toward the front of the cathedral. While Knight Commander Darius was holding his space inside, and had granted him leave to attend to his private errand, he knew that missing the beginning of the ceremony would extend past the limits of his lord’s patience. He hastened, nearly bumping into a pair of priests that were just coming around the corner of one of the buildings that adjoined the cathedral.

“Excuse me,” he said, hastening past. For a moment, he hesitated, and glanced back, but the pair were moving almost as quickly as he had been, and all he saw was the backs of their white robes as they moved into the shadow of the cathedral and disappeared. He lingered for another second, suddenly uncertain.

A loud cry from the square drew his attention back around. He was going to be late, if he wasn't already, and making his rendezvous with Maricela was likely going to cost him more in the way of demerits. The thought of dishonesty to conceal his tryst did not occur to him; he would accept whatever punishments or additional assignments were required of him with equanimity. While he was already one of the most skilled of the Knights of the Dragon at twenty-one, rank had not yet kept up with talent, and if anything his potential put more burden of responsibility upon his shoulders.

The priests were forgotten as the young knight hurried back toward the square.

Chapter 375

BREAK-IN

"That knight was prescient," Parzad whispered, as they emerged from the shadow of the rectory to see the massive cathedral looming directly over them. "He nearly divined our purpose."

"Focus on the objective," Jasek muttered back. He did not turn, but he thought he could feel the weight of the knight's stare on his back, and he tensed slightly, waiting for the hue and cry that would transform their mission into something else.

But no shout came, and in just a few seconds they were lost among the understructure of the cathedral. Massive supports bolstered the building along its sides and rear, forming deep nooks in the stone, and in one of those the door was waiting for them. Jasek led them to it; the lock took him less time than most people would have spent fumbling with the key, and then they were inside.

The interior was dark, the corridor behind the door lit only by small lamps recessed into niches in the walls, but Jasek's eyes adjusted quickly. They could hear the noise from the cathedral that seemed to bleed through the stones of the wall to their right, and signs of activity were evident up ahead as the supporting cast for the ceremony went about its preparations. The corridor opened onto a room that held a number of priests; all it would have taken was for one to turn to see them. But Jasek led them through a small arch that opened onto a narrow staircase leading down, and once more they were gone before anyone could see them.

"This would have been much simpler in the night hours," Parzad said.

"It may seem so, but it is far easier to escape notice in a press of busy people," Jasek returned. The stairs deposited them onto another level, with passages branching off in several directions, and at least a half-dozen iron-shod doors visible in the light of single lamp.

“Someone is coming,” Parzad began, but even as Jasek turned, a woman’s voice stopped them in their tracks.

“You aren’t supposed to be down here.”

The speaker was a woman in late middle age, clad in robes almost identical to those worn by the two men. The light from the lamp glinted off of the silver sigil of the burning torch that she wore around her neck.

Parzad tensed, but Jasek responded before he could take action. “Pardons, priestess. I know that this area is off-limits, but the Patriarch’s secretary sent us to check the lower robing room for... ah, well, it seems that His Holiness misplaced the mozzetta that he had intended to wear for the second part of the ceremony. People have been sent running in every direction; I suspect we were grabbed merely because we were nearby.” He let out a sigh. “After coming all the way from Elem, it looks as though we will miss the most important ritual of our age.”

The woman’s expression shifted. “Come on, I’ll help you look. Though the lower chamber is hardly used any more, and it’s very unlikely that you’ll find it there.”

She led them down one of the corridors, around one bend and then another, past a dozen iron-shod doors. The only others they encountered were a pair of servants, teenaged girls who stepped aside to let them pass.

“Thank you for helping us, priestess...”

“Naela,” she said.

“Ah, thank you then, Naela. We have only just arrived in Camar this morning, and it has been rather... ah, chaotic, thus far.”

“So, you are both from Elem?” the priestess asked.

“I am, originally,” Jasek said. “My companion Patriocles here, he is from Dalemar.”

The priestess nodded. “Well. Here we are.” They stopped at an intersection of two passages, next to a large door. There was another archway nearby, which led to a set of stairs that headed down. Jasek gestured in that direction. “There is yet another cellar below this one?”

“That stair leads down to the Vault. You would not want to wander down there; there are guards, and the Patriarch does not suffer casual intrusions upon that level.”

“Good to know. Now, where would the vestment be located?”

The priestess led them into the robing room, which clearly had not seen recent use. Heavy wooden wardrobes lined the walls, interspaced with curved brass hooks at eye level; a half-dozen long benches were spread out between them. Two small wooden chests lay on a table to the left of the entry. Layers of dust covered everything, and a small magical flame set into a casement high along one wall provided a wan light. “You see, no one has been in here in—umph!”

Her words were cut off as Jasek seized her, wrapping a muscled arm around her throat and locking it tight with his free hand. She started to struggle, but he was much stronger, and after a few feeble moments her body went limp as his grip cut off the flow of blood to her brain. He maintained the hold until he was certain that she was dead. Parzad had already secured the door behind them, and as he turned, Jasek nodded toward one of the tall wooden wardrobes.

“Open that up for me, will you?”

The guards assigned to duty in the church’s vault took their duty seriously, for all that they knew that they were the least of the protections that warded that safehold. Neither was particularly perturbed at missing the grand ceremony above; all of the temple guards were going to pull long duty shifts today, and at least in the vault it was quiet.

Quiet enough so that they heard the noise of people coming down the stairs, and were alert when the two priests appeared in the small guardroom. They were having some trouble with a wooden chest that they were carrying between them.

“No one is allowed down here without authorization from the Patriarch,” the older of the two guards said. He glanced at his companion, who shook his head slightly; he didn’t recognize either of the two priests.

“Oh, we don’t want access, the Patriarch’s secretary just asked us to move this chest down here,” one of the two priests replied. “From what I understand, it just came in from Elem, and he wants it put in the Vault once the ceremony up there is finished.”

The two priests had started to put the chest down, but the older guard forestalled them with a raised hand. “I’m sorry, but you cannot leave that here.”

“But I was told...”

“Gelawin Sorath knows the rules better than anyone. You’ll have to leave it upstairs.”

The two priests shared a look. Finally, the first said, “All right, I’m sorry for the bother. Can I just put it down for a second, catch my breath?”

The older guard glanced back at the other, who hadn’t moved from his position, and stood ready, his hand on the hilt of his sword. He never even saw the small broad-

bladed dart that sank into his throat as he turned back. The guardsman clutched at the wound, gurgling as he slumped forward, and fell to the ground.

The other guard opened his mouth to shout an alarm, but he suddenly froze. Jasek had started toward him, but as soon as he saw the guard stop he glanced back at Parzad, who had fixed the hapless man with a cold stare, ensnaring him with some power.

“Nice,” he said, taking his time, using the man’s own dagger to finish him. He eased the dying man to the ground, then looked around.

“We need to be swift,” he said. The secret door wasn’t hard to find, especially since he knew it had to be there somewhere, and that it had seen a lot of use over the years. An entire segment of the wall swung back, revealing a larger chamber beyond.

The chamber was dominated by the large metal door set deep into a recess in the far wall. The door was ingrained with a sigil of a blazing sun, and there was no keyhole or other opening, not even any evident hinges, just a slab of unbroken, solid metal. A pair of lamps set into the walls to either side provided a constant illumination.

Jasek scanned the room. “Where’s the barrier?”

Parzard had the faraway look of a man who sees what others do not. “It is there.”

“Let’s get the guards in here.”

It took less than a minute to make the transfer, and then Jasek closed the door behind them. After a wary glance at Parzad, who stood there stonily, making no indication, he started toward the door.

He got about halfway through it before something happened.

It started as a tingling across the skin of his arms, but the barrier quickly manifested as a translucent blue aura that seemed to radiate out from the walls surrounding the door.

Jasek extended his right hand, and snapped his fingers. And suddenly, there was a sword in his grasp.

The sword was a short broad-bladed weapon, not unlike the *gladius* used by the Camarian legions. But its blade was jet black, and shone glossily in the light of the lamps.

Jasek stepped forward, until he was within reach of the blue glow. He extended the sword slowly, until its point was right up against the edge of the barrier. Then, he began to cut.

The sword sliced through the glow as though it was a coherent object. Layers of blue slid off the barrier, dissolving as they fell away toward the floor. He had managed to forge an opening almost the size of a man when the glowing field flickered and collapsed utterly, disappearing into nothing.

“They will know that we are here, now,” Parzad said.

“Well then, we’d better get moving. There’s nothing I can do about that door; that’s a slab of solid adamantine, with no locking mechanism to work on. From what I’ve heard, it’s warded against magic, so no simple *knock* spell’s going to get us past it. Your boss sent you here with me for a reason, so you’d better do whatever it is that you’re going to do.”

Parzad did not respond, merely turned to the door and started walking toward it. As he approached it, the outline of his form became hazy, and then his body became translucent, with the light of the far lamp shining through him.

By the time he reached the door, he was a ghost, and he passed through it without apparent difficulty.

Jasek watched and waited for a minute that became two, and then there was a loud scraping noise, and the heavy door began to sink into the floor. As it opened, it revealed Parzad, who stood there as solid as he had been before.

“Let us get what we came here to find,” the wilder said, turning to lead Jasek into the vault beyond the door.

Chapter 376

OLD WOUNDS

Dar emerged from the recessed door in the back of the cathedral, into the empty rectory courtyard. The mass of the cathedral stood between the courtyard and the huge square on the far side, but he could still hear the droning din of the professional speakers hired to repeat the Patriarch’s words to the population gathered there, the huge crowds that could not fit inside the building.

The fighter took a deep breath, like that of a swimmer coming up from a long dive. He glanced down at the fine garments he wore, expensive linens trimmed with soft frostfur and silver thread. The backs of the gloves he wore bore the sigil of Camar, traced in gold. He smirked. While he had no official title in Camar, he was still too “important” to show up at an event as significant as this one dressed like a commoner. Or so a dozen people had told him, including Allera.

The door opened behind him, and he didn't have to turn around to know who it was. It sometimes felt like just thinking about her could summon her, that reassuring presence that was so much a part of him that he could no longer imagine what his life had been like without her.

"I had no idea you were considering a new career as a rogue," she said, coming up behind him to place a hand on his shoulder. "How you escaped that press of well-wishers... I thought maybe you'd pocketed a potion of *gaseous form* somewhere."

"People know to get out of my way."

"I hope you didn't break any bones; that would be inconvenient." She came around and looked up at him. "Are you all right?"

He grunted noncommittally. "Just needed a little air. I've gotten used to life on the frontier. There's probably more people inside that cathedral than ten villages the size of Hope, twenty maybe."

"We'll be expected for the Ritual of Commemoration, once they get started again."

Dar grimaced. "Gah, it'll take an hour just to get through the line to the privy."

"It will make people feel better if you say something. Tiros gave people a sense of stability, and they need to know that Camar is in good hands, going forward."

"What does that have to do with us? We aren't part of this, anymore."

"Just because we live where we do doesn't make us any less a part of this society," she persisted. "Maybe you should come with me, on my next circuit, when we place the newly trained healers in their communities, and check on the ones that..."

He interrupted her with a waved hand. "I have no more interest in the life of the wanderer."

"Is this about the... encounter... on the road, before?"

He looked down at her. "I've had enough of fighting," he said. "That's one reason I went with you to Hope. Here, in 'civilization', it always comes down to swords and blood."

"Sometimes swords are needed, to defend things that are worth protecting."

"I know that. And I've shed my share of blood."

“More than your share. And I know exactly what you are feeling, I too have felt it. We have built something... important, at Hope. The collegium has done a lot of good; we’ve trained over a hundred healers since we started. You have done more than your share with that, as well. There are a lot of lives that have been turned around at Hope.”

“But we also cannot disengage completely from the world around us. I know you’ve given a great deal; no one can fault you for what you’ve sacrificed for Camar. I willingly came with you to Hope, to start a new community, to build a new life. But I can’t turn my back on the outside world. It needs us, still.”

“Not all fighting is done with swords,” she said, touching his arm.

He covered her hand with his. “You are still the diplomat. You should give lessons to Darius’s Dragons on negotiation.” He smiled, and turned to look off across the courtyard.

“I already have a job,” she said, with a smile. Come on, I’ll...”

She trailed off suddenly. Sensing her tensing, he turned back to look at her. “What’s the matter?”

The healer’s expression looked vague, but then she turned and stared at a point just over his shoulder. “I believe we are being magically *scried*,” she said.

Dar’s hand darted to his hip reflexively, and he cursed as he remembered that he was not carrying any weapons. “Can you tell who it is?”

“No... wait, it’s gone.”

Dar shook his head. “Come on, let’s find Jaduran, or someone else with some authority here...”

But he was interrupted a moment later as a flash of magical energy appeared in the courtyard, only about a dozen paces ahead of them. The disturbance lasted only a heartbeat, and when it had faded, three newcomers faced them.

“By the hells...” Dar muttered.

“Greetings, Corath Dar, Allera Hialar,” Setarcos said, with a short bow.

Dar did not recognize one of Setarcos’s companions, a muscled young Drusian clad in a simple brown robe. But he certainly recognized the other, and also recognized the look of hatred that shone in her eyes.

“Corath Dar,” Kupra said. “Hardly a day has gone by without my imagining what it would be like to see you die.”

Chapter 377

OLD ACQUAINTANCES

Allera stepped in front of Dar, a nimbus of blue energies flaring around her fists as she summoned her power. But Dar did not flinch from the wizardess's steeled gaze. "Oh? Thinking that today might be the day, woman?"

Violence flared in Kupra's eyes, and her own fists were clenched at her side, but she did not make any move to attack. Setarcos turned to her, and whispered something. She did not turn her stare from Dar, but said to the monk, "Per our agreement, my debt to you is paid, old man." She spoke words of magic, and vanished in a slight flare of white power.

"What was that all about?" Allera asked.

"Someone else who bears a grudge," Dar said.

Setarcos came forward, the other monk in his shadow. "I would not have brought the two of you together again, but time was of the essence, and our attempts to scry others I knew from Camar were unsuccessful."

"What is the matter, Setarcos?" Allera asked.

"We come bearing a warning. There is a cult in Drusia, a foul cabal of nihilists who worship the apotheosis of destruction. Their goal is to bring about the end of the world, an armageddon."

"Sounds a bit familiar," Dar said.

"These cultists are not associated with the servants of Orcus, not directly, at least. But recently my order, the Vigilant Fists, located and destroyed a major cell of this cult. We had been searching for years to locate their hiding place, and while we killed most of the cultists, their leader escaped."

"And this cult leader has an interest in Camar?" Allera asked.

The old monk nodded. "We found some documents, and a huge mural, in the main chamber of their sanctuary. The mural depicted a huge, red monstrosity, a demonic thing that they refer to as the Ravager. There was also something small in the background, a distinctive landscape that might have been unfamiliar to most, but not to anyone who had ever been to Rappan Athuk..."

He trailed off as he noticed the change in Dar's expression. "I take it that this tale bears some relevance for you?"

But Dar was already running toward the cathedral door. Allera rushed after him, glancing back to see that the monks were keeping pace, the old man moving with surprising quickness for his advanced age. By the time she got inside, Dar had already grabbed a priest, and was almost shaking the poor man as he spoke.

"I don't care if the ceremony's about to start, get Jaduran, and get him down to the Vault, *now!* And send a squad of temple guards down there as well."

Releasing the priest, Dar dashed down the stairs that led from the upper level to the cathedral cellars. Allera was right behind him. "What are you doing?" she yelled after him.

"I have a bad feeling, angel," he said. He reached the bottom of the stairs but did not hesitate, moving with purpose to the next set of stairs that led to the sublevel that housed the vault. He had been down to the warren of catacombs under the cathedral several times, mostly for grim errands related to Rappan Athuk, but he had only been to the vault itself once, in the company of Jaduran, shortly after the final defeat of Orcus those twelve years back.

He got to the guard room and stopped. The chamber was empty.

"I smell blood," Allera said, entering the room behind him. "There was violence here, very recently."

"There's a secret door over here," Dar said. He had a good memory, but the exact mechanism was difficult to identify, and by the time that he got it open others had arrived. The two monks stepped to the side of the stairs, fading into the shadows, while the small knot of priests and armed guards that arrived in their wake looked around in confusion.

"What is going on here?" a man clad in a uniform bearing golden insignia asked. He pressed forward but hesitated, recognizing Dar and Allera.

"Aren't there supposed to be guards here?" Dar asked.

"Yes, two at all times, but..."

He was interrupted as Dar finally worked the hidden mechanism, and a segment of wall groaned open. The others followed him as he moved into the chamber beyond.

They didn't have to look far. The bodies of the two guards had been dumped unceremoniously off to the side, just inside the hidden portal. The huge doorway to the Vault stood open ahead of them, gaping like an open maw.

The guards rushed forward with two of the priests. The other priest went over to the guards with Allera, but Dar already knew what they would find. His fist clenched and unclenched reflexively.

"Damn it, I hate it when I'm right."

Chapter 378

THE TEMPLE OF THE FINAL SACRAMENT

On the same morning that the funeral service for Velan Tiros was scheduled to begin in Camar, the dawn was just a rumor on the eastern horizon when the four made their appearance. All but invisible in the predawn haze, the four figures drifted down out of the sky, into a densely wooded dell nestled into the range of rolling hills and jagged ridges that abutted the sea. The four *wind walkers* drifted between the web of interlocking branches and drifted to the ground, which was covered with layers of dead leaves. They took on substance after a few moments as the spell ended, leaving them standing in a cluster facing the south.

"This way," Ghazaran said, leading the way.

They did not have far to go to their destination. The ground descended as they made their way forward, toward the darkest depths of the dell. The air was cold, still, the web of branches above them blocking out both the light and the wind. Dead twigs crackled under their feet, and only the lack of undergrowth allowed them to press ahead without light to direct them. The forest was otherwise silent, dead.

"This is ill-advised," the Seer said, his voice sounding eerily loud in the morning stillness. "Not only do we lose the abilities of Jasek and Parzad, but we place ourselves in a position where we will be unable to render aid, should they encounter difficulties in their mission."

Ghazaran did not look back. "We have no choice but to proceed, and quickly. My *divination* has revealed that our enemies have knowledge of our plans, and will attempt to intervene."

"All the more reason to abandon this side errand, and focus on our primary objective."

“I have consulted with higher powers, mage. We will require the assistance of the Duke to have any chance of success in the Well.”

The wizard subsided as the ground leveled out, and a structure rose out of the forest ahead of them.

The fane was located in a clearing, but the surrounding trees extended their long branches over it like a shroud, leaving only a tiny opening through which the slowly brightening sky could be seen above. Those trees nearest the building itself were short, stunted affairs, and nothing at all grew within about ten paces of the massive blocks of black marble that marked its foundation. The structure was not especially large, perhaps thirty feet by forty. A set of weathered stone steps faced them, leading up to a dark opening in the front of the building.

Falah had moved ahead unbidden to scout out the perimeter. The hulking southerner was clad in a breastplate of black adamantine, and wore his huge khopesh slung across his back, atop a bulky bundle wrapped in leather and bound with thick black cords. For a man of his size, he moved with surprising grace and speed, possibly the result of magical augmentation.

“We shall have to move quickly,” Ghazaran said. “I hope that your knowledge of the Ways is as good as you claim, wizard.”

“I will do my part,” the Seer said. “We will face trials within. Our combined spellpower is considerable, and *its* presence will help,” he said, with a nod in the direction of Zafir Navev, who stood a short distance away, masked in its robes, its thoughts private. “However, we are lacking in brute strength, no offense intended to your companion.”

“I have arranged for assistance in that area,” Ghazaran said. He walked over to the side of the fane. The ground here was blasted and dry, the soil infused with a reddish taint like dried blood.

Falah had returned, and the cleric turned to him. “I require ten minutes of undisturbed solitude.” The fighter nodded, and took up a warding stance a few paces away.

As the Seer and Navev watched silently, the cleric knelt and incanted a ritual of summoning. The complex phrases, full of guttural croaks and unnatural syllables, felt somehow appropriate to this dismal place. The Seer eventually grew bored and walked over to the front of the building, inspecting an inscribed plaque of black metal set into the stone at the top of the stairs. He did not enter the structure itself. Navev shuffled back and forth, faint noises issuing occasionally from the depths of its cowl.

By the time that Ghazaran completed his summoning, the others had returned, awaiting the conclusion of his spell. A frisson of dark energies had begun to gather in the space before him, and as he concluded his invocation a considerable form began to materialize within that vortex. Ghazaran concluded by issuing a repeated command,

“Zuur’ka, Zuur’ka, Zuur’ka!” then sagged back, weakened by the energies involved in the summoning.

As he finished the third repetition of the name, the summoned creature stepped forward out of the energy matrix and took on substance. It was big, over nine feet of stony flesh and bulging muscles. It looked like a gargoyle at first glance, with broad wings and a long face complete with protruding fangs and jutting horns. But it had four arms rather than two, and it carried a massive axe in two of them, which it lifted menacingly as it loomed over the priest. Falah regarded the newcomer impassively, trusting in the commands of his master, but the Seer and Navev both tensed, expectant, their respective powers ready at hand.

“You dare to call me again, human!” the nycaloth said, its voice deep and powerful. “I am not some lesser being to be yanked from Gehenna to serve your whims! I warned you the last time that you trifle with the nether powers at the risk of your soul!”

If Ghazaran was discomfited by the creature’s threats, or the proximity of the big axe to his neck, he gave no sign of it. “I do not call you for a tifle, mighty Zuur’ka,” he said. “I give you the opportunity to discomfit a rival, to rend demons, and to gain a prize that will serve you well in your war against the infernal hosts that invade your realm.”

“Bah,” the ‘loth said, but its curiosity was ill-disguised. “If I might show you what I offer, great Zuur’ka?” Ghazaran prodded.

The nycaloth made a small gesture, and Ghazaran nodded to Falah. The warrior unlimbered his falchion, hooking the hilt into his belt within easy reach before he unslung the large package across his back. The cords parted to reveal a greataxe, its single blade an glimmering arc of white steel. It glowed slightly as the fighter grasped the hilt, and tiny sparks of flickering energy began to dance around the blade as he tugged it free and tossed the leather wrap aside.

“A shock axe might be a useful weapon, against those devils with which you war,” Ghazaran suggested.

“The weapon is puny in size,” Zuur’ka said. And while it was true that the yugoloth’s axe was considerably larger, the greed in its eyes as it looked upon the offered weapon was impossible to dissemble, and fooled none of those present.

The negotiations passed quickly, and concluded with the outsider taking the axe, and a position at the van of their company. The nycaloth barely acknowledged Falah or the Seer, but it gave a hard look to Navev, whose bandaged fingers clenched and unclenched, while black tendrils of insubstantial energy writhed between them.

They made their way back up the steps, to the entrance of the fane. The interior of the building was a single small chamber, the only feature of note the metal plaque set into the floor of the entry, and a ramp inside that descended into the earth.

Ghazaran paused for a moment to look up at the brightening sky one last time. “We have approximately six hours until the ceremony in Camar begins. We must complete our errand swiftly, so that we may be ready when Jasek and Parzad rejoin us.”

“And if something goes wrong?” the Seer asked.

Ghazaran’s smile was anything but friendly. “You must have faith.” He turned and nodded to Zuur’ka, who started down the ramp, the others falling into a line behind him. Within a few moments, they were gone, and the dark fane again became silent.

Chapter 379

A BLOODY WELCOME

Falah stood silent without complaint, his chest heaving as blood coursed down his body from the deep puncture wounds in his neck, left bicep, and right hip. Ghazaran poured healing energy from a wand into the fighter’s injured body, who grew noticeably stronger as the flows first eased, then stopped, the wounds knitting shut as the magic completed its work.

“What manner of creature was that?” the cleric asked the Seer.

“A bone crawler,” the mage responded, looking around the nycaloth, which was poking around in the wreckage of the destroyed guardian. The ‘loth had absorbed the brunt of the creature’s initial attacks, but its resistance to mundane weapons had allowed it to weather its assault far better than Falah. At first they had thought it some sort of construct, a clattering mound of bones knitted together by some forgotten arcane rite, but once Zuur’ka and Falah had really gotten into it, a living creature had been revealed beneath the encrusted armor of bones it had worn. It had responded with a violent frenzy of attacks, lashing them with tendrils that bore wickedly sharp bone fragments at their ends. But ultimately it could not withstand their combined assault, especially once Navev unleashed an *eldritch blast* that tore a gaping hole in one side of its amorphous body.

“You might have alerted us to the presence of such a guardian,” Ghazaran said, as he finished healing Falah’s wounds. The warrior silently took up his khopesh and took up a warding position at the mouth of the passage to the east.

“I told you before, that my knowledge of the secrets of this place is incomplete,” the mage replied. “I have only been in these halls once before, and I was escorted at the time. That was some time ago.”

“Let us hope that your knowledge of the Bloodways is more... accurate.”

“I have already made my feelings about this mission clear,” the mage returned.

Ghazaran did not bother to respond. The nycaloth returned from the niche from which the creature had sprung upon them bearing a golden shield. Its face had been shaped into the image of a roaring lion, and none of them needed an orison or cantrip to guess that it was likely magical. “None of you use a shield, so perhaps I will utilize this item,” the nycaloth said.

“That was not within our bargain. However, should your service prove instrumental to the completion of our mission, and demonstrate a willing support to its accomplishment, then I will countenance a worthy addendum to the reward portion of our contract.”

The cleric extended a hand, and the nycaloth turned over the shield with a scowl. Ghazaran handed it to Falah, who could not use such a device in conjunction with his huge blade, but who slung it across his back, so that the lion’s face looked upon them as he turned back toward the corridor.

Ghazaran indicated that direction, and Zuur’ka clomped off with Falah behind him. “Let us hope that the next chamber does not contain more surprises,” the cleric said.

The corridor sloped down and continued for some sixty feet before ending in a large stone door. Zuur’ka forced it open to reveal a room that was surprising indeed in its unusual construction. The floor of the chamber was a great open pit, full of a noxious green fluid that filled the chamber with wafts of toxic fumes. Narrow paths only slightly above the level of the fluid offered a passage across the acid pools that were tenuous at best, leading to a pair of large doors at the near end of the room to their left, and another barely visible across the chamber at its far end.

Ghazaran turned to the Seer, who pointed across the room. “The doors are traps. The true exit is another illusory wall on the far side of the room, to the left. One of the walkways passes close enough to step through.”

The cleric turned to the nycaloth. “Fly ahead and see if the route is clear of threats.”

“That is a hazardous duty, worthy of additional reward.”

Ghazaran chuckled. “You are immune to acid, and these fumes will not affect you in the slightest. Are you genuinely afraid, or merely seeking advantage?”

The nycaloth’s stare was menacing, but it complied, spreading its wings and launching itself into the air. The others drew back from the entry, the acidic fumes already making their heads swim, and threatening their gear with corrosion. The backblast from the nycaloth’s wings further sprayed them with droplets of acid, until the creature drew clear and flew rapidly across the chamber toward the far wall.

The illusory wall was right where the Seer had indicated. The nycaloth slowed as it approached, wary, but its claws passed through the image, followed quickly by the rest of it.

Unfortunately for Ghazaran's *planar ally*, something else was waiting right behind the wall. The companions could not see what was happening, but they heard the creature's exclamation of alarm. Before they could take action to intervene, the nycaloth reappeared, its wings flapping violently as it sought to rise back up into the air.

The source of its problems was immediately evident: a black ooze clung to its lower body, folded around its legs and lower torso like a tattered cloak. Part of it vanished through the illusory wall, connected by a thick tendril that stretched as the 'loth sought to pull free.

The yugoloth was strong, but the ooze refused to release its prey. For a moment it looked as though it might tear free, but then the connecting strand of ooze thickened and pulsed, and the 'loth was dragged roughly down, landing in the pool of acid with a raucus splash of sizzling droplets.

The bulk of the ooze came through the wall after it, descending onto it like a crashing wave of pure black.

Chapter 380

THE EBON OOZE

The nycaloth did not go down without a fight. The ooze had fairly engulfed it, now, driving it under the surface of the acid, but it seized hold of the nearest of the narrow walkways and pulled itself up, tearing at the ooze's substance with its free claws. Fortunately it was immune to the deadly caustic touch of both the creature and the acid pool, so it could focus its attention on the foe.

Falah had started toward the narrow pathway as soon as the monster had appeared, but Ghazaran forestalled him. The cleric looked at the mage, who shrugged and incanted a spell. Rising into the air, he drifted across the room, hovering high near the ceiling to give him as much distance as possible from the heavy vapors rising from the pool.

Navev remained well back. Ghazaran turned to the mummy. "Perhaps you would like to contribute?"

The creature's voice rasped from deep within the faded cowl. "From this range, I would be more likely to strike your ally than the ooze."

Ghazaran shrugged, and turned back to watch the developing battle.

The nycaloth could not gain advantage, but at least it was keeping the ooze from pushing it down under the surface of the water. The stalemate was broken a moment later as the Seer arrived overhead, and unleashed a *cone of cold* upon both the yugoloth and the ooze. The amorphous black thing was stunned by the spell, its outer layer freezing over into a brittle crust. The nycaloth, shielded somewhat from the wizard's spell by the ooze and by its own considerable resistance to cold attacks, took full advantage, tearing free and digging huge gashes in its "body". Gobs of ooze fell away into the acid, where they dissolved into black streaks that lingered atop its surface.

The ooze, mindless in its attack, continued its efforts to overcome the fiend, but its opening had passed. The Seer peppered it with a series of *scorching rays* that burned away long swathes of the creature, and Zuur'ka finished the job, emerging from the acid to stand dripping and furious at the edge of the illusory wall.

With the creature dispatched, it was a trivial matter for the others to make their way across the narrow causeway and join the nycaloth and wizard at the far end. Ghazaran conjured water that they used to wash their gear clean of the lingering droplets of acid. While most of their mundane gear would need eventual replacement, the damage was not sufficient to reduce their effectiveness for now.

The nycaloth was not pleased. It hurled its greataxe down upon the floor. "My weapon is ruined!" it cursed. "I do not appreciate being used to trigger traps, or to serve as the target for area-effect spells."

"I will heal your wounds," Ghazaran said, drawing out his wand. "And your sacrifice is noted; for now you may use the axe I gave you, and when the mission is complete I will grant you the shield as a bonus."

That mollified the 'loth somewhat, but there was still more than a bit of tension present when the group, restored once more to full health, set out again. They made their way through the unremarkable chamber that had housed the ooze, and then down a set of stairs that deposited them in a larger chamber below.

The tomb was considerable and smelled of decay. Large stone sarcophagi lined the chamber to either side of the central aisle, a full score on each side. The companions gave them a wide berth, all save Falah, who stepped close to examine one briefly. The lids of the sarcophagi bore exceptional carvings, presumably of their inhabitants. The warrior gave a start as he recognized the figure depicted on the lid of the one he was looking at.

It was himself.

The Seer chuckled as the fighter drew back in alarm. "A minor illusion," he said. "Of more concern is the next chamber. There is a potent enchantment effect there, capable of driving the minds of weak men insane with lust. I would suggest that you protect yourselves, and we should pass through swiftly."

Ghazaran nodded, and placed protective wards upon himself and Falah. Navev, of course, needed no such protection.

The chamber of which the Seer warned was located at the base of a shaft that descended for twenty feet straight down. A ladder of iron rungs offered an easy route down, although the Seer merely drifted down using his *overland flight* spell. The nycaloth led them into the lushly decorated chamber, which included plush cushions, diaphanous silk screens, flickering oil lamps that oozed a sweet smoke, and other rich appointments. A faint music seemed to stir on the air, and a hint of laughter could almost be discerned at the edges of their perceptions.

"This could be one of the pleasure chambers in the palace of a Razhuri sultan," Ghazaran said, with a raised eyebrow as he looked about. "The illusions here are rather... compelling."

"Orcus had a sick sense of humor," the Seer said. He directed them quickly to the hidden door on one side of the room, and they made their way through at once to another corridor that led deeper into the complex.

This new tunnel grew rougher as they progressed, and eventually it opened onto a vast natural cavern. Brightly colored fungi grew along the walls and in great spongy masses in the center of the place, some of them giving off a phosphorescent glow that rivaled their own magical light sources. The nycaloth started forward, curious perhaps, but the Seer raised a hand in warning.

"There are guardians here," he said. "If we move quickly we may avoid them, but if we are challenged, we must strike quickly and decisively."

Falah abruptly drew his sword. As the group grew silent, they could all hear the sounds of movement in the darkness ahead.

"It would seem that they already know we are here," Ghazaran said. He lifted his hand and invoked a *daylight* spell. The brilliant radiance revealed the approaching figures: a trio of shambling, animated toadstools, each over ten feet tall, with several long tentacles twisting down from their bulging heads. They were accompanied by a quartet of awkward, stumbling forms, things that had once been humanoid, but were now clearly nothing close to that.

Chapter 381

LEAVING A BLOODY TRAIL

“Bloodsuckers and meat puppets,” the Seer said. “Those things are what we will become, if we let the mushrooms touch us.” He lifted his hands and began incanting a spell. The toadstools and their puppets shambled forward to attack. Zuur’ka and Falah stepped forward to block them from the casters, but their enemies moved too slowly, giving them ample time to unleash their magic.

Navev gestured, and a forest of twining black tentacles erupted from the floor, seizing all three of the bloodsuckers and the four meat puppets. The puppets, their bones dissolved by the process of their transformation, squished violently as the tentacles tightened around their bodies, and a terrible moaning rose from within the area of the invocation as the dark energies began to freeze them solid.

“Effective,” Ghazaran said. They merely watched as the guardians struggled to escape the *chilling tentacles*. One of the bloodsuckers tore free and approached them. Zuur’ka stepped forward to meet the thing, but before it could reach the edge of the tentacles Navev blasted it with an *eldritch blast*, knocking it back into the center of the effect. Within a minute it was done, and as the tentacles vanished back into nothing only a mess of crushed and frozen matter was left behind on the floor.

“Well, shall we proceed?” the cleric suggested.

They were alert for other dangers, but the cavern did not present further hazards until they reached the far side. The cavern’s walls narrowed around them as they followed a bend into a long, tapering tunnel that culminated in a stone door set deep into the surrounding wall. Zuur’ka started toward the portal, but Ghazaran held the nycaloth back.

“There are black encrustations upon the wall around that door,” the cleric said, holding up his hand so that the *daylight* could better illuminate the area.

The Seer peered at the substance from a safe distance. “Ah, memory moss, I believe. A dangerous hazard—you have good eyes, priest.”

“My kind are accustomed to the dangers of the underworld,” the cleric replied.

The colony of moss was obliterated by a *fireball* from the Seer. The door was sealed, and while they found a keyhole, none of them possessed the skill to defeat the lock. The question became moot when Navev blasted the portal with a series of *eldritch blasts*, reducing it to rubble.

The area beyond the door was once again worked stone, a corridor that deposited them into another large hall. Here again were ranks of stone sarcophagi, and again some permanent illusion magic reshaped the designs atop them into the visages of the companions. This time, however, the faces carved into the stone bore expressions of terror and suffering, and the detail work was sufficient that they could discern worms eating at the flesh of their arms and legs, strips of skin being flayed away, and other depictions of tortures in progress.

“A charming place,” Ghazaran said dryly, as they made their way to the far side of the hall. The only exit was another shaft leading down, navigated by another iron ladder. Zuur’ka and the Seer flew down, while Navev merely glanced over the edge and magically transported himself to the bottom. They waited while Ghazaran, followed by Falah, took the more traditional means of the ladder to descend.

“How long is this going to take?” Zuur’ka asked, as Ghazaran stepped down off the last of the rungs onto the floor of the shaft. “I have important matters awaiting my attention in Gehenna.”

“If we do not complete the task within the fourteen hours allotted within our contract, I will release you,” Ghazaran said. “By my estimation, it has been little more than one hour since I called you to the Prime.”

The nycaloth subsided again, muttering imprecations.

The bottom of the shaft contained a pair of heavy doors of black marble, set with large pull-handles in thick, shiny brass. Navev stepped forward again, its magic coalescing around its bandaged fingers, but this time the doors were neither locked nor trapped, and Zuur’ka pulled them open with ease. The heavy doors swung on recessed hinges, assisted by some sort of hidden counterweight.

“How much further to the entrance of the Bloodways?” Ghazaran asked.

“We grow near,” the Seer replied. “There is another set of guardians, and perhaps the mistress of this dungeon. With Orcus gone, I do not know if she will still be present.”

“She?”

“An undead thing, of ancient and eldritch power. She was my escort on my first visit here.”

“Interesting. If I may ask, what was your errand, on that initial visit?”

“I sought knowledge,” the Seer said. “Many and powerful are the secrets of Rappan Athuk.”

“Indeed.” The cleric turned to Zuur’ka, who was waiting impatiently at the doors. “By all means, let us proceed,” he said. He fell in beside the Seer and Navev; for now Falah brought up the rear.

The doorway gave onto a short passage that opened onto another long hall. A large stone arch, carved into an oval with curved lines decorating its length, served as the transition from tunnel to chamber. Ghazaran’s light shone off a high ceiling of polished white marble, a stark contrast to the dark and neglected areas that they had passed through thus far.

The Seer held them at the arch. “Arrek veltex,” he said.

“A password?” Ghazaran asked.

“It should be safe now... if my memory is accurate.”

The cleric’s reply was a raised eyebrow. But nothing happened when they moved into the hall, and as they made their way down its length, following it around a bend to the left, they came to another set of black doors. These had been carved extensively, and while they had been defaced by deep slashes across their surface, it was immediately obvious what they had been shaped to represent.

“The demon lord looks rather reduced,” Ghazaran observed, looking up at the damaged depiction of Orcus.

“The lords of the Abyss still squabble over the spoils,” Zuur’ka intoned, issuing a noise that might have been a laugh. “The pits roil with chaos unleashed.”

“Such is a constant, if anything in the Abyss can be called such,” the Seer observed. “In any case, I believe the doors to be safe; at least I cannot detect any fell auras about them.”

The doors opened to reveal a downward sloping corridor, a full twenty feet wide and fifteen feet tall. The walls were covered with plaster, which bore images of funeral rites that grew more morbid and disturbing with each step. The hall extended straight for almost the full range of Ghazaran’s light, ultimately turning left.

The group made its way forward. The hall continued its subtle but steady descent as they continued around the bend. Their light indicated another left turn up ahead as Zuur’ka paused, its eyes narrowing as it focused its stare into realms beyond the mere physical.

“Three quasits approach,” the nycaloth said.

“I will deal with them,” the Seer said. He stepped forward and said, “I will answer your questions, and pass beyond to the Bloodways.”

But the only response was a frenzied flapping. “The imps withdraw,” Zuur’ka said, his tone indicating that he was not impressed by these defenders.

Ghazaran and the Seer exchanged a look. “It would seem that discipline among the guardians has broken down,” the cleric observed.

“This does not bode well,” the mage said. They set out again, the yugoloth in the lead.

The hall turned once more, and culminated in a large chamber. Here the images that decorated the plaster were truly grim, filled with demons and other foul things that cavorted among the ritualists, seizing the dead and dragging the souls of the departed down to the Abyss. The chamber held no furnishings or other decorations, but there were three quasits darting and dancing in the air near the far wall. As soon as they caught sight of the intruders, the little demons darted toward the wall. As they reached it, the trio vanished into the plaster, each passing into a painstakingly detailed and gruesome image of a tall, vulpine vrock demon.

None of the companions were particularly surprised when the images began to shimmer and twist, and the demons stepped out of the mural, taking on solid substance as they confronted the intruders.

“Well now,” Ghazaran said, as the vocks shrieked and leapt at them.

Chapter 382

A FIGHT TO THE FINISH

The vocks might have stepped out of a two-dimensional mural, but they sounded real enough, and the air reverberated with the pounding of their wings as they leapt to the attack.

Navev lifted a hand and blasted them with an *eldritch blast* that struck the leader, and then forked into secondary arcs that hit the other two an instant later. All three vocks were blasted roughly back by the beams, although none appeared to be seriously damaged.

That changed a moment later, as Zuur’ka and Falah descended upon the fiends. The demons lashed out at their attackers with a violent frenzy of claws and bites, but in turn suffered heavily. Falah carved a deep cut across the body of one vrock, his magical *khopesh* unleashing a thunderous roar of sonic energy as he struck. The vrock, already battered, fell back dazed. Zuur’ka fell upon a second, springing up and then descending upon the demon with raking claws. The vrock recovered quickly and

counterattacked with its own natural weapons, but the two fiends' respective resistances made them somewhat difficult to hurt badly. The demon, however, had one edge, as it released a pulse of toxic spores that began to burrow into the nycaloth's arms and chest. That attack drove Zuur'ka into a greater frenzy, and the nycaloth seized the demon in two of its arms and hurled it down upon the ground, while unlimbering its new axe with its other pair of clawed hands.

The third vrock sprang up and tried to aid its companion by taking the nycaloth from behind. It dug a claw into its back and might have gotten a dangerous hold, except that Navev hit it solidly with another *eldritch blast*, knocking it halfway across the room.

Ghazaran glanced over at the Seer, who was watching the battle dispassionately. "You do not feel any need to intervene?"

"My resources are finite, and it seems as though our companions have the matter well in hand."

Falah was having difficulty with his opponent; while he had gotten the advantage in his initial rush, the vrock was proving more durable than it had first appeared. It sprang up into the air, its wings flapping madly as it descended upon the fighter, tearing at his shoulders and head with its hind claws. Falah slashed at it with his big sword, but while he scored another hit, this one was a mere glancing blow, nowhere near as serious as the first. The demon unleashed its own cloud of spores, and suddenly the fighter was in serious straits, with blood coursing down his body from the vicious wounds opened by the demon's claws.

"Oh, very well," the Seer said, peppering the demon with a barrage of *magic missiles*. Ghazaran contributed with a *mass inflict wounds* spell, and all three demons shrieked as the spell penetrated their resistances and tore into their substance.

With that, the battle turned quickly against the demons. The demon that Navev had twice blasted elected to take the fight directly against the casters, but by the time that it had recovered and dove at them the warlock's power had built up again at its call. No sooner had the demon dug its claws into Navev's withered body than the mummy flared a final *eldritch blast* into its chest, at point blank range. This time the demon had expected the attack, and was able to keep from being blasted backward. It knocked Navev off its feet as it landed, but it was now seriously hurt, with blackened scars covering its body where the three blasts had scored. Before it could exploit its temporary advantage over the fallen warlock, Ghazaran stepped forward to deliver a touch attack. The demon buffeted him with a claw, but the cleric's concentration held as he unleashed an *inflict critical wounds* spell. The demon's body twisted as the deadly magic coursed through it, and it collapsed, its false body dissolving around it to reveal the quasit inside. The small demon sought to flee, but Navev, still on the ground, tracked its passage as it fled, and vaporized it with a well-placed blast.

Falah's foe was now seriously discomfited, but it pressed its attack upon the seriously injured fighter. But the spellpower of his allies had given him a brief respite, and the vrock's assault was met by a powerful downward slice of the khopesh that took the fiend's leg off at the hip. The demon fell to the ground, its body dissolving as rapidly as had the first. The quasit screeched as it rose up into the air, out of Falah's reach. The fighter turned to give assistance to Zuur'ka, but his wounds were too great, and the spores that had sprayed across him continued to burrow deep into his flesh. He made barely two steps before he collapsed, the deadly khopesh clattering to the ground a moment before his body hit the floor.

Zuur'ka and the final vrock had exchanged a vicious and bloody attacks at close quarters, but due to their innate resistances to physical damage, the wounds suffered had been mostly superficial thus far. Blood coursed down the vrock's chest from a blow from the nycaloth's new axe, but in turn the 'loth's upper torso trailed long growths where the demon's spores had deeply infested its flesh. The vrock had gotten back to its feet, and unleashed a full attack that culminated with its beak tearing a deep gouge in Zuur'ka's neck. The 'loth attempted to deliver another punishing blow with the axe, but the vrock seized hold of the nycaloth's wrists, pinning them.

Unfortunately for the demon, Zuur'ka had *four* arms.

Lifting the axe, and the vrock's arms, Zuur'ka dug its lower claws deep into the vrock's torso. The demon gave up nothing in size or strength to the nycaloth, but Zuur'ka was in a battle frenzy, and lifted the vrock up like a sack of grain. The vrock fought back with its hind claws, opening terrible gashes across the front of the nycaloth's legs. But Zuur'ka ignored the wounds, roaring as it hurled itself forward, the vrock held captive against its own body. They slammed into the far wall hard enough to crack the plaster. The demon, stunned, lost its grip on Zuur'ka's wrists, and the nycaloth slammed the axe down hard into its face, cracking its beak. The demon hissed in pain and tried to get up, but Zuur'ka did not ease off, smashing the axe down again, crushing one of the demon's eyes in its socket.

It just got worse from there. When the vrock started to come apart, the nycaloth was ready. The quasit tried to get away, but Zuur'ka seized it, holding it tightly in two of its claws. The little creature tried to babble something, but its cries turned to terrible screams of pain as the nycaloth tore its wings off, then its arms, and finally its legs. By the time that it finally crushed the little thing in its claws, it had already stopped moving.

The nycaloth turned to see the others watching, waiting. Ghazaran had brought Falah back from death's door using his healing magic, and continued to pour positive energy into him from one of his healing wands while the fighter stood unsteadily, covered in his own blood and the shriveled remnants of the vrock spore tendrils.

The nycaloth tossed down the messy remains of the quasit onto the floor.

"I require healing," Zuur'ka said.

“Of course,” Ghazaran said. “Well done.”

They took a moment to catch their breath, and for Ghazaran to finish healing those injured in the fight. The cleric burned through one healing wand entirely, tossing it aside before drawing out a second from one of the pouches at his waist. When he saw the Seer looking at him, he said, “I have spent years preparing for this day, wizard; I will not be denied now through scarcity of resources.”

“Not all of us can afford to be so profligate,” the wizard said. He walked over to the left wall, where the plaster showed an image of a giant cavernous maw swallowing up the tormented souls of the dead. “The entrance to the inner vault is here,” he said.

Navev shuffled forward, black energies crackling around its fingers. The undead warlock unleashed a barrage of eldritch power that tore away the plaster like a barbed whip slicing through tender flesh. There was a door of stone behind the covering, but Navev kept up its barrage, and soon that too crumbled, leaving a gaping opening in the stone.

“Come,” Ghazaran said, returning with a now-healed Zuur’ka. “Let us see if the guardian awaits our arrival.”

Chapter 383

AAPHIA

Zuur’ka pushed through the rubble of the doorway, which accessed a broad stone staircase that descended into a smaller chamber below. The companions made their way down, into the place that was obviously the final destination warding the entrance to the Bloodways.

The chamber was constructed of massive stone blocks that gave the place an impression of eternal solidity. To their left, a round door of steel was set into a threshold of unbroken stone; a small circular opening that might have been a keyhole was set into the center of the portal.

To their right, a long-dead woman sat upon a throne of red stone.

There was naught left but bones, and a long mane of glassy golden hair that clung somehow to the skeleton’s skull. It was clad in the remnants of what have once been a dress of exceptional finery, and now hung from the skeleton’s gaunt frame in tatters. An amulet of interlocking golden rings hung from a cord around its neck, and a thin steel chain dangled further down, dipping under the fabric of its garment.

No one present was particularly surprised when the skeleton shifted slightly, and turned toward them. Pale golden lights flickered into being within the caverns of its eye sockets.

The Seer presented himself boldly. "Aaphia. You remember me; I passed through these halls once before, in your company. I seek entrance to the Bloodways, along with my companions here."

The crypt thing regarded them for a long interval. When it finally spoke, the voice was still recognizable as female, but it intoned hollowly, as though spoken from the depths of a hole burrowed deep within the ground.

"The Master has gone. This place is now only for the dead."

Zuur'ka growled, but Ghazaran silenced him with a slightly raised hand. "With your Master departed, there is no reason to hinder us. We have business with Duke Aerim."

The skeleton shifted its hands slightly on the arms of its throne. "The Bloodwraith no longer has any concern for the affairs of the living."

"Then you will not permit us to pass?"

Aaphia extended a finger and pointed at Navev. "That one may pass beyond. The rest of you may remain, if you wish."

"I ask you to reconsider. Clearly you have power, and it is not my desire to make an enemy of you, but we will not be dissuaded."

"So be it."

The crypt thing gestured, and abruptly Falah and Zuur'ka vanished. Aaphia lifted her finger again toward Navev. "You are worthy. Join me, and we shall make this our realm, for eternity."

Ghazaran and the Seer had both readied components for spells. "What did you do with the others?" he demanded.

"Their suffering is transitory; soon they will pass over into the next reality. Your fate shall be joined to theirs; you will join me, here, for an eternity."

Chapter 384

THE THRESHOLD OF BLOOD

“I don’t think so,” the Seer said, as he unleashed a *lightning bolt* at the crypt thing.

The bolt could not miss at that range, but as it struck the blazing arc exploded in a frisson of magical energies that blinded them for a moment. When it had faded, it revealed Aaphia sitting unharmed upon the throne.

“A ward protects her!” the mage warned, already drawing back for the inevitable counterattack. It came immediately, as the crypt thing lifted a finger and directed a fiery *scorching ray* into the Seer. The wizard leapt aside with uncharacteristic spryness, patting wildly at the flames that flickered about his robe.

Ghazaran invoked a spell, and swelled as divine potency infused his body. The cleric expanded to almost twice his original size, and drew out a thick black rod that oozed raw magical power. He stepped forward to engage the crypt thing, which waited patiently upon its throne, impassive.

The cleric smote the creature with his rod, delivering a punishing strike that smashed in one entire side of its ribcage. But the dark thing merely absorbed the hit, extending a skeletal hand to seize the cleric’s wrist before he could draw back his weapon. There was a flash of magical power as the undead guardian discharged some sort of magic into him, but Ghazaran was infused with the power of dark gods, and he shook off the effect. Tearing his arm free, the cleric smashed down with the rod again and again, until only shattered fragments of bone remained.

“What do you think happened to the others?” Ghazaran asked the Seer, replacing the rod at his belt as his spell faded, and he shrank back down to his original size.

“It was a teleportation effect, but I do not believe that the range is especially great. Likely they are somewhere else in the complex, perhaps a confined bubble in the rock, possibly prepared in some manner to be immediately lethal.”

Ghazaran nodded; if he felt sadness or remorse at the loss of Falah and Zuur’ka, he did not show it. Instead he turned to Navev. “You were less than helpful in that encounter.”

“Perhaps our ally was tempted by the creature’s offer,” the Seer ventured.

Navev did not respond, but the cold stare that radiated from within that cowl gave adequate expression to the mummy’s thoughts.

Ghazaran did not flinch from that stare. “Remember our arrangement, Navev. We both will gain from the accomplishment of our objective.”

Again the mummy’s reply was silence, until finally it turned and shambled off toward the door. The Seer had gone over to the crypt thing’s remains, and bent to examine it.

“Well, presumably this is the key to that door,” he said, drawing out a key on the long steel chain around its neck. He did not feel compelled to share that he pocketed the creature’s amulet as well.

Ghazaran came over to investigate, but paused as a noise drew his attention around, back to the stairs leading up out of the crypt. “Something approaches.”

The three took up ready positions flanking the entrance, but the identity of the newcomers was obvious long before they became visible; they had gotten accustomed to Zuur’ka’s near-constant invective.

“What transpired?” Ghazaran asked, as the nycaloth and human fighter appeared together. Both looked as though they’d been carved up; several strips of flayed skin dangled from the fiend’s arms, and Falah was even worse off, with bulging swathes of bloody muscle visible where the skin had been ripped away.

“I am displeased,” Zuur’ka intoned, as Ghazaran drew out his healing wand yet again. “We were transported inside the stone crypts in the last tomb, where a fierce magic went to work upon us at once. There was no space within to move; fortunately I was able to transport myself out of the prison within a few moments.”

“And Falah?”

“He freed himself, although with more difficulty.”

“A devious trap,” the Seer noted. “Someone without the ability to *teleport*, or one less strong than our fighter here, would have been in quite an unenviable position.”

“Such devices would be most useful in Gehenna,” Zuur’ka said. “I shall have to investigate this magic some time in the future.”

“For now, we have the key, and a clear destination,” Ghazaran said. Taking the key from the Seer, the cleric crossed the room to the steel door. The key fit perfectly in the round lock, and after a few twists there was a loud click, and the door began to swing open.

The portal, once recessed into the doorway, revealed a round chamber beyond. The room was dominated by a circular shaft that descended straight down into darkness, for as far as they could see.

“How far does it extend?” Ghazaran said.

“Several hundred feet,” the Seer answered. “I can assist in getting us all down, but it will be more difficult coming up. There are handholds on the sides of the shaft, but it would be no easy ascent.”

“We will manage,” Ghazaran replied. “Use your magic to take us down.”

The wizard’s *feather fall* spell facilitated the descent, although there was a brief, terrifying moment before the magic took full effect. Zuur’ka floated above them, trusting in its own means of flight to traverse the shaft.

The shaft dropped them into a large cavern, seemingly of natural construction. There appeared to be several tunnels offering exit, but it was hard to see clearly, as a cloying red mist filled the place, swirling and twisting as if alive, though there was no breeze.

Ghazaran looked down at his hands. The red mists had already begun to condense on them, forming droplets of crimson like fresh blood. Looking at the others, he could see the color already beginning to seep into their garments. Soon, they would all be stained with it.

“Welcome to the Bloodways,” the Seer intoned, his voice sepulchral as it drifted out of the mists.

Chapter 385

LEVELS OF COMMITMENT

The mage sagged against the adjacent wall. Garish red streaks covered his face, hands, clothes; all of them had the look of victims of torture.

Ghazaran was using another healing wand to treat Falah, who stood quiescent, breathing heavily. The fighter’s neck and arms were covered with nasty wounds; large swathes of flesh looked to have been dissolved, revealing the muscles—and in one case a starkly white bone—beneath. But new flesh crept out from the damaged old to cover the openings as positive blue energy poured into the wounded man’s body, and within less than the span of a minute he was whole once more.

The cleric glanced over at the Seer while he worked. “Interesting. The creature appeared to have the properties of an ochre jelly, but with the color and consistency of blood.”

The Seer looked down at the smeared and sticky remains that covered the floor of the tunnel. “This is foolish. Our resources are being seriously depleted; we need to withdraw, rest. The inherent auras of the Ways interferes with some of my magic, but if we withdraw to the temple dungeon, I can conjure an extradimensional sanctuary that will provide complete security.”

Having finished with Falah, Ghazaran made a gesture, and the fighter took up a warding position at the mouth of the crossing passage where the blood jelly had attacked. The creature had dropped onto Falah from above without warning, and only blind luck had caused him to step aside at the last moment, letting the bulk of the creature land on the floor instead of on his head.

The cleric put away his healing wand and drew out another. "I will *restore* you again, if you are weary."

The Seer waved a hand dismissively. "A dozen *lesser restorations* will not help; that magic only postpones the reckoning. I am nearly out of spells, and the attacks upon us grow more frequent."

Ghazaran's cool expression did not change. "We are still on the correct course to our destination?"

The Seer's lips twisted into a sneer. "I will take you to the Bloodwraith's lair. But it does us no good if we are too weak to overcome the Duke and his minions, when we arrive."

"Leave that to me," Ghazaran said. "And to him," he said, indicating the vague form that remained in the mists, shadowing them.

The Seer could not fully repress a shudder. Navev was the real reason they had gotten this far. The mummy was virtually immune to the threats that populated the Bloodways, and in turn its invocations had proven devastating. It had been the *eldritch blasts* from the undead warlock that had finally destroyed the blood jelly, as they had the gelatinous cube, the devouring mists, and the blood golems before. The golems had been among the first, and the worst; the bloated slug-like things had emerged from the omnipresent mists and fallen on Zuur'ka without warning, killing the nycaloth almost before the rest of them could react. The delay provided by Ghazaran's *planar ally* had given them a chance to defend themselves, and none of them felt any remorse at the sacrifice, but the Seer had been quick to note how the loss had compromised the physical strength of their company. He had encouraged retreat then, as well, but Ghazaran had been uncompromising in his commitment to their mission.

"How long have we been down here?" the Seer asked.

Ghazaran looked thoughtful for a moment. "Impossible to tell precisely, of course... but I would estimate perhaps six hours."

"Six hours? It will soon be high sun in Camar. Jasek and Parzad will complete their mission, and will not be able to return. As I told you earlier, the Bloodways interfere with magical transportation."

"It is of no concern. I directed a *sending* to Parzad before we entered the complex. They will wait for my communication before they break the tokens that I gave them."

“What? That is a significant, and in my mind a foolish and unnecessary risk. The Camarians are not fools. They will seek out those that invaded their sanctum, and they may have the magical means to penetrate the wards that protect our pair. Jasek is resourceful, but even he cannot hide from a senior mage or high priest.”

“All the more reason to complete our mission quickly. How far are we from the Bloodwraith’s lair?”

The two men shared a hard stare for several moments. Finally, the Seer said, “Another hour, perhaps. Assuming that we are not attacked again, en route.”

“Then perhaps we should be on our way,” the cleric said. He gestured to Falah and Navev. The three of them moved into the intersection, and waited for the Seer to indicate their direction of travel.

The mage pushed off from the wall, and indicated the right tunnel. The four of them continued on, and were swallowed up by the red mists within a few steps, as though they had never existed at all.

Chapter 386

THE LAIR OF THE BLOODWRAITH

Their entrance was dramatic.

The massive slab door exploded in a barrage of fragments, dust, and black energy. Falah stormed through the gap, his khopesh bare in his hands, a faint haze of magical protection shimmering around the outline of his body.

The minions of the Bloodwraith were waiting for him.

The chamber was larger than it looked, but the crowded interior and the density of the red mists gave it a cramped, close feeling. There were four doors, situated in the center of each wall, each flanked by a pair of upstanding stone sarcophagi. More of the large stone tombs were situated in the middle of the room, six of them surrounding and facing a larger one atop a raised platform in the center. The lids of the stone boxes had been carved into the shapes of armored warriors, stained by the red mists to look as though they were covered in blood. But the lids were ajar, the occupants of the tombs disgorged to meet the intruders into Duke Aerim’s sanctum.

Eight armored skeletons stood around the perimeter of the room, flanking the doors. The warriors bore long swords and battered shields that carried a faint but just discernable sigil, the design depicting a griffon clutching a burning sphere in its talons.

The two guardians nearest the shattered door lunged forward at Falah as the dust from the explosion began to settle. The fighter pivoted and blocked the swing of the first, but the second, striking from his unprotected flank, carved its blade into his armored side. The fighter's mail held, but he grunted as the force of the impact staggered him. The skeletons were stronger than they looked, and grim red points of fire glowed within their hollow eye sockets. The skeletons lifted their swords to strike again, but behind the fighter dark energies flared, and the two creatures fell back, rebuked by a power greater than their own. But more were coming, moving around the perimeter of the room from the other doorways.

In the center of the room, six tall, lean creatures stepped forward to face the intruders. These figures still bore flesh upon their gaunt forms, but one look at the faces deep within the half-helms they wore was enough to reveal that they too were undead, augmented wights sustained by the dark power of the Bloodwraith. Each of these bore a greatsword in an archaic style, with thick quillons carved into the shape of hands that grasped globes of stylized fire. They moved ponderously, the crimson-encrusted chainmail covering their bodies swishing with their movements, but they formed into a line with the precision of the veteran warriors that they had been in life, and started forward as one toward the embattled Razhuri fighter.

But before they could close the distance enough to engage, the sword wights were caught up in a swarm of twisting, sinuous black tendrils that sprang up from the floor. Navev's *chilling tentacles* filled the chamber, and while the undead guardians were not especially perturbed by the plummeting temperature within the invocation's area of effect, they were inconvenienced as the tentacles wrapped around their legs and arms, holding them in place.

Ghazaran stood in the doorway, sheltered by Falah as the fighter laid into the nearer of the two bone warriors rebuked by the cleric. Scanning the mists, he pointed into the air above the great tomb in the center of the chamber. "There!"

A figure materialized out of the mists where the priest indicated. Descending from above, the insubstantial form of the Bloodwraith seemed to be as one with the surrounding mists, the tendrils of red fog drifting in and around its body. As it drew closer, they could begin to make out some of the details of its form. The wraith's body was a vague outline, but it appeared to wear both armor and a shrouding robe, both in an archaic style that had faded from human knowledge hundreds of years ago.

Duke Aerim made a gesture, an imperious sweep of its hand that tore a swath through the surrounding mists. Ghazaran scanned the chamber for threats, but too late realized that the Bloodwraith had other surprises in store.

The cleric looked up in time to see the two huge devouring mists descending from above. He lifted his divine focus, but was too late to act before one of the things enveloped him. A chill pressed against his skin, and bright red points—real blood, this time—erupted all along his arms, neck, and face as the creature drew life from his body. He could not see, but Falah's cry indicated that the second creature had found its target as well. The mists around him flashed bright red, and he realized that the monster was swelling as it absorbed his blood. Over it all he could just make out a distant, sepulchral laughter, a hollow sound as devoid of life as the monsters that surrounded them.

Chapter 387

THE DUKE OF BLOOD

Ghazaran could not see; everything was a haze of red. His nostrils and mouth were full of the scent and taste of blood. The noises of the surrounding room were muted by the roaring of his own pulse, pounding furiously, and all sensation was pain as the devouring mist tore more of his blood from his body.

And yet, in the midst of that assault upon his senses, the cleric maintained a concentration as sharp as a razor's edge.

Positive energy flared from his hands, driving back the mists. The thing that engulfed him convulsed, and he could feel its pain. And upon his discharge of power came other attacks; black bolts of eldritch potency, and then a titanic bolt of electrical energy that tore through the mist, vaporizing it. The lightning... no, a *chain lightning*, Ghazaran realized, as the secondary arcs blasted through the other undead, was devastating, and most of the corporeal undead, snared by the *chilling tentacles*, had no chance of avoiding the worst of the blast.

Ghazaran blinked and rubbed his face to clear his eyes of the cloying blood. The second devouring mist, though obviously seriously damaged, was still attacking Falah, and the cleric could see tiny droplets of blood flaring as they emerged from the fighter's skin and were drawn up into the creature. He was still fighting, but his own attacks were not having much effect upon the thing.

Looking up, he saw that the Bloodwraith was still hovering above them, out toward the center of the room. As the cleric watched, the Duke opened its mouth impossibly wide, disgorging a gout of red mist. The thing began to twist and surge forward as it grew, and within moments it had taken on the form of another devouring mist, ready to attack and feed upon their blood.

A loud clang of metal on metal drew Ghazaran's attention back down; several of the sword wights had managed to struggle forward through the *chilling tentacles*, and Falah

had matched swords with them, even as the devouring mist continued to harry him from above. The lighter bone warriors were having a tougher time, and had a longer distance to travel through the area of the invocation, but most of them were continuing to struggle forward, even as Navev's tendrils continued to lash at their bodies.

Another *eldritch blast* from Navev ripped into the devouring mist above Falah, slicing through its gaseous substance like a harsh gust of wind dispersing fog. The mist, already damaged, came apart, droplets of unabsorbed blood falling to the ground in a patter around it. Navev's bolt kept going and struck the mist descending from the Bloodwraith, but it dissipated against the creature's resistances without causing harm.

Gharazan drew out a pair of wands, and stabbed one against Falah's back, restoring some of the strength that the devouring mist's blood drain had siphoned from him. The effort was timely, as the newest mist dropped upon them like a falling cloak, engulfing both cleric and fighter in its substance. Almost immediately Ghazaran could feel the prickling sensation upon his skin, as it began to tug at the blood flowing through his veins underneath the flesh. Again he found his vision obscured, but he could hear Falah grunt, presumably as he took another hit from the sword wights.

"Strike at the Duke!" he shouted, hoping that the others could hear him through the immaterial substance of the devouring mist. He lifted his second wand and triggered it, but the mist absorbed the positive energy without effect. Whether this was because the thing was freshly conjured by the Duke, or merely because the wand's spellpower was insufficient, he was not certain. But what he did know was that he was starting to feel a bit light-headed from the loss of blood. He had depleted most of his more powerful spells fighting through the Temple of the Final Sacrament and the Bloodways, but like the Seer he had kept some power in reserve.

His *heal* spell shattered the resistances of the devouring mist like a hammer, and it jerked wildly in the air as it drew back, leaving behind a trail of falling red droplets. It did not get a chance to recover, as another *eldritch blast* tore through it en route to the Bloodwraith, and it dissolved back into the surrounding red fog as though it had never been at all.

Falah was on his feet, if barely, but his foes were likewise having great difficulty. The two sword wights that had won forward to engage the fighter had been seriously damaged by the *chain lightning* and the *chilling tentacles*, and first one, and then the other, came apart under the mighty swings of the Razhuri warrior's khopesh. The fighter was far too canny a foe to rush forward to engage the others and risk being caught by the *tentacles*, so he waited for them to come to him, lopping the head off of the remaining bone warrior that remained rebuked nearby to pass the time.

The Bloodwraith remained above them, indistinct in its halo of mist, although a clear malevolence shone in its bright red eyes. Navev hit it with another *eldritch blast*, but like the first this one merely stabbed through its body without apparent effect. The Seer had drawn out a wand, and peppered it with a barrage of *magic missiles*, but while the

streaking bolts each drew a ripple through the wraith's form, it did not appear to react to the wounds.

Navev raised a hand as the last of the Bloodwraith's servants collapsed, and the *chilling tentacles* dissolved back into the cracked stone of the crypt floor. Ghazaran stepped forward to the edge of the dais, and confronted the hovering form of the Bloodwraith, lifting his divine focus above his head. In his other hand he held a vial, thick with red fluid.

"By power and blood do I command you, Duke Aerim! Your eternal vigil has come to an end!"

A tremor passed through the undead thing as the cleric's words echoed through the vault. But if Ghazaran expected some form of compliance or obescience, he was to be disappointed, as the wraith's face twisted into a paroxysm of rage, and it descended upon him, arms spread like wings to enfold him in its grasp.

Chapter 388

BLOOD AND LIFE

As the Bloodwraith plummeted down to attack, Ghazaran crushed the vial he carried in his hand, and thrust it up to meet the descending creature. The cleric's hard expression twisted with pain as his hand passed into the wraith's substance, but he did not flinch away, stabbing deeper until his entire arm to the elbow was lost inside the shifting vapors that comprised the undead duke.

The effect upon the Bloodwraith was more dramatic. Its body convulsed, as though the cleric's fist had been a spike that it had impaled itself upon. Its arms, which had been collapsing upon the cleric in its attack, flared back, and a deep, terrible groan issued from its open mouth. Flashes of energy could be seen within its body, like flickers of lightning witnessed within the depths of a storm.

Ghazaran turned his head, and shouted, "Navev!"

The mummy had entered the chamber proper, and at the cleric's command it lifted a withered arm. Black tendrils of eldritch power were already gathering around its fingers, and this time, the blast tore deep into the substance of the Bloodwraith, tearing gashes in it that oozed trailers of red mist.

The unholy creature was clearly injured now, but as the initial shock of Ghazaran's counter began to wear off it resumed its attack. Flashes still radiated out from the cleric's fist, buried deep within the wraith's body, but the creature, driven by an ancient

and potent hatred, thrust itself down deeper, drawing its arms back down and pressing them around the cleric's throat. Ghazaran was staggered by the creature's fell power, and the others could see him waning, his flesh as pale as new snow where its insubstantial claws had brushed him. Falah tried to move to the aid of his lord, but the fighter was sorely wounded, and he fell within the outer ring of sarcophagi, leaving marks of bright blood against the ancient and weathered stone as he stumbled to his knees. Still he struggled, and he pushed himself up, wavering from the loss of so much blood from the touch of the devouring mists.

Navev blasted the Bloodwraith again, and again his assault tore at its body, but the creature remained focused upon Ghazaran. At first it seemed as though there could only be one outcome; the wraith appeared almost indestructible, while the cleric could barely stand. But then, as Ghazaran's knee nearly brushed the floor, the priest called upon some desperate reservoir of strength, and he stood once more, driving his arm yet deeper into the wraith's body, until his face almost brushed against the insubstantial visage of the Duke. The creature howled at him, but Ghazaran discharged a last flare of positive energy, the last such spell left within his reservoir of divine power. The unholy thing could not stand before that attack, and it dissolved with a last haunting screech that faded into nothing as the mists reclaimed the collapsing form of the Bloodwraith.

The cleric sagged against the nearest tomb, breathing heavily. He drew out one of his wands and activated it, drawing the power into himself to replace the blood and vitality lost in the desperate battle against the undead. Falah waited patiently a few feet away, leaning against another sarcophagus to keep from falling down. The cleric looked up as the Seer approached.

"Impressive," the mage said. "I was not aware that blood magic was within your area of expertise."

Ghazaran looked up as he drew more of his wand's power into himself. As it depleted the last of its stored power he tossed it aside, and took another one from his pouch. He gestured to Falah to come over to him. He rubbed his other hand, covered with blood and shards of glass from the broken vial, on the edge of the stone tomb. "A minor ritual, something that I picked up in the jungles of Razhur."

"The blood... how were you able to establish the connection to the wraith?"

The cleric touched his wand to one of Falah's wounds, which closed as the blue flare of healing energy seeped into him. "The blood was that of the last descendent of the house of Aerim."

The Seer raised an eyebrow. "I was not aware that any such existed. That must have been difficult to come by."

“Indeed.” The cleric did not elaborate. Instead he stood, and gestured for Falah to join him on the bier in the center of the chamber. The Seer and Navev watched as the pair worked at the lid. Ghazaran drew out a pair of prybars of black metal, but even so it took the big Razhuri’s full strength to lift the heavy lid enough for the cleric to work his bar in enough to start levering it aside. It took another full minute of grunts and heavy effort before the stone lid toppled, landing hard on the adjacent floor with enough force to crack the stone.

The Seer joined them atop the dais, curious. The mists clung to the three of them as they looked into the interior of the tomb, but their magical lights gleamed off of bright metal inside.

The sole occupant of the tomb was a man long-dead. He had obviously been laid here in great state; his bones were still encased in armor, plate of silvery mithral chased in gold, and bearing the sigil of the house of Aerim upon the breastplate. A robe of cloth-of-gold covered much of his body, and a circlet of solid gold still rested upon the brow of the faded skull within the open helm. A greatsword lay at the skeleton’s side, its blade bare. None of the items showed any sign of decay or age.

The Seer raised an eyebrow. “What do you intend to do here? You should be aware that a powerful curse lies upon these artifacts, and further that the essence of the Bloodwraith is tied to them. You destroyed it once, but it will return, and it will follow anyone that takes any of these items.”

Ghazaran looked up. “I do not intend to steal the Duke’s possessions.”

The wizard’s expression darkened. “You had said that we needed the aid of the Bloodwraith, but it resisted your attempts to dominate it. So what more do you hope to gain?”

“I did not say that we needed the assistance of the Bloodwraith. I said that we needed the assistance of Duke Aerim.” He nodded to Falah; the warrior took up a warding position near the edge of the dais, facing the open doorway that led back out into the Bloodways. The priest reached into his *pouch of holding* and drew out a black vestment, which he put on over his armor.

“But... you cannot mean...”

Ghazaran met the wizard’s eyes briefly, but did not respond. The Seer looked down at the remains within the tomb, then back at the cleric. “The Duke has been dead for at least four hundred years, and probably closer to five. Even a *true resurrection* cannot bring back one gone so long, even if the soul can be found and channeled back to the Prime.”

At that comment, Ghazaran did smile slightly, a slight twist to his features. “You lack faith, friend.”

The Seer drew back a step as Ghazaran took up a position at the head of the open sarcophagus. In his black robe, he looked almost like an undead thing himself, its long folds trailing as he lifted his arms out over the remains of the once-legendary Duke. Aerim, who had led the armies of Good who had come to Rappan Athuk to destroy the legions of Orcus. Aerim, who had once been a consecrated knight, who had ultimately fallen before the devastating power of the Prince of the Undead. Aerim, who had served for centuries as the Bloodwraith, corrupted beyond human understanding into a foul, sinister thing by the dark energies resident within the Bloodways.

Ghazaran reached down and placed something upon the brow of the dead knight. It sparkled brilliantly upon the weathered bone, just below the golden circlet.

The Seer peered down at it, and then started in surprise. For once he betrayed amazement, as he looked back up at Ghazaran. "You have possession of chrysalium! The Tears of the Gods! Why did you not share this earlier?"

But Ghazaran had begun to incant, and the wizard could feel the power growing within the mists all around him, almost at once. Now alarmed, he started to back away, but as he turned he nearly ran into Navev, who had approached silently during their exchange. The mummy stared up at the priest with an unreadable mystery in its dead eyes, and as they shifted briefly to the Seer the man felt an icy cold like a dagger thrust deep within his insides. He stumbled away, falling against one of the tombs on the lower tier. Looking down at his hands, the mage saw that they were wet with blood, the omnipresent markings of the Bloodways.

The ritual continued unabated atop the dais, and the Seer could now see the magical currents that the priest was manipulating, even without the agency of arcane divination. The mists themselves were twisting around the tomb of the Duke, and the Seer could perceive a pulsing within them, like a heartbeat. He wanted to cover his ears and avert his eyes, almost overcome by the clashing powers that warred in this place. But the Seer was a creature of lust; not for the mundane matters of flesh that drove most of his race, but for knowledge, secrets, hidden whispers and scattered fragments of lore lost to the eyes of man. It was that lust that had driven him to Rappan Athuk, the same that had cost him his name and his life... before. And it was the same that caused him to step not away from the dark rite being practiced here, but forward, until the edges of the swirling mists caressed him, and red flared before his eyes as the blood within them brushed his face.

He wiped his eyes, clearing them, and watched.

It was impossible to tell how long it took, caught within the maelstrom of mists and power. When it was done, the Seer was caught off guard for a moment; he blinked, his senses slowly returning to normal as the echoes of the ritual faded. His body felt as though he'd been stretched upon a rack, and his steps forward were halting. But he stepped up to the dais, and kept going, until he stood at the foot of the Duke's tomb.

Ghazaran was still there, clutching the edges of the sarcophagus as a support; the priest looked gaunt and frail.

But the man lying within the tomb was anything but. Clad within his armor, resplendent within the golden robe, he looked a lord, a prince, a knight. He looked to be about fifty, his beard and hair sparkled through liberally with gray, which added rather that detracted from his bearing. His features were strong, and even motionless he seemed to radiate a quiet charisma. He looked like a man just laid to rest, but the Seer could see his chest rising and falling in slow cadence.

The eyes of the Duke opened. For a moment they fluttered around, unfocused, vague. Then that haze of confusion dissipated, and his stare shifted toward the Seer, and sharpened.

In that moment, the wizard knew that Ghazaran had been right, and he understood why they needed Duke Aerim's help.

Chapter 389

EMERGENCE

When they emerged from the depths of the Temple of the Final Sacrament, the day was already deepening into twilight, the light of the fading sun muted by dense clouds overhead and the twisting branches of the surrounding forest. The companions that had delved into the Bloodways showed the signs of their nearly sixteen hours underground; all were exhausted and dirty, save for Zafir Navev, who trailed behind the others, silent and deadly.

Duke Aerim stood at the threshold of the ancient temple, and stared thoughtfully into the open air beyond. The former Bloodwraith had been quiet for most of their journey back to the surface. At first he had seemed somewhat dazed, overcome by the transition back to life, but the further they had gotten from the tomb within the Bloodways, the stronger he had gotten. Ghazaran had spent most of the trip back up in close consultation with the resurrected lord, but Aerim had said little, stirring out of his quiescence only when they were assaulted by a blood golem in the Ways. The thing had seemed confused, and Aerim's blade had torn it into fragments almost before it could marshal an effective attack.

They had all washed with water conjured by Ghazaran once they'd finally escaped the Bloodways and returned to the dungeons under the Temple of the Final Sacrament, but all of their garments remained sodden with streaks of red, giving them all a rough, barbaric look. Faint red outlines of their footprints trailed down the steps behind them, a marker of their passage.

The Seer exchanged a few words with Ghazaran, and then walked away, out into the clearing surrounding the temple. He did not go far before casting a spell, summoning a shimmering doorway of magical energy into which he vanished. Whatever magical portal he had created disappeared behind him, a few seconds after he had departed.

Ghazaran cast a spell as well, a *sending*. Within a few seconds, there was a shimmer in the air, and both Jasek and Parzad appeared, clad in plain, functional garments that would have drawn little attention in Camar, or any other city across the world.

"It's about fucking time," Jasek said, as he looked around their surroundings. An eyebrow came up as he saw Aerim, but the Duke seemed barely interested in their affairs, even when they involved the sudden disappearance or appearance of members of their company. "Half the city is looking for us, and I was going to have to..."

"It was necessary," Ghazaran interrupted. He looked at Parzad. "You have it?"

The wilder nodded. He drew out a leather wrap, and handed it to Ghazaran. The cleric's eyes grew covetous as he unwrapped the package, but he only glanced at the flash of yellow within before he closed it and tucked it into his pouch. He looked over at Navev, who returned the gaze without reaction. Parzad also handed over a small bundle of leather scroll cases, which the priest examined in more detail. "Excellent, excellent. These will prove quite useful. You have done well."

"Your information was good," Jasek admitted. "They weren't ready for us."

"Others have intervened; our foes have gained more knowledge, and will likely try to stop us."

"Isn't that all the more reason to get moving?" Jasek asked.

"I am cognizant of the needs for urgency, but there are preparations that must be made first. Secure a camp near the temple," he told them. "I will require solitude inside; do not intrude, even if you detect odd noises or lights within."

"What if we come under attack?" Jasek asked. "The Camarians have wizards and clerics too, you know."

"I do not believe that they will be able to reach us before dawn, and we will be well on our way to our ultimate goal by then. If they prove more adaptable than we thought, then feel free to take whatever actions you feel are appropriate. I trust to your resourcefulness, Jasek."

"Somehow I am not reassured," the rogue said, but he nodded, already scanning the area for the best spot to camp. "What about him?" he said, indicating the Duke, still standing facing away from them, at the top of the Temple steps.

“Leave Duke Aerim to me,” Ghazaran said.

As the others headed outside to begin their preparations for their camp, the cleric walked over to Aerim. The Duke stood with his arms folded across his broad chest, obscuring his sigil. His golden robe was a bit threadbare, but remained remarkably intact for its age.

Aerim acknowledged him with a faint inclination of his head. “I am grateful for removing me from that... existence,” he said. “But I have no interest in this scheme of yours.”

“You will have the opportunity to gain vengeance against those who sent you into peril, and abandoned you in the depths of the world below,” the cleric said.

Aerim’s hands tightened into fists, indicating that he had not forgotten, but still he shook his head. “This Camar of yours is alien to me,” he said. “The people responsible for my fate are all dead, along with their descendants, and those who followed, for hundreds of years. I do not know this world, but I would look upon it, ere I judge my path.”

“Alone?”

“Such appears to be my lot.”

“Perhaps not.” Something in his voice made the Duke turn, and see the object that the cleric was holding in his hand.

It was a small silver locket, dangling on a thin chain. Aerim took it, staring at it in his hand. “Alyse,” he said, the word thick in his throat.

“The legends say that all that you loved suffered for your fall.”

Aerim looked at the cleric, and there was a promise of death in his eyes.

“Orcus and his cult have been laid low; that vengeance is denied you. But neither do you owe the wretched people of this world any allegiance. Help me release the Ravager from its prison, and I will restore your wife to you, using the same power that I summoned to draw you from your suffering, back to the world of the living. From there, you can determine your fate by your own will, and not the failings of others.”

Aerim’s anger did not abate, but it had shifted from the cleric. He looked down at the locket. “Why did you bring me back, priest?”

“You were the finest swordsman of your age.”

“Swords are cheap enough, in this or any age. Do not trifle with me; speak truth, or I will take your life before I take my leave.”

"I shall deliver it to you, then. You know already that I serve ancient and powerful gods. They told me how to release you, now that the Demon is defeated, and they told me that you were the key to the successful completion of my quest."

"But why? I am just a man."

"No. You were, and are, more. I freed you from the prison of the Bloodways, but the power of that place still flows in your veins. You are Aerim, but you are also *Aegis*, the weapon of ages, the blade against which the pain of the world will be wrought."

Aerim was silent for a long moment. Finally, he closed the hand holding the locket into a fist, and lowered it to his side.

"So be it. But if you deceive me, know that I will see that your suffering rivals mine, before you die."

Ghazaran nodded calmly. "Agreed."

Chapter 390

REVELATIONS

"I don't know what the fuck we're wasting time here debating," Corath Dar said, slapping the table with his hand to emphasize his point. "*We know* who was behind it, *we know* where they are going, and *we know* what they want."

"I respect your passion, general, but thus far there has been no hard evidence that they were anything but very resourceful thieves," Sukat Koth said.

Dar's expression was a thunderhead. "They were there for that dagger. You may not know what that means, councilor, but Allera and I were there, and we do."

The big Emorite leaned forward in his seat. "I defer to your knowledge, general, lady healer, but other things were taken as well. A cache of scrolls, a fortune in emeralds..."

"Among sixty lockboxes left unmolested..."

"For which we are grateful to you, general. Had you not interrupted the thieves in the midst of their heist, they might have cleaned out the vault entirely."

Dar fumed at the reminder. While it was almost certain that the intruders had been in the vault just minutes before Dar and the others had arrived—Allera had been able to

determine that from the condition of the dead guards—there had been no trace of them once they had entered the interior of the vault. They found a small pile of scrolls—old records of the church, of great historical value, but not magical—burning in one corner of the innermost chamber of the vault, but that hadn't been any real threat to the place, and they stamped out the flames without difficulty. The clerics had scanned for invisible or otherwise hidden traces of the thieves, but they had found nothing, nothing at all.

Allera placed a hand on his, and Dar turned back to the others. “Even if I'm wrong, we cannot take the chance. We need to get to Rappan Athuk, and without fucking delay.”

“I do not disagree with your reasoning, general,” Sukat Koth said. “I want to see these bastards brought to justice as much as you do. But unless you have learned to fly, we can do nothing until the morning.”

Dar turned toward a woman in a gray robe seated to his left across the table. “And you are telling me that there is no one in that fucking Guild of yours who can transport us to Rappan Athuk?”

Jalla Calestin swallowed; for a senior member of the Guild of Sorcery, she seemed rather uncomfortable to be present at this gathering. Barely past thirty, she certainly did not have the presence to stand up to an angry Corath Dar. “That... that is correct, general.”

Dar opened his mouth to speak further, but Koth interrupted him with a raised hand. “We require more information before we act rashly. Jaduran will be here soon, and he can tell us what he has learned.”

Allera moved her hand from Dar's hand to his shoulder, but instead of sitting down, he turned and walked across the room. The council chamber had no proper windows, only long slits protected with heavy slabs of leaded glass. They didn't really offer much in the way of a view, but Dar could see the lights of the city faintly through the nearest.

The sun had only set a little over an hour past, and it already looked like it was going to be a long night.

The conversation went on behind him. Kiron Tonneth was saying something about the readiness of the Dragon Knights, but the words buzzed together in Dar's tired mind. He rubbed his head, but the headache that had been building there refused to yield. Allera would be able to help him later, he knew, but he also knew that his wife was under her own personal strain.

Allera had left Rappan Athuk scarred deeply. She was strong, stronger than anyone he had ever known, stronger than him, certainly, inside where it counted. But while they had been happy in the lives they had built in the aftermath, he could still see the shadow that she carried with her. She had poured her life into rebuilding the corps of healers so needed in the difficult years that had followed their victory over Orcus; it had given her

meaning and purpose in life. But while she still commanded an awesome power, he had never seen her draw as deeply upon the healing energies of the world as she had on those final days within the bowels of the Dungeon of Graves.

The fighter turned as the doors opened. Commander Octavius and General Cossus Velius of the First Legion entered first, both men looking very tired. Behind them came the Patriarch, supported on the arm of his young assistant. The cleric was talking quietly to Setarcos, the two aged men walking with heads leaning close together for privacy. The old monk's younger companion brought up the rear, along with a guard who closed the doors once they were all inside.

The existing conversation evaporated as all eyes focused upon Decius Jaduran. The Patriarch made even Setarcos seem youthful by comparison, and he nodded in thanks to Maricela as she pulled out his chair at the head of the table, and helped him settle into it. The old cleric sighed as he adjusted his robe.

"Well?" Dar finally said, impatient.

Jaduran shifted his head to look at Dar, then turned back to the rest of those gathered at the table. "Commander Octavius."

The head of Camar's city watch addressed them. "Word of the theft has been kept quiet. We've spoken to everyone who was present at the vault, and the rest of the temple staff that knows about the alarm. As far as the public knows, the memorial ceremony was cut short due to the Patriarch's weariness."

"That will not last," Sukat Koth interjected. "Too many people were there. At best, you are only delaying the inevitable."

"What about the thieves?" Kiron asked.

Jaduran made a small gesture to Maricela, and the priestess spoke up, saying, "We... ah, I was able to use a *speak with the dead* spell to ask Naela... questions, about the men who did this. There were two of them, both men, posing as priests. They knew... they knew enough about the temple and its procedures to fool her."

"What about the guards?" Dar asked. "I would have thought your men would have been more alert."

Again Jaduran deferred to his assistant. "These men possessed considerable magic," the priestess said. "The vault has two layers of defense, one magical, and one physical. Both were bypassed by the invaders."

"Were either of them undead?" Dar asked suddenly. The question raised a stir around the table, but Maricela replied even before Jaduran could prompt her.

“That is... impossible, general. No undead creature could get within fifty yards of the cathedral without triggering multiple alarms and wards, let alone the vaults. No, that cannot be.”

Jaduran nodded in confirmation. “I have contacted the Father, using both *divination* and *commune* spells. Talen Karedes and his followers were not involved with this attack.”

“What about Zafir Navev?”

Jaduran shook his head. “Even if the warlock could have transported himself through the wards into the cathedral, the alarms that Maricela mentioned would have discharged the moment he materialized within its walls.”

“So what have you learned, Patriarch?” Sukat Koth asked.

The priest paused a moment, as if gathering strength to speak. “I have confirmed Setarcos’s story. The leader of the cult that his order defeated in Drusia was... involved in the theft.”

Dar weighed him with a hard look. “You know more, priest.”

Jaduran nodded. “You were right, general. The theft of the dagger-key was not incidental. The objective of the cult is Rappan Athuk, and more specifically, the lost well where the Ravager is imprisoned.”

There was a moment of silence. “The ravager? What is that?” Kiron asked.

“You don’t want to know, kid,” Dar said, his jaw clenched.

Chapter 391

DECISIONS

Outside of the old ducal palace, the city of Camar was relatively quiet as the deepening night settled upon the city. Inside the massive stone walls of that complex, however, a buzz of activity persisted despite the late hour. Small parties of armed men rushed about, dodging the servants who moved with no less haste as they attended to various errands. In the armories weapons and armor were being attended to by teams of smiths, while veteran guardsmen carefully checked and rechecked supply packs. Messengers departed on fast horses, heading for locations within the sleeping city, or toward the permanent camp a mile from the city’s walls where the First Legion was headquartered.

In their modest but comfortable suite of rooms in the wing of the palace complex reserved for guests, Corath Dar and Allera Hialar were likewise still awake. Both looked tired, but they had only just returned from the meeting with the leaders of Camar, and there was a lot to be done before they could seek the comfort of sleep.

Dar drew out a heavy leather satchel from their luggage, grunting as he lifted it onto the hutch at the foot of their bed. It clanked with the sound of metal as he laid it down. "I don't know why I even brought this," he said. "Instinct, I guess." He ran his hand over the flap, but paused as his fingers reached the clasp. "I don't even remember the last time I wore it."

Allera looked up from where she was going through her own bag of healing supplies. "Six years ago, Harvestide. The hydra."

Dar nodded. "Yeah, I remember that." He looked wistful for a moment, but then he snorted and released the satchel, striding back and forth across the room as if he was trying to work off some extra energy. "I guess I'm going to need a new sword. I could go to the armory, I suppose... or maybe Alzoun might have something useful."

Allera did not respond, but her mouth twisted slightly; she did not like the priest of Dagos, and his new position of relative "respectability" in Camar did little to ameliorate that.

Dar picked up on that without having to look at her. "Yeah, maybe you're right. But if we're going after a bunch of fucking cultists, I will need something more than this," he said, picking up his scabbarded knife from where it rested next to the heavy pack.

"Maricela told me that Jaduran wants to see you in the morning, before you depart. Perhaps he can help with that."

Dar grunted. "She's young, very young, that priestess." At Allera's raised eyebrow, he grinned and added, "That's not what I meant. You're more than enough woman for any man, angel."

The healer shot him a wry look. "Maricela's the most powerful priest of the Father currently serving in the capital, save Jaduran himself. As far as I know, she's the only one other than the Patriarch and myself who are capable of raising the dead, although I wonder about Alzoun." At Dar's look of surprise, she continued, "There's something between her and that knight, Kiron."

Dar nodded. "Yeah, I picked up on that as well. I'd rather we didn't have to bring either of them, but Koth and Octavius both agree that the boy's the best that Darius has. And there isn't exactly a crop of veterans from the legions or the Watch that are clamoring to go to Rappan Athuk. Most of those who were smart took their pensions after the Demon War and got as far the hell away from Camar as they could."

Allera put down her bag and came over to him. "We can't do it alone."

He took her in his arms. "Yeah, I know. Damn it, angel, when did we get so old?"

She smiled up at him. "It just sort of creeps up on you." She elbowed him slightly in the gut. "And besides, speak for yourself, old man."

She started to pull away, but he held her. "Maybe I'll show you just what this old man can do."

Her smile deepened, but then she shook her head. "I... I need to spend some time in meditation tonight. I thought I'd go to the grove at Camarellia."

"In the middle of the night?"

"There is too much dead stone here, too much fear, and anxiety, bred deep into the foundations of this place itself. I need to be in a place where I can feel the energies of the land and the pulse of its lifebeat."

She pulled away from him again, and this time he let her go. She walked across the room. "I have a feeling that we are going to need every bit of power that I can channel, on this mission," she said. "I haven't used... I haven't drawn as much as I did, since that last time..."

"I know, angel. I understand."

She took up her cloak. "You should get some sleep..."

He snorted again. "Like hell. You'll get your privacy, but if you think I'm going to let you out of my sight, then you've taken one too many shots to the head over the years."

She started to protest, but he spoke over her. "Look, these guys are bad news; not only did they have the resources to invade the cathedral and penetrate the vault, but they are planning on breaking into the fucking *Well*, for gods' sake. If they think they can take on Amurru..."

Allera shuddered; she had a particularly vivid memory of their last encounter with the ancient lich guardian.

"Anyway, an enemy like that is going to know that you and I are a possible danger to their plans. They have to know that we'll try to stop them; I wouldn't put it past them to try to take us out. The very least we can do is not make it too easy for them."

Allera digested his logic, found no fault with it, and nodded. "All right."

Dar buckled on his belt, adjusted the hilt of his dagger, and grabbed his own cloak. "Let's stop by the armory on the way. Let's see how much sway a retired old general still has in this place."

Chapter 392

IN THE DEEP OF THE NIGHT

The night was absolutely still; not even a hint of breeze or the chirping of a lonely cricket shattered the perfect quiet that surrounded the Temple of the Final Sacrament. In their camp outside, set amidst the wreckage of a once-massive dead tree, the living members of Ghazaran's company slept fitfully, their dreams given dark substance from their proximity to the corrupt place. Parzad kept watch from a perch atop the bole of the fallen tree, a vague shadow in the nearly perfect darkness. Navev was perhaps somewhere nearby as well, but the mummy was one with the night, and not likely to be found by casual observation.

Within the temple, Ghazaran knelt upon the cold hard stone. The cleric had removed his armor and tunic. The skin of his bare torso was taut like old parchment, and covered with ritual scars that marked his body like the sketched borders of an old, faded map. His lips moved soundlessly, and periodically he would stretch. The movements were not those of a man trying to relieve tired muscles; rather, during those episodes it seemed almost as if he was being pulled by some unseen force, and each time he would return to his previous stance, sucking in air in weary gasps.

His meditations continued for hours; midnight came and went, and then the quiet hours that comprised the darkest, deepest stretch of the night. Still there was no interruption, either from within or without, until suddenly his entire body shuddered, and his eyes burst open, staring into the dark.

He remained kneeling there for several minutes more, his body trembling with effort. Finally, he crawled over to where he had left his gear, and drew out his *everburning torch*. Careful to shield the light, so that it only cast a tiny flicker of flame from its source, the cleric went to work.

First he took out a small pouch, and used its contents to trace a pattern in the floor, using fine silver dust. The pattern, once complete, formed a summoning circle some seven feet across. He drew upon a small amount of his power to invest potency into the circle, closing it.

That task complete, the cleric began to incant. The spell he cast was similar to the one he had used the day before, when he had called the nycaloth Zuur'ka to his service.

But this spell was far more potent, and each syllable built a reserve of energy that grew to the point where it could almost be felt in the air.

Above the circle, a flickering distortion became visible in the air.

And then, without fanfare, it was done. The distortion was gone, replaced by a newcomer that stood within the circle.

The new arrival looked human at first glance, but was a bit too lean, his proportions a bit too... off. He resembled one of the *aelfinn*, the race that humans called "elves", but his skin was a dusky gray, and his eyes were vertical slits, with cat-like pupils that shone golden in the faint light from the cleric's torch.

The elf looked down at the silver perimeter of the summoning circle, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. "You seek into insult me, human?"

Ghazaran rose, with some difficulty, and bowed. "No, Lord Zhunxa. I was merely being cautious." He stepped forward and smudged the perimeter of the circle with his boot. At once, the elf stepped forward, flexing the muscles of his arms and back.

"In this place, you shall call me Ozmad. Just Ozmad, you understand?"

Ghazaran nodded slightly; he made the gesture seem a grand bow. "As you command, great lord."

The elf rubbed his arms, as if restoring circulation. "I was beginning to doubt whether your brain would ever be able to grasp the higher mysteries," he said. "Current status."

The cleric seemed unaffected by the elf's harsh comment, and immediately reported, "We are in the Temple of the Final Sacrament, a few leagues from the main entrance to Rappan Athuk. We have recovered the third key. Duke Aerim has been restored to life and has been persuaded to join us, although he is reluctant. Our enemies are aware of our activities, in a broad sense, but no counterattack has materialized as of yet."

The elf raised one eyebrow at the last statement. "The Camarians are of no concern; their hierarchy is muddled and divided. By the time that they are able to respond, it will be too late."

Ghazaran nodded but did not offer further comment.

"However, there is need for haste. There are others working against us; an agent of the Eye was approaching my citadel as you initiated your calling."

"The Eye? Will they be able to follow you here?"

Ozmad looked at the cleric with a desultory expression. “The agents of the Mind’s Eye are far more effective than your feeble human organizations on this Prime. That is why I do not intend to give them the opportunity to intervene. Once we are within the prison, their ability to interrupt our activities becomes almost nil.”

“Very well, lord. It will take a short time to prepare our forces. With your permission...”

The elf waved a hand in dismissal. As the cleric departed, he walked over to the open arch where Aerim had stood pondering the night not so many hours before. However, unlike the resurrected knight, the elf’s expression was one of eager anticipation, his lips twisting into a smile that promised grim things to come.

Chapter 393

A NEW SWORD

Dar was slightly out of breath as he approached the top of the stairs. While he was still in pretty good shape, despite the encroaching hand of age upon his frame, he wasn’t used to wearing forty pounds of metal, and it showed.

Still, he nodded in greeting to the clerics in the small nook at the top of the stairs. Maricela was there, looking quite different than she had the other times Dar had seen her. The young priestess was clad in a breastplate of shining mithral sized to her lithe figure, and a flanged mace as long as her arm was slung across her back like a broadsword. Behind her stood two tall, muscled, and probably teenaged young men who flanked a small wooden chair with handles attached to its legs. A torch, probably magical, glowed brightly over the door at the top of the stairs, reflecting bright spots off of Dar’s armor upon the walls.

“His Holiness is expecting you,” Maricela said, pulling open the door and stepping aside to give him room.

Dar entered; the door closed soundlessly behind him.

The private office of the Patriarch of Camar was appointed with functional but good quality furnishings that were a bit subdued; Decius Jaduran lacked the sense of opulence of his predecessor. There was a bit of dust visible on the shelves along the far wall, and there was a slightly stale scent in the air, both testifying to the infrequent use to which the room had been put of late.

Jaduran was standing at one of the windows that offered a spectacular view of Camar, and the curving bay to the east. Down in the city it had still been night, but up here one

could see the brightening of the horizon out over the ocean, as dawn crept steadily nearer.

The most powerful cleric of the Shining Father in Camar turned as he entered. “Sorry to make you trudge all the way up here. I wanted to get a look at the dawn. I don’t get up here very often, all those steps, you know.” The cleric made his way over to his desk, and clasped a slender hand to the back of the tall chair there. There was a bundle of the desk, a long wrap of pale leather bound with cords of cloth-of-gold.

“We are nearly ready downstairs,” Dar said.

“Yes. Yes.” The cleric ran his other hand across the surface of his desk. He looked up. “I see you have a new sword.”

Dar shrugged, and the hilt jutting up over his right shoulder jerked a bit. “Octavius had an extra blade in his armory. No fancy spells on it, but sharp enough, I suppose.”

“Perhaps that is all you should ask of a sword. Still, I have spent some time working on... this.” The cleric unbound the cords on the bundle, and unwrapped the leather to reveal a longsword, lying there bare.

Dar could not fully suppress a gasp of surprise.

The pommel, hilt, and crossguard were plain enough, blocky and functional, the hilt wrapped in black leather and elongated to suit a two-handed fighting style. But the blade... the blade was *alive*, or it seemed to be, glimmering with streams of silver, gold, and blue that traveled up and down its length as the lights of the room played upon its surface. As he looked closer, Dar saw that there were striations within the steel, distinct channels of blue running through bands of lighter and darker steel. It made the weapon look flawed at first glance, but as he stared at it he realized that there was a pattern beneath the surface, a fundamental sense of order that he could somehow feel resounding within his very bones.

He looked down and realized that he’d reached out and touched the blade without conscious thought. He looked up at Jaduran with an astonished expression.

“Yes. There is a part of *Valor* in it, and some of *Beatus Incendia* as well. I had the remnants you brought back reforged, along with some... older... materials that we had in the Vault. I thank the Father that I had gotten into the habit of keeping it up here, instead of down in the Vault. I haven’t worked on it for years, but it’s been waiting here. Waiting for you, General Dar.”

“What is its name?”

“It is *Sanctus Justicia*, the old cleric said. “Or more simply, *Justice*.”

Dar took up the sword. It felt right, and he could feel the thrum of magical power pass through him.

“Exceptional,” he said.

“Thank you. It had been a good twenty years since I’d enchanted a blade, but I’d like to think that the Father worked through me, on this one.”

“What are its properties?”

“It is axiomatic, as was *Valor*. But you will also find that *Justice* does not suffer easily the existence of undead.”

Dar nodded.

The cleric uncinched the belt of white leather that encircled his waist. Dar raised an eyebrow, but the cleric said, “This is a *belt of health*, which provides a potent boost to one’s constitution. I know that you already have a magical belt, but Allera could...” He trailed off as he removed the belt, and sagged forward against the desk. Dar hurried over to catch him before he fell, but the cleric shooed him away, clutching at the back of his chair for support.

“I... I am all right. I did not realize how much I had come to rely upon it...”

“Maybe you’d better keep it, Patriarch.”

“No. Allera will have greater need of it. It will be her strength that will carry you forward on this mission. Hers... and yours.”

“All right.” Dar accepted the belt, slinging it over his shoulder.

“If you would please get Maricela, let her know that I am ready. We should not keep the others waiting.”

Chapter 394

DEPARTURE

By the time that Dar, Maricela, and Jaduran exited the cathedral through the back door into the rectory courtyard, the glow on the eastern horizon had brightened enough to see those gathered there, waiting. Even so, the guards set around the perimeter of the courtyard remained vague shadows, and the buildings of the city beyond were even more indistinct, angular black shapes rising out of the lingering morning fog.

There were a few muted greetings that died quickly. Those gathered knew their roles, and they had a fairly good idea of what lie ahead for them. They were professionals, all of them, diverse in backgrounds and experience, but united by common cause.

Setarcos was not going with them, but the old monk was speaking quietly to his disciple, the iron Selaht. The younger monk accepted something from his elder, and bowed respectfully before coming over to join the rest of those gathered in front of the cathedral.

Kiron Tonneth was resplendent in full plate armor, polished to a brilliant shine even in the muted light. His greatsword, a weapon of holy power, was slung across his back along with an unstrung longbow, and he wore the sigil of the Dragon Knights of Camar boldly on both his surcoat and his cloak, the dragon seeming almost alive as it rippled with his movements. He was flanked by a pair of knights who were both older than he was, but were more conservatively clad in breastplates of blacksteel and plain gray cloaks. Aldos carried a wickedly curving glaive as his primary weapon, while Petronia's expression was as cold as the blade of the heavy waraxe she carried.

Octavius was speaking to the veteran guardsmen who would make up the balance of their squad. Primus, Secundus, and Tertius looked almost identical in their heavy kit, with suits of chainmail topped by halfhelms with protruding noseguards. They bore the classic Camarian features, with strong jaws, pale skin, and eyes colored like mountain pools. They looked calm, joking quietly among themselves, but someone as experienced as Dar could see that the behavior was forced. Their leader was a centurion named Qatarn, who looked as though he might have been sculpted as the archetype of the warrior ideal; he overtopped Dar by a good six inches, and his biceps bulged with corded muscle as he checked the buckles and straps of his soldiers' kit. For all his physical presence he had a reputation as a cool, decisive leader, and his only replies were curt nods as he absorbed his commander's instructions.

The last member of their company was a scout loaned to them from the First Legion. Zethas was an olive-skinned Eremite who seemed ill-at-ease on his feet; like many of the men of Camar's westernmost province he seemed built to ride. There was a nervous energy to the man, but his eyes missed nothing as they shifted back and forth around the courtyard.

A temple guard ran up, bearing an assortment of leather scabbards hastily gathered from the armory. Dar picked out one that fit his new sword, and slid it into the sheath, testing the draw a few times to ensure that it would not stick. Allera came up to him as he finished. "Everyone is ready," she said. Jaduran was speaking with the others that would accompany them on this mission, but Dar did not need to listen; he had heard it all before.

He looked over their company one more time. "We could really use a wizard."

Allera followed his gaze over them. “The Guild doesn’t have anyone left even remotely as strong as Zosimos or Letellia, let alone Honoratius. Jalla has talent, but she...”

“She doesn’t have the gut for this kind of thing,” Dar finished for her.

“She gave us a few names, but Jaduran agreed that having someone who’s barely more than an apprentice join the team would be more of a hindrance than a benefit to the mission. Octavius’s men, at least, have all seen action, and they are all volunteers to boot.”

“Yeah, the people we had at Alderford were all veterans as well. And Southwatch. And Janaris, and Trajaran, and Highbluff.”

She did not flinch from his gaze. “What can we do? If we fail, a lot of people are going to die.”

He did not respond immediately. Finally, he said, “Jaduran wanted you to have this, it boosts your stamina.” He offered her the belt, and she accepted it, adjusting it to fit around her waist. When she was done, she began, “Corath, I...”

But when she looked up, she saw that he’d already gone to join the others.

The twelve who would travel south to Rappan Athuk gathered closer together around the Patriarch. The old cleric leaned on a young priest; Maricela had already joined the company. She and Kiron shared a glance that said much, but no one spoke, until Jaduran addressed them one last time.

“Follow Dar and Allera; they know the way. Captain Nonius will be expecting you; I sent him another *sending* earlier this morning. Trust in your training, and in each other, and in the Light. Camar and its people rely upon you, as it relied upon its heroes in the past.”

“Stay close, and stay alert,” Dar said to the others. “This means of travel can be disorienting, so stay focused, watch your sector, and remember the signals. It will be a good six hours to Rappan Athuk, so if you have to take a piss, better do it now.”

They waited as Jaduran summoned his magic, casting three *wind walk* spells. As the magic took hold of them, clusters of the men and women gathered in the courtyard dissolved into insubstantial forms of pale mist, almost invisible in the morning fog. Dar and Allera were among the last group, along with Selaht and Zethas. As Jaduran finished his final spell. Dar reached out and took Allera’s hand. She clung to his as the magic took hold, and their bodies became indistinct. Dar did not linger, launching himself into the sky like a catapult stone. The others rose after him, forming a ragged line that quickly extended out toward the south.

Toward Rappan Athuk, where the Dungeon of Graves waited for them.

Chapter 395

BACK AGAIN

It was around noon, but the cloud cover that blanketed the sky was so dense that the sun was completely lost behind a shroud of gray. The column of *wind walkers* that streaked in low over the hills was almost invisible, flickers that came and went in a speed faster than the swiftest horse, outpacing even the occasional bird that dared the unpleasant sky this day.

The leader suddenly banked and dove, the others lagging behind as they adjusted. By the time that they had caught him, Corath Dar had already reached the ground, and was taking on solid form.

The look on the fighter's face was grim.

“Damn it, I hate it when I’m right.”

Dar stood in the midst of what looked to have been a small camp. All that was left now was a wreckage of torn fabric that might have been tents, and some broken gear scattered around in a wide radius.

And bodies. There were a lot of bodies, horses and men alike, slaughtered in grim fashion. Many of them were too badly damaged for clear identification, but Dar's experienced eyes saw a holy symbol of Soleus around a neck that glistened red with blood, and the insignia on another dead man's chest that identified him as Captain Nonius, the leader of this patrol. All told, there were maybe two dozen bodies here, and Dar could make out a few others in the distance, enough to suggest that if Nonius's entire force hadn't been exterminated in this attack, it had been damn near close to it.

The others had landed and were materializing around him. Dar was already striding forward, his boots crunching on the weathered rocks beneath his feet. The soil here, throughout all of the hill country, was sparse and poor, and little more than weeds, tangled brush, and tired, stunted trees grew in the area. And as Dar walked forward, even the weeds petered out, leaving only dead earth, marked by the occasional bit of material too white to be stone.

Only Kiron and Selaht followed him as he left the camp. Behind him the others were checking the bodies, hoping against the slight chance that someone might have survived the attack. Qatarn was giving orders, setting up a perimeter. Dar didn't bother with any of that; he trusted his people to do what needed to be done.

He needed to see for himself.

It didn't take long; Nonius had set up his camp almost on the edge of the dell.

The valley seemed smaller, now. Once a gaping wound in the earth, now it was a shallow bowl, its low point maybe thirty or forty feet below its edge. Dar had not been here since that last operation, when a thousand men and half again as many animals had worked for two weeks to seal the entrance to Rappan Athuk away from the world of men. Nature and the years had worked to conceal the evidence of their work, but Dar could still recognize the hills they had cut into to get the stone and earth that they had used to fill in the valley, thousands and thousands of tons of it.

They had left no marker, no memorial. And indeed, there was nothing here to suggest that this place was in any way special. Nothing but the absence of any growing thing within the dell, and the memories that came unbidden as he looked down into it.

Well, that, and the fresh hole excavated in the bottom of the depression.

Kiron said something, but Dar ignored him, walking straight down toward the site of the dig. What had once been a steep, treacherous slope before was now just a gentle descent, and it only took a few minutes to reach the site.

Piles of earth and stone were scattered haphazardly about. Whoever had done this had been preoccupied with speed rather than order. The hole itself was considerable, and slanted at an angle; it had to be, to enable whoever or whatever had dug it to remove the dirt and stone as it was uncovered. A big job.

And Jaduran had been in contact with Nonius *just that morning...*

Selaht picked up a piece of stone the size of a melon, and looked it over. He showed it to Kiron, turning it so that the knight could clearly see the edge where it had been roughly broken off of a larger formation. "This was done by a creature of great size and strength."

The knight nodded. Behind him, the others were coming into the dell. One look at Allera's face was enough to tell the tale of what they'd found in their search for survivors in the camp.

Placing his feet carefully, Dar leaned over into the excavated shaft. The poor light was enough to show that it went down thirty, forty, fifty feet. He could just make out the vague form at its bottom, but he didn't need to see it clearly; he already knew where they were.

He turned to Kiron. "Get the ropes—"

He was interrupted by a flare in the sky above, a brief explosion of light accompanied by a rumbling hiss like that of a distant rockslide. Twelve heads came up, and witnessed the appearance of a *tear* in the sky, an opening that remained open just long enough to disgorge an intruder.

The figure looked human, or at least it had the form of a man; it was clad in heavy robes that swathed any details of its identity, swirling around it as it hovered in the air nearly a hundred feet above the ground. The robes were blue, trimmed with a lacing pattern in black and white that formed odd geometric designs as they traveled across their owner's body. The newcomer wore long boots, gloves, and a pair of belts, one encircling its waist and the torso rising over the left shoulder; they supported dozens of pouches. It carried a long staff with a hooked end that looked like it was fashioned of solid silver, and as it descended, drifting down out of the sky toward them, they could see that a mask covered its face, deep within a cowl that shrouded its head.

Oddly, the mask bore no slits or other openings; it was not clear how the newcomer could see. But it was clear that whoever or whatever it was, it knew they were there; as it flew down it was clearly coming toward them.

Weapons were readied among the Camarians, but Dar held up a hand. "Hold," he ordered, though his other hand fell to the hilt of his sword.

They watched as the robed traveler descended to a point just above them, on the far side of the hole in the ground. It did not quite touch the ground, hovering through the agency of some magic or other power.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" Dar asked.

"I have come in pursuit of a powerful being bent on mischief," the newcomer said. Its voice was thick and scratchy, but there was something oddly familiar about it that raised Dar's hackles. "It appears that it has already entered Rappan Athuk; we can lose no time if we are to have a chance to stop it."

"You still haven't answered my first question," Dar said.

In response, the traveler lifted a hand to its cowl and pulled it back, sweeping the mask off its face as it brought its hand forward. The face behind the mask was marked with an intricate, creeping tattoo that wound around her right eye, and there were obvious marks of scarring around the left side of the jaw, stretching from the mouth all the way back to the ear. But those changes were not enough to stop Dar from recognizing the newcomer at once.

"Letellia!" Allera exclaimed.

The sorceress nodded. "Allera. Dar. It is... good to see you again."

Chapter 396

OLD FRIENDS

Letellia drifted closer, but Dar noticed that she kept clear of both the hole in the ground and the reach of their weapons, coming to a stop about six feet away. She was almost eye to eye with Dar; her feet remained about six inches above the ground.

“Letellia... what happened to you?” Allera asked. The healer had started to come forward, but she had sensed the same thing Dar had, and had halted in her initial move to embrace the sorceress. The others shared an uncomfortable look; they knew that something was wrong, but they did not understand the subtext.

“Allera, there is no time,” the sorceress said, her voice thickened and deepened with more than just the usual changes of age. It sounded like the words were trapped in her throat, rattling around inside before they were able to escape. “If Ozmad is here... he’s sought out Rappan Athuk for a reason, we have to stop it.”

“I don’t know who this ‘Ozmad’ is, but we’re here to stop some murderous bastards from releasing the Ravager,” Dar said.

Letellia paled. “Gods, no...” she said, and suddenly turned, vanishing down the shaft as though she had been hurled down into it. Her robes flared about her, and then she was just... gone.

“Letellia!” Allera yelled after her, but the only response she got back was the echo of her shout.

“Secure ropes, now!” Dar yelled, but Allera interrupted him. “The *wind walk* spells are still active...”

Dar smacked his forehead. “Right, I’m an idiot.” His brow tightened, and as he concentrated, he slowly began to dissolve back into his mist form. The others imitated him, although it took time to complete the transformation, and it was almost thirty seconds before the Camarians descended into the shaft. Maricela cast a *light* spell before she transitioned, and the globe of illumination followed them down, glimmering as it passed through their misty outlines.

They reached the Well quickly. Dar had been there when it had been sealed, twelve years ago. Five clerics casting *stone shape* spells had closed the opening, and had then warded it with magical glyphs. That had stopped the intruders no more than the tons of earth and stone; the opening was sundered now, its jagged edges forming a black mouth around the deeper, older shaft beneath it. There was no sign of Letellia, so

Dar kept going, the others trailing behind. The air grew colder as they descended, and moist; droplets of moisture and slicks of lichen clung to the walls of the shaft.

He found the sorceress at the bottom. She hovered over a flat plane of dark water. She carried no light source; apparently she no longer needed it to see. As Maricela's *light* reached them, Dar could see that the water was only a few feet deep; under its surface, partially obscured by new mud, he could see the mithral hatch.

Sealed.

"Damn it," Dar said. "We're too late."

Chapter 397

DOWN THE WELL AGAIN

The companions, restored to their solid forms again, stood in water that rose up to their shins. Above them, the shaft rose high up above them, to the sundered Well, and above that, so far away that it looked almost like an illusion, they could see the glow of the open sky.

And at their feet, the mithral hatch.

"The water level is rising," Zethas said. He indicated water marks that suggested that the natural level of the pool was a good ten feet higher than where they were currently standing.

Dar ignored him. "How long, do you think?" he asked Allera.

The healer reached out and put her hand against the rough edge of the wall; water flowing down the surface flared out around her fingers. "Tough to say. Not more than an hour or two, I'd guess."

Dar looked up at Letellia. "Well? Do you have any answers?"

His voice was hard; there was still some tension there.

Letellia matched the chill in his stare. The sorceress lifted a hand, incanting mystic syllables that echoed oddly up the length of the shaft. Power in the form of a blue halo flared around her hand as she closed it into a fist, but that was nothing compared to the result of her spell.

A massive, disembodied fist appeared in the air in front of the sorceress, a copy as broad across as a wagon wheel. As Letellia drew her hand down, the *clenched fist* copied the motion, driving down toward the pool with greatly amplified speed and force. The companions drew back in alarm as the *fist* struck the pool, soaking them with surge of dark water. The water barely slowed the *fist*, which smashed into the mithral hatch, sending blasts of mud flying out in every direction. The impact was like that of a battering ram, and the ground beneath them shook with the force of it.

The hatch held, unaffected.

The water was already rushing back in, but Letellia's hand had already risen again, and at her command the *clenched fist* drove down again and again. The companions huddled near the sides of the pool, covering their faces against the constant spray of mud and water. The noise was pulsing, the echoes of the impacts layering one upon the other until it felt like they were standing inside a bell being struck. Dar yelled something, but it was lost in the din, and Letellia did not let up, ordering her simulacra to continue its assault.

But the spell did finally come to an end, and the surface of the pool again became flat, the ripples of movement caused by the impacts only slowly easing into nothing.

The hatch remained closed, apparently unharmed by the display.

"What the fuck was that?" Dar yelled, thrashing forward through the water back to the edge of the hatch.

"That was my best effort to force an entry," Letellia replied. "That having failed, I welcome your plan."

Dar's expression darkened further, but Allera stepped in between them. "It serves no purpose to argue; the hatch obviously cannot be forced. Letellia, what about your *dimension door* spell? Can you transport us in groups beyond the hatch?"

The sorceress shook her head. "You may not remember from our last visit, but the special stone that surrounds the vault is impervious to all forms of magical transportation. It is well and truly sealed from the outside world."

"Are there other ways in, besides this hatch?" Kiron asked. "Maybe we can wait here, ambush them when they come out."

"By then, it'll be too late, kid," Dar said. "The hatch didn't stop the spawn from getting out, and I seriously doubt it'll hinder the big Ravager in the slightest." Kiron opened his mouth to add something, but Dar continued over him. "Trust me; we barely stopped the spawn even with Honoratius and Talen on our side; I don't know what the big one's like, but from what Allera told us of its prison, I don't expect we'll have a chance."

“So how do we get inside?” Maricela asked. Mud now streaked her breastplate and vestments, but the blazing flame from the head of the mace she carried shone brightly in her eyes.

Dar and Allera shared a look; there were no answers there. “I don’t know,” the fighter finally said, staring down at the bright mithral gleaming under the surface of the water at their feet.

Chapter 398

BLOOD AND LOOT

“Did you hear that?” Jasek asked.

Ghazaran called a halt, but not, Jasek noticed, before glancing over at his whatever-the-fuck-he-was, Ozmad. The elf—or was it giant?—seemed disinterested in what the rest of them were doing most of the time, but his apparent nonchalance did not fool the thief in the slightest. While he wasn’t sure just *what* Ozmad was, it had quickly become clear that he was far more than just another *planar ally*.

Thus far, Ozmad had not contributed a great deal to their effort here, other than digging the shaft that had given them access to the Well. That had been surprising, and impressive. Jasek had heard of items like the one that the creature had used, but the reality of seeing it in action had been something else entirely. Since then Ozmad had been a mostly silent observer of their progress, but it was clear in the way that Ghazaran deferred to him that the balance of power within their little group had shifted subtly.

Now Ghazaran was looking at him. “It sounded like a pounding, distant, very faint. From back the way we came.”

Now that they had all stopped moving, everyone strained to listen, but the complex was silent. “Perhaps you are jumping at shadows, thief,” the Seer suggested. “You forget that we closed the hatch behind us, and the only keys are in our possession.”

But Ghazaran made a curt motion, and Falah and Parzad broke off from the group, and headed back the way they had come.

Jasek bit back a sharp retort. They were all on edge, and it wasn’t just because of the alien nature of this place, or the fierce resistance they had faced since they had reached the bottom of the Well, and broached the hatch that had led into the complex.

Getting that far had been relatively trivial. They had arrived at Rappan Athuk just before dawn, to find a strong Camarian patrol encamped there. The Camarian force had included almost two dozen soldiers, accompanied by both a mage and a cleric. They had been alert, expecting trouble, but it hadn't saved them.

Concealed by the predawn murk, and the heavy morning fog that cloaked the hills, the *wind walking* company had drifted almost to the edge of the camp, and materialized undetected amongst a nearby cluster of boulders. Jasek had been late to arrive; Ghazaran did not have enough power to transform all of them with his spell, and the thief had been unable to keep up using the power of his winged cloak. Ozmad had likewise been able to fly under his own power. Jasek remembered feeling relieved when he'd realized that he was able to fly somewhat faster than the elf. While Ghazaran's latest *ally* had made no hostile overtures toward the rest of them, there was something frightening in the creature's eyes when it looked at you, as though it could peel away the shrouds over your eyes and stare upon the naked surface of the soul.

By the time that Jasek and Ozmad had finally reached the camp, it was already over. The enemy mage had only managed a few pitiful *magic missiles* before Navev had obliterated him with a single *eldritch blast*. The cleric had not even gotten off a spell; hit with a *silence* by Ghazaran, she had been cut down by Aerim in the initial charge.

And what a rush that had been. Jasek had arrived in time to see the former Bloodwraith take down a pair of warriors in a blur of steel and blood. He'd left a trail behind him, a path through the enemy camp that had been littered with bodies. A few of the Camarians had broken and tried to flee, but they did not get very far. Ozmad had flown into the camp holding a struggling Camarian by the ankle, the elf handling the larger human aloft with little apparent effort. The interrogation had taken only a few minutes; Jasek missed most of it, ordered to scout the area by Ghazaran. But it appeared that his initial guess had been right; the Camarians had been expecting them.

Well, the Camarians had been expecting trouble. He doubted that they really had been expecting anything like *them*.

They had not lingered long, as the mists were already beginning to thin under the glow of the sun rising over the hills to the east. Ghazaran had led them out into the dell, or rather, the rock pit that the Camarians had dumped on top of Rappan Athuk. Jasek had considered this a serious obstacle, but that was before Ozmad transformed himself into a giant. At a command, his mattock had grown into a huge tool that had dislodged boulders and great clods of earth with obviously magical efficiency. What would have taken a team of a hundred men days had taken Ozmad just a few hours to complete.

Breaching the seals on the Well had been trivial; the Camarians' *glyphs of warding* had barely fazed Ozmad. Getting down the shaft had likewise been easy, as Ghazaran's *wind walk* spell had still had hours left on it. The cleric used another spell to move aside the water at the bottom of the shaft, leaving just a few minutes of scraping mud to reveal

the hatch. Right where Ghazaran had said it would be. Jasek remembered thinking that it had been easy, too easy, thus far.

In hindsight, he'd been right.

The thief's attention was drawn back to the present as the others turned back to the last pair of *prismatic spheres*. They gathered around the last pair, brilliant globes set into recessed alcoves opposite each other, a narrow space between to allow a sure-footed individual safe passage beyond. His companions all looked back at him, waiting with clear expectation in their faces.

Jasek sighed and stepped forward. Despite the potential for reward, despite the fact that this had already worked seven times, he still felt nervous using *Dweomerblight* against these shields. The Seer had provided a quite thorough explanation of the *spheres* when they'd first entered this gallery, including a detailed description of what the different colors within the protective bubble of light did to creatures that tried to force their way through. His sword had never failed him, but there was still something unpleasant about the thought of challenging something with the potential to kill you several times over.

But with the scrutiny of the others—and in particular, the greedy eyes of the Seer—full upon him, Jasek pressed forward. As he had seven times before already, he swept *Dweomerblight* up into the nearer *sphere*, starting low and then slicing the blade upward slowly. As it had against the ward in the Camarian vault, the sword tore through the shifting rainbow of bright colors, slicing an opening in much the same way that an inserted object opened a gap in the smooth surface of a waterfall. The tear started to close almost at once, resealing itself from the bottom, but it remained open long enough for Jasek to step through, into the protected area within.

When it closed, he was well and truly alone; an eerie feeling, with scintillating colored death spiraling just a pace away. The space within the globe was empty save for a low pedestal of white stone, like the others had been. This one supported a ceramic bowl, with about a dozen small objects inside.

None of the other pedestals had been trapped, but Jasek was careful.

He returned through the *sphere* a minute later, by the same means by which he'd entered. The bowl and its contents were tucked under his left arm. The Seer was there almost at once; no doubt he was being magically scanned by the wizard's *arcane sight* to verify that he hadn't picked up any new auras.

Jasek held out the bowl; the objects rattled around within. The Seer reached in and picked one up, holding it up to catch the almost blinding light coming off of the *prismatic sphere*. He frowned.

It was an acorn.

The Seer snorted, and tossed the acorn back into the bowl. Jasek glanced at Ghazaran. "I take it you have no objection to my taking these?"

"Be my guest. But we must press on. We have already delayed too long in this place."

Jasek dumped the acorns into his pouch, leaving the bowl against the wall next to the *sphere*. The eight *prismatic spheres* that they'd penetrated thus far, counting this one, had yielded a variety of odd treasures, and while the acorns looked unremarkable, he wasn't going to assume that they were without value. He and the Seer had already disputed over whether the items they'd found fit under the definition of "ancient lore" and "monetary wealth" per the terms of their respective contracts. Jasek had ended up with a golden necklace that had supported a number of mithral plaques etched with strange designs. The item had radiated a very potent magic, but the thief had lived too long to experiment with unfamiliar artifacts. The necklace sat secure in his pouch.

A number of the *spheres* had guarded empty pedestals. The Seer had claimed an odd bronze sphere encircled with bands of various metals, attached to the sphere in such a way that they could rotate concurrently around it. Other than the fact that it too radiated a strong magical aura, they had no idea what that device did either. Jasek had also turned up a more straightforward boon, a scimitar fashioned of brilliant, red-tinged steel. Like the other items, this one had radiated potent magic. Ghazaran had offered the weapon to Aerim, but the Duke had demurred, so the scimitar went to Falah, who carried it alongside his khopesh.

"There is one more *sphere*," the Seer said, indicating the globe on the far side of the hall.

"Very well. Be swift." Ghazaran turned away, and Jasek could see that Falah and Parzad were returning, the chaotic light of the *spheres* farther down the hall making their forms indistinct until they were close enough to greet without shouting. Jasek headed forward to confront the last *sphere*, but he moved with deliberation, and kept one ear cocked to pick up the scouts' report.

"The energy barrier has reformed, and the damage to the chamber above has been completely repaired," Parzad said.

"Were there any signs of pursuit?"

"No. But I... sensed something, a faint psionic disturbance. I believe that someone or something is working against us here."

Jasek thought that was blatantly obvious; he didn't need Parzad's psychic talents to see that. From the moment they'd entered the vault they'd come under heavy attack. The vacuum trap had been clever, and it was really only luck that he hadn't been sucked through the hatch along with Falah, Ghazaran, Navev, and Aerim when they'd used the

three dagger-keys. The mud golems waiting in the chamber below had been... challenging, but once they'd recovered from the nasty fall and the chaotic aftermath of the trap they'd dispatched the creatures without too much difficulty. The dread wraiths had been more troublesome, and would have likely killed several of them had it not been for an extremely timely *repulsion* spell from Ghazaran.

Since then they'd had something of a reprieve, but Jasek thought of the missing treasures inside the *spheres*, and wondered what artifacts would be used against them by whatever guardians protected this place.

Once he was inside the last *sphere*, the thief moved quickly. The final treasure gave him pause for a moment, but finally he chuckled to himself and claimed it. He was faster out this time, and was standing back in front of the others no more than thirty seconds after he'd stepped inside.

The Seer snorted. "Flowers?" Jasek's prize was a ceramic vase, full of a bouquet of brightly colored flowers.

"Magical?" Ghazaran asked.

The Seer was already focusing his *arcane sight*. "Bah. The aura is weak, likely a permanent preservation transmutation. A waste of time." He grabbed the vase from the thief, and hurled it against the wall. The noise of it shattering seemed unusually loud in the vast emptiness of the hall.

"That vase may have been a thousand years old," Aerim said, "A relic of a vanished civilization." The Duke had said little during their looting of the gallery; most of the time he seemed a thousand miles away, staring at things beyond the scope of this place. The only time that Jasek had sensed him really present was during battle; then Aerim had moved in a blur of deadly efficiency, accounting for one of the mud golems and at least four wraiths.

The Seer muttered something inaudible in response to the Duke's comment. It was clear that the wizard appeared to be disappointed in their findings thus far. Jasek thought that was stupid; the big loot would be at the end of the complex, probably hidden in the same prison that held the Ravager. The necklace had been encouraging, and after Aerim's last comment, he went back and picked up the ceramic bowl that had held the acorns, adding that to his haul.

"We must continue," Ghazaran was saying. "Jasek, if you would?"

The rest of their company followed in the thief's wake as he continued past the last *spheres*—walking very carefully through the gap between them—to the end of the hall. There a broad arch, a full ten feet high, opened onto a round chamber. The walls were perfectly smooth and featureless. The only appointment of note was a strand of golden fiber that dangled from a tiny opening in the ceiling. A small golden object hung from it,

at about chest height. It was difficult to tell what it was from across the room, but it looked like a key.

Jasek lingered in the archway, studying the chamber intently. He dropped into a crouch, and ran a finger along the stones where the threshold met the chamber.

“Well?” the Seer asked. “There are no hostile magics here, nothing beyond the background auras of this place. Why do we delay?”

Jasek looked back at him. “I am wary of keys that appear with a lock.” He stood. “There is something wrong about the construction of this room. I believe that the floor is designed to collapse, or shift in some manner. I have my suspicions about the ceiling as well.”

Ghazaran glanced back at Ozmad, and again Jasek got the impression that more was said behind that brief shared gaze. The cleric looked over at his minions. “Parzad, if you would.”

The wilder stepped forward into the room. Nothing dramatic happened, and the Seer shot a sneer at Jasek, but the thief’s attention was focused entirely upon Parzad. He reached the golden cord, and reached out to take the dangling object in one hand.

He’d barely touched it when the ceiling came apart, as a massive metal frame, covering the entirety of the chamber and likely weighing several tons, crashed down onto the floor.

Chapter 399

IMPASSE

They tried other options, but most of them could tell that they were just going through the motions.

Qatarn’s soldiers went to work on the hatch with prybars, but it was pretty obvious that they weren’t going to have any luck where Letellia’s magic smashing hand had failed. Allera tried a *break enchantment* spell, likewise without any effect. By the time they had run through even those options the water level had climbed to their waists, and was slowly but steadily rising.

“I can empower most of us to walk on the surface of the water,” Maricela said.

Dar let out a frustrated sigh. “No, save it,” he said. “We’re not going to accomplish anything here.” He looked up at the shaft, at the distant point of light high above. “We’d better...”

“Wait,” Allera interrupted. “There’s one more thing we can try. Maricela, you said before we left that you had a *sending* spell prepared?”

The priestess nodded. “Yes, to report back to the Patriarch. I’d intended to wait until we got to the hatch, but now...”

“Do you have to know the person that you are trying to contact?”

“Well, generally, yes, although you can attempt to contact someone with whom you are familiar, but have not met personally. Such attempts are often difficult and there is no way to know...”

“If there’s a chance, we have to take it. Here is what I want you to do...”

* * * * *

The spell took about ten minutes to cast, although it seemed much longer for those shivering in the water. By the time she finished her incantation, the water was up to the chests of the soldiers, and the others crouched miserably in crevices around the perimeter of the shaft, clutching to slick and slime-encrusted protrusions of rock to keep them from sliding back down into the pool.

Maricela had told them that she could send a brief message of up to twenty-five words, and receive a reply of similar length if the *sending* reached its intended destination. But none of them expected the reply they got.

“Why have you returned?” Maricela asked, her voice subtly different than it had been before.

“Mari?” Kiron asked, turning toward her in concern. He started to reach for her, but Selaht interrupted him with a hand on his arm. The knight started to shrug free, but Dar stepped in between them and the priestess.

“Why have you come?” she repeated.

“Amurru?” Allera asked. The priestess did not reply, but there was something strange in her eyes, an odd look that Dar had seen once before, in the eyes of his wife. “We have come in pursuit of evil men.”

“You have failed to protect the keys,” Maricela said, her voice hollow and empty, but her words an indictment. “You have let this danger enter within the vault.”

“Look,” Dar interjected. “We know they want to release the Ravager. Just let us—”

“They will not succeed. The Ravager must never be freed.”

“Yeah, how’s that going for you? These assholes aren’t your average bad guys. If there were dead, you wouldn’t be talking to us right now, so I’m guessing they’re making pretty good progress against your traps and guardians. If there’s a chance that they can succeed, let us in, and we’ll take care of them.”

“We have a stake in this as well, Amurru,” Allera added. “If the Ravager is released, it is our people, our cities that will be destroyed. Please... we only want to help. Once these enemies are defeated, you have our word that we will withdraw. You can keep the keys, so that no others can intrude upon your sanctuary.”

There was a long silence.

“Please, Amurru. You know my heart. You know I speak the truth. Look into the heart of the woman through which you speak. We only want to protect the prison.”

The guardian stared at them through her borrowed eyes.

Finally, a noise started, a grinding sound that rumbled through the ground beneath their feet.

Chapter 400

THE ELEVATOR

The metal frame struck the floor with a cacophonous noise, shaking the walls around them as the force of the impact was distributed outward from the floor. The Seer and Falah had fallen to the ground; the falling frame had passed along the very edge of the archway threshold, and if they’d been leaning forward just a bit, both would have likely been struck by it, with obvious unpleasant consequences.

Parzad turned to look at the others waiting in the archway. His body was insubstantial, but as he stepped up, onto the grate that was now embedded in the floor, his *shed body* power faded, and he took on solidity again.

“A useful trait,” Duke Aerim commented. He had barely flinched when the grate had plummeted through the ceiling, and he offered a hand to help Falah back to his feet.

There was a loud grinding noise, and the floor started to sink. Not just the floor; the ceiling was descending as well, and within a few seconds they could see it start to cover the archway from above.

“It is an elevator!” Ghazaran exclaimed. “Quickly, into the chamber, before the entry is closed!”

“And if the goal is to seal us within?” the Seer shot back, but he followed the others as they obeyed the cleric’s command. Ozmad was the last to make it, and by then he had to duck to avoid the descending ceiling. He hopped down onto the grate, already five feet below its original level, and slowly building up speed as it continued to drop. The grate provided uncertain footing, but the spaces between the thick bars were not wide enough for them to stand on the stone floor, so they had to make do.

The elevator continued to descend, grinding on unseen gears. The mechanism seemed to reach a terminal velocity; at least it did not appear that it would reach a speed that would prove hazardous upon a sudden stop. Striations on the walls allowed them to judge their approximate speed; it looked as though it took about a minute to cover roughly twenty feet.

“How deep does this go?” the Seer asked, after about five minutes had passed.

“It looks like we are about to find out,” Ghazaran said. The cleric had given up trying to stand on the vibrating grate, and had sat down. He now pointed at the wall, where another archway had become visible. The others readied themselves as the opening expanded, revealing another passageway beyond.

“How far down, do you think?” the cleric asked Jasek.

“About a hundred and ten, hundred and twenty feet,” the thief said, moving lightly over the grate to the tunnel mouth. The elevator came to a halt with a grinding thud; once it had stopped, Ghazaran got up, and walked over to the arch, with Ozmad as his shadow behind him. Jasek saw that the new floor lined up with that inside the elevator, with less than a finger’s thickness separating the two. “Impressive construction,” he said, checking the archway for traps before proceeding.

“It would appear that this was a one-way trip,” the Seer said. “Even if the elevator is designed to reset, I see no mechanism for lifting the grate back up into the ceiling.”

“If necessary, we will follow the Ravager out,” Ghazaran said. The cleric had recovered some of his confidence, it seemed, and he did not stop to check with his companion before gesturing Jasek forward. They fell into their usual formation, with Jasek scouting in the lead, and Navev shuffling along in the rear.

The passage ran straight ahead for about forty feet, then opened onto an irregular chamber through yet another broad stone arch. This room, unlike most of the others

through which they had traveled, had been done up in a remarkable decoration. The walls were covered with reliefs that depicted a forest scene, supplemented by a series of stone carvings in the shape of tall, ancient oaks arranged around the perimeter of the chamber. Those statues rose up to brush the tiled ceiling some thirty feet above. Another of the now-familiar mithral vault doors, recessed into a deep alcove in the center of the opposite wall some forty feet away, appeared to be the only means of egress.

“Well now, if this isn’t a trap, I don’t know what is,” Jasek said.

Navev lifted a hand and blasted one of the stone trees flanking the entry. Stone chips went flying as the *eldritch blast* tore across the trunk of the statue, but nothing else happened.

“All right. Cautious, but quickly,” Ghazaran said. The cleric nodded at Jasek, who took the lead. His sword was a black gleam in his hand, and he scanned the floor before every step, alert for hidden triggers or other traps.

He had reached the middle of the room when the response finally came.

The noise was surprisingly gentle, more like the whistling of wind through a forest than the cracking of breaking stone that he’d expected. Jasek shifted into a defensive stance and fell back as six of the stone trees came alive, their thick branches sweeping down like long arms. Their carved roots became legs that lifted the huge trunks off the floor.

Once animated, the stone guardians stepped forward to attack.

Chapter 401

TREADING NEW GROUND

It was not especially cold, but Allera could not suppress a shiver.

They had come by express invitation, this time, but the vault still felt like an alien and unwelcome place. The colored striations in the walls flickered oddly in the light of their torches, and the noises they made were either muted by the pressing weight of all that strange rock, or caught by some strange acoustic quirk and echoed back at them, distorted until they sounded like the wail of some tormented soul. As a result, there had not been much conversation, beyond the information that they needed as they pressed on deeper into the complex.

Thus far, they had had a relatively easy time of it. The sudden opening of the vault hatch had nearly caught them off guard, but Dar had quickly ordered their companions

to take hold of something solid. When the hatch had opened, and the gathered water had sloughed down through the opening, Secundus had slipped and would have fallen through, but for a quick action by Kiron. The young knight had ended up as mud-slicked and soaked through as the rest of them, by the time they all made it down to the floor of the cavern below, but he looked no less determined for it. They all knew what was at stake.

They all had an idea, but only Allera truly grasped the magnitude of what awaited them. Only she had confronted the Ravager, and even within its prison she had gotten a glimpse of its reality. Only a glimpse, but she still had nightmares about that which Amurru had shown her.

She shivered again. Maricela saw, and said, “Are you all right, healer?”

Allera nodded. “I’m fine.” She turned her attention back to the chamber that Dar and the others were searching. Behind them, the stone along the left wall was knitting slowly back together, and Allera knew that as soon as it was fully restored, the hissing barrier of *brilliant energy* would come back to life. This was as far as they had gotten into the complex, last time. A pair of illusory demiliches had emerged from the walls and attacked them, knocking most of her companions into a catatonic state. Amurru had appeared to her for the first time, then. The memory of that encounter was still not a pleasant one.

This time, there had been no illusions to threaten them. Thus far they had encountered no guardians at all, although they had found some dark smears in the room of steel pillars. The smears could have been anything, but Allera remembered their desperate battle against dread wraiths in that room on their first visit here. Apparently the wraiths, if they had in fact been restored, had not been enough to stop the raiders that they tracked.

Their had been no other traces of their quarry, but there was only one way that they could have gone. The open vault doors indicated the way, but the trail had come to an apparent dead-end in this room. The only distinctive feature of the room—other than the energy field—was a set of three stone biers set into deep niches in the walls ahead and to either side. The remains of the long-dead warriors that had rested on those biers lay on the floor amidst a tumble of ancient armor and weapons, as if hastily searched and then discarded.

Zethas, the scout, spoke up from the far alcove. “I think there’s something under this stone block,” he said to the others. “And there’s some scrapes here that suggest it was moved recently.” Qatarn gestured, and the three guardsmen hastened to assist the wiry Elemite.

There was a flare of blue light behind them, as the walls completed their self-repair and the energy barrier erupted back into light. “Our escape is cut off,” Selaht commented. Allera glanced at the monk; their newest ally was still an enigmatic figure, who spoke

little. Her eyes were continually drawn to the intricate tattoos that covered his hands and wrists, the patterns vanishing up into the sleeves of his loose robe. When he clenched his fists, the drawings moved and twisted almost like actual flames.

Maricela was staring back at the barrier. “How long has this all been here?” she asked. “Thousands of years?”

“This whole place is one big trap,” Allera found herself saying. “To keep the Ravager in.”

Dar and Kiron had joined the guardsmen, and together they were able to move the heavy stone slab. As the stone ground forward, it revealed a shaft that descended into another chamber below. An odd radiance of shifting colors could be seen glinting off the walls, but they could not discern its source from their current location.

Dar shone his torch on the walls of the shaft; there were no footholds or rungs to facilitate descent. He nodded at Zethras, who was already digging out his ropes, knotted at regular intervals to allow for an easier climb. The heavy stone slab made for a convenient anchor, and he looped the rope around it, tossing both ends down into the shaft.

Letellia rose up off the ground, and drifted through the air toward the shaft. For a moment it looked like she intended to go on ahead of them, as she had before, but Dar stood and moved to block her. “Scouts first,” he said.

Allera came forward to join them. She looked at Letellia, hovering beside the opening. For a moment, she thought that the sorceress would defy her husband, and push forward despite him. But finally, Letellia nodded incrementally, and drifted back a few paces.

While Dar and the others attended to the shaft, the healer followed the sorceress. For a moment, there was an awkward silence between them; Allera had many questions, but it was obvious that Letellia was in no mood to discuss what had happened to her. “Once we rest, I can heal the injury done to your throat,” she finally said.

“Do not bother. It is part of what I am, now.”

“Why... why didn’t you contact us earlier, Letellia? We tried repeatedly to find you... after, but even *discern location* did not reveal your location. We had feared you dead.”

“I was dead. My rebirth was... unpleasant, but it allowed me to find a new purpose.” She hesitated, and an almost human empathy passed across her face. “I do not blame you, Allera, none of you, for what happened to me. I made the choice that brought me to my fate.”

Allera's response was interrupted by Dar. "We're going down," he said. Most of the soldiers had already descended on the ropes, and Aldos was helping Petronia as the knight lowered herself into the shaft. Allera looked back up at Letellia, but the sorceress was already moving, drifting quickly over the shaft before dropping like a stone, narrowly avoiding the descending knight.

"Are you all right?" Dar asked her, as she came over to him. He glanced at the mouth of the shaft. "Did she reveal anything more?"

"She has been through a lot. If we had more time, I would try to help her..."

Dar nodded in understanding. "After." He handed one of the ropes to Allera, and took the other end himself. The two of them, the last to descend, dropped into the shaft, moving down quickly hand-over-hand to where the others waited below.

The shaft deposited them into a wide hall that extended to their left and right. The walls of the hall glimmered with reflected light in a range of colors, making them seem almost alive.

"What is that?" Allera asked, stepping away from the rope to look down the hall to the right. There was a glow shining there, almost blinding, a mélange of colors that was too bright to look at directly.

"Trouble," Dar said. Gesturing to Kiron to watch their backs, he and Allera headed down the hall to the right.

"Look at the walls," Allera said. They had been etched, faintly, with letters in a runic script, forming words no more than a few inches high. They covered the walls in long marches, from a few feet off the floor almost to the vaulted ceiling above.

"They are names," Letellia said. "This place is a memorial of a civilization long dead." She drifted forward above them, her feet a good three feet off the ground.

"How do you know that?" Dar growled.

"I can hear their silent cries," Letellia replied, her voice distant, her eyes fixed on some place far ahead.

Several of the soldiers shared grim looks, but no one spoke.

Zethas and Selaht, scouting ahead, were approaching the end of the passage ahead. Allera could now distinguish the source of the bright lights as a pair of scintillating globes. Before them, the scout and monk were just vague black outlines. Zethas approached one of the spheres with caution, a hand raised to shelter his eyes, the other probing ahead of him like a blind man seeking the edge of a wall.

“Do not touch them, on your lives,” Letellia’s voice sounded clearly. The Elemite drew back his hand as if he’d been scalded. She looked down at Dar. “They are *prismatic spheres*, sovereign barriers against all but the most powerful of magics. Even a casual contact with the colors is almost certain death.”

“I wonder what they are hiding?” Kiron asked.

“It’s not our concern,” Dar said. “I doubt that our friends are inside them, so we keep going.” He gestured to Zethas, who turned away from the globe and pressed on. Allera could see that the corridor turned to the left and continued; she hadn’t noticed earlier with the light from the *spheres* blinding her.

“Stay close, nobody touch anything,” Qatarn cautioned his men. From the looks on the faces of the guardsmen, the warning was unnecessary.

The passage continued for another twenty paces, the scrawl of names continuing around them, until they encountered another pair of alcoves, another two *spheres*. There was a narrow space between them, and they could see an archway ahead that might have been an exit, so after a brief hesitation Dar gestured them forward. Each of them passed warily through the gap, keeping their hands and weapons pressed close against their bodies, as far from the shifting lights as possible. But the static barriers did not stir from their places, and within a few moments they were all through safely.

“A dead end,” Kiron said, looking at the arch. Once beyond the *prismatic spheres* they could see that it was blocked from top to bottom by a massive slab of stone.

“Zethas, check it out,” Dar said. The scout started forward, but before he reached the arch there was a flicker in the air, a shimmering as though a bit of dust had gotten frozen in the light. The scout drew back suddenly, and several of the others lifted weapons, but the flicker was gone as swiftly as it had come. But for the barest instant, the outline of *something* had been there.

“This place is cursed,” Tertius said, holding his sword in white-fingered hands.

“When I want your opinion, soldier, I will ask for it,” Qatarn barked. “You are a man of the Watch, not a soothsayer or priest.” But even though the centurion’s voice was level, all of them could feel the unease that radiated from this place like heat from a fire.

Zethas looked back at Dar, who nodded back toward the arch. Swallowing, the Elemite started forward again. But he’d barely made it three steps when a grinding noise began, a sound like the world below them coming alive.

“It’s moving,” Kiron said, pointing with his sword at the stone within the arch. They could all see it, the slab slowly moving upward. It revealed only more stone below, but kept rising. Maricela moved to his side, her own eyes wide with expectation.

“The way is being opened for us,” Letellia said.

“Or it’s a trap,” Aldos said.

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Dar said. He faced the slab, which kept rising, slowly but continuously. “All we can do now is wait.”

And so they waited.

Chapter 402

THE STONE FOREST

Jasek fell back as the six stone trees, three on each side of the room, came to life and started forward.

But his companions had been ready for something like this, and were quick to act. The Seer invoked a *wall of force*, cutting off the entire left side of the chamber, and trapping three of the trees behind it. The stone trees battered at the barrier, but their efforts had no effect.

The three trees on the right moved forward ponderously, their long limbs giving them a considerable reach. Navev hit one of them with an *eldritch blast*, but the streaking black energies merely vanished into the thing, absorbed without inflicting damage. “Golems, resistant to magic,” Parzad suggested.

But the Seer frowned. “I do not believe so,” he said. He hurled a *lightning bolt* that clipped two of the trees in its arc, but like Navev’s attack, his magic merely flashed harmlessly around their trunks, doing no damage. “Elementals of some sort, I believe. But their spell resistance is considerable, and possibly beyond my ability to penetrate.”

Ozmad said nothing, and merely made a gesture that invoked an *unholy aura* around himself. The black radiance spread outward, its protection coalescing around each of the elf’s companions, offering protection.

That assistance proved very timely as Jasek leapt back, the closest tree slamming its long branches down into the ground where he’d been standing. Falah rushed forward to engage the creatures and keep them away from the casters, unslinging his khopesh as he ran. But he was still a good five paces away from the trunk of the nearest when a branch snapped down into his side, knocking him flying across the room. He hit the wall next to the archway hard enough to drive the air from his lungs, and as he fell to his feet he slumped against the stone, gasping for breath.

Aerim surged into battle in the Razhuri fighter's wake. Another branch tore down at him, but the veteran warrior shifted subtly to the left, surging forward as the jagged ends of the stone limbs raked the air behind him. But before he could draw close enough to its trunk to attack, the second tree moved to block him. A pair of huge branches came down, smashing into him from each side like a pair of sledges. Stone branches jabbed into his armored torso like a dozen spearheads, while a forest of limbs formed a dense web around him, holding him fast while the branches continued to grind away at him.

Jasek, still evading, glanced over his shoulder to see the last tree bearing down on him. He dove forward as it swept a huge branch down toward him. While his maneuver allowed him to slip under the thick bole of the branch, he was snagged by the thinner trailing branches that jutted from the limb like a hundred trailing fingers. The tree scooped him off the ground like a shovel, and before he could attempt to slip free it twisted and hurled him like a rock across the room. He narrowly missed being brained by the capstone in the entry arch, but went a good fifteen feet further down the tunnel beyond before he finally hit the ground. The thief remained aware enough to roll with the impact, but he was almost back to the elevator before he finally came to a halt, battered and dazed from the rough treatment.

Ghazaran looked at Parzad. "Tend to Falah," the cleric said. He drew out his mace-like rod as he turned back to face the seemingly invincible tree-golems, and invoked a *righteous might* spell. His stature grew to twice his original size, but the trees still loomed over him by a considerable margin. Stepping forward, he engaged the tree that had struck down Falah, delivering a powerful blow to its trunk that hit hard enough to crack the stone. The tree, however, countered with a series of titanic impacts that knocked the cleric roughly to the side. Ghazaran fell against the slick *wall of force*, recovering in time to turn into another series of powerful attacks.

In the meantime, the tree that had hurled Jasek away had made its way forward to engage the spellcasters in the second rank. The Seer completed a *haste* spell, bolstering his allies, but then was quick to use his enhanced speed to beat a hasty retreat. He fell back into the entryway, where he vanished under the cover of an *invisibility* spell. Ozmad held his ground, and seemed almost careless of the danger, an unperturbed look on his face as he looked up at the massive thing bearing down on him. The tree lifted several of its massive branches as it came within reach of the elf, and with its next "step" it drove them down, clearly intending to reduce its foe to a bloody smear on the chamber floor.

But in the sparest instant before the blow landed, Ozmad summoned his magical power to his defense. A globe of transparent blue energy appeared around him, and the stone tree's assault was rebuffed as solidly as if it had been a real tree's branches hitting an iron wall. The tree hit the *resilient sphere* a second time, and then a third, but within the globe Ozmad merely stood unaffected, casting more buffing spells. The golem could not harm him within the protection of the barrier, but as long as it was up, neither could he do anything to affect the course of the battle outside.

With a roar and a cracking of stone, Duke Aerim exploded through the crushing branches holding him. The tree lashed him with a long protruding root as he stepped up to the massive trunk, but he took the hit across his armored torso without flinching. The fighter, armed with strength augmented beyond that of any common men, smote the tree solidly across the bole with his greatsword. The ancient weapon, forged by dwarven smiths in a time far beyond living memory, rang as it smashed into the thing's solid substance, but the steel held, and the stone gave way. A crack opened in its trunk, and a hissing noise issued from within. Aerim recovered his swing and brought the sword up to follow up with another strike.

But as the tree reared back, and the crack Aerim had opened grew wider, a gout of pustulent ochre substance issued from the wound, spraying over the face and body of the armored warrior. Wisps of smoke rose from his golden robe and mithral armor as the caustic substance burned him, and the man's scream echoed from within the depths of his helmet, filling the chamber with a discordant noise of burning agony.

Chapter 403

TIMBER

Ghazaran and his companions were finding themselves hard-pressed by the stone treants, which thus far had dished out considerable damage without being seriously harmed in return. The sheer size of the guardians made them difficult to engage, for they could toss their diminutive foes about with little effort, as Falah and Jasek had already learned.

But the invaders of the vault had their own surprises in store. Ghazaran held his ground against his foe, his *righteous might* spell giving him the size and strength needed to go toe-to-toe against one of the stone trees. The thing still had a considerable advantage, but the spell protected him against the worst of its blows, allowing him to stay engaged long enough to buy time for his allies to regain the initiative.

Thus far, the allies weren't having much luck with that.

Aerim's foe had taken a powerful blow, but that in turn only raised a new danger, the deadly acidic properties of the things' "blood". The warrior, more cautious now, leapt over a twisting root and delivered another strike that opened another crack in the tree's knotted trunk. This time the Duke was able to avoid the gusher of caustic fluid, but he could not avoid being struck by another sweeping branch, which smacked hard into his left hip, lifting him into the air and sending him flying across the room toward the far door. He smashed into a carving of creeping vines, shattering them in a crash of shattered fragments and stone dust.

He fell forward and landed on his feet, winded but intact.

The last of the stone trees continued to batter at Ozmad's *resilient sphere*, but it was clear that the elf was not coming out from his shelter until good and ready. The elf continued to layer magical wards upon himself, and his form began to shift and blur within the confines of his barrier as a *displacement* spell took effect.

The tree failed to detect Zafir Navev until the mummy was standing directly beside it. The warlock lifted a withered claw, and blasted the tree with another *eldritch blast*.

This time, the magic pierced the thing's spell resistance, and a long swath of dark stone exploded from its side as the black energies tore into it. The injury seemed like little more than a scratch, though, the blackened stretch covering only a tiny fraction of the thing's huge trunk. The impact had unbalanced it, however, and as another branch came crashing down on the elf's *sphere* it leaned far over, crashing down onto another limb as it struggled to right itself. Navev hit it again, but its attacks had only gained a brief advantage, as the tree swept out another branch and snagged the mummy up, lifting it into the air in a crushing grip. The warlock struggled, but it did not have anything close to the strength needed to break free.

Falah returned to the fray, bolstered by a healing potion and a jolt of energizing psionic power from Parzad. The fighter rushed back into the melee, coming to the aid of Ghazaran. Fortunately his charge coincided with Navev's initial attack on the tree between him and his goal, so he was able to avoid an attack of opportunity as he circled that melee and closed on the second foe. That tree crashed against the *wall of force* as the cleric continued to press it, but for each hit that the priest delivered with his rod, the tree was doubling that with powerful slams from its branches. Ghazaran was clearly starting to show the effects of that pounding, and his own counters were coming slower with each hit he absorbed.

His situation looked about to get a whole lot worse, as the tree that had tossed aside Aerim lumbered forward to join in the beating. Falah saw it coming, and moved to block its advance, but the human fighter looked almost pathetic as he lifted his khopesh against the oncoming monstrosity. It swatted him almost casually, but this time the Razhuri rolled with the hit, coming up next to one of the massive roots. He struck it hard, his blade cutting a gash that spilled a jet of that ugly yellow ichor. Falah fell back, trying to avoid that toxic plume, but the distraction cost him another hit that knocked him onto his back. He slid a stop ten feet from where he'd been struck, coughing from the vapors that he'd inhaled.

Unfortunately for him, that was still within reach of the creature.

Navev continued to lash out at the tree even as the stone monster tightened its grip, firing an *eldritch blast* at the branch that held it. The treant was not impressed, and hurled its prisoner in a hard arc upward. Navev slammed first against the vaulted ceiling, then the far wall, and finally caromed off the floor, spinning to a stop not far from

where he'd launched his initial attack at the thing some fifteen seconds before. The tree lurched forward, lifting its cumbersome frame on its roots, obviously intending to simply crush the undead warlock beneath its bulk.

Its advance took it past Ozmad, who had been forgotten in the face of a more immediate threat. But as it continued past the elf, his *resilient sphere* flickered and vanished. The elf drew out the little mattock from his belt, and began to change. He grew rapidly, his body swelling as his stature expanded, until he was eight feet, ten, twelve, and still he grew. The tree, sensing perhaps that something was amiss, took a backwards swipe at him with a branch, but the blow passed harmlessly through him, fooled by his *displacement* spell. His weapon, its true nature revealed now as a *mattock of the titans*, grew with him, and if anything transformed faster, until the elf—now possessed of the size and form of a cloud giant—had to hold it in two hands.

The tree aborted its trampling of Navev and turned to face Ozmad. The now-huge arcanist went to work with its weapon, smashing it into the tree, which was now about the same size as he. The mattock delivered crushing blows, and the tree shook with the force of the impacts. It tried to counter, but Ozmad's earlier delay stood him in good stead now, as his wards either deflected or absorbed most of its strikes. Even the one solid hit that the tree landed barely seemed to faze him; his *bear's endurance* and *greater heroism* spells had enhanced his physical stamina until he was almost unstoppable.

The same could not be said for Ghazaran, who fell to one knee as his foe delivered a series of punishing blows to his head and body. The cleric, his face bloodied from a hit that had crushed against the front of his helmet, staggered to his feet in time to take a solid shot across the front of his body that drove him back against the *wall of force*. The three treants behind the barrier continued to pound against it, waiting for the spell to dissipate.

Ghazaran's foe surged forward to finish him off, but before it could resume its assault, the priest cast a *heal* spell. He gave ground before its rush, moving slowly back along the *wall*, protecting his flank and preempting a full attack from the stone tree. But the room was not that big, even considering the portion cut off by the Seer's barrier, and there was not much room for him to retreat.

Falah struggled to get up as his tree bore down on him, but the heel of his boot slipped on a patch of yellow ichor, and he fell. The tree surged forward to trample him, but in the instant before he would have been crushed, the fighter shot out of its path, sliding to the side along the floor, coming to a stop a good fifteen feet away, just out of its reach. The respite was temporary, as the tree shifted to follow, but it found itself confronted once again by Aerim, who had recovered enough to return to the fray. The Duke seemed intent on another charge, but as the tree started to attack he aborted his rush, and fell into a defensive stance. The branch was still long enough to strike him, but it was a glancing blow instead of another devastating impact, and as it drew back the limb

the warrior hacked at it with his blade, severing a six-foot length of protruding stone that fell to the ground, hissing as more of the yellow gunk was released into the air.

The tree, of course, did not feel pain, but Aerim was able to draw it after him as it broke off from Falah to engage him. He did not have much room to retreat either, but he led it slowly back toward the mithral door recessed in the far wall, dodging sweeping branches and occasionally lunging out with his sword to deliver a minor hit.

Black tendrils of power flared in the front of the room, where Navev was continuing to support Ozmad in laying waste to the first of the stone treants. The giant was wielding the *mattock of the titans* with great efficiency against the thing, delivering crushing blows that oozed rather than jetted the poisonous yellow substance from its body. He hewed at it with a calm precision, almost more like a lumberjack than a fighter in his singleminded focus upon the task. The tree continued to attack him, but his wards held, and even the hits that pierced his defenses failed to do enough damage to seriously hurt him.

The same could not be said for the tree, and the abuse finally became too much for it as Ozmad delivered a final vicious blow that snapped its trunk with a loud and terrible crack. The tree crumbled as it fell to the ground, disgorging a plume of noxious spray that spread out across the floor around its remains.

Ozmad paid it no heed, striding back across the room toward where a desperate battle was still being raged.

The Seer's voice, magically enhanced to fill the chamber, echoed near the entrance. "The *wall of force* will not last much longer! We must withdraw!"

"No!" Ghazaran shouted, grunting as a sweeping branch clipped his shoulder. "Forward, to the far door! We must make it through!" He ducked under another branch and pushed forward, coming around the tree and putting it between him and the *wall of force*. The maneuver cost him, as the tree slashed its branches across his face and chest. Red sprayed out from under his helmet; one of the long stone juts had sliced open his jaw to the bone.

Aerim had avoided serious damage as he'd run the treant in a zig-zagging course back across the room, but he was quickly running out of room to maneuver as the alcove and its door drew nearer behind him. But as he drew within ten paces of the recessed door, the mithral portal groaned and swung ponderously open. The Duke, alerted by the noise, shifted slightly, wary of another threat, but the only thing there was a black shadow, which resolved into Jasek as the thief drew back his cowl and shouted a warning to the others.

"Quick, everyone through!"

Aerim turned to hold off the treant on his back, but as he pivoted he saw that he was already too late. He managed to get his sword up, but the blow that crashed into him was far stronger than his parry, and as something hard slammed into the front of his helmet he felt only a vague sensation of flying, and then... nothing.

Chapter 404

NARROW ESCAPES

Jasek started to shout a warning, but he was too late, as Aerim went down under the stone treant's attack. He vacillated in the doorway for an instant, just an instant, as the creature lumbered forward to crush the fallen Duke. Jasek was no fighter; he'd seen more than enough of the battle as he'd snuck around to the mithral door to know that he would barely slow the thing.

He sensed rather than saw someone approaching fast from his left; he stepped aside in time to avoid the Seer, who darted through the doorway, still shrouded by *invisibility*. He saw Parzad, approaching along the wall to his left. Falah was still over by Ghazaran, behind the nearer of the treants, still a good fifteen paces distant. They were still fighting the other creature, giving ground, and Jasek could see that they risked being caught between the two monsters, which would open them up to a world of hurt.

But the equalizer in that equation was already moving to intercept. Ozmad had come around Ghazaran's foe, and was rushing with giant-sized strides toward the second. But Jasek could tell with a glance that there was no way that the giant would reach the treant before it crushed Aerim.

"So long, chum," the thief said, as the treant lifted the mass of roots that would put an end to the short return of Duke Aerim.

And then, as Jasek's eyes widened in surprise, the prone form of the Duke shot forward toward him, sliding along the floor as if dragged by an invisible team of horses. He came to a stop almost at the thief's feet, and Jasek was even more surprised to see that the man was already coming around, groaning as he shook his head and tried to get up. Jasek helped him, uncomfortably aware of the huge figure that was looming very tall indeed over them as it approached.

"Get through the door!" he hissed, all but dragging the semi-conscious fighter after him. A huge branch lifted and came sweeping down toward them; reflexively Jasek dropped his companion and leapt straight back. A sudden pain greeted him as his shoulder clipped the metal threshold of the doorway, and he fell into an awkward crouch in the narrow opening. He heard a grunting noise and realized that the Seer was trying to push the door shut.

The swinging branch passed close enough to fill the gap with a gust of wind. Aerim fell down, but the crushing impact Jasek had expected never reached him. As he watched the treant was flung roughly back and to the side, and as it left the focus of his gaze he could see the long shaft of Ozmad's *mattock of the titans* hooked under one of its branches. The giant stepped into position in front of the door, blood streaking his face where one of the branches had slashed him.

"Get through the door!" he boomed. Jasek saw Ghazaran, already starting to shrink back to his normal size, charging toward him, Falah a shadow behind him. There was no sign of Zafir Navev, but Jasek did not spare a moment's concern for the mummy; the creature clearly had no problems with surviving. What he focused on was getting out of the way. Aerim had gotten up again, moving under his own power despite what was obviously a number of grievous wounds. Parzad passed through the slowly closing gap of the doorway just a step behind the Duke. Ghazaran and Falah ran between Ozmad's legs and were through just a few heartbeats behind him.

"Quickly, we must seal the door!" the Seer exclaimed, still pushing at the heavy mithral portal. It was more physical exertion than Jasek had ever seen the mage engage in during the entirety of their admittedly brief time together. Parzad was standing nearby, neither helping nor hindering, and now Jasek saw Navev as well, hovering silently in the shadows a short distance away.

"We have to wait for Ozmad!" Ghazaran returned. Jasek could no longer see out into the chamber, but he could hear the loud crash of blows as the giant held off both of the remaining treants. The thief wasn't sure who to give the edge to in that confrontation, but having felt the strength of the massive trees first hand, he wasn't going to put a bet on his companion, either.

But the door was almost completely shut, now, and there was no way that the elf would make it through, let alone in his giant-sized form. Ghazaran nodded to Falah, who started toward the door, but even as he reached for it, a sudden gust of yellow smoke drifted through the closing crack. Falah drew back reflexively as more of the stuff poured around the edges of the door, coalescing on the near side of the mithral slab.

"Now, close it!" Ghazaran said, pushing forward. Jasek joined them, and the door slammed shut with a loud click, a noise that was echoed several times as whatever mechanism operated the portal sealed it in place. As the chaos of their escape faded, they all became aware of a whirring sound that filled the corridor.

The gaseous cloud was already forming back into Ozmad, who had once again returned to his elf-form. He seemed little the worse for his experience, although it was difficult to see him clearly with the still-shifting auras of his *displacement* and *unholy aura* spells lingering about his body.

Ghazaran looked at Jasek. "Well done, getting the door open."

The thief nodded. "These round doors seem to have been intended to keep something in, rather than to keep the likes of us out."

The Seer had become visible again; either his spell had lapsed, or he had dismissed it. "And if there had been another vacuum beyond?" he asked.

"Then we would have been sucked into that," Jasek said, drawing his *everburning torch* out from under his cloak, and lifting it to shine down the passage behind them.

They all looked in that direction, and saw the source of the whirring noise.

The corridor formed an uneven course, with deep alcoves flanking the center of the tunnel, forming nooks that alternated between the right and the left. Where those nooks intersected tall pillars jutted out into the corridor. At first, it looked as though some odd distortion surrounded those pillars, a blurring in the air around them, but as they continued to stare, they could see that the pillars were in fact *spinning*, and the noise they made came from long blades that were buried in the stone, blades that were cutting the air so fast that they formed a blur. The blades were long enough that they almost touched in the center of the corridor, forming a deadly arc of spinning steel that quite effectively barred their path forward.

Chapter 405

CONVICTION

The spinning pillars and their attached blades continued their constant whirr, blocking the passage as effectively as a solid stone wall.

Aerim removed his helmet. There was a long shard of stone, a part of one of the stone treants' branches, jutting from his neck. The vicious puncture trailed a line of bright red blood down his chest. He reached up and groped at it, yanking it out as soon as he got a decent grip. His hands were slick with blood, and more oozed out of the wound as he withdrew the shard. Ghazaran started toward him, another of his healing wands in his hands, but the Duke held him at bay with a raised hand.

As they watched, the long trail of blood... *moved*, with fat drops of the red liquid flowing back up into the deep wound. The opening in his neck seemed to drink up the blood, closing as the last of it was reabsorbed back into the Duke's body.

Aerim could not see what happened, but he could see the reaction on the faces of the others. He drew off his left glove. There was a deep cut on the back of his hand that ran from the web of flesh between his thumb and forefinger, back down almost to his

wrist. Blood was smeared around it, but as he watched, all of the crimson fluid seeped back into the slash, which closed back up, leaving his skin unmarred.

“What did you do to me?” he said, staring at the hand.

“I brought you back from an eternity of torment,” Ghazaran said simply. “But the Bloodways are still a part of you. I told you that, when I brought you back to life.”

“And this,” the Duke said, clenching his fist, “This, you call *life*?”

“This is not the time to address this,” the cleric said. “But should we complete our mission, I swear to you that I will do everything in my power to purge the taint you bear from you. And then I will grant you the other reward that I promised.”

The Duke’s stare was cold and penetrating, but he said nothing. Ghazaran did not wilt under that scrutiny, and just stood there, the two connected by an invisible line.

“Um... we’ve got bigger problems here, guys,” Jasek said. The thief had moved cautiously up almost to the very edge of the reach of the spinning blades. Their passage caused his cloak to flare up around his body, and he was very careful not to let its flapping ends anywhere near to the blurring steel tips. “There is a pattern here, but the gaps are almost imperceptible. And the pillars are interconnected, and spin in different directions; one fuck up and you get stuck in between them, and carved into pieces.”

Ghazaran broke the contact between him and Aerim, and looked at the Seer. “You can transport us across?”

The wizard’s expression was dubious. “I can take five, no more. The warlock can obviously handle himself, but that still leaves six.”

Ozmad started to say something, but Aerim was already walking forward. Ghazaran opened his mouth to shout something, but the words were lost as the Duke stepped into the reach of the spinning blades. For a moment, the knight moved in a blur that seemed to echo the passage of the deadly steel, and then he was through the first gap, darting ahead out of the reach of the first gauntlet of pillars.

The others watched, transfixed by the scene, as the Duke made his way to the second set of deadly blades. He slowed for the barest instant, studying the pattern of spinning blades, and then he was diving through, against twisting his armored body to avoid the slashing blades.

For a moment, it looked as though he had a chance to escape the deadly circuit unscathed. But even as he dove forward through the deadly gap between the second pair of pillars, steel flashed, slicing hard into his right shoulder. They could see droplets of blood flicker in the air as they caught the light. Aerim turned and avoided being

hurled back into the deadly zone betwixt the pillars, and staggered to the side, into one of the alcoves. He was drawn up short as another blade clipped his breastplate, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to knock him down. He took a step back and remained there in the nook, standing perfectly still in one of the narrow gaps between the blade arcs.

Ghazaran turned to the Seer. "Aid him."

The wizard's lips twisted into a faint sneer. "Give me one of the Tears, and I will consider it."

Ghazaran looked back at Ozmad, but the elf looked slightly amused, if anything. "It would seem that our Duke has plans of his own," he said.

Aerim crouched and darted forward again. He made his way past the third set of pillars, taking another hit, but getting past. He did not pause this time, and leapt forward into the last circuit of spinning blades.

"He's going to make it," Jasek said. But the Duke's luck had been used up. A blade clipped his shoulder, hard, and then another caught him solidly across the body, knocking him back. Aerim was flung roughly into the deadly matrix between the sets of pillars. He hung there in the air, caught within a flashing storm of blades that rained down on him from multiple directions, holding him in place as they slammed hard into his body, twisting him around in a violent circle like some hapless child's toy.

"Well, so much for the Duke," the Seer drawled.

Chapter 406

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING

At the Seer's comment, Jasek glanced back, but instead of the wizard's smirk, his eyes were drawn to the expression on Ghazaran's face. The cleric's features remained utterly cool, but there was something in his eyes, an intensity, that sent a cold chill down the thief's spine. For a moment, he thought that the cleric would go in after the Duke himself, but other than a slight clenching of his fists, he made no move.

He turned back, unable to resist watching the warrior's end. But to his surprise, Aerim was still fighting, still alive. Bloody wounds covered his upper torso, and as he watched, a blade took his left leg out from under him. That should have ended it right there, but as Jasek watched in amazement Aerim lurched forward, ducking under a sweeping blade that would have taken him in the neck, leaping off his good leg, twisting in mid-air out of the path of a second blade. Another hit him in the torso as he reached the

apogee of his leap, but he was already through, and it knocked him forward rather than back into the trap. He spun around and fell, but rolled forward, and came up into a crouch, breathing heavily.

“Take us across,” Ghazaran commanded. The five of them pressed close around the Seer, who invoked his magic, opening a *dimension door* that took them far down the passage, ahead of Aerim and well past the area of risk. Navev followed a few moments later.

Gesturing for Falah and Parzad to watch the corridor ahead—it bent around another corner to the left after a short distance further—Ghazaran turned to Aerim. He offered no aid as the Duke pulled himself to his feet. He had suffered grievous wounds, but they had already witnessed how quickly he healed.

“That was a foolish and unnecessary risk,” the cleric said. “With the resources at our disposal, we would have found a way to get across.”

Aerim fixed the cleric with his trademark hard stare. “Perhaps now we each understand the other,” he said. Grimacing slightly as he put weight on his injured leg, he walked past the priest without another word, heading down the corridor toward the bend. When he walked past the Seer, his hand suddenly shot out. His palm smacked hard into the wizard’s cheek, hard enough to knock him off his feet. The Seer fell to the ground, stunned; his *stoneskin* had protected him from injury, but the suddenness of the attack had caught him off guard.

After a second, fury replaced surprise, and he lifted his hands, beginning the somantic gestures needed for a spell.

Aerim merely looked down at him, with less emotion than if he’d been a stone he’d inadvertently dislodged. The wizard hesitated, looking at the others. No one made any move to interfere. The Seer snarled and pushed himself back to his feet, but by the time he’d turned back to the Duke, Aerim had already turned away and was walking toward the bend in the passage.

The others followed. Parzad and Falah lingered behind, waiting for their master, but they went on around the corner after a nod from Ghazaran, leaving him and the wizard alone for a moment. The Seer looked back at the cleric, and his eyes narrowed dangerously. Then he turned and followed after the rest of the group.

The cleric looked back once more at the deadly storm of spinning blades, and then turned and followed them.

The bend in the passage was followed by only a few dozen strides before it culminated in another of the mithral vault doors. Like the others they had encountered thus far, this one had a wheel-lock to operate it on this side; like the others it had been designed to prevent egress, not entry. Jasek was already scanning the door for hidden traps or

other threats; as the Seer and Ghazaran rejoined the group he nodded to Falah that he could begin to open it.

The door, like the others, took considerable effort to open, but the Razhuri fighter kept at it, twisting the wheel in a ponderous but consistent motion. When the locking mechanism finally released, the door began to swing outward, revealing a vast, dimly lit space beyond.

“By the gods,” Jasek said, the words drawn from him without conscious thought.

The chamber was larger by an order of magnitude than anything they had encountered thus far. The place was irregularly shaped, a huge cavern that stretched onward for almost two hundred feet, its far end a vague vista in the distance. The light came from everywhere and nowhere at once, a dim shimmering that suffused the very air itself. It was not enough to clearly distinguish many details, but there was one feature that caught their attention right away, and which had provoked Jasek’s curse.

It stood facing away from them, looking out into the room. The statue was massive, fifty or sixty feet tall from the bottom of its feet to the top of the sword it held outstretched above it. The depiction was of a winged man, carved with armor in an archaic style, a breastplate and greaves to cover the arms and legs, like one of the gladiators of the ancient days. Even facing away from them, they could all feel the presence of it, something in the stone that stood watching, waiting.

“A guardian,” the Seer said.

“It is not watching for us,” Ghazaran replied. As they moved forward, cautiously, their lights revealed more than the chamber’s dim glow had hidden. The walls to either side of them were carved with intricate detail, dominated with deep reliefs of armored men, warriors in stone that marched around the perimeter of the room. Those carvings seemed to extend across the length of the cavern. Most of the cavern was slightly lower than the area around the entry; the floor rose as it approached them, forming a platform of sorts upon which the huge stone angel stood sentry.

Their eyes were continuously drawn to that sentinel, dominating the room. They could all feel something from it, a sense of power in waiting, anticipating something that might happen in the next minute, or not for a thousand years. They moved forward slowly, giving its huge feet a wide berth.

It was Ozmad who finally awakened them to the danger. “The watchers stir,” the elf said. At first they all stared back up at the angel, but the huge statue had not moved. But the noise of stone grinding alerted them to what the elf had sensed, and they looked back down to see the stone warriors stepping out of the reliefs in the walls. Each stood over nine feet tall, and they shook the ground with their movements. There was a full score of them, each stepping into formation as they pulled away from the wall.

And they were fast, faster than men, the sound of their footfalls melding into a cacophony of noise that filled the chamber, building and echoing until it pounded at their senses like a hammer.

Aerim's shout sounded over that din. "FALL BACK!" he yelled, but even as they started to retreat, the charging horde swept over them.

Chapter 407

THE STONE LEGION

They came on so quickly, that the defenders barely had time to ready their weapons before the leading edge of the golem charge hit them.

Aerim was in the forefront, and he took a blow across his chest that would have toppled a normal man, even in heavy armor. But the Duke merely grunted, staggering backwards but recovering quickly. A second golem came around the first and lunged at him, but he met it with a powerful swing of his blade. The enchanted steel sang off the golem's body, and shards of stone went flying from the impact. The golem swept a fist at him, but he was already falling back, and the monster's attack hit only empty air.

More golems came up the opposite side of the platform, around the far side of the huge stone angel. Falah stepped forward to block the path of the leading foe toward Ghazaran and the other casters, but he paid for it as the creature smashed into him. The Razhuri was a tough fighter, but the golem outweighed him by a factor of ten, and he was flung roughly back, bouncing hard on the floor and rolling to a stop a good fifteen feet away. Dazed by the force of the collision, he nevertheless had kept his grip on his sword, and he immediately started to come to his feet.

The golem that had hit him kept on coming, flanked by another to each side. But before they could reach the rest of the group black tendrils erupted from the floor, twining around the legs of the stone warriors. At once the temperature plummeted. Navev's *chilling tentacles* only partially hindered the golems, their mass and strength allowing them to tear free of their clinging grasp. But even a few seconds' delay gave the companions time to fall back to the vault door.

"Duke Aerim!" Ghazaran yelled. The Duke was continuing to give ground, but now three golems were pressing him, crowding in on each other as they delivered strike after strike. Somehow, Aerim had kept both his footing and his position, subtly adjusting his path of retreat so that the golems could not surround and overwhelm him. He had delivered a second hit on the one he'd first engaged, and deep cracks covered its body, but the golem paid no heed to the damage.

The lead golem on the other side of the platform pushed through the last of the *chilling tentacles* on the edge of Navev's invocation, and moved forward to intercept the Duke. Another had made its way around Aerim, moving along the wall, and it lunged forward at the closest target, which happened to be Navev. Jasek, a few steps closer to the door, saw it coming and shouted a warning, but the undead warlock merely turned and impassively watched the two thousand pounds of stone death rushing toward it. The thief hesitated only an instant, then turned and darted toward the mouth of the passage, the round opening gleaming with the ring of bright mithral set into the surrounding stone. The Seer was already trying to pull the heavy door shut, but he was either waiting for the rest of them, or having difficulty swinging it on its massive recessed hinges.

There was a loud noise as the golem charging Navev reached his target, and brought its massive fists down. The mummy had made no move to evade, but in the last instant there had been a black flash of energy, and the golem's strike passed harmlessly through the warlock, striking the floor with enough force to open a long crack in the ancient stone. The floor was of the same odd stone as the rest of the complex, and almost at once the damage began to repair itself, the jagged opening slowly knitting back together. The golem leaned precipitously forward, passing through the image left behind by the warlock's dimensional shift, but it quickly recovered, resuming its charge forward.

They had almost all won back to the doorway, all save Aerim, who now found his route to the escape blocked by the golem that had escaped the *chilling tentacles*. He did not have time for hesitation; several golems were on his heels, and it was not clear how even he could withstand their combined assault.

Ghazaran looked at Ozmad, who had watched the entire battle with dispassionate observation, falling back to the doorway as though he were on a feastday stroll. "We need him," the cleric said.

The elf waved a hand, and a black slick formed upon the ground directly in front of the golem advancing to block Aerim. The stone warrior's foot slid out from under it, and it plummeted forward, directly toward Aerim. The Duke, seeing two thousand pounds of stone come crushing down toward him, leapt forward, diving under the falling golem. He landed on the edge of Ozmad's *grease* effect and slid forward, his heavy armor scraping on the smooth floor. He was up even before his momentum had fully eased. The golems pursuing were only a step behind him, barely delayed by having to hurdle or bypass their fallen companion. But the door, persuaded by the combined efforts of the Seer, Jasek, and Parzad, was swinging shut, and as Aerim surged forward, turning his body to slide through the narrowing gap, it slid back into its threshold like a cork being thrust into a bottle. Falah reached for the heavy wheel that would reseal it.

But before he could work the mechanism, the door shuddered, and creaked back open a few inches. Falah pulled at the wheel, but he may as well have been trying to stop an avalanche.

The door groaned alarmingly on its hinges as it swung open another half-foot. Several sets of stone fingers were visible around the edges.

“Oh, we’re fucked,” Jasek said, to nobody in particular.

Chapter 408

THE STAND

The door creaked open wider, slowly, with a noise like the scream of a thousand dying animals. The golems must have bent the door on its hinges in their initial forcing of it, but even solid mithral could not withstand their combined strength. A dozen stone hands were now visible around the periphery of the door, forcing it wider.

The companions drew back. “Now where do we go, o fearless leader?” the Seer said to Ghazaran. “Or have you forgotten the hall of spinning blades?”

Ghazaran’s expression cracked, just slightly, betraying a hint of uncharacteristic anger. As if to echo that unexpected burst of emotion, Parzad shifted into position behind the wizard. But before the cleric could respond, Aerim, still somewhat battered from the punishment he’d absorbed from the golems, stepped forward to face the door. The Duke scanned the corridor peering up at the vaulted ceiling, making a full circuit with his eyes down the walls, finally stopping at his feet. He nodded to himself. Taking up his great blade, he drew it hard across the floor in front of him. Sparks rose up as the metal deeply etched the stone. The magical rock quickly healed the damage done to it, but Aerim was no longer looking, his attention was focused upon the door.

“Here we stand,” he said, simply.

The opening in the doorway was now a good five feet across; as they watched, a golem thrust itself into the gap, using its body as a wedge to force the opening wider. The hinges protested alarmingly, and then there was a series of loud pops, like a hammer striking an anvil. The door fell open, slamming to the ground with an echoing crash.

Behind it was an awful lot of stone warriors.

“My magic will be of no use against these,” the Seer warned, from the rear of the group. Ghazaran had come forward, and he touched Aerim, healing his wounds. Falah had taken up a position at the Duke’s side, slightly behind him. He’d put away his khopesh, instead arming himself with the scimitar they’d found guarded by the *prismatic spheres* in the gallery above. He had not yet used the weapon, but the Seer had pronounced it possessed of a potent magic, and in these close quarters it was less likely to interfere with the Duke’s greatsword.

Ozmad added his own support, infusing the Duke with a *bear's endurance* spell. The elf withdrew calmly as the first of the golems surged forward into the passage. The things were so big that only one of them could fit easily into the corridor at a time, although the others pressed in behind, waiting for an opportunity to join in the fray.

Aerim merely waited behind his now-invisible line. As the golem came within reach, he fell into a defensive stance, his sword held straight up like a lance. The long blade did not so much as quiver.

The golem had reach, but even as it struck Aerim pivoted and smashed his sword across its body, striking a stylized stone greave with enough force to drive a crack through its entire arm. In turn he took a glancing blow that nearly knocked him off balance, but Falah was there to steady him. Aerim sprang forward off the fighter, driving his sword in a violent series of attacks that left massive cracks crossing the golem's frame. The construct countered with another blow that rang hard off Aerim's left shoulder, but the Duke did not yield before its assault. As it swung its other arm around to follow up he hit it again, striking its arm near the first crack, and finishing the work of destroying the limb. The golem's entire arm flew forward, bouncing off the wall and skittering to a halt at Jasek's feet. The golem did not long survive the loss; Aerim's next hit was a powerful thrust that drove into the meeting point of two of the long cracks covering its torso, and as the sword penetrated the thing it began to collapse in a rain of debris.

Even as the golem disintegrated, two more of the guardians pressed forward, crushed together in the narrow confines of the passage, seeking to overwhelm the Duke through sheer mass and inertia. Aerim just had enough time to resume his stance, and as the pair met him he drove forward, smashing his sword down into the leg of the one on his left. The other lowered both fists and thrust forward, but Falah had his flank, and while the blow from his scimitar did little in the way of damage, it diverted the golem enough to spoil its attack.

The fighters' rough breaths had started to form white plumes in front of their mouths. Behind the attacking pair, more *chilling tentacles* had emerged from the walls and floor, wrapping around the arms and legs of the golems lined up around the ruined door. The golems made no move to evade, intent upon their goal.

Aerim and Falah were forced back slowly, each step hard won by powerful blows given and absorbed. Falah's jaw was a broken mess where a glancing hit had crushed the side of his helmet against his face; blood poured down his chest, and sprayed out as he fought for breath. Aerim was absorbing even more punishment, but Gharazan and Ozmad had both come up behind him, and as he fell back, they were there to infuse him with healing power and magical defenses. Ozmad protected him with another ward, a *displacement* spell that caused his outline to shift and distort. Thus bolstered, Aerim surged back forward into the fray, ducking under a sweeping arm and laying into the more damaged golem with a series of violent blows. Even in the confined space,

confronted by two foes that greatly overpowered him in size and strength, Aerim fought like a banshee, wielding his huge sword as through it was a wooden switch. A second golem crumbled, forming a low mound of debris that spread across the width of the passage.

But the golems kept coming. They were fast, too fast, and as the companions gave ground, they tore free of Navev's *chilling tentacles* and came on. Each of the golems was covered now with a rime of frost, and bits of ice cracked off their bodies as they moved.

The rest of the companions were able to offer little aid to the fighters holding back the stone tide. Parzad had taken a glowing crystal out of his pouch, and there was a look of solid concentration on his flat features, but there was no obvious result to his efforts. The Seer remained at the rear of the group, tentative, as though debating whether to hazard the corridor of spinning blades once more. Jasek had his sword out, but he obviously knew that his skills would be of limited use should Aerim or Falah fall.

Falah was moving lethargically, his reflexes slowing in a way that went beyond mere fatigue. The golems were doing *something* to the defenders; Jasek began to show it as well, the thief sagging as he leaned against the tunnel wall. Of those in the front, only Aerim seemed unaffected, as he met the next golem in a violent exchange of sword and stone. He won that exchange, and the golem fell back into the one behind it, coming apart as cracks crawled and expanded across its body.

The Duke started to lift his sword back into his defensive stance, but the next golem in line came on too quickly, thrusting through the crumbling remains of its fellow. The litter of stone debris covering the floor did not hinder it, and clouds of dust rose up under its tread as it stepped forward and delivered a truly massive blow upon Aerim. The Duke was knocked back, and his sword clattered loudly upon the floor as it fell from his suddenly limp hands. He landed in a crouch, his left arm dangling uselessly from his side, broken, his lips twisted into a rictus.

The golem surged forward to exploit its advantage. Falah stepped into its path to stop it, but the construct caught him with a solid backhand across the front of his face. His helmet saved his brains from being splashed across the wall, but the blow launched him flying off his feet. Spinning backward, he flipped heels over head and caromed off the wall before landing face-down in a heap upon the floor.

Despite being in obvious agony, and ignoring his broken arm, Duke Aerim reached out his good hand for his sword. But before he could reach it, the golem's huge foot landed on the blade, pinning it against the floor under two thousand pounds of stone. The granite warrior loomed over him, its fists coming up to finish what it had started.

THE POUNDING

As the golem slammed its fists down toward Aerim, Ozmad stepped forward to meet it. The elf looked almost pathetic as he lifted his slender hands, but even as he moved he began to... change. His body swelled, his arms growing thicker and longer as they rose up to meet the golem's attack. His face also transformed, his delicate elven features replaced by an almost bestial, fearsome visage. His skin deepened in shade to a deep blue, and tufts of red hair erupted from his skin in dozens of places. His billowing garments became instantly tight, but the cloth expanded to cover, bulging with the bulk of huge muscles and long limbs. Finally, a pair of horns emerged from his forehead, black shafts that ended in twisting points.

The ogre mage caught the golem's wrists in his hands, absorbing the force of its attack with a mere grunt. The two stood there for a moment, locked in a battle of strength for which they were apparently closely matched. The golem still had a significant advantage in terms of weight, but Ozmad held his ground, his muscles swollen with magically-enhanced strength.

Behind him, Ghazaran drew Aerim out of the fray, while Parzad used his psionic abilities to slide the unconscious Falah back down the rubble-strewn passage. There wasn't much more space left to retreat; the bend of the corridor was only a few paces behind them, now, and the deadly stretch of spinning blades lay not far beyond that.

The stalemate between Ozmad and the golem had only lasted for a second or two, but another golem was already starting to push around them, and a third was adding its weight to the first by pushing hard against its back. Suddenly the ogre mage yielded, releasing his foe and stepping quickly back. The golem bent almost double as its fists slammed into the floor, striking just inches from Ozmad's feet; his boots had resized with him, but clearly weren't up to providing protection against that kind of blow, had it connected.

The golem, still moving with magically enhanced speed, reacted quickly, but Ozmad was faster. The ogre reached to its belt and drew out its mattock, which looked tiny in his huge fist, but almost instantaneously the weapon began to grow as well, extending until it was almost twice the size of Aerim's sword, the shaft nearly as long as that of a spear, only several times as thick. Despite the crowded quarters the ogre wielded it as effectively as the Duke had his blade, lifting the huge weapon easily and driving the hooked end down into the golem's shoulder. The blade caught like a shovel biting into earth, and a huge chunk of the creature, including its right arm, came away as he yanked down on it.

The golem was in serious shape now, but its companion took advantage to push past and attack, driving a solid punch into the ogre's flank. The blow should have punished even a foe as large and powerful as the ogre, but Ozmad merely grunted and reversed

its weapon, taking off half the golem's face with a two-handed strike. Within the confines of the corridor Ozmad could not manage the wide swings that had been so effective against the stone trees earlier, but the short, curt strikes he was unleashing seemed hardly less deadly. The one-armed golem he'd just crippled lunged forward to attack with its remaining fist, but he slammed the mattock into its side at the hip. The limb gave, and as it fell it crumbled into rubble.

The temperature in the corridor was below freezing, now; Navev's *chilling tentacles* filled the corridor from end to end, and the outer shells of the golems were starting to crack as the supernatural chill took deep hold of their bodies.

Aerim and Falah were both on their feet again, if still sorely hurt, but there was nothing for them to do but watch as Ozmad destroyed one golem after another. The ogre mage took hit after hit, but his own wards and magical protections absorbed a good deal of the attacks, and as soon as he'd stabilized Falah, Ghazaran took up position directly behind Ozmad, touching the back of one leg repeatedly with a healing wand. The stone warriors did not relent, and soon the mound of debris was the size of a low wall, clogging the passage and impeding the movement of the next ranks. But still the golems came, their skin cracking as they tore free from the *tentacles*, leaving flakes of frost and shattered bits of stone in their wake.

It was some time later, no more than minutes, certainly, although it felt like much longer to those standing in the corridor. By the time that the noise of the golems grew still, and the last crumbled into debris, they were all pale and shivering with cold, all save Ozmad, who looked like a demon with his hide covered in stone dust that was caked with blood where he'd absorbed blows hard enough to break his skin. Navev had dismissed the *tentacles*, but it still felt like the interior of a meat locker within the confines of the passage.

Ghazaran threw down his wand, its power utterly depleted. "My remaining healing resources are... limited," the cleric said.

"We need... to rest," the Seer said. His breath came out in white plumes in front of him, and he trembled as though it had been he who had held the line against the golems.

"We cannot stop," Ozmad said. The ogre mage lifted his mattock, which began at once to shrink back to its usual diminutive size. Tucked back into his belt, it looked almost like a child's toy rather than a weapon.

Jasek stepped forward and looked up at the ogre mage. He said quietly, "Not that I want to agree with... him," he said, indicating the Seer with a jut of his elbow, "but we've all taken a beating, especially you and the Duke there. I can't feel my arms and legs, and that's not going to help when it comes time when you need my skills. We need to take a breather, find someplace to hole up for a while, catch our breath."

The ogre shook his head. "The Duke and myself will recover quickly from our wounds. As for the rest of you, Ghazaran will do what he can once we are free of this corridor, but we cannot linger long. Look for yourself."

He gestured toward the mounds of rubble, and as they collectively turned to look they could all see what he meant. The heaps of shattered stone, its odd multicolor shadings matching those in the walls and floor, were beginning to diminish. On closer examination it could be seen that the rubble from the golems was slowly seeping into the floor, absorbed back into the substance of this place.

"What's happening?" Jasek asked.

"I imagine if we continue forward, we will see the stone guardians slowly reforming," Ghazaran said.

Ozmad nodded. "Indeed. We must be past their cavern by the time that they are reborn."

"And when we return?" the Seer asked.

"The Ravager will open a path that anyone will be able to follow," Ghazaran said. Ozmad had already started forward, his huge boots crunching on the rubble as he trod forward toward the gaping opening where the mithral door had stood at the end of the corridor. The others, after a moment's hesitation, followed after him.

Chapter 410

MEETING AMURRU

The chamber with the giant statue was as it had been before—or at least, nearly so, for their eyes were drawn to the niches in the walls where the stone guards had once stood in relief. More than one of them glanced up to the massive angel, with its spread wings and huge sword lifted higher above them than the spire of a castle tower. But the stone guardian, if in fact that was what it was, did not stir for them. Perhaps Ghazaran had been right, and it had been set here not to watch for them, but for the thing that lay deeper within this complex, the thing they had come here to free.

They made their way across the huge cavern in silence, even their footfalls muted on the odd stone of the floor. There was only one break in the quiet, as Jasek drew their attention to one of the alcoves, where they could all see a pair of stone feet. Once again, Ghazaran had been right; the warders were reforming.

They pressed on, and while the decorative carvings continued around the entire expanse of the chamber, they encountered no more empty—or mostly empty—alcoves. What they did find, in a deeply recessed nook on the far wall of the cavern, was another of the mithral vault doors. By now their procedure was familiar, and after both Jasek and the Seer had scanned the portal for mundane and magical hazards, Falah applied himself to the heavy wheel. The faint grinding noise that penetrated through the mithral put them all on edge, and each of them stood ready for anything with spell or weapon.

But this door opened without incident, revealing another corridor beyond. There was a dim but flickering glow of natural light that reached them from down its length, where it appeared that the corridor opened onto another chamber a good fifty feet or so ahead.

With a brief look back, Jasek started ahead. He saw little in the way of reassurance in the faces of his companions; more and more, it was as if Ghazaran and Ozmad were seeing beyond what was here, their attention focused on something beyond his perception. Compared to them, the face of the Seer, his eyes betraying a mix of avarice, hatred, and mistrust, was almost reassuring. Those feelings, at least, he could understand. Falah and Parzad were not worth mentioning, as they were mere appendages of the cleric; and as for Navev...

The thief suppressed a shudder, and led them forward.

The chamber at the end of the corridor was lit by flames that burned in stone pots carved into the walls around the perimeter. They had to be magical, as Jasek smelled no smoke in the air, and the place was filled with an almost preternatural chill that pressed through his clothes and skin and made itself felt in his bones. Opposite them several curving steps led onto a dais, where another dark passage was visible, flanked by a pair of rune-carved stone pillars.

They were not the only inhabitants of the chamber.

The guardians made no motion as they entered, but almost by reflex Jasek stepped aside, into the shadows under one of the stone fire-bowls. Ozmad did not hesitate, stepping boldly forward, Ghazaran and his followers almost at his heels. They examined the figures standing in niches along the walls to either side as intently as the thief had.

There were ten, five to either side, forming an honor guard of two rows that faced out into the chamber, at them. One glance was enough to show that they were dead, desiccated figures wrapped in strips of ancient linen, bulging here or there where a bone protruded from ancient flesh. Jasek did not need to look back to know that they were echoes of the shambling figure that was just now appearing at the mouth of the passage behind them. The mummies wore breastplates of hammered bronze in a style that the thief suspected had not been seen in a thousand years, and each carried a huge sword, held in both fists before them, the blades forming long curves that almost touched the walls behind them at their ends.

Ghazaran muttered something that Jasek couldn't quite hear. Ozmad looked down at the cleric, and there seemed to be something communicated between them, a signal that Jasek couldn't quite read. The thief saw that the cleric had taken out the bundle of leather scrollcases that he'd stolen from the sun priests in Camar; according to what Ghazaran had said, there was powerful magic inscribed upon those old parchments. Falah and Parzad both tensed, expecting trouble.

The ogre stepped forward, and spread his arms wide. "Show yourself, caretaker!" the ogre shouted, his deep voice echoing through the chamber.

It happened so quickly that Jasek blinked and he—*it*—was just *there*, standing atop the dais between the pillars. If the mummies radiated a sense of great age, this thing was seeped in it. It bore no wrappings, so they could see how its dried flesh clung to its bones like an almost sheer cloth. It looked so frail that they could not see how it could stand, let alone move about under its own power, but it was clad in heavy armor, a suit of archaic half-plate fashioned from scaled dragonhide rather than metal, the whole covered in a robe that was little more than strips of cloth. It bore a shaft of flanged bronze as a weapon, a light mace that it carried like a scepter. When it spoke, Jasek started in surprise; the thing's jaw barely moved, but he could hear its voice as though it was standing right in front of him.

"You seek to unleash destruction upon the world," it said. "That cannot be permitted."

Ozmad opened his mouth to speak, but before the ogre could respond to the creature's challenge, a wracking pain erupted through Jasek's body. He fell back against the support of the wall as invisible daggers stabbed deep into him, with no way to evade or dodge the attack. He saw that he was not the only one; the others were clearly suffering the same assault. All save one; Navev just stood there, half-obscured in the darkness of the corridor.

Trying to fight through the pain, Jasek looked up in time to see the mummy guardians flourish their great blades and rush forward to attack.

Chapter 411

ANOTHER STROLL THROUGH THE FOREST

"Well, this doesn't look good," Dar said.

The spacious chamber before them had been decorated to resemble a forest, down to the incredibly faithful depictions of leaves set into the stonework that ran around the perimeter of the place. Almost a dozen huge stone trees had been painstakingly crafted

out of the surrounding stone, their highest branches reaching almost to the top of the vaulted ceiling thirty feet above.

The floor was covered with debris, bits and pieces of stone littered about carelessly. They were quick to notice the connection with the gap along the wall where another of the stone trees might have fit in.

“What do you think?” the fighter asked Allera. “Golems?”

“I don’t know,” the healer replied. “There is a strong... presence... here. And blood. There was a battle here, not long past.”

Letellia hovered behind them, her eyes open to things that none of the others could see. “Elementals.”

“Why aren’t they attacking?” Kiron asked.

“Maybe that... Amurru... has commanded them to let us pass,” Maricela suggested.

“Don’t count on it,” Dar said. Zethas had taken a step forward, his head craning nervously at the stone giants all around them, but Dar forestalled him. “Stay here,” he said to all of them. Drawing *Justice* from its sheath, he started forward across the room.

“Stand ready,” Qatarn ordered his men, unnecessarily, for everyone in the group stood on a razor’s edge, their weapons and magic held prepared on the edge of use. Zethas fingered his bow, an arrow held against the string, half drawn. Only Selaht seemed unaffected by the tense mood, but his penetrating dark eyes missed nothing.

Thus none of them were surprised when one of the trees along the wall suddenly swung its branches down and took a step forward, its lower body splitting apart to form legs, its massive roots acting almost like great splayed feet. Dar, only barely halfway across the room, spun to meet it, but almost immediately the one behind him also started moving, and then others, including a pair flanking the mithral door in the far wall.

“We have to help him!” Kiron shouted. He lifted his sword, but even as the knights and soldiers started forward, Dar turned and yelled at them, “Hold the line!” Recognizing the poor odds, Dar continued his turn and started running back toward the others. But the nearest of the trees was already too close.

“Look out!” Allera yelled, but even if she’d shouted earlier, there was little that Dar could have done to avoid the branch that snapped down like a whip, cracking hard across his back. The blow knocked him forward and down, and he was fortunate to only fall to one knee.

Letellia, her brow furrowed in concentration, cast a spell, conjuring a *wall of force* that slanted across the room, forming a barrier from floor to ceiling. Three of the stone

treants were caught behind the obstacle; they flailed at it with their branches, and for a moment they looked almost frustrated.

But while she'd placed the *wall* with expert precision, she'd been unable to block off one other besides the one that had hit Dar. That treant surged forward with a sudden burst of speed. Allera, acting quickly, hurled up a *repulsion* field to stop it, but the invisible barrier did not even faze the creature, and if anything it picked up more speed as it lumbered forward. Likewise Maricela's beam of *searing light* dissolved as it struck it, indicating that the stone treants were possessed of considerable resistance of magic.

Dar felt rather than saw the monster coming up fast behind him, and he hurled himself out of its path. The fighter had been only an ancillary target of its rush, but even so one of the heavy roots clipped him across the left thigh, and this time he did go down fully, spinning as his legs were knocked out from under him.

There was nothing that the others could do to help him, for the huge creature kept on going, smashing into the front of their defensive line. Kiron with his knights, and Qatarn with his soldiers, each formed one side of the wedge. The fighters were ready with their weapons, but the treant hit them with the force of a charge of heavy cavalry. Tertius screamed and was launched flying, his sword flipping end over end before it hit the wall near the entrance and clattered loudly to the floor. The fighter did not travel quite so far, but he landed just as hard, and while he was still conscious, he did not get up. The other two watchmen were not struck quite so violently, but both were knocked back, Primus jostled to the side, falling to one knee, while Secundus was spun about so fast that he bounced off of the nearby wall. Only Qatarn held his ground, the huge centurion grunting as a root smacked hard into his gut.

The knights fared little better. Aldos had set his glaive against its charge, but while its momentum drove the curving blade deep into its stone trunk, the force of it knocked him aside as well, and he barely kept his grip on his weapon as he fell to his knees. Yellow fluid spurted from the gash, and where it landed on the knight's cloak and arm it raised wisps of noxious smoke. Kiron, his big sword flashing, was only barely able to keep from being pinned under the thing, and he yelled a battle cry as he slashed at the roots all around him. Only Petronia avoided being trampled, and that was by falling back as quickly as she could, shielding her face as jagged branches scratched at her armor.

Dar struggled to get up, but before he could do anything, one of the long branches from the first treant wrapped around his body, lifting him into the air. He lashed out with *Justice*, and a segment of branch, covered in jutting spines like stone fingers, went flying. But more branches were tangled around his legs and torso, and he could not get free.

Trying to keep his orientation as the thing whipped him around, he brandished his sword again, but before he could strike the treant hurled him straight upward, into the ceiling. Air was blasted from his lungs from the force of the impact. He hung there for the barest instant, and then he was falling, the floor rushing up to greet him.

He grimaced at the expected impact, but he did not land as expected. Instead, as he plummeted downward, the treant whipped around another branch. The fighter barely had the time to register what was happening before it struck, batting him out of the air like a man swatting a bug. His sword was knocked out of his grasp, and clattered against the ground. A moment later, he hit high against the *wall of force*. His journey only then came to an end, as he fell a final eight feet to splat hard upon the floor, his body a maze of hurts from the battering he'd suffered.

He managed to lift his head to see that it was not yet over; the treant was coming his way.

Chapter 412

STONE, STEEL, AND FLESH

Dar's sweeping gaze locked onto his sword, its bare blade glittering faintly as it caught up the light of his torch, which had fallen not far from where the weapon had finally come to rest. Unfortunately, there was the small matter of the charging stone treant between him and it.

Still, he growled a challenge as he pushed himself back up to his feet, trying to ignore the agony in his battered body, and the weight of his heavy armor that tried to drag him back down to the floor. There was no way he was going to stand up to the treant's charge, not based on the pounding he'd already absorbed from it, but at least he was going to die on his feet.

But then a flood of healing power flowed into him, banishing the pain and tilting the odds—not quite in his favor, but at least a bit more towards balance.

A fast-approaching form seen out of the corner of his eye drew his attention. It was the monk, Selaht, his robe fluttering to the ground behind him as he slipped out of it on the run. The monk's body was like iron covered in leather, his skin marked with a half-dozen intricate tattoos that ran across his chest and down his long arms to his fists. Dar wasn't sure how he'd gotten past the violent exchange taking place near the entrance of the chamber; he could see bodies flying, and hear the shouts of his companions as they took the fight to the second treant. But there was no time to see more; his foe was almost upon him.

"The sword!" he yelled, but Selaht was already bending down in mid-stride, and without breaking the pace of his charge he seized the hilt of *Justice* and snapped the sword up, shooting it across the room toward him in a broad arc. Dar had to rush to the side to

have a chance of catching it, which he realized was deliberate, so as to minimize the chance of the sword's arc being deflected by the treant.

For all the monk's efforts, though, the treant was closer, and it had reach. Dar saw the branch coming, and tried to duck under it, but a forest of tiny spines jutted from the end of the limb, and a dozen or more crackled loudly against his armor, knocking him back again even as they snapped off from the force of the impact. He felt a sharp wedge of pain in his side and realized that one of the spines had probably penetrated through a gap in the metal plates protecting his torso. Still, he was able to stay on his feet, and he forced his body to keep going, toward the approaching sword. He heard the sound of it rebounding off the *wall of force*, and when it hit the ground he was only a few paces away, still running, the treant shifting to pursue.

In the entryway, the rest of the companions were having a difficult time with the second treant. Kiron continued to dance in and out of the protruding tangle of roots around its legs, but while the knight had narrowly avoided several counterattacks, his reflexes and heavy armor turning devastating blows into glancing near-misses, his own strikes had made little impact upon it. Petronia had had more success with her axe, the hard adamantite of the blade strong enough to pierce the thing's thick hide. She had seen what had happened to Aldos when he'd hurt it in the initial charge, and had thus far avoided the jets of acidic fluid that issued from the wounds in its body. Unfortunately, her attacks had also drawn the monstrosity's full attention, and as she leapt forward to deliver another strike a sweeping branch caught her from behind, hitting her across the back of her helmet with enough force to knock her sprawling, unconscious.

On the opposite side of the creature, Qatarn had rallied Primus and Secundus to try to carve wounds in its right flank, but thus far their attacks had been ineffective. Maricela had rushed in to pull the fallen Tertius out of the thing's reach, intending to drag him back from death's door with magical healing, but Allera's *mass heal* beat her to it, and the guardsman was already recovering his feet, surprised to suddenly find all of his injuries just... gone. The cleric pressed the soldier's sword back into his hand, and invoked a blessing upon her companions, trying to think of a way that she could hurt these seemingly invincible foes with her own apparently insufficient magic.

Zethas remained in the corridor beyond the archway, plying his bow. While the Eremite had yet to miss his target, there was no indication that the shafts sticking out of the treant's body had made any impression upon it, as none had penetrated deeper than an inch into its trunk.

Letellia had somewhat more success with her magic. The sorceress, still hovering above the ground, rose effortlessly into the air just outside the arch. She lifted her silver staff and incanted briefly. A flaring *lightning bolt* traveled from her hands and down the length of the staff, arcing into the body of the treant. Her placement had clearly been carefully intentioned, for the bolt kept on going, striking the second treant even as it lunged toward Dar for a second time. Her magic, augmented by the power of her staff,

overcame the treants' spell resistance, and left blackened traces covering their pale gray trunks.

Her attack did not go unanswered. The stone treant lifted its branches, ignoring the warriors around it, and lunged at her, almost crushing Kiron under one of its gnarled feet. Letellia calmly tried to dart under the arch to escape, but the thing caught her with a thrusting branch. Tightening its grip so that she could barely squirm, it drew back with its prize. There was a moment of hesitation that was quiet save for the noises of the warriors trying in vain to hack at its legs.

Then it lifted the branch holding the sorceress, and with its full weight behind the swing, drove her head-first toward the wall above the arch.

Chapter 413

IMPACTS

The companions redoubled their efforts to distract the treant or otherwise stop it from killing Letellia, but it ignored them as it drove the sorceress head-first toward the adjacent wall.

Letellia had stopped trying to break free of its grasp; the branches twisted around her body held her like iron manacles. Instead, in the last second before her brains would have been splashed across the wall, she summoned her magic, and opened a *dimension door* that transported her to the relative safety of the corridor below. Zethas almost dropped his bow as she materialized beside him, only slightly the worse for the experience.

The warriors were starting to have some effect against the treant through sheer determination and persistence. Kiron had kept hewing at a spot on the thing's left leg until the stone finally split open, spraying him with foul yellow ichor. The stuff sizzled as it seared his flesh, but his cry of pain turned into an angry roar, and he redoubled the fury of his assault. The treant smashed down at him with a branch, but he merely took the hit and kept fighting, hacking at its thick trunk as though his sword was a woodsman's axe.

Selaht, still chasing after the treant that had been pounding on Dar, ducked under a sweeping branch, then leapt over another that came in almost in the shadow of the first. He flipped forward almost on top of the roots that surrounded the treant's right leg, and slammed a fist into its body. Red flames erupted from the point of impact, and as he drew back, they remained, a bright nimbus of fire around each of his hands, somehow burning hot without harming him.

Dar gagged as toxic fumes burned in his nostrils. He'd kept pressing the attack, flanking the treant in conjunction with Selaht, trying to hurt it without getting crushed in the process. Another healing spell had infused him with fresh energy, but it seemed that he'd barely had time to take a swing before the branches were smashing at him again, delivering blows that each hit like the club of a giant. The wound in his side had healed, but he had fresh ones in his neck, arms, and back, and he could feel blood trickling down the left side of his face where a glancing hit had bent the inside of his faceguard against his temple.

He'd hurt the thing; long gashes covered the treant's legs now, which continued to ooze that nasty yellow gunk. But he'd fought enough battles against bigger enemies to know when he couldn't stand up to a full-on, head-to-head smackdown.

"We've got to move!" he yelled at Selaht, and started running backwards, along the line of the *wall of force*. He was dimly aware of the pounding on the other side, and wondered just how long Letellia's magic was going to last. *If it goes down soon, I'm fucked*, he thought. He almost lost it as the tree gave him a going-away present, a blow that crashed against his right hip, and drove him into the wall. But then he was away, and trying to get position for the inevitable chase. Glancing up, he saw that the treant was already following. Selaht had moved back out of its reach as well, but Dar wasn't really that surprised that it was coming after him.

Trouble just seemed to follow him around, it seemed.

The other treant was showing just as much damage as the first, but the warriors surrounding it were taking wounds faster than Allera could treat them. Primus had gotten a good hit against the thing, sliding his sword up into one of the gaps in its trunk opened by the others. The soldier thrust his blade deeper even as the yellow ochre spilled out over his sword arm, and he did not relinquish his weapon even as the stuff started to sizzle against his skin. But a moment later the treant swept down a branch that caught him solidly at the point where his neck met his body. There was a loud and terrible crack, and when the warrior finally settled to the ground, the angle at which his head lay told of his fate. Allera sent another pulse of healing energy through them just a moment later, but the young man did not stir.

The young soldier's death drove the others as they continued to press their assault. It was becoming difficult to see now with the yellow vapors rising up off the floor and out of the treant's wounds, but the warriors kept on diving into that miasma, unleashing attacks. Petronia got up off the ground for the second time, drawn back again by Allera's healing magic, and cut off a length of root the thickness of her forearm. The treant responded predictably, lunging down at her, but Aldos was there to provide cover, setting his glaive to meet the descending branch. The impact tore half of the limb away, but both knights were knocked sprawling.

The treant shifted a step closer to the fallen pair, but before it could finish them Kiron launched another attack against its damaged leg. His first blow rang off the stone as it

glanced off its armored body, but some fortune must have guided his backswing, as the blessed weapon struck a weak point, and there was a rumbling cascade as half the limb gave way, shearing off of the creature's body. The treant tottered, and for a moment, it looked as though it would collapse. Kiron sought to take advantage, and lifted his sword to finish it.

But the moment passed, and the treant recovered in time to defend itself. Leaning on its damaged limb, it smashed a branch down upon the knight, driving him into the ground with the force of a sledgehammer. The treant could not rise, but it did not have to, and instead used its weight as a weapon, crushing the man beneath it. Kiron tried to fight free, but he could only cry out in pain as metal plates groaned, and blood spurted out from his mouth as his innards were reduced to paste.

CHAPTER 414

INTERCESSION

“GET OFF OF HIM!” Maricela yelled, her voice transformed into a bellow as her *righteous might* spell doubled her height. On top of the *divine power* spell she'd just cast not six seconds past, her own physical power, modest before the infusion of holy energies, was suddenly greater than any of her companions, even the indomitable Corath Dar. Her mace, now a slab of steel almost five feet long, erupted in blazing flames as she stepped forward and slammed it into the treant's body. The thing staggered backward, again off balance, but still it fought, a branch flailing around into the cleric's face. She shrugged off clawing stone juts that tore wounds in the flesh under her helmet, and lifted the mace to strike again. But before the blow could land, a glowing streak shot out from the corridor, and caught the treant a solid blow. The *crushing fist* was finally too much for the treant, and as it fell over backward it came apart, shattering even before it hit the floor and smashed into a thousand pieces.

Maricela started to bend over the broken body of Kiron, but the knight, somehow, was still conscious, and he pointed toward the far end of the room. “Help... Dar!” he managed to get out, before he collapsed. Allera was there at once, her hands glowing with a bright blue glow, ready to help him.

The priestess looked up, and saw that Dar needed all the help he could get.

Dar was getting a rough refresher in fighting against an opponent that had him outmatched in size, strength, reach, and the sheer ability to absorb punishment. He'd gotten in a few solid hits, and the cracks in the creature's trunk continued to trail streaks of yellow vapor, but it seemed hardly affected by its injuries. It had been too long since he'd been in a violent, desperate melee like this, and he was no longer the man of living steel that had been forged from raw iron in those last desperate missions to Rappan

Athuk. He was anything but frail, but the years... well, they had a way of creeping up on you.

But he was still Corath Dar, and as he absorbed another punishing strike, the long branches slapping him across the face and chest like whips, he was able to keep his focus, and his head.

“That the fucking best you got, you fucking *tree?*” he shouted. Lifting *Justice*, he feinted as though he was going to leap forward to attack, but even as a pair of branches swept down toward him, he leapt back into one of the vacated alcoves along the wall. He did not hesitate there long, waiting only until it had completed its swing and lifted its branches again. Then he charged forward again before the treant could trap him in the confined space. Selaht was still trying to harry the creature from behind, leaping in to attack and then springing away before it could effectively counter. But thus far the monk had not managed to hurt it seriously, although black streaks marked its legs where his burning fists had impacted.

Dar knew that his best chance was staying away from the treant, to not give it a chance to deliver a full attack like that first one that had sent him flying across the room. But there just wasn't enough room in the chamber for nimble evasions, and the treant was just too damned big. Those facts were reinforced again as he tried to run past it, to get out of the corner formed by the stone chamber wall and the straight plane of Letellia's *wall of force*. The treant swatted him almost casually, and even though he saw the blow coming, there was no room to escape it. He yelled as he hurled himself forward, willing his armored body to move faster, but then he was flying again, his limbs splaying outward as the branch connected solidly with the small of his back. The floor rose up to greet him, and he landed hard, his breath smashed out of his lungs.

He did not have to turn over to know that the treant would be bearing down on him. He tried to get up, but his body had decided it had taken enough of a beating for the moment; his muscles refused to obey. He couldn't even lift his head enough to see out of his helmet; all that was there was the smooth grain of the stone and the smell of his own sweat and blood in his nostrils. He could hear it coming though; the ground all but shook with the noise of its charge.

Well, fuck, he thought, waiting for the inevitable.

Chapter 415

REINFORCEMENTS

Dar could only wait for his companions to do something to intervene; while he doggedly clung to consciousness, he may as well have been a sack of grain for all that he could do to affect the ongoing course of the battle.

The ground trembled under his feet, and he heard a noise that sounded like a pair of elephants colliding. He heard a battle cry... female, but other than that, he could not quite place it. Then he detected a faint smell, familiar, reassuring. He did not feel the touch of her hands on his neck, but the flood of healing energy that followed was like a geyser of cool water. Hands grasped him, helped him up, but he no longer needed the aid; Allera's potent spell had restored him like a month of rest.

He looked up to see the treant under heavy assault, its long branches flailing not five paces away. Maricela, suddenly transformed into a giant, was doing the bulk of the beating on it, but Dar could see the way she favored her left side, and blood splattered the top of her breastplate where the creature's branches had gotten in under her guard and torn through the chain protecting her neck. Allera was already casting another *mass cure*, but the priestess did not withdraw, pressing her attack even as another pair of branches battered her hard, staggering her. Dar could see how close she'd come to falling; she'd never withstand another full series of attacks.

Secundus and Qatarn were beside him; the soldiers had been the one to help him up, and the centurion offered him the hilt of *Justice*. Now that the surge of healing had worked its course, he felt his nascent exhaustion creeping back in, but he squelched it ruthlessly as he accepted his weapon.

"For Camar!" he shouted, charging once more into the battle.

The treant had taken significantly more punishment in the brief moments that he'd been down, and he took advantage, targeting a long crevice that had been opened where its left leg met its body. The treant obviously remembered him, for it lowered a branch to knock him away again before he could close enough to strike. But Allera's *heal* spell had been very thorough, and he was able to push through the strike, lifting his arms to protect his face as the stone branches raked him. He planted a foot and delivered a blow that rang like a clapper striking a bell. Yellow acid sprayed across his face, but he hardly heeded it, roaring as he drove his sword deeper into the gash, yanking at it as though the axiomatic steel was a prybar. The caustic fog had gotten into his eyes, and he couldn't even see the enemy any more, but he could *feel* it when the limb popped, and the treant started to fall. Someone grabbed him and pulled him back, and bits of stone pinged against his armor as the creature exploded into rubble.

Yanking off his helmet, he tried to blink his eyes clear. "Are you all right?" Allera's voice, close to him. "Hold still," she said, and a moment later, a flood of water washed across his face. Blinking madly, he started to wipe a hand across his eyes, but Allera grabbed him and stopped him, making an annoying click with her tongue. "Just give it a moment," she said, and then he felt a soft cloth wiping away the water and what was left of the noxious fluid.

The others stood around him, forming a wedge. Or most of them; he glanced back to see Primus lying where he'd fallen, his body splayed out upon the stone. The floor was littered with debris from the two destroyed guardians, making footing treacherous.

Letellia floated forward, her feet drifting a few feet above the floor. "How long?" Dar asked. His eyes turned back to what everyone else was looking at, the shimmering barrier behind which three more of the treants waited. They had not left up, and while they could not hear the sound of their blows against the *wall of force*, they could feel the faint vibrations of their movements traveling through the floor.

Letellia's expression was placid, unrevealing. "Approximately twenty seconds," she replied, as though he had asked about whether she thought it might rain today.

"Back, everyone back to the corridor!" he yelled, putting his own words into action. "Can you put up another of those walls?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, still cool. "But it will only postpone the inevitable. We need to get past them, any my resources are not unlimited."

Dar growled something unintelligible; there was a solution here, he could feel it, but it remained just out of his reach.

Qatarn had paused next to him, after ordering his men forward. Secundus and Tertius took hold of Primus's body, dragging the slain soldier back into the relative security of the corridor. "We cannot hold the line against three of them, sir," the centurion said, his voice pitched low so that it would not carry.

Dar glanced back at the treants, and then at the corridor. They would be hard pressed to fit into that confined space, he thought; it depended on how aggressively the things would pursue them.

A sudden noise alerted him to the collapse of the *wall of force* behind him; he resisted the urge to look back as he followed the others out of the room. The others had taken up defensive positions in the passageway, the knights in front a good twenty feet back from the arch. Maricela's spell had expired, and she had returned to her usual size, standing next to Allera behind the warriors. Letellia floated above them, her head almost brushing the ceiling above. Dar turned to see the treants approaching fast, then Letellia gestured, and a glistening white *wall of ice*, thick enough to be almost opaque, appeared within the archway.

"That may delay them a few mo—" she began, but as the first of the trees reached the barrier, it winked out of existence. "Their spell resistance is... problematic," she said, clucking her tongue in frustration.

Dar didn't get a chance to respond, as the lead treant bent low, almost doubled over, and surged into the passage toward them. It thrust two of its branches ahead of it, the long finger-like twigs splaying from their ends like a knot of spearheads. Letellia drifted back, behind the row of warriors, who formed an overlapping screen, the knights in front, Aldos lifting his glaive over Petronia's shoulder, while in the rear the soldiers unlimbered their heavy crossbows and begun winding the mechanisms. Zethas, in the back of the column near Allera, had kept up a desultory barrage of fire since the start of the battle, pausing only to refill his quiver from one of the bundles he kept stored in his pack.

Dar roared a challenge as the long branches stabbed into the front rank of defenders. Bits of stone broke off against his breastplate, and he felt others poking into the gaps where chain and leather lay under the magical plates. The creature was at a disadvantage in these close quarters, but its sheer strength and momentum still allowed it to hurt them. In turn, the fringe of branches made it tough for the companions to get close enough to inflict serious damage against its trunk.

There was naught to do but keep fighting, however. The second treant had crowded into the passage behind the first, unable to progress further beyond the bulk of its companion. Their branches dug gouges in the walls as they pressed slowly ahead, like a cork being forced deeper into the neck of a bottle. The lead treant had only enough space now to poke two of its branches forward, jabbing at the enemies in front of it. That alone was considerable; Kiron took a hard hit that smacked right into the center of his pelvis, knocking him roughly against the wall. Despite the armor protecting his torso, the blow had to have hurt. Maricela forced her way past the soldiers and reached out to him, imparting a healing spell with her touch.

Petronia hewed at the branches with her axe, the adamantine blade shearing through stone as though the treant's limbs had indeed been merely wood. Standing beside her, Dar tore away half a forking length of branch that shattered like kindling as it fell to the ground. Between them, Aldos wielded his glaive like a spear, delivering sharp, chopping thrusts against the treant's thick body. The knight was strong, but it was like trying to hew through a door with a dinner knife, and slow going.

For a dozen heartbeats the battle raged in the confines of the corridor, with the companions dealing damage, while the treant continued to pound at them in return. The soldiers lifted their heavy arbalests and fired shots into the treant's upper body, over the shoulders of their companions engaged in melee. Letellia fired a series of *scorching rays* that inflicted minor damage; the majority of the fiery beams dissolved as soon as they touched the creature, and those that got through seemed to do little more than darken its trunk. Of all of them, it was only Petronia and Dar who inflicted serious harm, hacking their way through the screen of branches to where they could start hewing at its legs. Pinned as it was within the corridor, the treant could do little more than take the hits, although it continued to twist its body and bring new branches into play. Slicks of vile yellow substance covered the floor where the fluid had jetted from the monster's wounds, the fumes rising from them foul and toxic.

When an end to it came, it was swift enough to be surprising. Cracks and gashes covered the treant's legs, and more than half of its branches had been hewn away, but the suddenness of its collapse was unexpected. The stone treants seemed to just lose cohesiveness once they had absorbed a certain amount of damage, and it crumbled into debris, bits of stone bouncing off the warriors' helmets and breastplates as they fell.

"Watch out!" Dar yelled, but the shout was lost in the clatter, not only of the falling debris, but the noise of the second treant thrusting its branches through the remnants of its destroyed cousin. Petronia and Dar were thrust aside, and Aldos was hit hard enough to be knocked off his feet, landing awkwardly on his side. A stone tendril twisted around the knight's ankle, and he yelled as he started to slide forward, back toward the arch and the hulk waiting there.

"Aldos!" Petronia yelled, pushing off the wall as she lifted her axe in both hands. The adamantine blade bit hard into the branch, cutting it a scant foot above the fallen knight's entangled leg. Dar was cutting at it from the opposite side, but a web of branches pressed at him, and each one he hewed away left another one between him and the embattled pair.

Kiron rushed forward, healed by Maricela. Crossbow bolts flashed above his head, passing scant inches from the crest of his helmet as they slammed hard into the treant's upper body. More fiery beams followed them, flaring as they hit the treant's body.

Dar lunged through the screen of branches, extending *Justice* out fully, targeting the gap where one of the treant's legs met its body. The tip of the sword flashed as it bit deep, the jet of yellow indicating that the fighter had scored, and scored deeply. The treant drew back, but as it retreated, a branch caught on one of the straps of Petronia's armor. The knight was dragged roughly back with the treant, snagged like a fish on a trawler's line.

"Petronia!" Kiron yelled. He rushed after her, leaping to grab her hand, but a sudden yank by the treant pulled her out of reach, and his caught only empty air. The woman knight cried out as the treant swept her back out of the passage. It did not bother to hold her, merely thrusting its captive behind it, out into the room, where they could distantly hear her armor rattling as it hit the stone floor. Her axe lay where she'd dropped it amidst a pile of stone rubble at their feet.

"Forward!" Kiron yelled, driving ahead even as the treant turned back to block the passage, lowering a fresh set of branches to attack. Kiron took a hit that shook his entire body, but he forced his way through it, laying into the treant's body with his sword. He barely had room to swing the weapon, hewing at it as though the blade was a lumberjack's saw, working it deeper into the shallow crack he'd opened with his initial blow. The treant brought up a branch and smashed it down into the knight's face. Kiron was tough, but the blow might have well been from a battering ram. He staggered backward and fell onto his back, blood seeping from the front of his helmet.

Aldos and Dar were in his place before the treant could follow up on its attack. Their weapons flashed, just as a flurry of bolts and arrows thudded into its body above. Their assault was followed by another *lightning bolt* from Letellia, bolstered by the power of her staff, that blasted through the treant's spell resistance and tore a black swath across its body. But the thing was insanely durable, and even with yellow pustulence oozing from the deep cracks all over its body it continued to press its attack. Thrusting its branches into the mouth of the corridor like a maid churning butter, it battered the defenders, who withstood the onslaught with grim determination. That fortitude was bolstered a moment later by another *mass cure* from Allera, which closed wounds and dissolved bruises even as they formed. Maricela had rushed forward to shield Kiron from the thrusting branches, and Qatarn joined her to help drag the injured knight back from the battle line and back to his feet. No sooner had Allera's spell taken hold than he was rushing forward again to rejoin the battle, although there was little space for him alongside Dar and Aldos.

As the branches came sweeping back, Dar let himself be dragged forward with them, until he was right in front of the treant's body. He swept *Justice* up in a two-handed swing with much of his augmented strength behind it. The blade sang off of the stone of the treant's body as it clove through and kept going, and then the treant was crumbling like the others. Dar staggered through the falling rubble, already looking for the last of the creatures. Gray dust coated him as he emerged in the mouth of the archway.

He didn't have to look long; the last treant found him, smiting him with a solid blow that knocked him backward, stumbling over the piled rubble that cluttered the arch. He did not go all the way down, pushing off against the remnants of destroyed treants, lifting his sword in a defiance stance, waiting for the next attack, looking for Petronia.

He saw her, or rather what was left of her. There was nothing left of the woman knight but a few scattered heaps of bloody matter, here and there covered by what had once been clothes and armor. Dar, who had seen battle and violence wrought on a scale few living men could match, felt a sudden surge of bile rise in his throat at the sight. But there was no time to spare in retching; the treant loomed over him, its branches glistening sickly with fresh blood that fell in splatters around it as it lunged forward to continue the attack.

Chapter 416

SACRIFICES FOR THE CAUSE

A guttural roar rose from Dar's throat as he lurched forward to meet the treant's attack. Behind him, he was dimly aware of answering yells, of Kiron and Aldos charging at his flanks, at Qatarn and his soldiers following behind. There was fire, and lightning, and in

the end at last even a series of blazing pulses, *magic missiles* that left tiny black pocks in the treant's body. He took more wounds, and Allera and Maricela healed them almost as quickly. Everything else was battle and chaos, a blur that did not end until the last of the guardians hit the ground and shattered, bits and pieces of it scattering across the room almost to the far door in the opposite wall.

Allera was at his side at once, a look of concern on her face, but she only lingered for an instant before rushing off to help someone more in need of her aid. Looking around, Dar saw that everyone else was on their feet, although some of them barely. But for Primus and Petrellia, it was too late.

Aldos bent over one of the larger pieces of Petronia, his body shaking in what might have been rage, grief, or a part of both. "Why?" he said, rising quickly, turning away from the carcass. "We came with the guardian's blessing... why did it hurl these... these... *things* at us?"

"These were not constructs, but elementals, sentient things, but bound to this place," Letellia said. Dar noticed that her voice was as cool as a bank of snow. The woman he remembered would have paled at the sight before them, even as she drew upon her inner strength to get past it. But this person, it was as if what she saw was just pieces of meat, no longer connected to the living woman who had been their companion just a few moments ago. "The magic infusing this place is ancient; I can still feel it now, seeping into my thoughts like the warmth of a flame." There was none of that warmth in her eyes, however. "I imagine that they were compelled to attack anyone or anything that attempted to pass through this chamber. It is likely that Amurru had no power over them, and she did warn us of that, if you recall."

Anger flashed in Aldos's face for a moment, but Kiron caught his gaze, sending a silent message. The knight turned away from them, drawing his emotions back into the private confines of his mind.

"I can bring them back, across the veil," Allera said. "Petronia and Primus both." Her hand fell to the pouch at her hip, where a double-wrapped bag of diamonds rested, a fortune sufficient to buy a palace—or in her case, sufficient to *resurrect* a full half-dozen people, even a corpse as violated as Petronia's. She commanded an even greater power, one that she had only used once before, in the battle with Orcus twelve years ago. She had not spoken often of that experience, not even with Dar, but there were times when she looked at things blankly, and her fingers trembled with the force of unbidden memories. "I just need a little time."

"Time is one thing we do not have," Dar said. "Wrap the bodies; we'll be back for them when we can. Anyone who's still hurt, talk to Allera or Maricela, even if it's a fucking splinter. I want everyone to be at full strength."

Aldos had turned back at Allera's words, and at Dar's statement he turned back to the carcass of Petronia, unfastening his cloak. The brief look that they'd gotten of his face said that his anger was not going to soon fade.

Kiron brought something that might have been an arm over to the pile of Petronia's remains. After placing it down, he came over to Dar. "I am sorry for Aldos's outburst," he said quietly. "He... he cared for her greatly."

Yeah, while everyone knows that Corath Dar doesn't give a shit, Dar thought. But he only said, "Make sure everyone's ready. Don't leave anything behind that we might need."

It took less than a minute to complete their preparations, and continue ahead. The vault door at the far end of the chamber yielded to Dar and Kiron's strength, but as they drew it open another hazard was revealed.

"What in the hells..." Dar began, and Kiron echoed his sentiments with a muttered invocation to the Father. Stepping forward to allow the others to move past the open vault door, Dar held up his torch to get a better look.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me."

The whistling blades were moving so fast as to be barely visible as a line of shimmering blurs in the corridor. They sent a faint breeze toward the companions, who gathered at a safe distance, looking in vain for a way past.

"Maybe there's a way we can jam the mechanisms," Kiron began, but Dar shook his head. "The bad guys bypassed this somehow, so can we. Zethas, any secret doors or panels on our side?"

The scout was already looking, with the soldiers providing what help they could, tapping the walls with the hilts of their daggers. "Nothing, general," the wiry Eremite said, his eyes returning frequently to the whirling storm of blades that blocked their way.

"They used magic to move past this," Letellia said suddenly.

"Can you transport us past it?" Dar asked her.

She held his gaze squarely for a few heartbeats before nodding slightly. "It will require the use of several successive *dimension doors*, but it should work. Form two groups of five, close together, touching hands. Do not do anything else unless I direct it."

There was a slight shuffle as the companions complied with the sorceress's directions, but Dar hardly heard it. A flare had gone off in his mind, and his thoughts flew back to the confrontation with the stone trees in the last chamber. Letellia and her impassible

barriers, and her ability to *dimension door*, an ability, Dar knew from experience, that allowed one to bypass a *wall of force*.

“Are you all right?”

He shook his head, looking down at Allera as he came out of his reverie. Too late, for Primus and Petronia. But was it too late for the rest of them as well.

“I’m fine,” he replied, watching as Letellia took hold of the circle of Kiron, Maricela, Selaht, Zethas, and Aldos. Her magic wasn’t flashy; one moment the six of them were there, the next they were at the end of the passage, just beyond the last of the deadly blades. She pulled away from the others as soon as the spell was completed, and lingered only a few seconds before her magic surrounded her again, and she returned to them. The three remaining soldiers pressed in close around Dar and Allera, joining hands. Dar’s expression remained fixed on Letellia, trying to read the depths in her dark eyes. Her power had already been critical to moving them forward, but he recognized something in her stare, an intensity that he had seen in men on the battlefield, men who had lost everything but the single-minded focus on the objective. When a man reached that point, even survival became secondary, unimportant. It was a feeling he understood, but as a leader responsible for the lives of those under him, and for many more lives beyond that, he knew that sometimes, that kind of focus could be dangerous.

He did not turn his eyes away as Letellia drifted down and extended a hand, touching Allera on the shoulder. Power flared, and there was a brief moment of disorientation as reality shifted around them.

Chapter 417

THE GUARDIANS

It began with surprising quiet.

The mummies shambled forward without battle cries or noisy declarations, their wrapped feet making a soft whisking noise on the stone floor of the chamber. Aerim and Falah stepped forward to greet them, taking up warding positions on the left and right flanks of their wedge. They communicated without words, each facing five of the oncoming undead, knowing that they alone would not be enough to stop the approaching undead, let alone their immortal master atop the dais.

The soft chants of the spellcasters sounded disproportionately loud in that context, and the magical assault they unleashed was anything but subtle. Ghazaran, reading a scroll stolen from the cache of the church of Soleus, invoked a *mass cure serious wounds*

spell that tore through the ranks of the mummy warriors. But even as white light flared about their bodies, they lifted their swords and pressed forward to fulfill their eternal mandate, to keep that which they guarded safely bound. The spell damaged the creatures, but only marginally, and it did not even achieve that against the lich, the holy surge vanishing as it enveloped the undead lord.

In the immediate wake of the *mass cure*, the Seer unleashed a second assault, flinging a *chain lightning* into the ranks of the mummies. This spell, even more destructive than the first, slammed into the lead mummy on the right, continuing in an unbroken chain down their ranks before leaping across to the other file and continuing until all ten of the mummies had been hit. The first mummy, the one that had absorbed the full impact of the spell, staggered, the bandages covering its chest hanging in blackened strips. But it did not fall, and the others had withstood the attack much as they had the first, and kept on coming. The tail end of the bolt arced toward the lich, almost as an afterthought, but again the spell dissolved against some invisible barrier, and the wizard clicked his tongue in frustration.

And still the invaders were not finished; Navev joined his power to that of the other casters, invoking a field of *chilling tentacles* that sprung up out of the wall and floor along the left side of the room. The first two mummies, skirting the edge of that effect, avoided being snagged by the grasping tendrils, but the last three were all caught, struggling to free themselves as the *tentacles* twisted around their arms and legs.

And then the mummies were attacking. Aerim swept his blade into the first mummy, the one most damaged by the initial barrage of spells. His blade bit deep into its chest, and the creature fell, dust rising from its shattered ribs. The fighter did not hesitate, bringing his sword up into a ready stance, just in time to absorb the attacks of the fallen creature's allies. Steel forged beyond the memory of living men clashed, drawing lines of blue and orange sparks that rained down on the combatants. Aerim was a blademaster, a legend brought back to life, but the mummies likewise possessed much of the skill that they had owned when living, and only the Duke's heavy armor kept him from being cut down in that initial exchange. He kept moving, turning what might have been serious blows into glancing hits, grimacing as the mummy blades rang off his mail.

On the opposite flank, Falah faced off against the two mummies that had gotten around Navev's *chilling tentacles*. The Razhuri fighter made good in the initial exchange, taking a hit that had just slid under his parry, twisting his own blade so that it sheared off a big chunk of the first mummy's skull. The blow would have killed a living man, but the undead warrior barely seemed to feel it.

Two of the mummies on Aerim's flank moved to bypass the warrior, who could do nothing to stop them, as heavily engaged as he was. One rushed toward Ghazaran, who had unrolled a second scroll. The mummy came on too quickly for him to release the magic of the scroll, but Parzad stepped between them, lifting a hand as he summoned a bolt of psychokinetic energy to stop the attacker. The gambit failed, the surge of psionic power shattering against the dark will of the mummy. Parzad made no

move to evade as the mummy swept its sword down in a blinding arc. Ghazaran's ally was knocked flying, a flare of bright red blood spraying out from the deep wound in his left shoulder. Parzad fell hard to the ground and did not get up.

The other mummy lunged at Ozmad, but the ogre mage made no move to defend himself, barely flinching to avoid the sweeping blade. He took a deep gash across his belly that spurted red, but his attention was focused hard upon the lich, which watched with a cold, empty expression in its flickering red eyes. The mummy lifted its bloody sword to strike again, stepping close enough so that the trailing edges of funereal wrappings nearly brushed against the ogre's legs as it moved, but still the ogre's attention did not waver.

What he was waiting for came so suddenly that he nearly missed it, but the ogre mage was a wily and experienced veteran of magical duels. He was not entirely sure of just what spell the lich was casting, but based on the strength of the *mass inflict wounds* it had opened with, it would be potent and devastating in its impact. The ogre felt his own magic surge in response, and he felt the sudden sense of loss as the multiple overlapping wards that surrounded him abruptly vanished. The mattock in his right fist suddenly exploded in size, growing until it almost dragged him down, its long shaft like that of a lance, the massive black head as heavy as a sledgehammer's.

Ozmad rushed forward, shouldering the mummy warrior aside. He took another grazing hit that burned like fire along his flank, but he ignored that wound as a mere distraction, his attention focused entirely on the lich. The thing waited patiently for him upon the dais, its only concession to his rush a slight tightening of skeletal fingers upon the light mace at its side. With the bulk of the ogre rushing toward it, it seemed as though the lich would be utterly shattered by the sheer force of that charge.

The ogre lowered the head of his weapon, so that it was almost like a battering ram. But his goal was not so much to attack as it was to bring the lich within close reach. And indeed as he tromped up atop the dais, the lich suddenly shifted a pace to the left, as Ozmad's *antimagic field* disrupted its *displacement* spell. Ozmad shifted his now-unwieldy *mattock*, but not quickly enough. The lich lifted its mace, and with surprising speed smashed the head of the weapon into the ogre's body, striking his elbow, forearm, and hip in quick succession. The creature was far stronger than it looked, and Ozmad nearly lost its grip on his weapon as its left arm went limp.

But the ogre was strong as well, even without his magical enhancements bolstering him. He swept his weapon around, crushing one of the long black metal ends into the lich's body, just under its left arm. Bones shivered from the force of the impact, but the lich was as tough as old leather, and it kept its footing. Ozmad struck it again, dragging it even closer, keeping it well within the radius of his *antimagic field*. The two seemed locked almost in an embrace, with the lich looking almost like a child up close against the ogre, lashing out with precise blows from the almost tiny mace in its hand. Every time it hit, Ozmad grunted, and as it smashed him in the side he nearly staggered as a blossom of pain announced a rib giving way. Now seriously injured, the ogre refused to

retreat, and hooked the lich from behind with his good right arm, crushing the skeletal thing against his body. Within the *antimagic field*, he was secure from the paralyzing effects of its touch, and the lich could not immediately break free. The arm holding its mace was caught in the grapple, leaving it unable to counterattack.

Amurru's allies attempted to come to its aid. One of the mummy warriors, tearing free from the *chilling tentacles*, rushed at the ogre from behind. Ghazaran, reading from another scroll, called down a *flame strike* that engulfed several of the mummies. The cleric had been given a respite against its foe by Jasek, who had attacked the mummy after it had struck down Parzad, before it could follow up against the cleric. Parzad continued to bleed out upon the dark stone of the floor, but for now Ghazaran ignored him, addressing the more immediate threat.

The cleric's spell sent a flood of heat rushing through the chamber. It should have turned all four of the mummies caught in the blast into pyres, but when the holy flames dissipated they revealed them barely scorched. The divine power infused in the spell had done some damage, but far less than the cleric had expected. And of course the edges of the flames had vanished as they had hit the edge of Ozmad's *antimagic field*, doing no damage to either the ogre or his undead foe.

"They are resistant to fire!" Ghazaran announced to his companions. "You must help the ogre, if he falls, the lich will destroy us!"

Chapter 418

THROUGH THE GAUNTLET

The Seer's lips tightened into a scowl. "You owe me for this," he said, pointing and firing off a *disintegrate* that hit the mummy right as it reached the edge of the ogre's defensive aura. The creature was transformed instantly into a cascade of fine ash.

But while Ozmad had been granted a respite, the others were still hard pressed by their foes. Falah and Aerim still faced two mummies each, and there were two others that had nearly broken free of Navev's *chilling tentacles*. The mummy that Ozmad had knocked down got up and leapt at the Seer, who drew back in sudden alarm, while Jasek darted back just in time to avoid being cut in half by the mummy he'd attacked. "If you have a scroll that can stop these things, now would be the time to use it!" he yelled, trying to protect his side, where a red blossom had appeared where the tip of the mummy's sword has scored him.

Falah took another hit, and fell to one knee, his khopesh clattering on the floor as it fell from his grip. The mummies brought their swords up together, and the Razhuri's career would have come to an immediate end at that point had Zafir Navev not been present.

The undead warlock lanced a slashing *eldritch blast* into both mummies, knocking them off their feet and back into the reach of his *chilling tentacles*. The mummy warriors started to get up almost immediately, but the tentacles slowed their efforts, snaking around their legs and arms.

Aerim, infused with the unnatural power of the Bloodways, was a bit more durable than the other fighter, but even he could not absorb the degree of damage that the two mummy warriors were dishing out for long. He was forced to withdraw, luring the pair after him with a series of feints, retreating back toward the corner of the chamber, trying not to leave himself open to a full attack. But there just was not enough real estate in the place for that strategy to work for long, and as the walls reared up behind him, it was clear that he'd run out of time.

With obvious reluctance, despite the fact of his allies falling all around him, Ghazaran withdrew a small crystal from the pouch at his neck. It pulsed in his hand even as he uttered the words from another scroll taken from the cache at his hip. The Seer fell down just a pace away, clutching his hip where a mummy's sword had bit deep even through his *stoneskin*, but the cleric paid him no heed. The words upon the scroll flashed with blue light and vanished, and as the spell released the crystal in his fist flared with an echo of white light, transforming his hand into a shining beacon. The crystal amplified the power of the spell from the scroll, and that white light was echoed again as holy eruptions appeared around each of the mummies, sundering the dark energies that sustained their existence in unlife. All but two of the mummies collapsed into heaps of bone and fragments of alchemically-treated fabric as the *mass cure* wrought its effects. The two survivors came under immediate attack as the cleric's spell gave the warriors a second wind, and both fell within seconds, hacked apart by magical blades backed by mundane strength.

The lich was unaffected, protected within Ozmad's *antimagic field*, but it could clearly see that the battle had gone against it. The ogre had driven it forward, smashing his prisoner against the nearest wall, crushing bones with the force of the impact. Ozmad's own body bore numerous wounds, but the ogre fought on with an unprecedented ferocity, refusing to release his captive. For a moment it looked as though the ogre would emerge victorious, but his charge had jostled his arm enough to allow Amurru to break free. The lich fell back into the back of the alcove. Ozmad turned, a bit dazed, and started toward it, but as Amurru retreated into the corridor at the rear of the alcove, it slipped out of the *antimagic field*. The lich cast a spell, and suddenly just wasn't there, without flicker or afterimage to hint that it had ever been there at all.

Ghazaran's final *mass cure* had brought Parzad back from death's door, and as the ogre returned to them he had already started to go to work with another of his many healing wands. All of them had taken serious injuries in the brief but bloody fray. Ozmad kept his distance, so that his *antimagic field* would not interfere with the cleric's healing.

“You should have used that crystal right off,” the Seer was saying, although the cleric, focused on his task, seemed to pay him little heed. “Had you given it to me, my lightning would have obliterated the entire group at the start. Instead, your... allies nearly died, and all of us could have all been killed, had Ozmad not rushed the lich and neutralized its magic. With the creature still ahead of us, it would be prudent to share all resources that might ensure our success.”

“I have only one more of the *Tears*, and it is not here; I have already promised its use to another,” Ghazaran said. He glanced at Aerim; the Duke met his gaze with a cold stare that did not waver. Finally, the cleric glanced down at the small crystal in the palm of his hand. It no longer glittered, and looked almost opaque, clouded through with gray. “I would have liked to have kept this one for the last confrontation, but its use was necessary here. It does mean that we will not have that resource to call upon when we reach the Ravager’s prison.”

The Seer’s lips tightened into a dour expression. “I am nearly out of higher-order spells. Let us hope that the lich has no further surprises of its own.”

“It will be waiting for us, ahead,” Ozmad said. He had taken up his *mattock* again, but without the enchantment that allowed him to reduce its size, he could barely hold it in his right hand. His left arm was still obviously broken, although he flexed it slightly, grimacing as his natural regenerative powers worked upon the damaged limb .

“Is there anything else you would tell us, cleric, about what lies ahead?” the Seer asked.

But Ghazaran merely turned from healing Falah’s wounds, and nodded to the ogre mage. “If you would like me to treat your injuries, you will have to let down your protective aura.”

The ogre shook his head. “I will be well enough within a few minutes. We are close to our destination; I can feel it. We must continue, and it would be wise to remain within the radius of the *antimagic field* for as long as it lasts. The cost in terms of the loss of our magical abilities is more than offset by the protection that it will offer.”

“A sound precaution. Shall we, then?”

They gathered together and set out again, all of them remaining within the bubble of antimagic wrought by the ogre’s magic. Even the Seer entered that radiance, reluctantly, as it meant that his spells and items would be of no avail so long as the ogre’s spell persisted. But it also meant that the lich would be unable to strike them with its own magic.

By the time that they reached the end of the far passage, the ogre had recovered sufficiently to carry his huge weapon in both hands. He cradled it before him like a scepter, the long black blades atop the mattock extending out above him like the markings of legionary standard, almost scraping the ceiling above. The weapon was

almost as long as he was tall, but within the *antimagic field* it was just an oversized tool, its magical properties suppressed.

The corridor ended in another of the vault doors that deposited them into a large square chamber. Deep alcoves were set into each of the walls, but their attention was drawn to the floor, which was detailed in an intricate pattern that resembled the corridors of a maze. Just looking at it caused their heads to swim, but nothing else happened as the ogre led them across the chamber toward the nearest of the alcoves.

“Remain close,” Ozmad rumbled. He did not have to repeat himself.

Jasek’s sharp eyes detected a hidden panel in the far wall of the alcove in the left wall. He could not immediately discern the means of operating the secret door, but Ozmad solved the problem with a few powerful swings of his *mattock of the titans*. Even without its magical powers, the adamantine blades made short work of the thin stone, and soon there was an opening large enough for even the ogre to step through without being crowded.

The chamber beyond the door was slightly larger than the last, but it seemed much smaller due to the clutter of materials that filled it. The place was obviously a magical laboratory, with dozens if not hundreds of strange and wondrous items laid out on the low stone tables that stretched across the breadth of the room, or were arranged upon the shallow shelves built into the walls. Some of the items were easily recognizable, ancient scrolls and wands of bone or ebony, sitting among weapons that still looked sharp despite their obvious age. There were books, too, ancient tomes resting on the shelves along the far wall, bound in cracked and faded leather, plates of wood or metal, or even, in a few cases, the scales of some long-dead creature.

“Wondrous!” the Seer hissed, his expression covetous as he started toward the nearest of the worktables.

“Remain within the *field!*” Ghazaran warned, but the wizard paid little heed. “These items fall within my remit, per our bargain!” the mage said. He stopped beside a cluster of parchment scrolls, and reached for one with reedy fingers.

But as he touched the scroll, it... *moved*. Animated by some unseen force, it slid away from him, across the table. Frowning, the wizard reached for the next scroll, but it too moved away, followed a moment later by the rest.

“Looks like the owner of this place doesn’t want you messing with his stuff,” Jasek said. His words were light, but there was a hint of an edge in his tone, and his hands clenched.

“There is a entity here,” Ghazaran warned. Falah and Aerim had raised their weapons, but they remained close to the ogre, and the potential protection of his aura of antimagic.

The Seer, wary now, stepped back. But even as his boots scraped against the stone floor, the various items on the tables and nearby shelves began to rattle and shift, as if everything in the room had become possessed. And then, everything flew into the air, weapons and wands and scrolls alike dancing wildly around the chamber. It looked like utter chaos, but it was obvious that there was an intelligence behind it, a fact made obvious a moment later as one of the weapons, a gleaming shortsword, suddenly spun and dove straight toward the Seer, making a beeline toward the wizard's heart.

Chapter 419

THE AMALGAMATION

The wizard lifted a hand to cast a spell, but the sword was much faster, driven by an invisible hand.

There was a blur of motion, and the sword clanged loudly as Aerim deflected it with a sudden sweep of his long blade. The sword kept going through the parry, and its edge glanced off of the Seer's arm. The hit would have sliced his bicep down to the bone, but the wizard's *stoneskin* protected him, to a degree.

"Get back, man!" Aerim warned, thrusting the mage behind him. He looked into the mass of items swirling above. His eyes were drawn to an axe that seemed to shift malevolently, but the more immediate danger turned out to be a wand of faded bone that was suddenly pointing toward them, its head flaring with magical energy.

The sword was not done, either; it stopped just a few feet past the Seer, spinning in mid-air so that the point was aimed once more at the wizard's heart. But before it could launch itself again, the weapon suddenly trembled, and fell onto the surface of the adjacent table with a loud clatter.

The bone wand fired off a *lightning bolt*, but the blazing arc likewise died as it struck the edge of the advancing *antimagic field* that accompanied Ozmad. The others formed a wedge close around the ogre mage, pressing in close between the tables so that they could remain within the effect. The menacing axe had started toward Aerim, but now it spun away, as if wary of the aura that had caught up the sword. The sword lay there harmlessly until the ogre and his coterie were well past; then it sprang back into the air, joining the swirl that remained a good distance from the ogre mage's position.

Ozmad led them across the room in a slow but steady progression, ignoring the chaos above and around them. The amalgamation followed them, but could not affect them within the protective bubble of disruptive energy. They left it behind as they approached the room's only evident exit, another heavy door set into the wall to their right. The

others watched, wary of some surprise, as Falah and Jasek worked the mechanism, and then they were through, leaving the animated magical laboratory behind them.

What they encountered next drew a startled breath from all of them.

The chamber was vast in a way that made even the huge cavern of the stone guardians seem pedestrian by contrast. The place was a huge dome, a hemisphere carved in perfect symmetry from the odd, swirling stone of the complex.

There was no doubt in any of their minds that they had found their destination.

Most of the chamber was dominated by a vast pyramid that looked solid, at first glance. A second look revealed it to be made up of an energy that subtly shifted and shimmered. Beams of colored light emerged from openings along the perimeter of the room, two visible from their current position, one red, one yellow. The color of the beams faded into the gray mass of the pyramid, although occasionally a tendril of that color twisted through the barrier before disappearing. A gantry of silvery metal ran around the edge of the room about fifteen feet above them, its spars anchored directly into the curving wall, and providing access to the openings where the colored beams emerged. There was no way to tell how far back those round tunnels went, or where the energy beams originated.

“There it is,” Ozmad said, and it was only then that the others realized that the guardian had already proceeded them here.

The lich stood at the base of the pyramid, an insignificant ant against the backdrop of such a huge and eternal thing as the barrier. It stood near a discoloration in the stone, a line of black smear that ran across the floor, reaching almost into the barrier like the branch of a dead tree. The pyramid was opaque, but each of them could almost see the stirring within the barrier, almost like a child waiting to be born.

“Remain within the *antimagic field*,” Ozmad directed, unnecessarily, as all of them had felt the bite of the lich’s magic. All save Navev, but the mummy had faded back into the shadows, and was almost invisible in the doorway behind them.

“Step aside or be destroyed, guardian,” Ghazaran said, his voice echoing oddly within the chamber. The place was a perfect dome, but the pyramidal barrier did something odd to sounds, causing a weird reverberation that twisted and distorted them before they returned.

The lich did not move. “Turn away from this madness,” it said, its voice hollow but strong, and utterly determined. “You know not what you do here. The Ravager is a being of primal destruction; it cannot be controlled. What you will unleash upon the world will return against you a thousandfold, leaving only grief and rage in its wake.”

“We are fully cognizant of the consequences of our actions,” the cleric returned. The lich focused its glowing eyes upon the man, and after a moment, it nodded.

“So be it. But I cannot allow you to do this.”

The companions shifted, expecting some sort of attack, but the lich merely reached back and thrust a skeletal hand against the barrier behind it. Something flashed in its hand, and they could see its fingers sliding into the pyramid. The result was immediate; ripples of color spread out from the point of contact, and they could sense something deeper, a disturbance within the field.

“We must intervene,” Ozmad said, starting forward, the others forming a tight ring around the ogre. But they had barely covered a half-dozen steps when the lich’s actions resulted in a more immediate and dramatic response.

The only warning they had was a slight bulging in the barrier. It pushed back against the lich’s touch, strong enough to force the undead guardian back several steps. And then there was a blurring, or perhaps a tearing, as something came through the area of distortion. It came through like a charging dragon, trampling Amurru into the ground without seeming to even notice that the lich was there. The barrier snapped back into its usual position behind it.

“The Ravager!” Jasek exclaimed, looking up at the monstrosity with wide eyes. It was certainly as big as a dragon, built like some freakish combination of fiend and wolverine, its six clawed legs built to burrow and rend, its angular face broken by a massive jaw that was generously populated with razor-sharp teeth. Claws, teeth, and eyes were all utter black, devoid of color, while its hairless body was a heavy red, deepening the higher on its body one looked, until its crest bore the color of freshly spewn blood. Its flesh bulged with ridges of bone, as though plates of armor had been inserted under the skin. It was fearsome, and it exuded an aura of sheer destruction that only intensified as it fixed its eyes upon those that had intruded upon its slumber.

“No, this is but a spawn of the beast,” Ozmad explained. The others shot an incredulous glance between the ogre mage and the creature—this thing was just an *offspring* of the Ravager? “It would appear that the guardian has chosen to release one of those within its remit, in order to keep the greater entity confined.”

But there was no time for further consultation or consideration, as the creature recovered quickly, and lowered its head as it charged toward them.

Chapter 420

SPAWN OF THE RAVAGER

They barely had time to lift their weapons before the monstrous creature slammed into them.

It did not slow in its rush, just snapped its head around as it barreled into them, scattering the group as it tore by. The defenders managed a few hits; Aerim's sword bit into its shoulder a moment before he was knocked flying, while Falah's khopesh opened a gash in one of its legs, before the Razhuri vanished under its pounding claws. Ozmad brought up his mattock like a lance, but the impact of the creature nearly tore the weapon out of his grasp. The ogre was flung aside like a wooden pin in a game of bowls, and he took down Ghazaran as well, knocking the cleric onto his back. Jasek and Parzad hurled themselves out of the creature's path, narrowly avoiding the churning claws, and the Seer simply turned and ran, moving out of the rush of its charge, and not looking back until he was at least ten paces clear. His first action once free was to invoke an *invisibility* spell, and he vanished from view in mid-step.

The spawn's rush took it almost to the wall, and it lifted its frontmost claws to bite into the stone, lifting its head a good fifteen feet off the ground, almost brushing the bottom of the metal gantry above. It twisted its head almost full around, and no sooner had it marked its targets than it was pushing off, leaving deep gouges in the wall as it spun its body to face them again. It was remarkably fast for a creature of its size.

The companions were slowly getting to their feet. Some had been hurt more seriously than the others; Falah staggered as his left leg nearly gave way under him. The Razhuri had been trampled under the creature's claws, and blood spurted from a series of deep gashes in the limb. Despite the grievous wound, the fighter stumbled toward where his sword had fallen, grimacing against the pain. Aerim seemed less injured, and the fighter even managed a flourish with his great blade as he took up a defensive stance, waiting for the creature's second rush.

Ozmad barely looked at the creature as it turned around and started toward them again. "We must act now, before the guardian recovers," the ogre said. Reaching down, he grasped Ghazaran's shoulder roughly. Dismissing his *antimagic field*, the ogre spoke a word of magic, and both of them vanished.

A moment later, Amurru hurled its own magic at the companions. The lich was still prone, a number of its bones crushed under the rough treatment of the ravager spawn's arrival. But its power had not been inhibited by the damage it had sustained, and with a faint flicker both Falah and Jasek suddenly disappeared. Amurru slowly pulled itself to its feet, scanning the chamber as if looking for something.

Aerim found himself standing nearly alone against the ravager spawn's wrath, but the Duke did not seek flight. Instead he fell into a crouch as the creature reached him, hurling himself two paces to the right as its head lunged for him, its jaws opening wide to engulf him in a mess of sharp teeth. This time the creature's rush was tempered, its efforts focused on this single foe that had wounded it in its first blind charge.

The thing was fast, adjusting its lunge to account for the Duke's evasion. But Aerim was quick as well, spinning his body around in mid-air, agile despite the heavy weight of his armor and weapons. The spawn's jaws snapped closed on empty air, but its snout pounded into the Duke's shoulder with the force of a battering ram, knocking him back and nearly off his feet. But the Duke recovered swiftly, sweeping his sword up before the monster could pull its head back. The strike delivered only a clipping blow, but a jet of black blood spurted from the wound under its jaw, and its roar was anything but mild. At that point it might have been wiser for the Duke to withdraw, to open the gap between himself and the creature, but instead he stepped forward and drove half of the length of his blade into the juncture where the creature's neck met its body.

If the spawn's initial roar had shook the chamber, this one made it seem like the place was coming apart. Aerim twisted the sword in the wound, and leaned forward to push it deeper, but he never got the chance.

The ravager spawn's head snapped down, and seized the Duke in a crushing grip that trapped his left arm and most of that side of his body, from his shoulder to his hip. It lifted him like a dog manhandling a squirrel, and as it rose up, its forelimbs coming off the ground as it settled its weight back, it tore into the trapped fighter's sides with its razor-sharp claws. For an interminably long second it dug those claws deeper into the body of its prey, then it sudden snapped its head up, jerking to the side as it opened its jaws in a spray of red, releasing its victim. Aerim went flying across the room, landing just shy of the curving wall. His sword clattered loudly some distance away, making more noise than the Duke, who landed with a dull thump despite the weight of his mail. Aerim lay there, somehow clinging to consciousness. Blood lay splattered on the ground all around him, and he could just make out the remains of his left leg, which lay on the floor about ten feet away. His left arm was trapped under his body, but it was obvious that if that limb was still attached to him, it was only by the most tenuous of connections.

Making noises that did not sound human, the Duke quivered and bled.

A bolt of black energy sliced across one side of the creature's face. Gore trailing from its head, the creature twisted nimbly to face the source of this new attack. It fixed immediately upon Navev. The mummy had moved fully into the chamber, keeping in the shadows along the curving wall. It seemed unconcerned with having been detected, although no living thing could have been concerned with the vicious monstrosity that came charging forward, intent on repeating what it had done with Duke Aerim.

Navev stopped walking and waited to receive that rush. The creature was only a few paces away, its head already darting to seize it, when the mummy's figure shimmered slightly. The ravager spawn's head tore through the illusion left behind by the warlock's *flee the scene* invocation. It recovered quickly, but its head and shoulder still glanced off the chamber wall with enough force to leave long scratches in the wall. The magical

stone quickly healed, the marks disappearing within a few seconds. The damage done to the creature's disposition, however, was not as quick to disappear.

The creature's charge had covered for a new noise in the chamber, as the vault door leading to the laboratory slowly creaked open. The company that entered the vast room was larger than the one that had accompanied Ozmad into the place less than a minute previously, but they were no less wary. All eyes turned to the ravager spawn as it bounced off the wall and clawed its way back toward the center of the room.

"Oh, fuck," Dar said, echoing the sentiments of everyone there.

The creature's attention turned on them a moment later, or rather, it was drawn to the sudden appearance of a new adversary. The thing that suddenly appeared behind the ravager spawn looked much like the creature, only slightly smaller, and white where the other was red. The second creature lifted itself up onto its hind limbs, its claws slashing the air as it issued a roar that was obviously a direct challenge. The ravager spawn clearly took it as such, spinning around and darting forward at this new enemy. But the white spawn drew back with surprising speed, bounding back in a way that should have been impossible for a creature of its body structure, remaining just out of reach of the snapping jaws of the red ravager, and its slicing claws. But its charge was taking it straight toward the newcomers standing in the entrance.

"Scatter! Take cover!" Dar yelled, but his commands were all but drowned out in the noise of the creature's rush, and then it was upon them, and all hell broke loose.

Chapter 421

DISTRACTIONS

The ravager spawn dove through the illusion at full speed, knocking aside those of the companions who could not get out of the way quickly enough. Kiron was hit squarely by its left foreleg; even though the impact hadn't been intentional it was strong enough to slam him hard against the wall just left of the mithral doorframe. The creature seemed to realize what was happening and started to stop, but its momentum carried it forward, and its head and shoulders thrust into the partially open doorway. It snarled as one of its legs cracked hard on the mithral ring that encircled the doorway, but the collision angered it more than causing serious injury.

The companions were quick to recover. The group had become divided, with Qatarn and the soldiers on the far side of the doorway, in the laboratory, along with Zethas, Selaht, and Maricela. The twang of crossbows sounded over the noise of the creature's roars, indicating that they were attacking. Aldos jammed his glaive into the joint where one of the creatures hind legs met its body, but the weapon slid harmlessly off of its

armored hide. On its far side, Kiron found himself with little room between the creature's body and the wall. He lifted his sword to attack, but was forced to jump back to avoid a clawed leg that sought traction against the wall where he'd been standing.

Dar stepped into the gap between two of the creature's legs and sliced down with *Justice*. The axiomatic sword opened a long gash in its body, and a stream of blood, hissing with the heat of the monster's body, shot out over the fighter's chest. The ravager spawn's roar became an angry shriek, and all six of its legs seized onto the doorframe or the surrounding stone as it sought to pull itself free of the door.

But before it could free itself, Letellia drove a *clenched fist* into the back of the door, slamming it hard against the creature's body, crushing it in the jam of the portal. The mithral hinges creaked loudly in protest, but the door held.

"Hit it while it's caught!" Dar yelled. He put his own words into action, slicing *Justice* through one of its legs as it flailed violently, seeking a fresh purchase. The sword again bit deep, but it was like hewing a log for all the injury suffered by the monster. Aldos hit it again, and this time his blade bit through its hide, but the gash he opened barely showed blood. Kiron was shouting something across its body, but the words were lost in the noise made by the ravager spawn's struggles.

They did not get a chance to press the attack further, as the ravager's claws tore into the door and its frame, and with a sudden lurch of its body it simply ripped the vault door off its hinges. The mithral disk, which had to weigh thousands of pounds, went flying, almost clipping Allera before it spun and clattered to the floor. The creature pushed off and spun as it hurled itself back into the prison chamber. Dar and Aldos were hurled backward by its violent movements; both fell to the ground, although they were able to keep their grip on their weapons. They saw that a half dozen quarrels jutted from its head and neck, but none of the missiles had penetrated deep enough to draw blood. A black streak ran along the side of its head below its right eye; apparently Maricela had been able to hit it with a spell.

The creature seemed a bit disoriented, having just freed itself, surrounded by foes. It reacted by lashing out blindly at the nearest opponents. Kiron, still behind it, slammed his sword down into its thick torso, and the monster reflexively flexed, pinning him between the wall and its body. A claw slammed down into the joint of wall and floor to anchor it, almost crushing the knight's leg under it. Kiron struggled to free his arms enough to use his huge blade, while trying to avoid being mangled under the thing's awesome weight.

Selaht leapt forward, flames blazing around his hands. He delivered a punch squarely in the center of the creature's chest, a blow that seemed almost pathetic against the thing's size and bulk. But the ravager spawn responded immediately, slashing its head down like the chop of an axe. The side of its jaw, ridged with bone, hit the monk squarely on the shoulder, spinning him around as he went flying through the wreckage of the doorway. The creature started to follow, but another storm of quarrels and arrows

flew into its face, and Qatarn stepped into the breach, thrusting with his sword like the point of a spear, trying to buy time as Maricela helped the injured monk to his feet. His weak attack did little to hinder it, and as it lurched forward the claws of its foremost right limb clipped his shins, slicing through the greaves protecting the front of his boots as though the metal plates were wraps of parchment. The veteran centurion's face twisted in pain, but he held his ground, poking at the creature's leg with his sword, keeping its attention focused on him.

"You all right?" Dar yelled at Aldos. The knight nodded, using the haft of his weapon to help him regain his feet. Healing power flooded through both of them, as Allera expended one of her remaining *mass cure wounds* spells. Letellia was just a few feet away, but her attention was directed inward, toward the Ravager's prison, rather than at the spawn.

"We cannot linger here," the sorceress said. "Our enemies have gone ahead, to collapse the barrier. We must stop them."

Dar looked torn; he'd fought the ravager spawn before, and he had to know that their current forces had little chance of defeating even one of the creatures. But Allera stepped toward the sorceress decisively. "We'll go," she said. "Follow as soon as you can!"

Dar started to shake his head, but another roar from the creature drew his attention back in time to see Qatarn's upper body vanish into the ravager spawn's jaws. The sickening crunch of bones being crushed traveled clearly even over the noise it was making, and they could see the man's body go limp even before the creature lifted its head, its prize dangling beneath its clenched mouth.

"General!" Aldos yelled, clutching his glaive with white-fingered hands.

"Go!" Dar shouted at all of them, the word torn from him. Aldos started forward, but Dar seized his shoulder and roughly spun him around. "You're with them, knight!" he yelled, pushing him toward Letellia and Allera. Aldos had no chance to protest, as Letellia reached out and touched both him and the healer, invoking a *dimension door*. All three vanished.

Dar's roar was part frustration, part fury, and part fear as he lifted his sword and charged at the creature.

Chapter 422

SACRIFICES

Reality spun and then resolved with a lurching suddenness. Ghazaran stumbled and would have likely fallen if it had not been for the rail attached to the metal gantry. He looked up, a bit disoriented, into the mass of the gray pyramid, rising up high above him, almost to the apex of the domed ceiling high above. They were only about fifteen feet above the floor, but it felt like a lot more than that.

“What... what happened?”

“The degree of power present here is interfering with my magic,” Ozmad explained. He was offering something to the cleric; after a moment to gather himself Ghazaran realized that it was one of the gemed daggers. The ruby set into the hilt gleamed brightly, as though drinking in the pale light that radiated from the pyramid. The ogre was holding another of the daggers; the one with the blue gem, Ghazaran realized. Looking around, he saw that they had traveled around the perimeter of the room. From their current position, he could not see the entrance, although he could still hear the sounds of the battle with the ravager spawn.

“The lich will realize where we have gone,” the ogre said, impatient. It all but thrust the hilt of the dagger into the cleric’s chest. He took it, holding it gingerly. The disorientation from his passage through Ozmad’s *dimension door* was beginning to fade. He could see two of the colored beams from their current position, one red, one blue. Matching the daggers, he realized. He looked up at the ogre with a question on his lips.

“The warlock has the third,” the ogre said before he could speak. “Zafir Navev knows what must be done.”

Ghazaran nodded. Apparently Ozmad had been making arrangements of his own on the side. The ogre mage had long guided his own plans, and was possessed of secrets that had surprised the cleric more than once. But for the nonce, their interests appeared to be in alignment, and Ghazaran felt a sudden singularity focus his thoughts as the realization of his goal drew close at hand.

“The dagger-key will protect you from the beam,” the ogre was explaining. “Do not relinquish it. It will be needed to destroy the power source as well. There may be another guardian as well, within the generation chamber. Do not linger; there are other powers at work here.”

The cleric nodded. “The hour has come.” Ozmad nodded, and without further discourse turned and strode toward the opening where the blue beam lanced out into the pyramid. That was further away from the entrance, leaving Ghazaran the task of moving closer to the battle that still raged, from the noises that echoed oddly throughout the place. The ogre’s warning about the guardian remained fresh in his mind as well, so he did not linger, moving as quickly and quietly as he could along the gantry, toward the source of the red beam.

* * * * *

The Seer watched the ravager spawn engage the Camarians, although he felt only limited security within the protective embrace of his *invisibility*. His illusion had worked with superb efficacy, but he knew he was outmatched by the sorceress that accompanied the other group, even before she summoned that *clenched fist*. With the bulk of his spellpower already expended, he had no desire to engage in a magical duel, even for the items that the enemy caster no doubt possessed.

His philosophy was to know when to retreat to fight another day; it had stood him in good stead over the years.

But he'd only taken a single step back when he sensed a sudden chill, a dark presence at his back.

Spinning, words of magic already forming on his lips, he froze as a skeletal claw seized him by the throat. The chill pierced his skin and penetrated to his bones, and the spell he'd been starting to cast fled. Everything faded into indistinction, save for the twin pinpoints of red fire that held his attention fully.

"Where are the keys?" the lich said, its words forming complete in his mind.

* * * * *

Dar felt as though his arm was being torn from its socket. The creature's sweeping claw had only just clipped his shoulder, but one of the long black talons had pierced his armor, digging deep into the joint. The wound was terrible, but in a strange bit of luck the vicious tug as it yanked the clawed limb around pulled him out of the path of its snapping jaws. The ridged edge of the monster's head had rang his helmet hard enough to make him see stars, but he'd avoided the fate suffered by Qatarn just a few moments ago.

For a moment all he saw was a red blur, and then the pressure on his shoulder vanished, and the floor rose up to meet him. Pain exploded again as he landed hard, awkwardly, on the damaged shoulder, but he embraced it, fighting through the agony as he had so many times before. Somehow, he'd kept his grip on *Justice* with his other hand, or maybe the sword had clung to him, somehow. It had felt that way sometimes, when he'd wielded *Valor*.

He could not see. As he staggered to his feet, he pulled off his helmet; the battered and dented metal now offered more hindrance than protection. Blood trailed down his face; there was a gash above one of his eyes, and he blinked in an attempt to clear his vision.

The monster was there, just a few paces away. Kiron had stepped forward to engage it, explaining why it hadn't torn him apart while it had had him at its mercy a moment past. The knight's sword blazed a bright path, but even though the hit was a solid one, Dar

could see how slight the wounds it had taken were. It was regenerating, slowly, and he knew how durable these things were. Knew from experience. Without Letellia's spellpower, and Allera's healing...

He pushed that thought ruthlessly aside with an angry shake of his head. He'd taken a beating just in the few seconds since Allera had left with the sorceress, but this was not the first time he'd absorbed wounds that would have killed a lesser man. He was older, and maybe not wiser, but he was still Corath Dar, and no overgrown weasel was going to put an end to *him*.

His yell caught the monster's attention; it spun to face him as he began his charge. Its black eyes shone; blood trailed in runnels down the sides of its jaw. It answered the man's cry with a roar of its own, and dove forward to meet him.

Chapter 423

ONE KNIGHT

Aldos Jennar had been eleven on the Night of the Dead, when Camar had been gripped in a cataclysm of violence and death. The memories of that night had been burned into his psyche, and he still woke from vivid dreams of his family's armsmen and servants holding the front door of their house in the Gold Quarter against a pack of ghouls, the foul monsters' screams echoing through the house. The last attack had broken through, ghouls crashing through the heavy-paned windows into the study and the dining hall. He remembered his father standing at the head of the stairs, a sword that Aldos had never remembered seeing him holding bare in his hand.

The young Jennar had been in a position to inherit a thousand acres of prime land not far from the city, along with the estate within Camar, and investments worth almost ten thousand gold crowns. But that night, his life had changed. He never got a chance to meet the man who had led the armored soldiers who had come to their aid; his father had exchanged barely ten words with him before he took his forces back out into the night, to rescue others from the wandering knots of undead that were rampaging throughout the city. But he had never forgotten the face of Talen Karedes, and six years after that dread night, on reaching his majority, he had abandoned his inheritance to his younger brother Kayel, and had dedicated his life to the order of the Dragon, the Knights of Camar.

Now, running along a metal gantry, he felt a sense of everything falling apart around him that he hadn't felt since that deadly night twelve years ago. An empty hole flared in his chest, a sadness that he could not let himself feel now. There would be time for mourning later, if Allera could not bring Petronia back from the dead as she had promised. He glanced back over his shoulder, but the curve of the chamber and the

vast gray pyramid had already obscured his view of the entrance. He could hear the battle that continued to rage there, however.

The young knight clung to his duty, his orders. He felt a twinge at having abandoned Kiron, but he knew that his superior would have given him the same orders he'd received. Duty, the Mission, was all important. For all that Kiron was three years younger than he was, he'd developed a respect for the other knight that had nothing to do with their relative ranks. So he drew strength from the other man's example, and ran toward who knew what. Allera Hialar and the mysterious woman, the sorcerer who'd transported them up to this gantry, were each heading for one of the tunnels accessed by the metal scaffold that ran around the entire perimeter of the room. The one ahead, its blue beam becoming visible ahead as he ran, was his objective. He had no idea what he was going to face once he got there; he only knew that he had to stop the enemy from doing whatever they had come here to do.

And then, as he looked up again, he saw a man in his path.

The knight came to an abrupt halt, surprised. The man was a lean figure, Drusian by his coloring and look, clad in non-descript garments that might have been worn by a middling-prosperous farmer or tradesman. But there was something else, a look in his eyes, that sent a cold chill down the knight's back.

And perhaps most disturbing, he had not been there just a moment earlier, before Aldos's gaze had momentarily swept away from his destination, and he'd glanced back toward the chamber entry.

"Stand aside," he said, but he'd already lowered his glaive.

The man's mouth twisted slightly, and something... dangerous... entered his gaze. "I must aid my Master. I am not strong enough to hinder the sorceress, but you, you I can defeat, young knight."

Aldos's response was to charge forward, but he only made it one step forward before his entire body seemed to lock up. He tottered on his right foot, his weight unbalanced, and almost fell onto his face. He could not even twist his head, and could only watch as the Drusian stepped forward. The man was not even armed, but Aldos could do nothing as the man calmly pressed the head of his polearm aside, and stepped up to him, close enough for the knight to smell him.

The Drusian reached down and drew Aldos's dagger from its sheath at his hip. The knight struggled to move, but he could only tremble as the man lifted the blade with one hand, and with the other lifted up the metal links of his gorget.

Then pain, as the Drusian dragged his own knife across his throat. He could feel the blood gushing, and his awareness seemed to pulse out of his body with it.

“You have failed, knight,” the man said. The words pounded in Aldos head, and suddenly, desperately, he lurched forward. His weakening body seemed to lessen the hold that the Drusian had on his mind, and he collided with the man as he fell. The Drusian tried to break free, but Aldos snagged his arm around the man’s body. He hit the railing hard, and both men toppled over it, plummeting head-first down toward the hard floor fifteen feet below.

Aldos did not feel the impact. He was only dimly aware of the body of the Drusian under his. His vision was already growing dim, but he could just feel the man’s body, shaking. The knight’s lips twisted into a faint smile; the man’s neck was broken.

And then, everything dissolved into black.

Chapter 424

LOST

“Light,” Jasek said.

The small stone in the thief’s hand flared, casting a steady illumination that fully revealed the small chamber. There wasn’t much to reveal; the entire place was maybe six paces across, the irregular stone walls crowding close to a ceiling that was too low for a man to stand without brushing it in most places. Walls, floor, and ceiling alike were all of that odd banded stone that repaired itself when damaged. There was one exit, a low tunnel that was really more of a crawlspace.

Falah was on his knees, coughing. Jasek touched the necklace he wore under his tunic; with it he could breath easily, but he could still taste the taint on the air.

“The air is bad here,” he said. “We need to find a way out.”

Falah could not reply, but he nodded. Jasek led the way, fitting into the low tunnel easily. He glanced back at Falah, but the Razhuri followed without comment, his sword scraping on the floor behind him. The man could be single-minded in his actions.

The tunnel continued on, curving slightly to the left. There was one tight spot where he feared that Falah would get stuck, but the man merely shifted his sword and then dragged himself through, using his strong arms and legs to navigate the narrow space. And then they were through into a larger space. The tunnel opened onto a ledge that ran along the edge of the cavern, which was large enough that Jasek’s light failed to illuminate the floor below. The air was thick and moist; likely there was water below. The toxin in the air was also strong, as Falah’s distress continued.

“It looks like there’s another tunnel at the far end of the ledge,” Jasek said. “Let me check it out. If necessary, I’ll find us a way to get down to the floor of this room.”

Falah managed a grunt between coughs that Jasek accepted as agreement. The ledge was tight, ranging from a scant foot to almost three, but he was used to negotiating such obstacles, and he felt little danger of falling. Behind him, he heard Falah moving forward along the ledge, not really following him, but just trying to find a place where he could maneuver.

Some primal sense warned him, even as a sudden chill filled the air.

He looked down to see a massive form emerge from the darkness below. It was a huge worm, its black hide glistening, sucking the light into it. It moved with silence, and as Jasek looked at it, he felt as though someone had stabbed an icicle into his chest. His heart froze, clenched in sudden terror.

A noise came from Falah, and the thief realized that the monster’s long head was rising toward the fighter, not him. And then a blast of pure, unrelenting cold hit him, swallowing sight and sound and everything except for the feeling of being frozen. He was surprised when it passed, but before he could see clearly again he heard a potent THUMP that nearly caused him to plummet off the ledge.

Stumbling forward, he looked back, and wished he hadn’t.

The ledge was covered with slicks of ice all the way back to the mouth of the low tunnel from which they’d emerged. Falah was no longer there, but where he’d been standing Jasek could see gobs of red clinging to the ice-streaked stone. His gaze shifted to the chamber below, where he could see the black worm, its body rippling at the edges of his light. Its head had turned away, panning a leisurely course away from him, but as he watched it continued full around until it was starting closer again.

He didn’t hesitate further, and dove forward. Reckless, his boots just starting to slide on the slick rock with each step, he nearly toppled off the ledge a dozen times. His focus was on the tunnel opening on the far side of the chamber, where the ledge came to an end. It had looked like a tunnel, anyway, when he’d entered the room; if it was just a niche that came to an end, he was dead.

Of course, he might be dead in any case. He could feel the cold of the creature again, somehow piercing even the chill that had suffused him from its *cone of cold*. A lassitude seeped into him, but he fought it off, knowing that to falter, even for a moment, would end him.

He didn’t have to look back to know that the monster’s head was surging forward to engulf him. An involuntary shriek was torn from his lips as he leapt forward, diving for the tunnel mouth.

SOURCES OF POWER

The red beam filled the chamber with a bright crimson glow. The room was an almost perfect hemisphere, with the floor slanting down slightly to form a shallow bowl. In the center of the floor a tall pedestal that seemed to rise out of the substance of the ground, the only feature of the place other than the source of the beam. That source seemed to hover above the top of the pedestal rather than be supported by it, a translucent sphere of brilliant red energy with a diameter that approached five feet.

Ghazaran held the dagger-key tightly as he stepped out of the beam. Even with the protection of that device, he'd felt a penetrating sensation during his brief transit down the tunnel from the prison chamber, and he had a deep conviction that without the key, that beam would have torn the very flesh from his bones. His eyes were drawn to the sphere. If Ozmad was right, the key was the only thing that could damage that sphere, and bring down the energy beam.

He took a step forward, but before he could approach the sphere, there was a flare of power, accompanied by a stinging explosion of ash and flames, and a sudden odor of brimstone. Ghazaran barely had time to fling up an arm to protect his face before the pit fiend stepped into the room.

The devil did not mess around, immediately hitting him with a *meteor swarm*.

Ghazaran staggered back against the wall as the streaking spheres hit. Two of them clipped his arm and shoulder respectively, but he fared decently well against the explosion of fire. The attack penetrated his *spell resistance*—a pit fiend was no trivial caster—but his warding against fire absorbed almost all of the damage from the *swarm*.

The fiend, immune to the flames that swirled around it, grunted slightly as its foe absorbed its attack. It started toward him, preparing a *greater dispel* as it came.

Ghazaran did not wait for the devil to come within reach. Unrolling another scroll from the sun church's cache, he held it up so that the fiend could see the sunburst etched into the back of the parchment. He held the depleted chrysalium crystal he had used in the battle with the mummies and their lich master, but he felt barely a flicker of power from it. Still he channeled that flicker into his casting, and drew as well upon the might of his own patron, the chaos that was *anaethema* to lawful beings such as the pit fiend.

It was a close thing, very close, but the *banishment* spell took hold, and the devil was cast screaming back into the Hells.

After taking a deep breath to steady himself, the cleric stepped toward the radiant sphere.

* * * * *

Ozmad stepped warily out of the blue beam into a room that seemed to be a smaller version of the vast hemisphere that housed the pyramidal prison of the Ravager. The ogre's skin still tingled; the beam had completely suppressed all of his magic. It was similar to what his own *antimagic field* spell did, yet the feeling had been... alien.

He held the mithral dagger with the star sapphire in the hilt in one hand, and lugged his huge *mattock* with the other. He looked at the glowing sphere in the center of the room, the source of the beam, but made no move toward it, not yet.

Only a faint shimmer in the air announced the arrival of the guardian. The thing that appeared, floating above the floor, was familiar, if massive for its breed. Ten eyes on twisting stalks quickly swiveled to focus on him, and as its body turned, Ozmad could see the last already opening, a big orb that bulged so wide that the ogre could have spread both hands across and still not fully covered it.

The ogre didn't wait for that eye to face him. He summoned his magic, held at the ready for just this confrontation. His *antimagic field* erupted not an instant too soon, as several beams lanced out from the beholder's eyestalks, vanishing as they struck his barrier. The invisible cone of antimagic that issued from the creature's central eye filled the space between them, but the two auras simply met without further effect. The blue beam was completely unaffected by the fields, and the blue sphere did not so much as flicker, even though it was within the effect of both.

Ozmad tucked the dagger into his belt and charged, lifting his huge *mattock*. Even with its magic nullified, it was a considerable weapon, and the room, though large, was not big enough so that the beholder could escape its long reach. The creature seemed to recognize that as well, for it stopped firing off its beams, and slid toward him, rows of long teeth appearing as a big chunk of its lower body split open into a truly fearsome set of jaws.

The beholder was an impressive combatant, but its main potency lay in its magical abilities, and it could not overcome the ogre in a solely physical confrontation. Less than a minute after his arrival, Ozmad stepped forward over the deflated corpse of the thing, and approached the blue sphere.

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Zafir Navev seemed utterly unfazed by the yellow beam as it stepped out of the tunnel into the smaller domed chamber. A golden sphere hovered atop a pedestal in the center of the room, radiant with light that gathered into the beam of energy that departed through the passage it had just navigated. The mithral dagger shone brightly

in that light, especially the small globe of yellow topaz set into its hilt; that glowed like a small sun.

The mummy looked around; it had gotten wary. Part of the thing wanted the release of oblivion, *craved* it, but another part clung to existence like lichen on a rock, unable to break free. Power flared around it, a cloak that it wore constantly now, enough power to have already sundered the grip of sanity, had the creature been mortal.

The guardian appeared from behind the pedestal. Navev faced it without concern, although the thing was the strongest yet of the three entities bound to the power sources. The skull hovered in the air, flashes of light coming from it as the gems set into its eye sockets and jaws caught the glow of the golden sphere. The demilich drew upon its powerful magic and unleashed a green ray intended to *disintegrate* the mummy.

The spell was potent, unbelievably so, but as the beam struck the mummy, it flared against a frisson of red energies that flared bright against the emerald lance of the demilich's spell. Navev's *entropic warding* invocation absorbed the energies of the spell, which flashed in a bright cascade around it, causing no harm to the creature within the bright display.

Navev countered immediately with an *eldritch blast* that arced a black line that slashed into the glowing skull like a whip. But the demilich's defenses were far more potent than those of the mummy, and the dark bolt merely dissolved into nothing as it struck.

The demilich tried again with an empowered *fireball* that unleashed a blazing fury of heat and eager flames throughout the small chamber. The spell was appropriately selected against the typical weakness of a mummy, but Navev's amulet offered a strong defense against fire, and while the undead warlock did not escape unscathed, the flames failed to consume it.

Navev stepped forward as the fire of the spell died. The demilich drifted back, wary of a physical confrontation, but the warlock's focus was not upon the guardian. Instead, it lifted the mithral dagger-key, and lunged forward to strike at the sphere of golden energy in the center of the room.

The noise of the impact was terrible, like the crash of a dozen glass windows being smashed in all at once. The sphere withstood the blow, the dagger rebounding from its surface as though it had been made of stone rather than light. But as the mummy drew back, a narrow crack was visible in the sphere, and tiny filaments of golden substance trailed from the tiny opening, like hints of fog leaking out from within.

The demilich pressed its attack, hitting Navev with a *lightning bolt* that blasted solidly into the mummy's back, passing through it to flash against the sphere. The spell had no effect upon the translucent orb, but Navev was staggered by the impact. Its wrappings hung from its body in blackened streaks, now, revealing the corrupt flesh beneath,

scabrous strips of flesh trailing in long swathes from its frame to reveal the stark white of bone beneath. It created the horrible image of ribbons trailing from the coat of a reveler on Harvestide, the grim spectacle making a mockery of everything that was wholesome and good in life.

Navev did not turn to face the demilich. Driven now by something beyond even the unlife that sustained it, it lifted the dagger, and lunged forward again to assault the sphere. The trailing wisps of fog coming out of the damaged globe spun around his body as he moved, and another resounding crash of power filled the chamber as magics collided once more.

Chapter 426

AN END IN BATTLE

Looking into the eyes of the ravager spawn, Dar saw the certainty of death staring back at him. The creatures were not intelligent, at least not in any way more than a cunning beast, but it had marked him and his blade, and recognized him as the foe most capable of harming it.

There was naught to do but to press his charge, and meet it in a last confrontation.

But as the monster lunged, it suddenly screamed out in pain. Dar saw Kiron, his huge sword blazing with holy power, draw back from the powerful stroke he'd just delivered to the juncture where its foremost leg met its body. His sword trailed droplets of the creature's blood, but there was far more trailing from the knight's armor

Dar knew what the man had done, what he'd sacrificed to give him an opening, even before the creature's head snapped back. The wedge-shaped head slammed into the knight with the force of a battering ram, and he went flying back, twisting into a spin as one of his legs clipped the hindquarters of the beast. His flight ended only when he struck the ruined threshold of the vault door at the chamber entrance, and he fell hard, motionless. Maricela was running toward him even before he stopped moving, but Dar could not guess if he still lived after accepting a blow like that.

The spawn had gotten revenge for the painful wound it had taken, but it still remembered Dar. But as it swiveled its head back around, the veteran fighter was already moving. Everything seemed to slow down around him. He felt the jarring of his boots on the hard stone, each long stride sending a painful jolt up through his battered body. He had not been healed, but he no longer wondered at what gave him the strength to keep going. The sword in his hand blazed with a power that seemed to pour into him, and he felt a surge from it, something so familiar that it just seemed *right*. He and the sword were one.

The dragon's head came down to meet his charge, its jaws opening so wide that for a moment it was as though those huge teeth were all that there was in the world. Yet it seemed almost trivial for him to duck under that sweeping lunge. The creature's foul breath washed over him in a flood, and something hard grazed his back, but then it was past.

He planted his feet. One of the monster's feet was already coming forward. The foot-long claws were like daggers; they would tear into his guts and spread his organs all over the ground. His armor would be of no use against a foe that could dig through solid rock the way that a child tore through sand. It was coming, but that inevitable contact was just a distraction; it meant nothing.

A hum filled his head as he thrust upward with *Justice*. Upward through the leathery flesh under the creature's jaw, flesh that parted before his sword like taut cloth before the tailor's shears. Blood spouted down onto his hands, burning as it hissed against his flesh. It meant nothing. The creature, its dim brain feeling pain, started to jerk away, but Corath Dar would not be denied. His hands tightened around the hilt of his sword, and he thrust deeper, penetrating through the back of the creature's mouth, and then again into hard, muscled flesh. The sword penetrated the roof of its mouth and into the cavernous gap within the interior of its skull. Dar thrust still deeper, the crossguard and hilt of the sword vanishing along with his fists into the opening he had cut in the base of its jaw. He somehow knew when the tip of the blade entered its brain, and he cried out as the power flowed out of him, or through him, into the creature. Order flared where nothing but chaos had existed, and he felt the link binding the creature to life abruptly severed.

But momentum could not simply be destroyed so easily. Everything returned to normal speed even as the claws pierced his gut, and then he was spinning away, his hands empty, clutching at the air trying to regain what he'd lost. By the time he hit the floor, his lower body slick with his own blood, he'd already lost everything but a vague sensation of quiet, and then that too faded into gray as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 427

FIRST INTERVENTION

A reverberation that was part sound, part echo of raw power, filled the small chamber as Ghazaran struck the red sphere with the dagger-key. The glowing orb withstood the impact, but as the cleric drew back a faint wisp of crimson fog trailed after him, oozing slowly out of a crack in the surface of the sphere. The red beam continued unabated through the shaft that led to the great vault that was the Ravager's prison, but flickers of light began to play about the interior of the sphere.

Ghazaran stepped forward to continue his destruction of the sphere, but before he could strike it again another entered the chamber, exploding in a sudden flurry from the round tunnel. Letellia darted to the side and spun to a stop as she emerged from that passage. Fresh blood, garish in the red light that filled the room, spread across her body, seeping through her robes. She had not been able to escape the red beam in her navigation of the tunnel, and while her *overland flight* spell had enabled her to move through it quickly, she had not escaped the painful effects of that deadly ray. She was pale, and had to be weak from the blood she was losing, but the silver staff in her hands did not quake as she focused her attentions on Ghazaran.

"I had hoped to confront Zhunxa here, but his lackey will do," Letellia said, her voice tightly focused, the antipathy there barely contained.

"Chaos will not be denied," the cleric said, uttering a word of *blasphemy*. But when the echoes that dread syllable faded, the sorceress stood there utterly unaffected.

"My soul is not so weak," she said, lifting her staff. Ghazaran took a step toward her, as if to attack her, or draw close enough to deliver a touch spell. The dagger in his hand looked menacing, but Letellia knew enough to recognize that it was among the least dangerous of the cleric's weapons. The sorceress drifted back and up, toward the domed ceiling. The chamber was not especially large, but the ceiling was high enough so that she could easily ascend out of his reach. An unarmored man might have been able to leap up and seize her, but it looked like a dubious feat for the armored cleric.

But Ghazaran's threat had been a feint, for he suddenly reversed course and lunged again at the sphere, the dagger flashing in his hand. But Letellia merely gestured and invoked her magic, and a *wall of force* sprang into being, cutting the room in half, with her and the cleric on one side, and the glowing sphere on the other. The priest bounced off of the barrier, the mithral dagger scraping harmlessly off its surface.

"It ends here, cleric," she said. She extended her staff, and bright tendrils of electrical energy began to flicker down its length.

"Yes, it ends here!" Ghazaran shrieked. Lowering the dagger, he drew his other hand from a pouch at his throat, his fingers clenching into a fist around something small in his hand. He fell into a crouch even as Letellia blasted him with a *chain lightning* spell, the magic empowered by her staff. But the cleric had already called upon his own magic, and even as the last syllable of his incantation were torn from his lips in a scream of pain, he smashed his fist into the floor with what had to be enough force to break bones in his hand. Letellia could feel the power that erupted from that contact, a power augmented by a sudden surge that she could feel but not identify. Something in that surge of power felt... *familiar*.

The power traveled outward through the surrounding stone, amplifying several times over as the energy from a shattered *Tear of the Gods* took Ghazaran's *earthquake* spell

and transformed it into something greater. The chamber buckled as that power seized it, and the magical stone buckled under its grip. The *wall of force* could not stop the ceiling on both sides of it from collapsing. Letellia darted back in alarm, but she could not escape the sudden deluge of falling stone. The last things she heard were the laughter of the cleric, and a noise that sounded like a million glass crystals being shattered all at once.

Chapter 428

SECOND INTERVENTION

Even as the crumpled form of the beholder trembled its last at his feet, Ozmad stepped over it and approached the brilliant blue orb that floated over the low pedestal in the center of the chamber. He dropped the oversized *mattock*, knowing that it would be of no use against the seemingly fragile globe that powered the sapphire beam. The dagger with its blue gem was still tucked into his belt, and he drew it out, savoring the cold feel of the bare mithral against his fingers. All of his years of planning were finally coming to fruition. The power contained in this place was vast beyond comparison, and he would soon have possession of it. The release of the Ravager was almost incidental to that goal, but unleashing it should give him time to collect the prizes contained within these spheres, including first of all the one that was now literally within his reach.

But even as he lifted the dagger to destroy the warding sphere, he paused. It was not any remorse or doubt that stayed his hand, but a sudden awareness of power. The ogre mage turned back toward the tunnel, just in time to greet the newcomer that stepped out of the blue beam into the chamber.

“You are persistent, guardian,” he said.

“The Ravager must not be unleashed upon the world again,” the lich said, its voice sounding hollow from within the depths of its skull.

“You grow repetitive,” Ozmad replied. “You cannot defeat me; your sorceries cannot harm me.”

The lich took a step forward, but paused at the edge of the *antimagic field*, as though it could see the invisible threshold of the effect. The ogre let out a small chuckle.

“A wise decision. Neither your magic nor the fell properties of your undead state will have any effect within my ward.”

But then Amurru said, “I *wish* that your ability to use *antimagic* not function for the next sixty seconds.”

Ozmad's eyes widened in surprise, even as he felt the lich's invocation take hold. Inside his defensive field, no magic should have worked, yet *something* tore at his spell from within, and he could feel the familiar tingles as his dormant wards took hold as their normal function returned. Some of them, anyway; most of the shorter-term protections he typically wore had expired since he had originally created the *antimagic field*.

Ozmad knew that the guardian's power far exceeded his own; the *wish* confirmed it if nothing else had. But with the power inside the blue sphere within his grasp, he could not bring himself to flee.

To buy himself a moment's respite, he invoked a *resilient sphere* around himself.

But even as the magic flowed at his call, he felt an invisible knife rip through it, sundering the spell. Ozmad's surprise deepened into a sudden fear... how could the lich have reacted so quickly, so soon after casting another spell?

He realized, too late, that the lich's *dispel magic* had been *quickened*. The ogre tried to *teleport* away, knowing it was too late, even before the lich invoked a *power word* that slammed through his spell resistance as though it were not even there, knocking him reeling. Stunned, he desperately tried to clear his mind enough to summon his magic. He was strong enough so that the spell's effect would last only a few seconds, but the small part of his brain that was not befogged was shouting that the lich would not spend those few moments idle.

Just as the wisps of mental fog were beginning to clear, Ozmad felt a cold chill that stabbed through his body like a knife. Looking down, he saw the lich standing before him, careless of the huge arms that had crushed it once before. Ozmad realized now that he'd critically underestimated this foe, even as the paralysis took hold, and his muscles clenched into frozen immobility. He knew enough of the undead to know that his fate was sealed now, even as gravity took hold of him, and he toppled over, hitting the ground with a loud thump.

He could only see what was directly ahead of him, the chamber floor and a slice of the wall. His senses told him of the lich's presence, even before he felt its cold hands, prying the blue dagger from his grasp.

"I must attend to your allies," it said. "But I will return for you. You belong to this place, now."

Ozmad tried to struggle against the paralysis that held him, but he could only quiver slightly, helpless even to speak a word against the fate that awaited him.

THIRD INTERVENTION

Allera's mind swum in a haze as she staggered forward through the tunnel. The yellow beam had assaulted her mind from the first step she'd taken, and even through the protective glow of her *holy aura*, she constantly found herself hesitating, on the brink of being overwhelmed by that constant attack. The beam's effect did not cause permanent damage, or at least she hoped that was the case, but it clouded the brain, lulling one into a torpor where the mind and body wandered off on separate tangents. She suspected that without her discipline, she would be standing yet in the entrance of the tunnel, caught in a stupor that would likely have lasted until she starved to death.

The self-analysis of her situation helped steady her thoughts, and she became dimly aware of the tunnel opening up into a larger space just ahead. Driving away everything but her goal, she reached the opening and slumped out of the beam.

For a moment she could not make sense out of what she was seeing, and then everything snapped into clarity with an abrupt jolt. Her eyes were drawn first to the golden sphere that was the source of the yellow beam, but then she saw the figure standing next to it, partially obscured by tendrils of golden fog that seeped out of cracks in the sphere. She did not have to get a clear look to recognize Zafir Navev, or rather what the warlock had become.

And then she saw the floating skull, and the darkness she sensed coming off the undead warlock felt like a tiny flicker in contrast. The demilich turned to face her, and she could feel the evil in its stare, with a deep malevolence shining in its gemstone eyes. That hatred was directed at all living things, but Allera felt it as though it was focused upon her personally, as though she was an affront to its very existence. She felt the thing's power penetrate her, and then she was fighting for her life, trying to marshal her will to hold against the blackness that threatened to drag her soul away. She cried out as she held on, and the darkness drew back, hovering around the edges of her *holy aura*.

Then Navev hit her with an *eldritch blast*. The impact knocked her back against the adjacent wall, and for a moment stars floated in front of her vision. She could smell the stink of burned skin where the blast had scored her through the fabric of her robe.

Her own magic was largely depleted, but she was not helpless. Power surged through her, and the healing energy of a *mass cure light wounds* spell poured outward. She felt the tendrils of magic simply come apart as they touched the demilich, but the spell caused blue fire to flash from gaps in the rotten wrappings covering Navev's frame. The mummy had already been seriously damaged, she recognized, and now wavered, weakened but not quite down.

Unfortunately, that spell had been her last *mass cure*.

The realized that the demilich was drifting slowly closer toward her, but it had shifted its attention back to Navev, almost reluctantly, it seemed. A stream of *magic missiles* erupted from its gemstone eyes, blasting black pits into the mummy's back. Navev stumbled forward, and sank almost to one knee, off balance.

Allera was already running, her focus entirely upon the foe. Navev seemed to sense her coming, and lifted its head. She was surprised to see—regret?—something almost unreadable in the fading glow of its eyes. It lifted a hand, and the healer tensed, expecting another *eldritch blast*.

But instead of attacking her, Navev lurched toward the sphere, the mithral dagger coming up in its other hand. Allera launched herself at the mummy, even as fire exploded around her, another attack from the demilich. It had no effect upon Navev, she saw, the flames flickering against the decaying wrappings without catching. Her magic flowed through her, and she pressed her hand against the mummy's side, unleashing a *cure critical wounds* spell in the same instant that Navev drove the tip of the mithral dagger through the golden sphere.

A sound filled her, and a bright light swallowed her senses. She was vaguely aware of falling, and then the light burned through everything, until even her consciousness was lost within it.

Chapter 430

AFTER

“Come on angel, wake up. We need you here, Allera... I need you...”

She heard the words as a faint presence against the edge of the muzzled gray that surrounded her. The next ones were louder, but no less insistent.

“Damn it, Maricela, get in here!”

“I...” Allera tried to speak, found the simple word escape her. She tried to get up, but her body felt alien, like an unfamiliar shell. It did not obey her commands.

“Hold on, angel,” he said.

Summoning her will, she forced through the gray with sheer doggedness. As it retreated, she blinked—*could* blink, unable to keep her eyes open against the bright glow.

She was still in the spherical chamber, lying on the floor, her head cradled in Dar's lap. The bright light was Dar's torch; the sphere was gone, and with it the bright yellow glow. But to her damaged eyes the torch seemed like the light of the sun, and everything had a hazy look to it, even Dar's face slightly indistinct, as though she was looking upon a painting where the artist had blurred out the lines.

"I am all right," she said, although she felt anything but. Dar put a hand on her shoulder, as if expecting her to try to get up. Instead, she felt at her magic, letting out a sigh of relief as the power of a *cure serious wounds* spell seeped into her. The magic felt soothing, although her injuries were not just of the body, she knew. But her muscles tingled as control over them returned, and her vision sharpened incrementally, although she still had to avoid looking directly at the torch. Dar noticed her ailment, and shifted the torch behind him with his free hand.

"Thank you," she said. "I think I can get up, now."

"Just wait for Maricela," he replied. She opened her mouth to protest—there was nothing that the priestess could do for her that she herself could not—but froze as she got a look at the pedestal in the middle of the room over Dar's shoulder. He followed her stare, and held her as she started to struggle, trying to get away.

"It's all right," he said. "It's just a skull, it's not undead."

She stopped trying to resist him, and took a deep breath. The skull sat atop the pedestal, and would have been inside the sphere, when it still existed. She could now see that it lacked the gemstones set into it that the demilich had possessed, but she disagreed with Dar in one respect: there was *something* there, a presence, within the skull. Something ancient, and powerful.

She could hear someone approaching through the tunnel. With the yellow beam gone, passage through it had to be a lot easier than when she had done it, but its circular shape, a low shaft bored straight through the stone, made navigating it still slightly tricky. With Dar helping her, she pulled herself up to a sitting position, deciding it was easier to let Maricela help her if it eased her husband's worry.

But it was not the priestess of Soleus who appeared in the doorway, but rather Amurru. The lich, still clad in its ancient armor, regarded them with a look that was somehow just as penetrating, just as cold, as the stare she'd gotten from the demilich just a short while before. The creature said nothing, turning and walking to the pedestal. It took up the skull, tucking it into the crook of its arm. It headed back toward the exit, where it paused to look back at them again.

"Come. There is not much time."

Chapter 431

THE CHOICE

The difference was immediately evident.

Allera's stare traveled upward, to where the top of the pyramid of translucent energy approached the summit of the huge chamber. The barrier, however, was now a solid blue, and seemed almost insubstantial, as though she could push through it with a gentle thrust of her hand. She did no such thing, of course, and withdrew from it as she and Dar, following behind Amurru, entered the prison of the Ravager.

"So only one beam is still working," Dar was asking. Allera drew her attention back to the moment; she could not afford to let her mind wander, even if she was still suffering from the aftereffects of her clash with Navev and the demilich. Suddenly, she realized that she'd seen no trace of either creature in the room with the pedestal. Was the warlock destroyed?

But as she caught sight of the others, that thought faded into the back of her mind. The entry of the chamber had been the site of a gruesome and terrible battle. The ravager spawn lay in a bloody heap upon the floor near the doorway, its body riven by deep, penetrating cuts. Its head lay at an improbable angle, nearly severed from its thick neck.

The spawn was not the only casualty. Bodies lay nearby, covered with cloaks that were soaked through with blood. Allera did not have to see their faces; she knew them by their absence in the small group of people who were present. Kiron was pulling Aldos's body over to join the others where they were arrayed in a neat line by the far wall. Maricela was tending to Selaht; while the monk seemed hale and whole now, Allera instantly recognized the hints that indicated that he'd been nearly dead not long ago. The shredded remains of his robe, lying in a puddle near his feet, followed smears of blood that ran all the way to wall, not far from where the dead beast lay.

Zethas and Secundus, the only other survivors, were guarding a pair of captives that knelt nearby, tightly bound and gagged. With a start, Allera recognized one of them as the wizard that they'd battled in that temple of Orcus where Talen had been brought back to life as a vampire. The wizard sagged against his bonds, and looked as though he might collapse at any moment; he looked as though he was in shock, overcome by some unidentified trauma. The other man, clad only in an undertunic and loincloth, had strong features and an expression that was far too calm for this circumstance; he met Allera's gaze as though he were not restrained, and they were equals meeting in the street. There was something odd about the way he leaned, and it took a few moments for Allera to realize that his left leg was missing at the knee, and likewise his left arm

ended suddenly at the elbow. He wasn't bleeding, at least not as she could see, but she would have guessed that his amputations were recent nevertheless.

Kiron finished his task and straightened as they approached. "Report!" Dar snapped.

"Qatarn, Aldos, and Tertius are dead, sir," the knight said. He looked haggard, and Allera could tell that he'd been brought back from death's door by magical healing as well.

"I thought I told you to follow me, with the healer," Dar returned, an edge on his voice.

"He was in no condition to follow your order," Maricela snapped, helping the restored monk to his feet. Selaht wavered, and Allera knew that only the monk's discipline kept him upright; being suddenly restored after taking a beating took something out of a man. She'd seen Dar do it enough, sometimes multiple times during a single battle, but had also seen him pay the price, after. Sometimes it seems that the normal rules just didn't apply to her husband. "Once you killed that... thing, only Zethas was still on his feet," the priestess continued, "and we needed him here." She glanced meaningfully over to the captives. "That one," she said, nodding at the crippled man, "We found him crawling over the remains of his severed arm and leg to get to his sword. He almost put his knife into Zethas for all that, before Kiron was able to help subdue him."

"You can cut his fucking throat for all I care," Dar said. Allera put her hand on his arm and asked, "What about Letellia? She went for the red tunnel, as Aldos went for the blue." The presence of the dead knight indicated that he had never reached it, but the blue beam remained intact still.

"We found Aldos lying on the ground under the gantry with his neck broken," Kiron said, "But he took the bastard that killed him with him. I... I don't know what happened to the sorceress."

"She failed," Amurru said. The simple declaration drew them all around, to where the lich stood facing them, the massive blue wall of the Ravager's prison rising up behind it. "We have all failed, and the Ravager's time has come. Soon, it will walk free upon the surface of the world again, and there is naught that can stop it."

"We killed these," Dar said, nodding in the direction of the slain spawn. "We'll kill the big one as well."

"You do not know of what you speak, warrior," the lich said, its sonorous voice echoing deep from the cavern of its skull. "The Ravager is to these, as dragon is to a newt."

"How long?" Allera asked. She leaned against Dar, more for the reassuring presence of him, than for her own physical weakness. She knew that she would need a *restoration* spell to fully recover from her own experience, but there would be time for that later. For now, she focused her attention upon the ancient guardian.

The lich raised its mace like a scepter. "Days. Possibly one, no more than six. And the remaining spawn will likely stir themselves before then."

"And the beams? They cannot be restored?" Dar asked.

The lich's cold stare seemed to suggest a negative answer, but after a moment, the creature shifted, and it lifted the skull cradled in the elbow of its off arm. A red glow flickered deep within the cavernous sockets of the skull, and Allera could feel her companions tense, ready for battle even in their depleted state. But while the healer could feel the cold presence that indicated undeath, she felt no malevolence there, only an ancient sadness.

And then a voice issued from the skull, startling her. The voice was that of a woman, speaking in an accented but clear common speech. The words came out in a whisper, but despite the distance Allera could hear them as clearly as if they had been whispered in her ear.

"I am Nycristi, one of the Three set to ward this place, to keep the Ravager bound for all time. Long have I slumbered, but now the bindings falter, and the day against which we have struggled has come. Those who set us here, they knew that it might, knew that entropy is a constant, and all things that are can change. A hundred years, a thousand, a million millions, so long as the Ravager existed, then our watch would continue."

"So how do we beat it?" Dar asked. He clenched and unclenched his fists, and Allera thought he kept them from the hilt of his sword only through an effort.

"Our civilization was old and mature, and commanded great power. The Ravager was our greatest creation, and our biggest mistake. What was done, could not be undone, only kept bound."

"But the wards have been broken," Maricela said. "Can they be restored?"

"It is possible," Nycristi said. "But it will require a new sacrifice. Two new guardians must come forward. The third, Obares Sin, long lost from us and from himself, must be found. Then the ritual may be completed, and the beams restored, if it is successful. It will not be easy, and there is no guarantee that it will work. Many died, when the prison was originally created, so many aeons before."

"I don't like where this is going," Dar said. "Speak plainly. What do you mean by a 'sacrifice'?"

Amurru lowered the skull. "Artifacts of power maintained the beams," the lich said. "But they were created through the sacrifice of the life energy of the Three. I was one, Nycristi another, and Obares Sin the third. Two beams have failed, and so two more must give all of themselves to save the many."

"I will make the sacrifice, for Camar," Kiron said. Maricela gasped, but she met the young knight's eyes, and nodded, in understanding if not acceptance. "Whatever must be given, I will give it willingly."

The lich nodded. "You are brave, dragon knight, but your soul is not deep enough to withstand this burden. There are only two here who can complete the ritual." Its stare left no doubt as to whom it was referring.

Under that stare, Dar and Allera stood quietly, each holding close to the other. Finally, Dar spat. "Fuck that," he said. "I'll take my chances against the beast."

"I stand with you, my love," Allera said, "But can we put our lives, even our souls, against those that will die if we do not do what they say?"

"You trust them?"

"I... I do not believe that they are lying. I've communed with Amurru, I've sensed what's in there, beyond the barrier. It's... I cannot describe it, but it is immense, in all senses of the word." She leaned into him, and shuddered.

Dar reached down and lifted her chin with his hand. "I know it'll be tough, maybe impossible for us to beat. But you heard what the skull said. The prison will fail someday, eventually, and when that thing gets free, somebody's going to have to stop it. We may as well do it now." He looked around at the others, but against the enormity of the decision that faced them, none of them could find anything to say. Finally his gaze dropped back down to Allera, lingering for a moment before he looked back up at the lich.

"You must decide," the lich said. "The fate of the world is in your hands."

Author's Note: When I originally posted this story on EnWorld, I gave my readers the choice of how the plot would progress from here. One of the two plotlines had Dar and Allera agree to sacrifice themselves for the good of Camar, and the other had them electing to fight the Ravager to the death of one side or the other. The decision was overwhelmingly in favor of one option, although I did write a few chapters for the other choice, which you'll find in the Appendix to this document.

Chapter 432

FORTIFICATION

"No. It ends here."

The wind blew cold and hard, tugging on cloaks as though it were angry. Corath Dar stood along the crest of a hill, exposed to the full fury of that breeze, but he paid it little heed as the words replayed in his mind. There were a dozen people close enough to speak to without raising his voice, even with the wind, but standing there, his eyes scanning the surrounding countryside, he may as well have been alone.

There was the entrance to Rappan Athuk, a blemish upon the landscape the drew the eye. But Dar only glanced at that black opening, surrounded now by a lattice of wooden boards supporting a half-dozen ropes that descended into the darkness. His attention was focused more on the adjacent hills, and the buzz of activity that echoed that going on around him.

To his left, he could see a group of men and dwarves assembling another scorpion on the next hill over. They had discarded their cloaks, almost useless against the wind, and they worked quickly and with purpose despite the chill in the air. Completing his circuit of the hills surrounding Rappan Athuk, Dar noted eight of the siege engines, emplaced in positions hastily excavated from good places at the summits where the scorpions could target wide swathes of the surrounding area. There was another crew made up almost entirely of dwarves working in another spot further down, building an onager of some sort. Despite his long martial career he'd never seen a device that looked exactly like what they were building, but the dwarf commander had not elaborated on the details of its function, merely nodding when Dar had briefed him on what they could expect to face.

His gaze turned to the elves, who were working on something behind a set of folding screens that somehow resisted the force of the wind. He could just make out the outlines of a metal frame, but he couldn't see any more details from his current vantage.

The arrival of the elves had been as fortuitous as that of the dwarves, but the presence of neither was an accident. Jaduran had not been idle since enabling the *wind walking* of their party to Rappan Athuk. From what Maricela had told him, *sendings* had crossed the breadth of the continent in the last week, and more aid was on the way, with reinforcements trickling in every few hours by various magical means. The elvish ambassador had appeared just that morning, *teleporting* in with five other elves. Dar had greeted Mehlaraine Alderis warmly enough, but there had only been time for a few minutes of idle chatter before the pressing hand of time forced them to practicalities. He felt it pushing him, now, from the moment he work in the morning, until the last minutes late at night when exhaustion claimed him. Three days. Three days had passed since they'd left the Vault, and Dar knew that any minute could mark the end of the time they'd thus far been able to eke out.

Selanthas, standing at the edge of the ring of screens, caught his eye and nodded. The elf looked barely older than he'd been when they'd last met, twelve years ago. A few subtle lines around the corners of his eyes, perhaps. Grimacing at the protests of his back, sore from the intense labor he'd been engaged in these last days, Dar thought it

was unfair. Still, he was glad to have them, and not just for the skills of Mehlaraine and Selanthas; the ambassador sent by the elves was an archmage, an elf that looked as though he might have been sixty—and thus was likely somewhere between four and five times that in years. Sultheros had already proven his worth, using his magic to augment their preparations, and from what he'd told Dar his spellpower would be vital in the upcoming confrontation. His apprentice, a slender woman elf named Callyse, had gone off to help Jalla Calestin, who had been helping them secure lumber from the cospes of trees several miles to the east, using *levitate* spells on the hastily trimmed trunks in conjunction with *flying* magic. It was disconcerting, watching women he could have picked up with one hand, streaking low over the hills carrying a log weighing hundreds of pounds. But without them, there would have been no siege engines, and their fortifications would have been much more ad hoc.

"Another cohort of reinforcements will be here before noon, general," Kiron said behind him. With a single lingering look out over the work going on over the varied hilltops, Dar turned toward the man who had become his second-in-command.

Kiron carried himself with the same easy confidence he'd possessed before, but there was something new as well, a quiet air of experience that Dar had seen before, surrounding veterans who'd survived a difficult engagement. The knight had been almost as busy as he'd been, the last few days, working with the dwarves, humans, and elves that had struggled to prepare this place for what was coming.

"See that they're situated and given assignments," Dar said, unnecessarily. Kiron knew the plan almost as well as he did, perhaps better, given his training at the War College. The College had grown out of Talen's school situated at the headquarters of the Order of the Dragon Knights, and its graduates conducted a broad and extensive study of both strategy and tactics. Kiron was well-equipped to comment on the intricacies of the Camarian plan. There were holes in the plan; it was impossible that there wouldn't be, given the haste with which they had to put it together, and the nature of the thing that they faced. It was possible that Allera and Amurru were right, that they wouldn't be able to stop it. But even if they fell, they would do their best to give Jaduran and Camar time to prepare.

To prepare. For what? Armageddon? Dar couldn't fully stifle a wry laugh at the thought. He'd refused to sacrifice himself and Allera for a chance to restore the prison that held the Ravager, but if they'd failed, the two of them were only going to be among the first that lost their lives. It was too late to turn back now, but there was only one thing that could stop the stabbing knives of doubt that kept pushing at his gut.

"Something the matter, general?" Kiron asked.

Dar waved a hand. "No, I'm fine. Where's Allera?"

“She was talking with the prisoner, last I saw her,” the knight replied. Dar’s expression darkened, and his hand fell to the hilt of *Justice*. “Do you think he’s really as old as he claims to be?” Kiron asked.

“I don’t care either way,” Dar said. “He didn’t have anything useful to tell us about the Ravager, and that makes him just another hindrance.” More than that, perhaps. They’d sent their other captive, the enemy wizard, along with a pair of guards back to the secondary camp they’d set up a few miles back from the area, off to the northeast. The idea for the camp had originally been a necessity, to give their teams a chance to rest and recover in a protected spot far enough away from the constant activity surrounding the entrance. Dar had initially intended to send Aerim back with the Seer, but the man had suddenly fallen ill almost immediately after leaving the close environs of the entrance to Rappan Athuk. The guards had been alert for a scheme to trick them into lowering their guard, but Allera had confirmed that the man was too weak to move, and that his breathing had nearly faltered entirely. He’d recovered when they’d brought him back, and now was kept carefully bound in the tent set up for quick workbreaks between a clump of boulders in the lee of two of the hills facing Rappan Athuk. Of course, in the long run they were going to have a problem if they couldn’t move the self-declared “Duke” from the immediate environs, but that was an issue for after. If there was an after.

“Any word from the guardian?” Kiron asked.

“If it had contacted me, I wouldn’t have kept it a secret,” Dar snapped. He took a deep breath and shook his head. “I’m sorry. If Allera was here, should would have put me in my place for that.”

“It’s a lot of pressure,” Kiron said, and Dar realized that the young man felt it, although he seemed to be doing a better job of hiding it than he was. Dar’s gaze dropped to the unusual weapon riding on the man’s hip. “You figure out how to use that thing?”

“Yes. I mean, it’s strange, and the weight’s a bit off, but it’s basically just like my sword. Almost too much like it, in fact. And it’s strange, the way that it... changes. And how it goes through a boulder like it’s not even there, but it sliced a chicken in half like the world’s sharpest razor, bones and all.”

“The elf called it a ‘brilliant energy’ weapon. The guardian says we’ll need it to stop the Ravager.” He didn’t add that Amurru had tried to get him to carry it. He’d refused, and it wasn’t just the new bond he’d felt growing between himself and *Justice*. The lich’s weapon had felt somehow *wrong*, as though it were resisting him. The knight didn’t seem to have any problem with it, and Dar was content to leave it be.

But the thought of the lich opened other doors in his memory. Amurru had promised to notify them via a *sending* once the Ravager or its spawn penetrated the failing prison. The defenses of its vault were no longer regenerating, ever since the power sources bolstering the pyramid had collapsed; the complex would not slow the spawn for long,

let alone the larger creature. The lich had briefed them on the properties of the monster, but they'd already divined most of them in their encounters with the spawn. The thing regenerated quickly, and drew strength from the injuries it inflicted upon others. They would have to strike fast and decisively. It had some innate resistance to magic, but lacked the potent spell resistance of most fiends. It was, however, utterly immune to magic that would drain it, or which could kill it outright. Not that a death spell would have any affect upon a creature of its raw stamina, in any case.

The Ravager itself was at its simplest just a larger and stronger version of the spawn. But for all its legendary prowess, it was mortal. It could be killed. But it wasn't going to be easy.

And there had been one more thing that Amurru had told them, in response to something Allera had said about diamonds and *resurrection* magic. Apparently the greater beast had the ability to sunder a soul from its anchor, to devour a living creature so thoroughly that even the most powerful magic could not bring it back across the veil. It seemed almost overkill, but it reinforced the finality of this confrontation, if they needed another reason.

Dar hadn't realized where his feet had been carrying him until he looked down into the bowl nestled between several hills, at the fluttering tarp that marked the top of the temporary camp. The place was little more than a niche in the rocks, a sheltered place where the defenders could grab some hot tea, or maybe, if they were lucky, an hour's nap in between shifts. A few people were coming up out of the tent now, a man clad in the breastplate of the Watch accompanying a pair of clerics of Soleus, a man and woman who looked to be younger even than Kiron. He didn't know their names, but that wasn't remarkable; they had over a hundred people here now, and more were on the way. But Dar knew that numbers alone would not decide this fight.

"Are you going down?" Kiron asked him. Dar almost started; he'd nearly forgotten the knight's presence. But of course, he hadn't dismissed the young man, who would have stayed there until the end of time, maybe. No, that wasn't quite fair; the knight was not an automaton, and he'd demonstrated tactical initiative on several occasions just in the limited time they'd been together. But he had a strong sense of duty that Dar couldn't quite identify with.

His fist tightened around the hilt of his sword. Or maybe he could.

He turned away from the narrow, steep track that led down to the tent. "No," he said. "I—"

But he abruptly trailed off, his eyes growing unfocused as he stared at nothing. Kiron saw it, and tensed.

"Is it—"

But Dar's response was already coming. "INCOMING!" he yelled, loud enough so that his voice sounded over the wind, filling the valley between the hills, rebounding from the jagged ridges on the far side.

Chapter 433

THE VANGUARD

"That was too easy," Dar said.

Kiron looked up at him, an incredulous expression flitting across his features before he schooled them under iron discipline. Both men were covered in blood, some of it their own, but most belonging to the huge carcass that steamed hot and foul in the late afternoon air.

Dar heard people coming down the rough slope behind them, and turned to see Allera at their head. "Everyone all right?" he yelled up to her.

"Petronia suffered a broken collarbone, and one of the dwarven sappers had his skull cracked," the healer reported. "But they're all right." She didn't have to check Dar and Kiron; a *mass heal* had preceded her down the hill, even as the creature's death struggles had come to an end.

A slight rush of air announced the arrival of Mehlaraine, who descended on the wings of a *fly* spell to land gently beside him. "Just the one?" she asked.

"For now," he said, quietly. He looked up, scanning the dozens of faces that looked down at him from the emplacements atop the surrounding hills. More foot soldiers were approaching, but what happened here was already finished. One more of the ravager's spawn slain.

This was just a warm-up, Dar thought, the words grim within his mind.

The debriefing went smoothly, with Dar's battle commanders, representing all three races gathered at the site, reporting their perspective on what had happened.

Just about everything had gone according to plan. The creature had emerged from the Well seriously injured, whether from Amurru's delaying action or from the half-dozen *glyphs of warding* that the priests of the Father had placed within the shaft. The dwarven sappers had set up a series of deadfalls, and the creature's ascent had been hindered by hundred-pound slabs of rock that had fallen on it from above. They had failed to dislodge the creature from the walls of the shaft, however, and Dar was partly relieved that the attacks had only enraged it to push ahead faster. The smart play, from

the creature's perspective, would have been for it to pause until its natural regenerative abilities healed the wounds it had suffered in its escape from the vault. At least that was one area where they seemed to have an advantage over the things; they were pure, raw destruction, and not possessed of fine nuance.

The thing had certainly seemed pissed when it had finally emerged from the top of the shaft. Just to make sure, several more explosive *glyphs* had gone off around it, blasting it with shards of rock and tongues of fire, but doing little in the way of serious hurt to it.

That's when a dozen massive bolts, fired by the scorpions on the surrounding hilltops, had slammed down into it. Most of the missiles struck it, but nearly all simply shattered—*shattered!*—on its dark red hide. The thing's skin was tougher than a dragon's scales, a fact that Dar had learned through hard experience. But two of the shafts had penetrated, and the creature had certainly felt those. Each of the steel heads had a long groove down the center, into which enough purple worm poison had been poured to slay a whole cavalry troop's worth of horses. That had been a contribution of Alzoun and the church of Dagos, along with the *flaming burst* arrows that had begun lancing into the creature from the emplaced archers. Most of those had likewise had little or no effect, but one flashed into a bright spurt of flame as it hit the creature's head right at the corner of its jaw, and another vanished into the creature's left nostril.

Dar never did learn which of the two had come from Selanthas's bow, but he knew that one of them almost certainly had.

The creature had hesitated, just for a moment, looking for foes close at hand, confused by the attacks coming at it from all directions. But its indecision had come to a sudden end as Sultheros had blasted it with a streak of lightning that had briefly silhouetted its entire body in a raging nimbus of blue sparks. That made its decision; the creature had launched itself forward, straight for the hill where the elf had taken up position.

That had been part of the plan as well, but they'd underestimated the creature's speed. It ignored the traps that had been set for it, even as long wooden stakes had pierced its legs and stuck in its lower body, and flashes of yellow fire erupted where it stepped. The steep slope of the hill barely slowed it, its claws digging deep into the bare rocks as it shot up toward its tormentors, intent only on rending these little creatures that had dared to challenge it. Arrows and bolts continued to strike it, and a lighter barrage of spells from the *flying* wizards above, but while the barrage wore at it, none of the wounds it suffered were serious enough to slow it.

And then it reached the summit, where the defenders were waiting.

The creature had knocked down the outer edge of the emplacement with its first surge, ignoring the long pikes that stabbed deep into its chest, the reinforced shafts snapping as though they were toothpicks. Petronia, who'd set one of the pikes, went down, clutching her shoulder. More missiles struck, including another scorpion missile, fired at

point blank range into the juncture where the creature's neck connected to its armored body. Shards of rock from the shattered barricade were blasted into the defenders, pinging off their armor; a dwarf went down as a rock the size of a grapefruit caromed off his forehead.

The creature turned, looking for Sultheros, who stood calmly not ten paces away, flanked by Selanthas and one of the elven rangers he'd brought from Aelvenmarr. But before it could spring at the elf, Dar and Kiron rose up from behind the ruins of the barricade and struck.

Both blades bit deep, *Justice* carving through ridged flesh like a butcher's knife, while Kiron's sword of fiery red *brilliant energy* tore off its foremost left leg, severing it clean from the spawn's body. The creature let out a scream that had shattered the knight and rang in the ears of those present for minutes after. Unbalanced, it was hit by a barrage of arrows and then a *freezing sphere*, tossed almost casually by Sultheros. The globe hit the creature in the head and exploded, engulfing it in a torrent of freezing cold. Crystals of ice formed and were shattered by the thing's desperate movements, and accompanied it as it toppled over backward and plummeted back down the slope.

It had been a dramatic moment, but forewarned by Dar, the defenders had not let up. The scorpion crews continued to shoot it with their heavy bolts as quickly as they could reload, while Dar and Kiron had shot down the hill after it, each of them nearly falling. *magic missiles* streaked down from the wizards hovering above, but even with all the wounds it had suffered, still the thing was starting to stir again as Dar and Kiron reached it. But fortunately Dar had learned how to stop the spawn from regenerating. It was a messy business, destroying the brain that resided deep within that armored skull, but shortly, less than one minute after the creature had first emerged from the shaft, it had been finished.

Once the last of them had recounted the tale, the gathered men, dwarves, and elves paused, letting the moment of what they had just witnessed settle around them. They had beaten the ravager spawn, but that had only been a minor foe in comparison to what still waited below. More allies were on the way, and they had a few surprises left to them, but would it be enough?

"Swap out the front-line teams; send those who have finished two shifts back to the rear camp, and make sure those who are on the night watch get an hour's rest at the relief tent, in shifts. I want everyone to be ready."

There was a chorus of assents through the assembled group.

Dar looked at Dalvev Gorr, the leader of the dwarven sappers. The dwarf's face was as craggy as the hills on which his team had spent the last few days working, but Dar had seen the man work from dawn to dusk since his arrival two days ago, pushing his team to do likewise, even after a forced march from the small dwarven outpost in the foothills

of the Galerr Mountains leagues distant to the southwest. The dwarves were as hard as the iron they worked, and Dar was glad to have them.

“When will you have that onager finished, Gorr?”

“We’ll have the thrower done by midnight, general,” the dwarf said simply, as though another night without sleep were a trivial matter, not worthy of mention.

Dar nodded and turned to the elven wizard. “And you, archmage?”

“With the dawn, I will *teleport* back to Aelvenmarr and bring more rangers back, along with more supplies. It will be modest; we only have a handful of *bags of holding* left among the aelfinn.”

“Whatever you bring will help,” Dar said. He shifted his eyes to Maricela. “The wardings?”

“We will refresh those that we can now,” the priestess said. “The rest, in the morning.”

Dar would have preferred not to wait, but the priests of the Father prayed for spells with the coming of the dawn, and needed rest even for that. Some of the priests would sleep on the front lines with the men on watch, but they would sleep.

“All right,” he told them all. “Set watches and get some rest. I have a feeling we’re all going to need it.”

Chapter 434

SHORT NOTICE

The next *sending* came in the deep hours before dawn, when the horizon to the east had not yet begun to brighten with the light of the coming day. Even the wind had died down, until a preternatural hush had fallen over the hill country.

Dar shot up out of his rude cot in the back of the forward shelter. Even asleep, his hand had found the hilt of *Justice*, and the blade came half out of his sheath before he realized where he was.

Allera, caught in an even deeper sleep beside him, nevertheless stirred at his sudden movement. “Is it...” she began, blinking to clear the sleep from her eyes.

But Dar was already on his feet. Reaching down to grab his armor, lying in a neat pile at the foot of the cot, he drew the attention of the small knot of men in the outer “room”

of the shelter, warming their hands around the small camp stove where a pot of coffee was constantly kept ready for men taking a break from a long shift in the emplacements. Several soldiers rose, knowing or guessing the significance of Dar's sudden awakening.

He confirmed it a moment later. "Sound the alert," he said, "And send a runner to the rear camp. We've got company coming."

He slid his breastplate on over the chainmail vest he'd slept in. Allera was there to help him with the straps, and started efficiently fastening his greaves to his limbs even as he adjusted the fit of the heavy armor against his body.

"Is this it?" she asked, lifting the heavy shoulder plates up to him, so he could fasten them to his breastplate. The armor shone brilliantly in the light of the torches, flickering almost like something alive.

"The prison has collapsed," he said. "The Ravager hasn't stirred from its slumber yet, but there are three spawn heading our way. Amurru said it would delay them as long as it could."

Allera nodded. "Are you ready?" he asked her.

She reached up and touched his face, then handed him his helmet. *Justice* went last, the sword fitting against his hip like a part of him.

Only a few short minutes had passed since Dar had woken, but by the time he emerged from the tent and started up toward the crest, the emplacement above was abuzz with activity. Kiron was there, but Maricela had gone back to the rear camp for rest, and would not be along for a few minutes at least. They would have heard the horn sounding the alert, but it would take a little time for them to reach their positions on the front lines.

"How long until... until the big one wakes?" Allera asked, as they made their way up the steep slope. A rope had been strung to help those coming down, and Dar was making use of it, not trusting his eyes in the poor light cast by his torch.

"I don't know, angel," he said, pulling himself up the last stretch of trail with a grunt of effort. Kiron was there at once. "Report," he said, as the knight saluted him with a fist to his chest.

"Everyone's in place," Kiron said. "The engines are ready, and the elves..."

He trailed off, and Dar turned to see them approaching from further along the crest. Mehlaraine was already *flying*, hovering a few feet above the others with a long pike with a silver head clutched in one hand. The elves had taken shelter in a magical space created by the archmage; they could not have gotten more rest than the other troops, and had gotten no more time to prepare, but they looked calm, collected, and ready. The archmage merely met Dar's gaze and nodded; Sultheros knew the plan and his

place in it, and had suggested some of the improvements himself. His apprentice, standing at his shoulder, seemed slightly less composed, smoothing out the front of her robe with a slight nervous motion of her slender fingers.

“The reinforcements from the camp will be here in a few minutes,” Kiron went on.

“Let’s hope we have that long,” he said. He updated the others on what he’d told Allera earlier, and then moved to the forward emplacement, stepping up behind the wall of spikes to give him a clear view of the valley below.

There was enough light to see; they’d placed *everburning torches* in a wide ring around the dark entrance to Rappan Athuk, enough for them to clearly see anything larger than a cat that stirred in the area. There were more torches on the ridges, but those were kept hooded, to preserve the night vision of the defenders. To Dar’s eyes the forms moving on the other hilltops were vague shadows, flickering things that may or may not have been real.

His eyes were drawn almost inexorably to his far right, to another shadow jutting out from the edge of the ridge about twenty paces distant from his current position. He couldn’t make out Duke Aerim’s face, but he could feel the weight of the man’s stare, answering his gaze with cold equanimity. He could also feel Allera’s disapproval, but his wife did not say anything.

Aerim had taken advantage of the distraction caused by the first ravager spawn’s attack to attempt escape. Even with one arm and part of a leg missing, he’d broken free of his bonds, disabled the fully able soldier watching him, and fled a good fifty yards before he’d been spotted, using a spear as a crutch. The soldier had lived, although it might have been a close thing if they hadn’t had clerics close at hand. Aerim had been unapologetic, and had not complained even when the arrow that had finally taken him down was yanked from the meat of his right thigh. Dar wasn’t sure what he’d hoped to accomplish, given that he’d nearly collapsed the last time he’d been taken away from Rappan Athuk. Was that what he wanted, a simple release? He’d been tempted to give it to him, but something beyond Allera’s disapproval had stayed his hand.

Well, he wasn’t going anywhere now. The Duke had been chained to a pair of wooden beams as thick around as Dar’s waist, buried almost half of their lengths into the packed earth of the hilltop. The dwarves had initially started building a watchtower there, before Dar had directed them instead to focus on the siege engines. Given a month, the man might have been able to work his way free, but short of sacrificing his remaining arm and leg, he wasn’t going to escape in the near future.

A sudden flurry of movement around him drew Dar’s attention away from the prisoner, back down toward the pit in the valley below. Stepping forward, Dar motioned those nearby to silence. Fifty sets of eyes focused as one on the dark opening. The surrounding torches flickered slightly, although the wind remained utterly calm.

Then they heard the noise. A dull roar, filtered up through the ground, slowly building, a noise of frustrated rage, accompanying a promise of violence.

"It begins," Sultheros said, his voice oddly calm.

Chapter 435

IT BEGINS

Dar made a motion to Kiron, who lifted a torch affixed to a long pole, waving it above his head to alert those on the other hills. The action was unnecessary; it was impossible to miss the coming of the ravager spawn.

Sultheros touched Dar on the shoulder; the general felt a sudden flush of magical energy that faded within a few seconds. The elf then rose into the air and streaked out over the valley, followed by his apprentice Callyse, and then, to Dar's surprise, Jalla Calestin. Mehlaraine was already aloft, the silvered head of her pike gleaming off the light of the torches.

The elven archmage drew ahead of the women as he dropped to about a hundred feet above the shaft leading down to the Well. He moved his hands, speaking words that faded over the distance separating him from the others. A small bead of red light appeared in one hand; he dropped this, watching as it descended swiftly and vanished into the opening.

The *delayed blast fireball* exploded in a violent burst, and a plume of liquid fire erupted out of the hole. The flames accompanied the snarling, darting form of one of the ravager spawn, which hurled itself into the air, clawing and snapping at the elf. Even with its strength, however, it could not jump that high, and it flipped over as it arced back down toward the ground, landing on all six of its feet about fifteen paces away from the opening of the shaft. A second spawn, its face blackened with char from the blast, was already emerging, slightly more cautious than the first as it gripped the edges of the shaft and scanned the area. It hesitated only a moment, but it was suddenly thrust forward as the third spawn pushed out past it, snarling as it extracted itself from the shaft.

The defenders were already unleashing their fire into the things. Arrows and bolts lanced out of the night from the surrounding hilltops, but the three huge monsters barely seemed to notice them. They were not quite so dismissive of the scorpion bolts, but the initial volley was unlucky, scoring no hits. The long shafts of the missiles snapped as the steel heads were deflected by the monsters' dense hides, or they spun harmlessly away as the creatures twisted and turned, moving with a speed that was amazing for things of their size.

Blue-white energies flared from above, as Callyse shot one of the creatures with a *lightning bolt* from a wand. Hovering thirty feet away, Jalla Caestlin added a *fireball* that briefly flared around all three of the creatures, inflicting slight damage upon them. The plan involved focusing as much as their attacks as possible on a single creature until it was taken down, and then shifting to the next target. But the ravager spawn did not wait for that plan to come to fruition, and they were already moving, their claws churning up great plumes of dirt and stones as they sought out targets.

The first tracked Sultheros's movements with its eyes as the elf drew back slowly toward the hilltop where Dar's command resided. The elf was almost invisible in the night sky, and well out of the creature's reach, but the spawn's keen senses had no difficulty keeping him in view. Taking heavy fire from the hilltop, including several well-placed shots from Selanthas that stung at the tender flesh around its nostrils and eyes, it picked up speed as it followed the path that the first ravager spawn had taken less than twelve hours previously. The defenders, including Dar and Kiron and his knights, were waiting for it, but this time the odds were much less in their favor. While the clerics had refreshed some of the *glyphs of warding* within the shaft, they'd not had a chance to rest and recover more spells, and the dwarves had not had the time to reset their traps. Still, holy and arcane magic continued to pour into the beast as it surged up the hill. Callyse hit it with another *lightning bolt*, followed by a pair of *scorching rays* from Jalla Caestlin. Maricela had not yet arrived, but the few lesser clerics among the defenders added a ray of *searing light* and a *sound burst* that did not seem to faze the creature in the slightest.

Sultheros summoned his own magic again as the lead spawn approached the summit, and the protruding forest of stakes that had not managed to slow its slain brother. But this time, a large chunk of the hillside gave way under its claws, and the spawn fell in an avalanche of stones and dirt back down toward its base. But the rockslide was more than just that, as the plume of debris coalesced into a vaguely humanoid form that landed squarely atop the creature, crushing the spawn beneath almost fifty thousand pounds of rock. That would have killed almost anything, but the spawn was merely stunned, and as the earth elemental pulled itself up, its huge fists coming up to further punish the foe, the creature twisted its head almost full around, seizing the elemental in its massive jaws.

The second spawn had been drawn to the right of the first by a series of hits from the dwarven sappers entrenched in the emplaced position where the huge onager rested. The dwarves had mounted a number of heavy arbalests almost as big as they were on the embankment that sheltered their position, and had added a pair of small spring-operated launchers that sent pots of alchemist's fire arcing into the ground at the creature's feet. Neither the bolts nor the blazing flames really hurt the creature, but they drew its attention, enough to draw it forward in a violent charge that shook the ground. The dwarves somehow managed to stand their ground in the face of that surge, and even managed another volley of the burning pots, one of which struck the creature's left shoulder, leaving it trailing a stream of blazing fire in its wake. The logs and stones of

the emplacement shook as the creature neared, and the crossbowmen dropped down behind the shelter of the low wall, a move that looked to be of dubious help against such a terrible foe.

The dwarves manning the onager held their ground, watching with stoic expressions until the thing was almost on top of them. Then they slammed their hammers against the stays holding the huge central wheel in place. The tension released, the stubby throwing arm spun in a blur, picking up speed as it turned on the wheel's axis. The ravager spawn launched itself up over the embankment at the same moment that the last dwarf still standing threw another lever, and the heavy retaining arm of the catapult shot up into position, stopping the throwing arm on its next traverse, and launching the contents of its basket into the face of the spawn. Those contents—twenty razor-sharp disks of black adamantine—ruined the features of the creature in an instant, pulping one of its eyes, shearing away a dozen black teeth, and burying themselves in its thick hide. The monster, far from being mortally wounded even by that devastating attack, was nevertheless driven into a mad frenzy, and it hurled itself upon the engine, tearing and crushing. The onager was transformed into kindling in the blink of an eye, and two of the five dwarves were instantly killed. The sappers were no cowards, but were smart enough to know that standing their ground here would result only in death. They fled, another of their number dying as the creature shredded him with a flailing claw. The spawn, half blind and seriously injured, spent another few moments tearing up the emplacement, then started looking around for something else to kill.

“We have to intervene!” Allera yelled, but Dar shook his head. “Wait for the big one!” he yelled, even as he leaned out over the now-gaping cliff, firing his heavy bow down into the violence below. Sultheros's summoning had come just in time, but it had shorn off the front of their entrenchment, and Dar and Kiron had come close to following the creature back down the hill. Everyone who could hold a bow was firing now, and with the sheer volume of fire some of the shots were telling. But the spawn were incredibly resilient, and Dar knew that they were fighting the creatures' regenerative powers, hoping to overcome them before they could simply tear the Camarians and their allies apart.

He caught a glimpse of the third spawn as it surged up one of the other hills, which was held by another group of dwarves, bolstered by a handful of Camarian legionaries. The spawn's furor was explained by the scorpion bolt jutting from its left shoulder. Like the others it had no difficulty with the steep ascent, but its climb was made difficult by the traps laid by the dwarven sappers. Boulders the size of horses tumbled down onto the creature, smashing off the spawn with loud thunks. One dwarf leaned precariously over the edge and dropped a large cask directly onto the creature's head, which shattered into a bright flare of white fire that engulfed the spawn. The monster, enraged and blinded by the attack, hurled itself upward into the defenders. The dwarf that had thrown the cask was knocked flying, toppling over the edge and bouncing down the steep cliff before landing in a limp heap at its bottom. The Camarians were there to meet the creature, stabbing it with their long spears, but it was the abrupt collapse of the ledge at the top of the cliff that saved them, sending the spawn back down in a rough

trip that copied the fall of its brother a few moments ago. One of the legionaries followed it, screaming before his helmet was intercepted by a jutting boulder.

The first spawn, despite the disadvantage of its position, had managed to push itself up and out from under the elemental, ignoring the powerful slams that the summoned creature rained down against its head and neck. Shrieking in a red fury, the spawn seized hold of the elemental with its claws and teeth, and tore it apart in a display of raw strength.

Even as huge clods that had been part of the elemental were falling to the ground, the spawn was shooting up through them, back up the hill once more. Twin bolts of lightning from Sultheros and Callyse flared around its head, casting it in grim relief for an instant before the discharges faded. *Magic missiles* from Jalla peppered its back, but the tiny bolts seemed almost like gnats as they vanished against its hide. More mundane missiles shot down from above, stabbing into its body at point-blank range, and at that distance a few penetrated. But the creature was beyond feeling pain, and this time it would not be denied.

Allera threw up a *repulsion* spell, hoping to forestall it, but the thing went right through it without slowing. Time seemed to slow as the spawn surged through a wild cloud of swirling dust, whizzing arrows, and raucous sound. A scorpion loaded too quickly broke as it was fired, sending the bolt arcing high into the air across the valley.

The spawn surged toward the summit; forty feet away, thirty, twenty. Finally, as its claws bit into the summit, Dar roared a challenge and leapt off the cliff to meet it. Its jaws twisted sideways and snapped around his torso, but he was already driving the sword forward, through its left eye, into the brain. *Justice* flared white in his hand, then was yanked from his grip as the monster spasmed.

Creature and man fell together. The spawn's jaws clenched and then sprung open, dropping Dar to roll down the cliff after it. Fortunately the spawn's multiple trips up and down the cliff had sheared away most of the larger boulders, but landing on its body was hardly softer than landing on the packed earth around it. The spawn died faster than its brethren had before, its limbs clenching once, then falling still.

"Damn it, I am getting too fucking old for this shit," Dar said, grimacing as he tried to get up. His helmet had vanished, and he could feel blood trickling down the side of his head. His hair clung to his scalp, soaked with sweat and blood, and coated in a thick layer of dust and dirt that likewise lay in a patina over his armor and clothes. He started looking for the creature's head, to recover his sword, but his attention was drawn back up the ridge by Allera shouting his name.

"DAR!"

The fighter looked around for the threat, but realized that it wasn't he who was in danger. As the dust whirled around him he caught sight of the second spawn, climbing

the southern face of the hill, approaching the position he'd just vacated from its flank. He could just hear the yells of the defenders as they shifted to meet the new threat, but then the monster reached the crest, and everything devolved into a confused, violent melee.

One down, Dar thought, all too aware that this was still the warm-up, and that even now the Ravager itself was likely rising out of its aeons-long slumber, ready for a snack after its long rest.

Chapter 436

DESPERATE MEASURES

Allera's heart froze in her chest as she watched Dar go over the edge with the spawn, lost in a welter of slashing limbs and falling rock. Sultheros had empowered him with a *fly* spell at the start of the battle, but the creature had snared him in its jaws, and Allera could not see through the clouds of dust that were raised by its violent passage down the cliff. She leaned out over the battlement, and might have followed him down the cliff, had not Petronia lunged and grabbed onto her from behind.

"DAR!" she yelled, but she doubted he'd be able to hear her over the ongoing clatter of stones that continued to fall from the damaged cliff face. So she summoned her magic, flinging it blindly down the cliff, and felt a vast thrill of relief as she sensed the tiny white glow that was Dar's life force. He was wounded, but not as badly as she'd feared, and that white flame of her inner perception grew stronger as she poured healing power into it.

Shouts from the defenders nearby drew her attention around, in time to spot the second spawn that was making its way up the cliff on the south face of the hill. Men and dwarves were shifting to meet the new threat, and she heard Kiron yelling orders as he ran along the ridge, Aldos and Qatarn at his heels. Above them, she could just see Sultheros and the other wizards floating closer. She was also aware of the battle going on with the third spawn on the next hill over, but she could not spare any more attention for them right now. And over everything, pounding in the front of her mind was a glowing nodule of power held ready for release. She wanted to free it now, but knew that Dar was right, and that this was only the initial phase of the battle. Assuming any of them survived to greet the Ravager itself.

The spawn reached the crest and pulled itself over, snapping off wooden stakes as though they were mere splinters. Flames ran down one flank where one of the dwarven fire-pots had struck it, and near a dozen arrows peppered its crimson hide. Selanthas had stepped up atop the low wall that fronted the scorpion emplacement, and was firing as fast as he could reload, each shot striking the spawn. He was aiming for the vital

spots, eyes and nostrils and the softer flesh inside its slitted ears and gaping jaws, but thus far his assault, and the shots of his allies, seemed barely felt by the raging creature. The scorpion unleashed a bolt at close range that drove into the center of its chest, but the long missile simply shattered on impact, the bent steel head clattering to the ground to be trampled under the creature's huge claws.

As the creature gained the ridge the defenders engaged it directly, thrusting spears and other long weapons into its body. Again the attacks seemed to do little but distract the creature. It seized a dwarf in its jaws, cutting off his screams with a noisy crunch. Half of the hapless sapper went down its gullet; the other half was flung aside, landing at the feet of Duke Aerim, who could only watch from his prison, not ten paces away from where the spawn was working its way through the defenders.

More flashes of magical energy flared down from above, driving the creature into even greater paroxysms of rage. It rose up on its hind legs, snapping at the air, but the wizards had wisely kept their altitude high enough to avoid any reprisals from below. That immunity was not sovereign; the Camarians knew that the creature could change form, but Amurru had told them that the transformation into a shape capable of flight took upwards of a full minute, during which time the creature would be vulnerable to concentrated assault.

As it was, however, the spawn did not lack for targets upon the ground. It dug its claws into a stone-lined trench, ripping out a ten-foot swatch of hillside, along with the two legionaries manning it. Both men perished messily, along with a third who was almost accidentally impaled by a sudden outward thrust of one of the creature's legs. All six of its limbs terminated in four curving black claws as sharp as adamantine daggers, and those cut through stone, wood, and steel plate alike indiscriminately. The remaining defenders quailed before that assault and began to fall back.

Then Kiron and his knights reached the line, and threw themselves into the breach. The monster saw them coming and lunged to meet the young knight-captain, but Kiron dodged those deadly teeth, taking a glancing hit that nearly dislocated his shoulder. The epic magical blade given to them by Amurru flared into power, a five-foot shaft of ruby *brilliant energy* hissing from the long golden hilt at the knight's call. He threw himself forward before the creature could follow up on its attack, slicing the blade across the bottom of the spawn's jaw.

Here was finally a weapon against which the spawn's otherworldly resistances proved to be of no avail. The red blade carved a deep gouge in the creature's jaw, and eager blood that was just as bright sprayed out in a fan that hissed as it splattered on the knight's breastplate. The attacks by Aldos, Qatarn, and Petronia were of little matter, as far as the creature was concerned, for here was a foe that could really hurt it.

Unfortunately for Kiron, that worked both ways. He held his ground, knowing what was coming even as he lifted the *brilliant energy* sword again, and the full fury of the ravager spawn descended upon him.

Chapter 437

PAIN AND TORMENT

There was nowhere to go, even if he had decided to try to escape. Kiron's sword flashed red as he lifted it before his face, casting the monster's features into grim red relief. The ravager spawn seemed to move in a blur as it lunged at him, black claws and gaping jaws converging on his head.

There was a blue flash, and then an odd and sudden silence. A pulse passed *through* him, and for a moment his entire body thrummed with the intensity of it. But somehow, he was not crushed or torn apart, as he'd expected.

It took him several long moments to realize why he was not dead. As the chaos receded he found himself staring straight into the gullet of the beast, its jaws stretched unnaturally wide in front of him, frozen in mid-air, nearly close enough for him to reach out and touch one of the dagger-shaped teeth. A transparent blue aura separated him from the creature, and as he looked around he realized it was a bubble, a sphere of force that had appeared around him right as the creature had launched its attack. Protected by the *resilient sphere*, the creature could not harm him. Amurru had warned that the touch of the creatures could disrupt magic, but apparently this spell—it had to be Sutheros who had cast it, none of their other mages were powerful enough for magic of this sort—was durable enough to withstand the spawn's attack.

The spawn was belatedly realizing this as well. It unclenched its jaws and then leapt forward, perhaps believing that sheer mass could rupture the *sphere*. Kiron flinched as the weight of the creature settled upon him, but the magical globe held, and it suddenly grew dark as the weight of the thing settled around him. He could just see out from under the sides of its body by bending low, but could not discern what was happening at the forefront of the battle. Both cursing and thanking the magic that held him safe, he waited to find out what would happen.

And then, so suddenly that he started in surprise, the creature was past him, and he could see again. The monster's hindquarters were close enough to touch, its rear limbs half-folded around the *sphere*. He could not hear the sounds of battle from within the globe of force, but he had no doubt that his companions were engaged in desperate battle with it.

Kiron was ready a second later, when the *sphere* abruptly vanished. The epic sword danced like a switch in his hand, slicing half-through one hind leg, tearing through the second on his backswing, and then vanishing forward as he planted his feet and thrust the entire length of the blade into the monster's asshole.

The ravager spawn's reaction was rather... *intense*. Its body contorted improbably as it rose up into the air, its crippled rear legs spasming underneath it. As the damaged limbs collapsed it fell heavily to the side, slamming hard into the wooden frame to which Duke Aerim was bound. The impact sundered the wooden stakes and nearly did the same to the Duke, who was flung roughly to the ground, part of one of the sundered shafts still attached to him by his chains.

Kiron was down; the spawn's flailings had crushed his left leg, and blood oozed down his left side where its claws had penetrated deep through his armor into his body. But power flooded into him as Allera unleashed another *mass cure*, and his pains receded, fading into the background of tumult and chaos of battle. Petronia offered him a hand, which he took gratefully, staggering back to his feet. He'd lost the sword, which was probably still embedded deep in the body of the spawn.

The ravager spawn had been seriously injured, but it still had fight left in it, and it used its four intact legs to drag itself back onto its belly. Turning its eyes on the battered defenders, it issued a roar of pure malevolence that promised an accounting for its hurts.

An armored form shot up over the lip of the ridge, and flew headlong at the spawn. Corath Dar held *Justice* in both hands, the sword trailing long tendrils of ravager blood behind him as he continued to pick up speed. With his armor shining with a brilliance that went beyond the reflected lights from the hilltop, he seemed almost an avenging angel, intent upon the destruction of his foe.

But the spawn was not about to accept its fate meekly. Digging its foreclaws into the stony knobs of the ridge, it lunged forward and seized the diving fighter in a single snap of its jaws. Dar was too big a morsel to swallow easily, but pinned in its mouth, which engulfed him almost from shoulders to knees, he could not effectively strike back. He still held *Justice*, but his swordarm was trapped between two black teeth, the blade jutting out from the creature's mouth like a toothpick.

Kiron and the others rushed forward to Dar's aid, but before they could get close enough to rejoin the melee, the ravager spawn convulsed suddenly. Its jaws snapped open, hurling its prisoner free, as it roared again in pain. It twisted onto its side, the motion revealing Duke Aerim, who pulled free of the spawn in a cascade of blood and gore that splattered over his entire body. In his right hand the brilliant energy sword flared bright; somehow the Duke had managed to tear himself free, get over to the spawn while it was distracted with Dar, and seize the weapon embedded in the ravager's body. The ravager's struggles were growing weaker, now; blood poured from its abused hindquarters as from a fallen decanter. Aerim lifted the sword to strike again, but in its last violent throes one of the ravager's legs smashed into the ancient warrior's body, launching him into the air. He fell hard onto his back in front of the knights, still conscious but more than a little dazed. Kiron made a motion, and two legionaries

hastened to take custody of the man, reclaiming the sword before Aerim could recover enough to use it against them.

The knight ordered his remaining forces forward again, but there was no immediate need. Freed from the ravager spawn's jaws, Dar had recovered in mid-air, using the still-effective *fly* spell to spin and dart forward once more. The spawn could not react again in time, but it snapped its head up, trying to knock its attacker aside. There was a blur of steel and then Dar was past. Blood flashed in an arc above the spawn's head, and then it toppled back, its skull shorn nearly in two by the critical hit. After having put up such a violent fight, it died quickly, landing in a heap without so much as a tremor shaking its body.

"Make sure of it!" Kiron yelled, gesturing for Petronia to use her axe. A number of legionaries and dwarven sappers were still in the area, but most had either fled or been killed by the creature's rush. Three dwarves were still trying to work the scorpion, but the engine had been damaged in the fray, and they were having difficulty getting another bolt into the mechanism.

Dar spiraled around and landed beside Kiron. "That's two," he said. The two men looked out into the night at the far hill, where the third spawn had ascended. The hillside was cloaked in darkness, now, the torches that had been set there either knocked down or snuffed by the creature's ability to disrupt magic. Nothing moved, although anything could have been lying in the deep shadows along the crest. There was no indication that the twenty humans and dwarves that had occupied the fortifications atop the hill yet lived.

"There!" Kiron yelled, pointing toward the gap between two of the hills, off to the west.

Even without light, it wasn't hard to mark the passage of the ravager spawn, once they knew where to look. The creature seemed to be moving off, although its course would take it close to the secondary camp, Dar noticed at once. Maricela and the other reinforcements would be coming that way; maybe the creature had already detected them, and identified them as its next victims. Dar hadn't ever seen one of the ravager's brood retreat from a fight, so the alternative seemed more plausible.

Kiron had seen it too. "We have to stop it!" he yelled.

Chapter 438

THE LAST SPAWN

The spawn had already come under attack; the flying wizards had engaged it, but even Dar could see that their magic had been largely depleted. *Magic missiles* and *lightning*

bolts from wands flared in the night, and Dar caught sight of Mehlaraine, flying low over it, thrusting down with her pike into the creature's back. The spawn paid little heed to any of the attacks, trudging forward with singleminded intensity. Whatever wounds it had suffered thus far had likely been healed already, either by its innate regenerative power or via its nasty ability to absorb the life energy of the foes it destroyed.

"I'm on it," he said, but before he could *fly* off again, Allera grabbed onto his arm. "You're seriously hurt," she said, invoking a *heal* spell to purge him of his injuries. As the healing magic poured into him, she said, "I held onto it; there was nothing else I could do." It was clear from the look on her face that it had been difficult; Dar knew that she felt the loss of every dead human, dwarf, and elf around them as a painful wound.

"It will fall upon you," he told her, and then shot out into the night again, barely clearing the ruined battlements before diving down the face of the hill toward the retreating spawn. Behind him Kiron was shouting orders, but Dar knew that nothing that the knight did would likely affect the rest of this battle. An arrow from Selanthas passed him, dropping in an arc that intersected with the black slab of the monster. But then the creature turned into a dell between two parallel ridges, taking it out of sight of the defenders around Rappan Athuk.

Dar followed it, picking up more speed as he descended. They had to finish this, and quickly; he had no idea how much time they had left, but doubted that it would be very much. He lifted *Justice*, and picked his spot, right in the back of the ravager spawn's skull.

But before he could attack, the night came alive ahead of him.

Lightning flashed down into the gorge. But this was no mere *lightning bolt* from a wand; the surging currents of an *empowered chain lightning* filled the space between the ridges with blazes of power. Even more than fifty feet away, Dar could feel his skin tingling from it. The spawn felt it more acutely, rising up on its forelegs, uttering a scream of pain and rage.

A white lance of power streaked down and struck it in the throat, followed by a second, and then a third. The archer was a strange creature, a merging of a woman's body with that of a snake, with broad feathered wings that kept it aloft in a steady beat. It carried a white longbow that formed arrows of pure energy with each draw.

A short distance away, Dar saw a squat, pudgy black man, riding a flying carpet barely big enough to support him, drift down and point to the walls of the canyon. A rumbling accompanied a sudden collapse of the cliff walls, as rubble poured down toward the spawn. The plumes of debris took on shape, and Dar saw that the wizard had summoned a pair of earth elementals, each the size of a small cottage. But as the light of another white arrow flashed he saw that the outlines of the things were twisted, strange, pseudonatural reflections of the elemental forces that he'd seen and fought numerous times in his storied career. But the creatures, whatever they were, engaged

the spawn with vigor, putting their ponderous weight to advantage as they descended upon it from both sides.

The spawn reacted with predictable violence, lashing the elemental with its claws, while it took a massive bite out of its shoulder with its black teeth. The elemental, for all its pseudonatural resistances, was not able to withstand that amount of damage, and it collapsed in a heap of rubble. The other elemental smashed its fists into the spawn's back, but while the impacts were strong enough to collapse a stone wall, the creature merely twisted around to face the second threat. It tore a claw across the elemental's belly, sending fist-sized clods of earth flying. It looked very likely that the second summons would not long outlast the first.

But the attack of the pseudonatural elementals had distracted it long enough for the casters above to get in another sequence of attacks. Dar found himself an observer as another series of magical bolts from Sultheros and his companions tore home, but that was trivial compared to what followed. Dar now saw the source of the lightning that had landed moments ago, as a robed figure descended from the night skies, her robe dancing wildly around her. Letellia had replaced her cloth mask, but Dar knew her, even before she lifted the silver staff, and invoked another powerful spell. This time he saw the blue flashes build from his hands, swirling up and down the length of the staff, growing in intensity until she plunged the end downward. The bolt slammed down into the spawn's skull, and Dar could see the echoing glow flickering from its eyes, tendrils of energy flaring out from its teeth as the second *chain lightning* fully discharged. The fighter could smell the odor of roasted flesh, and for a brief moment he felt an odd sympathy for the thing, tormented by enemies that it could not reach.

Then he saw the light ahead, moments before a small column of armed men appeared along the trail ahead. Maricela was at their head, holding up her burning mace, its light glinting off the breastplates and steel spearheads of the legionaries.

The spawn saw it too. As the elemental lunged at it again, it lifted a claw and seized it by the chest. The elemental had to weigh thousands of pounds, but the spawn dashed it to the ground, its substance collapsing as the black claws tightened on its frame. The spawn was already surging forward, projecting all of its fury and frustration at this new target, one it could reach, a foe it could tear to pieces, and feed upon.

Chapter 439

PURSUIT

Dar dove toward the spawn, but his heavy armor slowed him, and the creature had a small but significant lead. Within a few seconds, he saw that he would not catch it before it reached Maricela and the Camarian reinforcements.

The priestess shouted orders, and the legionaries spread out across the trail, setting their long spears to take the spawn's charge. She fired a beam of *searing light* at the spawn, but while the bolt hit it squarely in the center of its chest, it did nothing to slow its rush.

The lillend archer kept pace easily, maintaining the fire from her magical bow. The shafts stabbed deeper into its body than mundane arrows, and left bloody streaks trailing down its back, but the spawn, it appeared, would not be denied.

The little black man on the flying rug had gotten ahead of the charging spawn, and dropped to within fifty feet of the canyon floor. He leaned over and dropped a small black ball that plummeted to the rocky ground. As the spawn charged forward, the rocky terrain around it came alive with stirring, grasping tendrils. At first, they looked like the common *black tentacles* spell, but as he drew near, Dar could see that these tentacles were coated in a slick substance that left dark marks on the spawn's skin where they struck, and each terminated in a gaping maw that snapped and hissed as they sought to gain purchase on its hide. The spawn tore through them like a farmer's scythe through wheat, but it cost it time, time that it no longer had.

Dar lifted *Justice* and prepared to strike, but Letellia drifted into his path, her hand outstretched to bar him. "Let me, general," she said, her voice hollow from behind her mask.

He wasn't about to argue with her; the spawn had been delayed by the black wizard's spell, but it was close enough for one dedicated charge to take it into the ranks of the Camarians. But even as he started to move around Letellia, she summoned her magic once more, and unleashed a final bolt of energy, once that stabbed into the back of the spawn's skull like a knife. The spawn, already critically wounded, collapsed in a twitching heap, even as the last flickering remnants of electricity danced around its head and died.

"That doesn't necessarily mean it's dead," Dar said, but the lillend was already descending, dropping to almost point-blank range as it continued to fire its bow into the creature's head. At that range, the entire length of the glowing shafts penetrated, and vanished into the interior of the spawn's skull.

Letellia started to drift back upward, forcing Dar to focus his thoughts on the *fly* spell to follow her. "We thought you were dead," he said, glancing back down at the path of destruction left by the ravager spawn through the canyon.

"I quite nearly was. Fortunately the collapse weakened the barrier between planes that exists in the vault, so I was able to eventually *plane shift* to another reality."

"Why didn't you let us know that you were alive?"

“I knew that your failure—our failure—would result in the eventual release of the Ravager. I had to take steps to address that eventuality. I regret that it took as long as it did to recover and return.”

He pointed down at the lillend, and the diminutive wizard floating below on his tiny square of carpet. “Who are your friends?”

“Members of the Mind’s Eye. I would have rallied more aid, but Lyllalya and Dra Mak Mor were the only ones who could come on such short notice. I have called in a number of favors, Corath Dar. Let us hope that are resources are sufficient to the task.”

They had risen high enough to see over the ridge, and Dar could see the lights of the torches that surrounded the entrance to Rappan Athuk, popping into sight like distant fireflies. There were other lights now on the hilltop where he’d left Kiron and the others, although at this range all Dar could make out were the outlines of men moving about.

There was one other thing as well. A rumbling, distant, a vague sound on the edges of his perception. Without the anchor of the ground beneath him, it seemed to come from everywhere at once.

“What’s that?”

“You know, Corath Dar. It is time.”

Concentrating on the magic, he shot forward, willing the spell to carry him faster. He was moving as fast as a charging warhorse, but it still felt as though the air around him had thickened, tugging at his limbs, his sword, his cloak.

“Allera!” he shouted, knowing that he was probably too far away for her to hear over the sound of the evening breeze, which had started up again briskly, as if to spite him. The rumbling grew louder, and he could see rocks dislodged from the hillsides ahead, bouncing as they tumbled down the steep slope.

He could see Kiron and the others, now. Kiron was shouting something, lost over the rising pitch of the trembling ground. He saw a flash of white and saw Allera, running toward him. He was still too far away.

And then the hill exploded in a shower of rocks, dirt, and dust. A stone the size of his head shot past him, close enough so that he could have reached out and touched it as it passed. For a moment, the hilltop was obscured by a storm of debris that hung in the air, swirling in the wind.

“Allera!” he yelled, but there was no sign of her. There was too much dust in the air to see anything for a few seconds. He coughed as he entered the outer edge of the cloud, but kept on going, trying to see something, anything.

And then the debris cleared, and he saw more than he wanted to see.

It was huge. It looked like the spawn, down to the black teeth and claws, but its crimson hide was a deeper, richer color, almost like congealed blood. It was easily the size of a galleon, and he couldn't even see all of it, its lower half still obstructed by the swirling dust and scattered dirt in the air. Apparently it had burrowed up directly from below, drawn by something—the sense of prey, magic, whatever. Even though it hadn't sensed him, its presence was almost overpowering. The Ravager was massive beyond its mere size, although that was more impressive than anything he'd ever faced before. No, it was *ancient*, epic, a thing beyond mere human words. It was a force of nature, destruction made manifest. He'd been a fool, to think that mere *men* could face such a thing and defeat it.

But what he felt more than anything at that moment was a tight fear for Allera. And then, as though summoned by the thought, he saw her, lying half-buried in a pile of rubble. She'd been hurled over the edge of the crest by the explosion, and had made the violent passage down the steep cliffside that he'd made earlier. He'd survived it, recovered to fight on, but his wife was not moving.

"Allera!" he cried out, diving toward her.

But the Ravager had finally sensed him, even before he cried out. As he dove, it lunged, its jaws opening to seize him and swallow him in a single gulp. Desperation guided instinct, and he threw himself aside, lashing out blindly with *Justice* in what had to be vain effort to divert its attack.

The sword struck one of the Ravager's teeth, and was almost wrenched out of his grip as he was buffeted roughly aside. He started to fall, but a moment later he felt an agony as the creature's jaws snapped shut, closing on his right wrist. His arm was nearly wrenched out of its socket as he was yanked violently down, and then, with a sickening tearing feeling that he felt through his entire body, his right hand and much of his forearm tore free, and he was tumbling away from it. For a moment, as he fell out of control, he caught a glimpse of the Ravager falling back, and saw the gleaming blade of *Justice* jutting from the right side of its jaw, protruding out from between its teeth like a toothpick.

But anything else, including recovering from his fall, proved beyond his abilities. The ground rose up quickly to meet him, and he landed in a rough heap on the piled earth and stone that had sloughed off the sundered hillside, blood from his severed arm splattering on the rocks around him as he slid to a halt.

Above him, the Ravager lifted its head toward the sky and unleashed a roar that shook the world.

THE RAVAGER

In the sky above the Ravager's perch, atop the remnants of the hilltop adjoining Rappan Athuk, the surviving defenders launched magical attacks that seemed as futile as they were tiny against its bulk. Much of the creature remained half-buried in the chaos of unearthed boulders, heaped earth, and jagged timber that it had created as it had burrowed up from the prison complex deep underground. Drawn by some instinct to the locus of the enemies fighting against its spawn, the Ravager had bypassed the broken wards and sundered traps of the ancient prison and burrowed up directly into the midst of those that would challenge its newly-won freedom.

Lightning flashed in the air, but it barely marked the Ravager's crimson hide. *Magic missiles* vanished into it, less than pinpricks, the slight injury they inflicted easily repaired by the creature's monstrous properties of regeneration. It had killed at least a dozen men and women in its sudden and violent appearance, and some trickle of their life force had found its way into the monster, siphoned off by another grim power of ancient lore imparted by its creators.

Letellia conjured a *crushing fist* that delivered a glancing blow to the creature's head. Just barely too strong to ignore, the attack drew an immediate response; the Ravager merely opened its jaws and engulfed the *fist*. That reaction might have given it at least some indigestion, but the creature's touch disrupted the sorceress's magic, and her conjuration dissolved as thoroughly as if the *fist* had been a morsel of flesh.

Around the base of the hill, dust-covered, battered forms stirred among the rubble, groaning as they slowly pulled themselves free of the debris. Here and there an arm, a leg, or another part of a body was visible, lying limp, their owners slain by the concussive force of the Ravager's arrival, or by shards of flying stone, or by the hard landing at the base of the cliff, or by being buried by the subsequent rockfall. A legionary, his arm dangling at an improbable angle, staggered through the wreckage, calling a name that was lost in the chaos that still raged around him.

Dar did not call out, but his face was a tight agony as he crawled through the clutter, his severed arm pressed tightly against his body. Blood left a generous trail in his wake, and it was clear that only sheer stubborn persistence kept him going now. His weapons lost, his body broken, all he could do now was make his way to the goal he'd seen before from above. The spell that had carried him aloft had been broken, or it had expired, and all he had left to carry him now was the lingering remnants of his strength.

Still, he reached Allera, lying limp in the dust that covered her face and clothes. He pulled her against him, his arm leaving a bright red mark on her tattered robe.

“Angel,” he croaked, the dust thick in his throat. “Angel, wake up... we need you. I need you.”

At first, he thought she was dead. He could not feel the warmth of her body through his heavy mail, and his good hand was numb, unable to feel anything but a vague echo of the pain that radiated from his other, severed limb. He tried to open her satchel, which miraculously still clung to her hip on a much-abused strip of leather. His fingers fumbled on the latch, and his vision blurred as rare tears appeared. He shook his head, partly in frustration, partly at anger at himself. The motion caused his vision to blur. He was already starting to drift; even Corath Dar had only so much blood in his body to lose.

A stone the size of a wagon wheel struck the ground six paces away, but he could not feel the shards that pinged loudly against his armored back. Looking up, he was only vaguely aware of the Ravager’s movements. It had pulled itself up out of the shaft it had dug, and clung to the top of the hill like a bird defending its nest. It hissed in what seemed to Dar to be irritation at the flying ants that continued to harry it. White shafts briefly flashed in his vision, but he no longer had enough awareness to recognize the arrows from the lillend’s bow.

He didn’t see Allera’s eyes open, or feel her hand on his arm. But the sudden sweet surge of healing magic cut through the haze into which he was falling, and brought him back fully into consciousness. Her spell had not been strong enough to fully heal him, but she had clearly channeled some of it into herself, for her gaze was strong as he finally met it with his own. She had noticed his amputation, and closed her hand without flinching over the stump, which was now covered in a tender layer of freshly-healed skin.

“I seem to keep losing that arm,” he said, almost laughing with his relief. But before she could respond, another impact nearby drew their attention back up. The Ravager’s movements were dislodging more of the hill, provoking new slides which tumbled down the hill. It was only a matter of time before something hit them. “We’ve got to get out of here,” he said. He started to rise, but she held him with her hand, her eyes steady.

“No. This is the time, and this is the place. I will need you... to hold me, to anchor me. There is going to be... a cost.”

He nodded. He did not try to caution her; there was no need. He held her, protecting her with his body, as she drew upon her power, the deep thread that connected her to the life energies that suffused this world. The magic that fueled her healing, and which she had wielded against the darkness of this world, and worlds beyond.

Her head lifted, and her eyes fluttered up into their sockets, showing almost all white. Her body shook, but Dar held her, serving as her anchor, as she drew that power into herself, using it to tear open a portal in the very fabric of reality.

The *gate* opened in the air above them, maybe a hundred feet above the Ravager. A brilliant light issued from within, accompanied by a sound both unreal and sublime, a note of simple purity that caused those mortals gathered here to stare up in surprise, the pain of their wounds and the desperation of their circumstances temporarily forgotten.

Allera send a calling through the portal, and the hosts of Heaven answered.

Chapter 441

HEAVEN'S ANSWER

They came in an orderly double-column, bright points of light that spread out to form a ring above the Ravager. Flaring with divine energy, they projected beams of liquid light that lanced down into the creature, flaring slightly as they vanished into its colossal bulk. Individually, each beam did little, but with eighteen lantern archons all firing a steady stream of bolts into the monster, it clearly felt an effect.

Despite being land-bound, the Ravager responded with a fury. Drawing its legs under it, it sprang into the air, gaining a surprising clearance despite its size. An archon vanished, swallowed up into the creature's maw, but the others darted nimbly back, only to form up again and descend to follow the creature as it slid awkwardly down the side of the hill. Even in motion they kept up their barrage, if at a slightly slower pace. The arcanists continued their own attacks, wearing away at the creature little by little. A portion of their spells were disrupted as they struck it, but the magic resistance of the Ravager was sporadic, and for each *lightning bolt* or *magic missile* that dissolved on impact, several others got through, inflicting damage. They were hurting it faster than its regeneration could repair its body, now, although the task seemed akin to tearing down a mountain using a pick and shovel.

"You did it," Dar breathed at Allera, watching the ongoing display in wonder. Fortunately the creature's leap had taken it down an adjacent flank of the hill, or its tumble would have crushed them both under its bulk. He looked for other survivors from the hilltop, but it was still too difficult to see through all the floating debris in the air.

Allera groaned slightly, and Dar looked down in concern. She held her hand outstretched before her, her body trembling with the effort of opening the *gate*.

"Let it go, Allera," he told her, resisting the urge to shake her, as if that could free her of the grasp of the magic. But she did not falter, and if anything drew deeper, her breath heaving in her chest as she refocused herself upon the portal floating high in the night sky.

The *gate* remained open for a few seconds longer, sufficient time for one more entity to arrive through.

The figure hovered in a globe of pure light that could be seen for leagues distant. He—if gender could even be assigned to something so utterly *perfect*—was a tall entity in the shape of a human being, a sculpture of gentle lines and flowing curves, bright wings flaring from his back. He carried a massive sword in one hand and a bow nearly as large as he in his other, and he wore a white robe, over which was fastened a breastplate of white steel so brilliant as to be almost blinding to look upon. All those gathered, who had been transfixed by the initial opening of the *gate* and the arrival of the heavenly host, now felt tears flow down their eyes at the sight of this newcomer, one of the generals of the blessed, a prince of the Light.

A solar.

The Ravager was the only thing present that appeared unfazed by the new arrival. Still harried by the archons, it lunged up on its hind legs in another attempt to lash out at its tormentors. But this time its counter was unsuccessful, as the archons merely flowed back out of its reach, still blasting with their beams. The Ravager was possessed of the ability to change form, but with the damage it was absorbing, it looked as though it would have to succumb before it could adopt a shape capable of dealing with flying enemies on their own terms.

“By all the gods,” Dar whispered, unable to do anything but watch as the solar descended from on high, its sword a bright shaft in its hand. Allera, her powers spent, sagged in his grasp, but there was a slight smile on her face that lingered as she passed from consciousness.

The solar released its sword, and to Dar’s surprise the weapon hovered obediently in the air beside its master as the angel lifted his heavy bow, and fitted a white shaft to the string. He hands moved in a blur as he fired once, a second time, and then too quickly for Dar to keep count of the arrows it launched. As far as Dar could tell, every shot struck the Ravager, but he could not tell how effective the impacts were. The idea of an arrow, even one fired from such a bow, harming the creature in any significant way seemed utterly unfathomable. But *something* had to be able to kill it; they had slain the spawn in numbers, and while durable and ferocious, those lesser monstrosities had bled like any other living thing that Dar had battled in his storied career.

But now, with his wife lying unconscious in his lap, and his hand somewhere inside the belly of that beast, probably keeping his sword company, all he could do was watch, and pray.

The Ravager lifted its head and roared a challenge at the solar, its fury quite clearly evident. The angel, in turn, perhaps unsatisfied with the results of his archery, slung his bow across his back and folded his wings close around him, seizing his sword out of the air as he arced over into a dive. The Ravager, sensing that a foe was coming to

challenge it directly, focused on the descending celestial, ignoring the beams of light that continued to lance into it from all directions. Letellia had summoned another *crushing fist*, but the Ravager likewise paid it little heed, ignoring the thumps that smacked hard into the densely knobbed flesh of its neck and shoulders.

The Ravager's long neck and generous reach allowed it first attack, but the angel spun in a beautiful pirouette under the snapping jaws, which closed upon empty air. His blade carved a long gash under its jaw, but he still retained enough agility to dart back, avoiding the claws that sought purchase in his hide. The angel did not escape fully; bright drops of blood glistened in the air as it withdrew, torn from gashes in the celestial's long legs. But the Ravager had clearly taken the worst of that exchange.

The angel immediately returned to the attack, streaking out over the Ravager's back, lashing out with his sword. The blazing steel weapon opened two deep gashes in the creature's hide, but only the head of the sword came back bloody, indicating that the strokes had failed to penetrate deeply.

The Ravager's body contorted, and it flipped over onto its back with an alarming suddenness. The angel drew back, but too late to avoid the raking claws that bit into its flesh from both sides. The sword flashed, and part of a claw fell away, but then the Ravager's head snapped hard into him. The combatants fell apart once, more, but bits of once-pristine white fabric trailed from the Ravager's jaws, and the solar had clearly absorbed serious punishment. The Ravager sought to press its advantage, lunging after its enemy, but the celestial wisely retreated, his wings lifting him almost effortlessly back into the air beyond its reach. In his wake the lantern archons reformed into a close circle, blasting away.

Dar, still transfixed, gently lowered Allera to the ground and rose to gain a better vantage, standing over her protectively as he watched the battle. He could see the creature laboring now, the cumulative effects of its wounds having a definite effect despite its ongoing regeneration.

The solar's glow had brightened as it hovered in the air, and now it dove again, uttering a cry of challenge that drew the Ravager's attention once more. Again the creature rose to meet its foe, but this time the solar abruptly arrested its dive, spreading its wings to stop its descent in a way that no mortal flier could ever have managed. The Ravager extended its neck fully, springing up on its legs, but the angel had judged the range perfectly, and the creature's jaws closed on empty air five feet below him. Gravity reasserted itself, and as the monster began to fall, the angel fired a *prismatic spray* into its face. The brilliant beams lanced into the Ravager, scoring its flesh in a manner that had to have hurt it, but even that potent magical assault failed to destroy it outright.

"Surely it cannot take much more!" Dar exclaimed, the words torn out of him in his frustration. He itched to join the fight, even in his current condition, but knew better than to attempt something so foolish. Then he saw a figure off to his right, staggering out of the swirling dust. Dar recognized him only by the familiar design of his armor; Kiron's

face was obliterated in caked dirt and blood, and he did not appear to see Dar as he stumbled forward, nearly falling with each tortuous step over the rough ground. He didn't even react when Dar grasped him, but he let himself be eased down to the ground not far from where Allera lay. Blood bubbled on his lips as he tried to speak, but Dar could not identify what he was trying to say.

"Stand easy, knight," he said, holding the dying man's shoulder.

A loud noise drew his attention back up, just as a tremor shook the ground under him, and he nearly fell. At first he could not see clearly what was happening, as a new plume of dust had risen like a rising fog from the side of the hill where the Ravager had battled Allera's celestial allies. Then he oriented on the bright points of light within the storm, and they allowed him to focus in on the outline of the creature, a dark shadow within the cloud.

And diminishing, as it burrowed into the ground beneath the hill.

The noise and shaking grew stronger, until stones began rolling down the hill around him. He dragged Kiron over to Allera and shielded both of them with his body. Debris glanced off of his back, hard enough to draw a grunt, but not enough to break bones. The chaos reached its peak and began to recede, but even as the noises faded, the thrum within the ground at his feet continued. To Dar, who had already guessed what was happening, it felt like the sound of hope dying.

The rockfall came to an end; a quiet interrupted only by the sound of the wind returned. He reached down and touched a stone half-buried in the ground. He could still just sense the trembling of the earth in the Ravager's wake.

A light drew his attention up. The solar descended toward him, his glow parting the swirling detritus in the air. His eyes shone with pity, and Dar felt a twinge of irrational anger, which he choked down with his frustration and pain. The celestial spread its wings and lifted a hand over them, and Dar felt a surge of healing power that eased his physical wounds, but did little to help those deeper hurts. Behind him, both Kiron and Allera stirred as the life-giving energies settled into their bodies.

The solar's presence had attracted others as well. Sultheros and the other mages drifted down from above, followed by Letellia and her otherplanar allies. The lantern archons had dispersed across the battlefield, looking for survivors that they could *aid*. Dar was dimly aware of shouts and a globe of light just coming into sight between the hills; Maricela and the soldiers in the relief column, arriving too late to do anything but pick up the pieces.

No. Dar squashed that thought as soon as it appeared. If they'd been here at the start of it, all they could have done was die, and in dying bolster the strength of the Ravager. Their decision—*his* decision—to face the creature had been the height of hubris, he saw that now. Still, Allera's intervention had nearly been enough to beat it, only the

creature had not quite been stupid to linger long enough to be destroyed. The same could not be said of most of his command...

“Are you well, general?” Sultheros asked. Dar realized that the elf had spoken before, but the words had swirled around him like the gusts of wind, lost without meaning. He struggled to his feet, even as Callyse and Jalla Calestin landed behind him, tending aid to Allera and Kiron. Mehlaraine had not remained, and was probably off looking for her husband. Selanthas had been atop the ridge when the creature had arrived, but he’d been at the very edge of the long crest; perhaps he’d been lucky.

“It was all for naught,” he said, fixing all of them—even the celestial lord—with a cold look. “The bastard got away, and we have no idea when or where it will strike again. The way it regenerates, it’ll be back to full strength in a few minutes, if that.”

None challenged his assessment. All they could do was deal with the survivors of the disaster, the celestials joining the surviving clerics to offer succor, if not solace.

Chapter 442

SURVIVOR

A day after the Ravager’s emergence from Rappan Athuk, the scene of the first battle between the Camarians and the creature remained desolate and stark. Dar and the other leaders of the group had departed late on the morning after the confrontation, using *wind walk* and *teleport* spells to return to the populated lands of the north. Only a handful of legionaries and dwarven sappers that had survived the assault remained, keeping watch. It was a precarious duty, for all that the arcanists had agreed that it was unlikely that the creature would return here. There were other, richer targets to sate its hunger, Letellia had pointed out, in a tone that had sent a chill down the backs of those who had been close enough to hear.

Legionaries in tattered and dust-covered livery poked through the rubble, persisting in their tasks despite their dazed expressions. The events of the previous night—from the desperate battles with the spawn, the appearance of the Ravager, up to the opening of the heavens themselves to give battle—had overwhelmed these men, whose lives had been commonplace up until this moment.

One soldier, a youth of twenty years by the name of Livius Tartha, looked over the dark form lying in a niche in the rocks three times before he nearly stumbled on it. Shaking his head to clear it, the legionary bent to examine the form, before starting in surprise.

“Centurion! There’s a live one here!”

Three others came running, including the summoned leader, a bald-headed veteran whose armor was dinged with almost as many scars as his creased flesh. The centurion was the first to reach the youth, and as he knelt beside the unfortunate victim, his experienced hands quickly confirmed the soldier's words.

"Water!" he yelled, accepting a skin from one of the other men. He lifted the head of the man lying in the rubble, and poured a thin stream of water between his cracked and blood-flecked lips. The man was clad in garments that might have once been of quality, but were now as torn and ragged as those of most of the survivors of last night's engagement. He was clearly a man of status, though; he wore a necklace of silver links tight around his throat, and there was chasing of the same metal on his belt buckle. Oddly, the centurion saw flecks of color in the dirt caught in the man's clothes, or maybe it was just a trick of the uncertain light. He wasn't clad in legion garb, and he obviously wasn't an elf, so that made him one of the "specials" that had been sent here to try to stop the demon-beast that had come up out of the ground to wreck destruction upon them.

The man stirred, and coughed. The centurion helped him as he turned his head and unloaded a surprising amount of dirt from his lungs. It was amazing that the man hadn't suffocated, with so much crap jammed down his throat. There was something stranger, as well; the man's face showed signs of exposure, his nose and ears looking almost like they'd been sorely frostbitten. It had been chilly, the last few nights, but even if he'd been lying here since the battle with the Ravager, it shouldn't have been bad enough to leave such marks on him.

"Get a stretcher," he said to two of the legionaries, who rushed off to comply. The centurion and the soldier who'd originally found the man remained with him, offering him water again once he'd finished clearing his throat and lungs of debris. The unfortunate accepted mechanically, although he was anything but lucid.

"Just take it easy, mate," the centurion said, looking up as the pair returned with the stretcher. They loaded him onto it, then the centurion directed the two bearers to take him back to the command tent for immediate treatment from the last cleric to have remained with the small remnant of the company.

"I thought we'd found the last of the live ones," the young legionary said. "Who do you think he was?"

"A damned lucky bastard," the centurion said. "Continue your sweep, soldier. Maybe we'll find another one."

The soldier saluted, and moved off. The centurion lingered for a moment, glancing down into the rocks where they'd found the man. The crevice went deeper than it first looked, and a sour smell rose up from below. It was a familiar stink; the same odor rose up off the rotting corpses of the dead spawn that lay in heaps around the bases of the hills.

“Lucky bastard,” the centurion repeated, then he moved off toward the tent, to check on the status of the survivor.

Chapter 443

PATH OF WRECKAGE

Deep under the surface of the world, far from the cares and even the awareness of the people of Camar, a city lay in ruins.

The place was called Talaceth-Azbar, and some of its structures dated back almost a thousand years. Or they had; much of the city was heaped in wreckage, the slender, twisting spires cast down, the carved structures that had been etched deep into the sloping walls of the huge cavern gouged off to leave blackened, empty pits where rooms and hallways had been before. A few days before, Talaceth-Azbar had supported a population of maybe a thousand citizens, mostly duergar, bugbears, and minotaurs, seasoned with a smattering of drow and tieflings, and the whole supported on the backs of maybe five thousand slaves.

Today, maybe fifty survivors picked through the rubble.

A small cluster of dark figures observed the scene from a ledge high atop the city, near the vaulted summit of the great cavern. Most of the luminescent growths that had been painstakingly cultivated along the cavern walls had been torn away with the destruction of the city’s structures, but there was no need for much illumination to note the thoroughness with which Talaceth-Azbar had been razed.

“And where is the creature now?” spoke a tall figure that loomed over the handful of duergar who looked down at the wreckage of their community with dark looks. He was clad in flowing garments that draped over his body like a shroud, but failed to conceal the considerable size and strength of their owner. His eyes gleamed like tiny torches, and even the sturdy deep dwarves stirred at his glance, quickly looking down at their feet. One might have attributed that to the fact that these creatures had had their spirits broken by the fate of their city, but to assume that would have underestimated the potency in the entity that the people of the underworld referred to at the Nightlord.

“Its travels are erratic, great lord,” one of the duergar managed. “We believe it makes for the general direction of Kalas Xothi.”

The Nightlord glanced over at another of those gathered on the ledge, a lean figure clad in a hooded robe. “Velkyr?”

The robed figure shifted slightly, the voice that came from the cowl rasped like the creak of an old door. "Divination magic still proves useless regarding the creature, master."

"Useless," the Nightlord said. The word came out like a curse, and all of those present quailed before it. But the Nightlord turned away, and looked back out over the cavern.

Someone approached from below, flying up close to the cavern wall. The new arrival was a figure much akin the Nightlord, but slightly smaller, faster, moving with a lithe ease as she dropped lightly onto the edge of the jutting platform. A woman, but otherwise an echo of the dark, powerful figure that dominated the scene evolving upon the ledge. She was clearly a part of him, but in the dark underworld, she had her own name: the Dark Lady.

"Anything?" the Nightlord asked.

The newcomer shook her head. "Nothing useful. Nothing that would indicate a weakness."

"If it had a weakness, we would have known of it by now."

"You recognized the descriptions of the attacker?" the Lady asked.

"Yes. It's the Ravager. The grown-up version."

"I seem to remember the little ones being a big enough problem in and of themselves."

The Nightlord smashed a fist into the palm of his other hand. "This has the stink of our old... *companions* all over it."

"You think they freed the creature, to use against us?"

The Nightlord snorted. "Not even they are that stupid. No, I suspect they've long since forgotten about us, and I would prefer to keep it that way. But I have not forgotten our expedition into the vault under Rappan Athuk. I also remember that our friends had custody of the keys, or at least one of them, I think. My memory of those last days... after... they are a bit... hazy."

"What about that fiend that came calling, a few months back?"

"I had not forgotten that emissary. I am starting to wonder if I made the right decision to destroy it."

"We agreed that we would not get involved in the actions of the surface world again."

The Nightlord gestured with his hand. "Look around you. It is going to be hard not to get involved with... this."

The Lady moved closer to him, the two shadows blending together. “What do you want to do?”

His eyes met hers. They were cold, those eyes, but what feeling remained in them, was saved for her. “We need information. I suspect our realm is just an appetizer for this thing, and we cannot remain ignorant of what is going on in the world beyond any longer.”

“We have agents...”

“No. This is something we need to do ourselves.”

“Velkyr will test his leash in our absence.”

“Of course he will. He is what he is.” In an undertone, but one that she heard clearly, he added, “We all are.”

He turned to face the delegation gathered along the ledge; the duergar flinched back reflexively as he focused his attention upon them. “You will rebuild. To aid in this, I will send a company of formians to assist you. I will furthermore cut your tribute in half for the next two intervals.”

One of the dwarves, his skin deeply furrowed like the ridges of the surrounding cliffs, blurted, “Half! But great lord, how can we...” His statement was cut off as he met the Nightlord’s eyes.

“You are fortunate indeed that enough of you survived to remain useful, or I would finish what the Ravager started, and take the lot of you now. Go! And think on what I have said.”

The dwarves fled as one. The robed figure remained, but it kept a respectful distance, leaving the Nightlord and his consort staring down over the ruined city, their minds sharing dark thoughts.

Chapter 444

MEANDERINGS

The ground trembled.

Corath Dar felt it, and he paused in one of the stone passages deep within Highbluff Castle to place his hand against the nearest wall. The thrumming was clearly felt

through the ancient stone blocks, and the vibration seeped through his hand into his arm, persisting for a good fifteen seconds before fading.

“Fuck,” the fighter said.

“General!”

He turned at the shout, and saw Petronia coming down the stairs at the far end of the corridor, a bright lamp held aloft in one hand. The blade of the knight’s axe gleamed brightly over her left shoulder; few of the Dragon Knights went anywhere unarmed any more. Dar understood; *Justice* rode at his own hip, even here, deep in the sanctuary of one of the strongest citadels in Camar.

“What is it?” he asked her, as she stopped in front of him, snapping off a salute.

“The others are waiting for you, general,” she said.

He nodded. “Tell them I’ll be there in a few minutes. Allera’s not with them?”

The momentary hesitation told him all he needed to know, even before she responded. “No, general. I believe she went below to speak to the prisoner.”

He didn’t respond, and she started to turn away before he forestalled her. “Wait a moment. Did they reestablish the link with Jaduran?”

“No. Jalla Calestin is still trying to puzzle out the workings of Honoratius’s Orb, I believe. But with Maricela here, and the Patriarch in Camar using *sendings* and *wind walking* messengers back and forth, we’re able to keep in fairly regular contact with the capital.”

She hesitated again, and Dar could sense the added question there. He wasn’t sure of the answer himself, so he said nothing. Petronia took it as a dismissal, so with another salute she headed back to the stairs, and the more comfortable chambers in the higher levels of the castle. The others were there, waiting for him.

Instead Dar turned and continued on his original course. He took another staircase at the end of the tunnel, descending several levels, until he was below the level of the castle walls, descending into the foundations of the bluff upon which the fortress and its surrounding town were perched. Much of the floors above were of recent construction, repaired after an assault from the first of the Ravager spawn years ago that had destroyed a good portion of the castle and town. But down here, the tunnels were hewn from the rock, and were as they had been when the fortress was first created, centuries ago. It was cold, too, but Dar was far beyond letting such a minor concern distract him.

He reached the level he wanted and headed off down a narrow corridor. A few lamps burned in niches set high along the wall, almost near the ceiling, but they were far enough apart to leave long expanses of shadow between them.

The passage wasn't very long, and it ended in a heavy wooden door that looked capable of resisting a siege. Dar reached for the handle, but before he could touch it he heard the sound of a metal latch being drawn, and then the door opened to reveal Allera.

She started when she saw him, hopping back in alarm and nearly dropping the small lamp she was carrying before she realized who it was. "Damn it, you scared me," she said.

"I thought you weren't going to come down here any more," he replied, unclenching his fist from the hilt of *Justice*.

"The bond between Duke Aerim and Rappan Athuk remains dormant, but it is still there. I need to check on him periodically."

"He's a dangerous man."

"I can take care of myself. And in any case, there is more to him than that. I have encouraged you to meet him; his story is... complex."

"I heard enough of his story from Jaduran to confirm that he be kept down here until this is all over."

"That is not all that Jaduran said. His *divination* refers to Aerim playing a significant role in the outcome of... of all this." Like Dar, she seemed reluctant to refer to the Ravager specifically, as if mentioning its name could somehow draw it, like a fiend from the hells.

"Bah, the gods are as cryptic as ever. That verse could be read in a dozen different ways. And 'the fallen champion of yesteryore' could refer to more individuals than our captive Duke."

She looked up at him. "I had considered that as well. But having spoke to him..."

"I did not try to stop you when you restored his leg and arm, but we don't have more time to waste on Aerim. Did you learn anything more from the wizard?"

Allera shook her head. "No. His mind is... broken, beyond my ability to repair. I do not think he knows more than what he told us, certainly nothing that would help us fight the creature." Her frown deepened; she seemed to take any failure of her healing abilities as a personal challenge. But the Seer had been forthcoming in their interrogations; it was just that what had been done was done, and there was little more that he could give them that could help with their current problem.

"A pity we did not find any more of those stones of holy power that he spoke of," Dar said. "Did you feel the tremor earlier?"

"I did. They have been getting stronger, of late."

"Yes. And with our magic proving useless in tracking the creature, we have no way of knowing when or where it will choose to make an appearance."

"We've been doing all that we can to get ready..."

"You were there, Allera. You know that whatever we do, it will probably not be enough."

"We drove it away. All we need to do is find a way to trap it, and kill it."

"To do that," a third voice interjected, "you must draw the Ravager to you... you must give it what it wants."

Dar and Allera spun together to face the speaker, who stood in the shadows a short distance down the corridor. Allera lifted her lamp, driving back the darkness enough to reveal the intruder.

"Where in the hells have you been?" Dar asked. "We tried to get in touch with you after the battle at Rappan Athuk, but you did not respond to our *sendings*."

"My power wanes," Amurru said, and as the lich shifted, they could see that it was only partially there; the light of Allera's lamp shone through its body, the outline of which only barely clung together, like a wisp of smoke on a breeze. "My existence is tied to the Ravager's prison, and like it, is now broken and crumbling into nothingness."

"We failed to destroy the creature," Allera said.

"I know. I sensed the outcome of your confrontation with the Ravager. You drove it away, but it has regained what it has lost, and has grown even more powerful. But while it has fed in the dark underways beneath the earth, its hunger grows stronger with each passing day."

"We beat it once," Dar said. "How can we force it to fight us again, on our own terms?"

The lich wavered, and for a moment it looked as though it would vanish entirely. But then the outline of the creature became more solid, the red pinpricks of light within the sockets of its eyes brightening like tiny torches.

"The Ravager is drawn to two things. Magic, and life. Its current diet is richer in the former than the latter, as the underworld realms it pillages are not as heavily populated as the world above. Its meanderings you have felt as the shaking of the world, as its claws tear into the fundament, and it opens breaches in the planet's mantle. Eventually this damage will cause earthquakes, or open passages that allow molten fluid from the

world's core to reach up to the surface. Or it will return to the surface, likely emerging under one of the more populated cities of your world."

Allera shook with the force of the lich's words, but she held her head up, and she put a hand on Dar's arm, to forestall him. The fighter's face had darkened as the undead guardian had spoken, and had drawn a few inches of *Justice* from its scabbard, as though he could stop the fate predicted by Amurru through the sheer force of his anger.

"You would not have come to us if you had no answer to Corath's question," the healer said. "You said we had to give it what it wanted, and that it wants magic and life. That would suggest it will go to Camar, the strongest source of both on this continent. Is there any way we can divert it from that path?"

The lich regarded them for a long moment, its red eyes blazing with power even despite the tenuous nature of its presence. Finally, it said, "There may be a chance, one chance. But if you fail this time, then it is almost certain that nothing will be able to stop it."

"We've heard that before," Dar said, grunting as he slammed his sword back into its scabbard.

Chapter 445

OLD FRIENDS

Dar could barely keep his eyes open as he made his way down the quiet corridor toward his chamber in the castle at Highbluff. With his rank he and Allera merited a private room in the upper level of the castle keep, despite the fact that the place was crowded almost beyond capacity with visiting warriors, priests, and mages, along with their entourages, apprentices, guards, and followers. The town outside the fortress was packed as well, sprawling out into the war camp beyond. A full six cohorts of the Second Legion were present, with more columns of men arriving by the day.

Dar's main interest at the moment was in his bed, but he could not quiet his thoughts of the tumult of the meeting that he'd just left. He could not tell what was worse, the reaction to the ideas that Amurru had shared with him and Allera, or the ultimate trust that Camar's leaders had placed in him, finally accepting the plan that he and his wife had put forward. He had seen reflected in their eyes the same thing that the lich had told them, a realization that a failure here would likely result in an end to everything.

Orcus was fairly straightforward, compared to this, he thought, as he reached his door, and shouldered it open. The room beyond was draped in deep shadows, the only light coming from a banked lamp set on the small table near the bed. Thick curtains covered

the slit windows, and the fire in the hearth was long dead, leaving the room noticeably colder than the passage.

In his distracted state, he sensed too late the sudden chill down his back that warned of danger.

He reached for his sword, but before he could draw *Justice* a shadowed figure stepped into the light of the lamp. Even as the fitful glow illuminated his pale features, and their eyes met, a familiar voice stabbed through him.

“Release your sword, and come forward. Don’t cry out or make any sudden maneuvers.”

Dar’s hands dropped, and he stepped forward into the room. “Talen,” he said, his lips tightening.

“I suppose we both knew that this day would come. That’s far enough; remain there.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not here for you personally, although believe me, there were times when I was tempted. I just want to talk.”

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Dar, you haven’t changed.” Talen came a step closer, more fully into the light. He was clad in a breastplate of faded blacksteel under his flowing cloak, and the hilt of a sword jutted out from his left hip. A amulet fashioned of a twisted weave of platinum shone at his throat. “I have left you with the ability to think, as a courtesy, but do not believe that I will not get what I want, one way or another.” He nodded toward the darkness across the room, on the other side of the bed. “Shay, the door, if you please.”

Another shadow detached itself from the wall, and moved silently through the darkness toward the door. But as she passed Dar, the fighter suddenly moved in a blur, slicing *Justice* out from its scabbard in a sudden motion. Talen lunged forward, hissing a command, but Dar ignored him, stopping the sword with its edge less than an inch from the vampire scout’s throat.

Shay merely laughed. “Well now, aren’t you just full of surprises,” she said. She kept her hands at her sides, but her body was slightly tensed, as if ready to spring into motion.

Dar’s hand was rock-steady, his attention split between Shay and Talen. The latter had halted his charge by the foot of the bed, just out of Dar’s reach. “You’re right,” he said to Talen. “I did expect that this meeting would happen someday.”

“An *amulet of protection from evil*?” Talen asked. He waved a hand, dismissing his own question. “No matter. As I said, we are here only to talk. If you want to take this encounter in another direction, that is up to you, but I would suggest that you not test my patience.”

Dar barked a curt laugh. “Being dead hasn’t improved your hearing. I said that I have nothing to say to...”

He didn’t get a chance to finish, as Talen made a slight motion with his left hand. Dar tensed, expecting an attack, but the vampire lord merely rested his hand on the knobby post at the foot of the bed. The movement had drawn Dar’s eyes only for an instant, but it was enough for Shay to sweep her arm up in a blur. She was obviously wearing a bracer under her sleeve, for metal tinged loudly on metal as *Justice* was knocked roughly aside. Dar fell back, recovering his guard, but the vampires formed up on his flanks, all show of companionability gone now, the danger no longer hooded in their eyes.

“I told you not to test me,” Talen said. “Now, are you going to listen, or am I going to have to...”

A brilliant light erupted around Dar, and the vampires stepped back, shielding their eyes. Allera pushed open the door and stepped into the room, her own body glowing with the same bright *holy aura* that surrounded her husband. Flickers of blue energy danced around her hands.

“I think you just got your answer, vampire,” Dar said. “Good timing, angel,” he added in an undertone.

“Why did you come here?” Allera asked.

Talen straightened, still shading his eyes from the light of the twin *auras*. “I wanted to know why you idiots released the Ravager,” he said, his lips twisting back into a snarl, revealing his pointed teeth.

“We did not unleash the creature,” Allera said. “Stay where you are, Shay,” the healer said, extending a finger toward the scout, who’d sidled a few inches to her left, toward Allera’s flank. “I tried my best to save the both of you, but do not think that my feelings toward you back then will cause me to hesitate now, if you force me to act.”

“You cannot save us from what we are,” Shay said, but she stopped her subtle movement.

“You were involved in what happened,” Talen said. “You had the keys, and my agents have reported that you went to Rappan Athuk, before the monstrosity was freed.”

“To try to stop the motherfuckers who did it,” Dar growled.

“Unsuccessfully, it would seem,” Talen said.

“We only had one of the keys, and that was stolen from the temple of Soleus,” Allera returned. “It was an evil cleric of some destruction-cult that completed the task. He had otherplanar aid, and allies that included Zafir Navev.”

“Don’t tell him anything,” Dar said, but Talen laughed. “So. Old Navev finally got the better of you, did he? Well, that alone almost makes it worth it. Almost. But your failure has threatened my realm, Dar, and that I cannot accept.”

“I don’t give a rat’s flying fuck for your ‘realm’. Do you think we didn’t know what had happened to you, ‘Nightlord’? You can go back into your hole and rot there for the rest of time, for all I care.”

Anger flashed in Talen’s eyes for a moment, but he mastered it quickly. “Eloquent as always, Dar. But the problem of the Ravager remains. For all the havoc that it is wreaking in my world at the moment, we both know that sooner or later it will come up again into yours, and when that happens, Camar is finished.”

“I had thought that you no longer gave a shit about us surface-dwellers,” Dar said.

“To be quite honest, I don’t. But the creature must be stopped, and I’d rather it be done with the blood of your fools than of mine. I know you are planning something; you can taste it in the air here. And I have not forgotten how you and those others think. So tell me your plans, and perhaps the lords of the darkness can help you servants of the light.”

Dar laughed. “You seriously expect me to trust you? Maybe you do want the creature dead. But if you expect me to think that you will not take advantage of the situation when and how it suits you, then death has addled your mind.”

“Don’t be a fool...”

“No,” Allera said. “He’s right. That bridge has been crossed, Talen. Now, if you want my help, I will do what I can to bring you back, both of you. You have fallen far, but maybe, with the gods’ blessing...”

“The gods!” Talen spat. “No, keep your gods, and keep your pity. I see now that it was a mistake to come here. But you will come to regret your decision, both of you. You will see soon, when it is too late.”

“Sometimes it is better to die with one’s principles, than to lose oneself in compromising them,” Dar said quietly. “A friend of mine once told me that.”

Talen's expression twisted into a dark sneer. He and Shay fell back out of the light, and as the shadows embraced them again, they dissolved into twin wafts of gaseous mist. They slid past the curtains through the open windows, and then they were gone.

"Are you all right?" Allera asked, coming over to Dar. At his nod, she took his hand in both of hers, watching the curtains as they shifted slightly in the breeze that made it though the deep slits in the fortress wall.

Chapter 446

ON THE BATTLEMENTS

A cold evening breeze blew hard over the battlements of the South Tower, yanking at the cloaks of the small cluster of men and women gathered there. The tower was the highest point in Highbluff, and had been ever since one of the ravager spawn had destroyed the old North Tower, twelve years ago. That part of the castle had never been rebuilt, and even though the walls had been rebuilt, there was still a gap there that hinted at the loss.

Most of those present stared toward the south, but Corath Dar's eyes drifted to the west, where the last rays of the setting sun were just visible over the distant horizon. The wind was coming from that direction, dragging long wisps of cloud that hung over them like cobwebs.

Allera came up to him, pressed her body into the crook of his. "It's beautiful," she said, staring at the sunset.

Dar didn't say anything, just held her there in the gathering twilight as the day faded. There was no conversation; it just seemed wrong to sully the moment. And everyone present had already made their views clear, very clear indeed, Dar thought grimly. As if sensing the tumult of his thoughts, Allera's grip on him tightened slightly.

He glanced back at the others, their backs to him as they watched the south. Letellia had removed the cloth mask that she used to obscure her face, but Dar knew that her expression would be just as unreadable as in their first meeting, or rather, the reunion that had come at Rappan Athuk just a few short weeks before.

Contrasted to her, Sultheros was an open book. The elven archmage had only just returned from the elven kingdom of Aelvenmarr a few hours ago. He'd spent the intervening time coordinating with the elven high council on how to deal with the threat posed by the Ravager, although he had left his apprentice, Callyse, here in his absence as a representative to keep him informed of developments in Camar. He looked smaller

than he was, standing between General Darius and Kiron, the two humans given added bulk with their weight of their heavy armor and weapons about them. Maricela stood a short distance back, although she added to Kiron's presence in much the same way that Allera added to Dar's. He found himself thinking more and more of them together of late, joined together with more strength as a whole than as individuals apart.

"There," Sultheros said, indicating a spot on the southern horizon with nod of his staff. The others stared out into the darkening sky, but it took a good minute before any of the humans could match what the elf's keen eyes had detected. The tiny speck in the distance grew rapidly, however, coming straight toward them as though fired from a crossbow.

Dar and Allera came over to the battlement, and the line of people there parted for him. "You take a grave risk, general," Letellia said, stepping back to make space. Darius opened his mouth to say something, but bit down on what it was, expressing himself only through a curt shake of his head.

We've come so far, Dar said, musing again on the respective changes in their positions. So much had been dumped on him, a role that he'd never asked for and never expected. Allera was like a buttress at his side, holding him up and allowing him to keep everything together, for an hour at a time. He felt old. His hand fell to the hilt of *Justice* as they watched the approaching form.

It was a surprise to finally be able to identify it, even though they'd expected something of its sort. The flyer was a skeletal thing, obviously undead, held together by threads of necromancy. Its wings beat in a constant, never-tiring progression, the bone struts connected by tattered spreads of dead flesh that barely seemed able to catch the air enough to keep it aloft. As it drew nearer, they could see that it was carrying something in its talons, a long shaft of wood or bone or metal. A few cries of alarm rose from the lower battlements below, but those on guard had been warned, and no arrows or thick bolts rose to greet the intruder. It came straight on toward those gathered atop the South Tower, who drew back to give the thing room to land.

It slowed as it approached the tower top, its wings spreading to catch the air. Close up, they could identify it as some sort of bird, perhaps a giant eagle or similar species in life. It caught the edge of the battlement and landed awkwardly on one gaunt talon, balancing with its wings as it extended its prize with its other.

Sultheros let out a soft exhalation. "One of the five staves of power," he said. "Crafted of ancient magic in the time of Druse-Tharon, the first of all empires."

"A *staff of the magi*," Letellia said, her tone more neutral, even reserved. "I know its kind, too well."

The others hesitated, but it was Dar who finally walked forward, and grasped the staff with a gloved fist. The skeletal thing released it at his touch, and seemed to just come

apart, decaying before their eyes into small bits of bone and wafts of dust that were quickly borne away on the evening breeze. There was something fastened to the shaft, a thick parchment tied with a golden thread. Dar left it there, and extended the staff to Sultheros. "Can you do it, elf?"

The archmage nodded. "I believe so." He took the staff gingerly, cradling it in his hands as though it would decay as had the skeletal messenger.

Dar turned to Darius. "Have the orders been issued to the Legions?"

"They have, General. The men don't understand, but they're happy enough to obey, in this case. I suspect you may have more trouble with the people from the town..."

"Deal with it. I expect those orders to be obeyed to the letter."

The old soldier inclined his head deeply. "It shall be as you say, General."

Dar turned to Letellia. "And your friends, they will be ready?"

"Lyllalya and Dra Mak Mor will be here, with whatever other aid the Mind's Eye can muster."

"Only as we agreed, under the plan," Dar said.

"We know what is at stake, Corath Dar."

Dar held her eyes for a moment later—that wasn't an agreement—but the sorceress did not flinch from his gaze. Finally he looked back at Sultheros. "How long?"

The archmage held the staff close against his body, protecting it—and the ancient scroll—from the wind. "I will not know for certain until I have had a chance to examine the scroll in detail, but from what you told us earlier... two days, maybe three. I will need to bring reagents and support from Aelvenmarr, and it may behoove us to utilize some of the resources of Camar's Guild, and the church of Soleus, as well. I don't have to say that we will need to be as prepared as we can possibly be."

Dar nodded, and turned to Kiron and Maricela. "Let Jaduran know. In three days, we will engage the Ravager." *And this time, there will be an end, one way or another*, he didn't have to add.

Chapter 447

PREPARATIONS

The morning after Dar and his companions received their special delivery, the town of Highbluff was a beehive of activity. The temporary legion camp outside of the town echoed with shouted orders and the clash of metal on metal as legionaries gathered into their units. Columns of men headed into the town. They encountered sullen resistance and eager compliance to their orders in roughly equal measure. By the time that the sun had risen fully above the horizon to the east, the entire town was in a stir of chaos that was only barely contained by tight strings of organization.

Those guards at the castle had slightly easier duty, but the sights they encountered were far more uncanny. The baron's guardsmen had gotten used to seeing unusual sights. Groups of men suddenly disappeared or reappeared in the roped-off area in the back of the castle court near the keep. Streaking clouds descended from above to take on the form of other men clad in the raiment of the clergy of the Shining Father. Elves and dwarves and other men and women of faraway lands came to the keep by these and other means, sometimes coming and leaving within the course of a single hour.

But both groups of men, soldiers and guards, were all too aware of what it was that they faced. A ravager spawn had torn a swath through Highbluff years ago, and while the town and keep had been rebuilt, there were plenty of residents who still remembered clearly the violence of that day. And word had spread from the survivors of the desperate battle at Rappan Athuk, stories that made that remembered engagement seem trivial by contrast.

The soldiers of Camar knew enough to know that they were but small pieces on the gameboard, and that the outcome of this contest, including the fate of their land, their livelihoods, and their very lives resided in the hands of those leaders who took counsel in the private chambers within the castle keep. That was enough, for most of them. They remembered another time when the dead rose and walked the earth, and when dark powers stalked the land. Heroes had risen to face those threats, the same heroes that provided hope for them now.

It was true that there were those that deserted, slipping away out of the town as night fell, nowhere to be found with the coming of the morning. But the orders that Dar had issued earlier had undercut the inevitable stirrings of panic. Men did their jobs, and worked to get ready.

The leader of the castle garrison was a man in his late thirties named Captain Karic Garsen. He had not been in Highbluff when the ravager spawn struck, but he'd served at Janaris with the Second Legion against the ghoulish horde, and in the aftermath of the victory over Orcus he'd spent a season with the patrols that had scoured the southern lands for straggling survivors of the undead legions raised against the people of Camar. He'd spent the last ten years here at Highbluff, and had a wife and two children. The latter he had already sent on to Camar with his wife's kin, leaving just him and Tamara in small house situated on the edge of town within bowshot of the castle walls.

The sun had already set as Garsen made his way home. He felt bone-weary after a long day coordinating the implementation of General Dar's orders in the castle. The baron had thrown his full support behind the General, but Garsen had been surprised at how much resistance there had been to a course of action that seemed completely sensible, to Garsen's thinking. But then again, he'd seen more than most of the people of Highbluff, even those who had seen the monster that had ravaged the town firsthand.

The house was dark, and deep shadows were already gathering in the street. Garsen went around to the back door, and frowned as he saw their horse, Champion, fretting in its stall. None of the preparations he had expected to see were in evidence, but it was possible that Tamara had chosen to do the work inside rather than here in the back court. He felt a tiny whisper of unease that was likely a product of all of the preparations he'd witnessed all day, but nevertheless he loosened his sword in its scabbard as he lifted the latch and stepped into the kitchen.

Tamara wasn't there, so he went into the front room to see her lying on the couch. She didn't even stir as he entered, but as he called her name, she turned her head slightly to look up at him. Garsen saw blood trailing down her neck, and the crimson edge on the collar of her shirt.

He took a step toward her, but stopped as a man appeared from the hall that led to their bedroom. He was tall, pale, built like a warrior and clad in black that could not conceal the familiar outlines of armor underneath.

"I'm sorry to intrude, Captain Garsen," the man said. "Your wife invited us in."

Garsen reached for his sword, wondering about the *us*, but even as his fist closed on the hilt of his weapon, his eyes met those of the stranger, and all of his energy just seemed to bleed out of his body. He felt a presence behind him, but could not move, could not do anything as he felt a sudden icy chill suffuse him, followed by a sharp pain on his neck.

"Remember why we're here," the man said.

The room seemed to sway around him, but then the cold presence lifted, and he found that he could still stand, though barely. "You never let me have any fun," a woman's voice came from behind him.

Garsen blinked, and it seemed as though the tall man was suddenly right there in front of him, though he could not remember seeing him move. He could not look away from his eyes, which held him in an iron grip.

"What... what do you want?" he somehow managed to ask. The pale man smiled. There was something oddly... familiar about him, although in his current state Garsen couldn't quite identify what it was.

“Answers,” the man said. “All I want is a few answers, to some very simple questions. Give them to me, and we will leave you and your wife unharmed. Well, at least we’ll leave you alive.” The woman behind him barked out a laugh that was anything but amusing.

Garsen did not believe him, but he knew that he would answer the questions, would do whatever the stranger asked. All he could do, as he screamed a prayer to the Shining Father within the confines of his own mind, was to hope that surviving this meeting would be a better thing than having perished.

Chapter 448

READINESS

In the predawn gloom, most of the town of Highbluff was cloaked in deep shadows. The fortress looming over the town on the raised bluff that gave the place its name was dark, its towers rising up like black fingers in the night.

But in the town’s large open square, which faced up against the foot of the bluff which supported the citadel, the night was dispelled by a riot of light and color. It appeared that the entire population of the town was gathered there, men, women, and children, clad in raiment as assorted and different as the faces of the citizens themselves. There were soldiers, too, dozens of them, clad in the uniforms and armor of the legions, or the City Watch of Camar, or the livery of the baron of Highbluff, or simply in the mismatched garb of quasi-professional mercenaries. There had to be almost three thousand people in the square, crowded together into a space that had been designed to accommodate perhaps a quarter that number.

The light came not from torches or lanterns, although a few of those burned fitfully around the perimeter of the square. Rather, it was the people themselves who glowed, their bodies shedding a pale and vague radiance that built as it gathered, until the entire square and its contents glimmered like a reflection of the moon that occasionally peeked through the shifting clouds above as it descended toward the horizon in anticipation of the coming day.

The gathering was surprisingly quiet, and a somber hush lingered over the square, as though those who had come together here were afraid to violate the solemnity of the hour. Every now and then a faint hint of voices drifted through the square, but they seemed vague and distant, as though they were an echo of words spoken elsewhere.

From atop the battlements of the old castle, Corath Dar looked down at the gathering in the town square. He had the look of a man who had not slept in some time. He was

flanked by several others, men and women dressed warmly against the morning chill, with cowls drawn up to shield their faces from view. One of those stepped forward from the deeper shadows farther back from the edge of the wall, and took up a position watching not far from Dar.

“You don’t have to be here,” Dar said to him. “In fact, you probably shouldn’t be.”

The robed figure turned slightly toward him. “I understand the logic of your orders, general,” Setarcos said. “But I’d really prefer to see what happens myself. Plus, I doubt that the life that clings yet to these bones would much sate the beast.”

Dar murmured something, but his attention remained focused on the town square. The glow rising from below cast his features into stark relief, giving him a grim appearance. His hands, resting on the weathered stone of the battlement, kept wanting to form into fists, but each time he clenched them, he forced himself to take a deep breath and loosen his grip.

“It will come when it comes,” Mehlaraine said. “The guardian said we would sense it coming; there is little use in our standing here to wait. It has been sixteen hours since they began the ritual. You need to rest.”

“They cannot rest,” Dar said without turning. “You would sleep while your kinsman is down there?”

The elf woman did not flinch from his hard words. “Selanthas is resting now, as I did earlier this night. Those supporting Sultheros work in shifts to attend him, and grant him their strength... as I believe that the servants of your sun god are doing for Allera. What good do you do them up here, watching?”

“I am doing all that I can do,” Dar admitted. He arched his back, stretching tired muscles. “What of your friend there?” he said, nodding toward the robed figure lingering against the far battlement, the one facing inward into the castle yard.

“Callyse would prefer to attend upon her master,” Mehlaraine said. “But she has her orders, and will obey them.” The apprentice mage inclined her head slightly, but otherwise it was as if she were a part of the stonework.

Dar bent his head back, looking up into the sky. It was still too dark to see Letellia and her friends, but he knew that they were up there. The sorceress had been true to her word, returning with her allies from the Mind’s Eye to confront the Ravager one last time. In addition to the diminutive alienist and lillend arcane archer that had fought beside her above Rappan Athuk, she had recruited two additional companions, a pair of half-dragon war mages who appeared identical as far as Dar could tell. The two creatures, whose names sounded like stones being crushed by a millstone, were almost as big as ogres, but Letellia had acknowledged that their magical abilities were not even close to the talent that she or Sultheros possessed. But they had joined her in the air,

their magic augmenting the power of their broad coppery wings in keeping them aloft. They had all been up there since the ritual had begun, coming down from the skies in shifts to take brief rests. The five of them—he thought of Letellia as much of an outsider as the others, now—made for an unusual coterie of allies, but at least they were offering aid. Before, he would have been worried right now about their commitment to what they were facing.

But... *before*, he'd been wrong about a lot of things.

His gaze dropped, until it rested on the black stones beneath his feet. He thought of the figure sitting bound inside the keep's main hall, alone in a dark and empty space made cavernous by the absence of even a single soul for company. He still wondered if that had been a mistake. Aerim would get free, eventually; that had been the whole point. Dar hadn't wanted to leave any man, even the Duke, to await death in a cell buried deep under the earth. The Duke was a dangerous man, all the more so for the dark magic that lay buried yet within him, muted but not destroyed by the intervention of Allera's healing powers. He'd gone over to the side of darkness and shadow, and spent centuries serving the dread master of Rappan Athuk. Maybe Allera was right, and he'd been the victim of events beyond his control. Or maybe he'd brought his fate upon himself. Dar hadn't been there, and he didn't care enough to judge. Aerim wasn't the man he'd been, perhaps. But neither was Corath Dar the same person who'd been thrust ill-equipped and damned into the Dungeon of Graves twelve years ago. And so the Duke waited like the rest of them to learn the course of their fate.

Someone emerged from the covered stair that led back down to the castle gatehouse. The clank of metal armor and slight tap of his polearm upon the stone of the battlement as he walked announced Aldos before he got close enough to be identified in the darkness. The knight ignored everyone but Dar, coming to attention a few paces from him, offering a salute that he could hear but not see. Dar did not look up, but said, "Report."

"The situation remains unchanged below, general," the Dragon Knight replied.

Dar pushed off from the battlement and rose to his full height before shifting to face him. For all that the general was a large man, Aldos only gave up a few inches to him. Yet the difference in their personal presence was considerable. The knight had lost his life for a second time in the battle with the Ravager outside Rappan Athuk, killed in the explosion of their hilltop entrenchments when the monster had burrowed up out of its prison directly under them. Allera had *raised* him a second time a few days later, but while he had still not fully recovered from that ordeal, the loyalty that Aldos and the other knights bore to Camar remained unquestioned. Dar had suggested to Kiron that neither Aldos nor Petronia had needed to remain here, but the young Knight Commander had not needed to ask his lieutenants what they thought; they would remain until the end, and if need be, pay the ultimate price.

Repeatedly, if necessary.

“Kiron would not have sent you up here if he didn’t have a purpose,” Dar said to him. “So spill it, knight.”

Aldos glanced at the elves, but Mehlaraine had retreated to the far battlement to speak quietly with Callyse. Dar growled something impatient, and the knight turned back to him. “The Knight Commander... he is not sure how much longer the elf mage... and the others... can continue the ritual.”

“They will continue as long as it is necessary,” Dar said. He turned back toward the town, and thrust his fists into the cold stone of the battlement.

“Yes, sir...” the knight said, trailing off.

“Speak,” Dar said, without turning.

“I have seen spellcasting, sir... but this... it’s *doing* something to them...”

“This is not something that we can interrupt and then continue later, knight. We only have one shot at this.”

“Perhaps if you came down and saw for yourself...”

Dar sprang up so quickly that Aldos nearly jumped back. He held his ground as Dar thrust himself almost into the other man’s face. “And do what? Do you not think that I would stop this, *want* to stop this? Do you think I don’t understand the cost?”

A hand rested on his shoulder; Mehlaraine stood there in support, but said nothing. After a moment Dar turned and strode away, past Setarcos, who simply stood there quietly in the shadows, observing without comment. For a moment it looked as though he was heading for the far tower, to leave them, but after a few long paces he turned and started back.

“Tell Kiron,” he began, but he did not get a chance to finish, as a bright flare of light from below drew the attention of all of them to the town square below.

They could all see the change in the glow that rose off of the gathered townsfolk; the inner light that suffused them flickered, dancing in unsteady pulses of energy that caused the shadows around the square to twist and writhe. Over it all they could see the brilliant white globe of a *daylight* spell, the signal that had drawn their focus.

“It’s time,” Dar said. A glance at the elves, but Callyse was already unrolling a long parchment scroll taken from her pouch. Mehlaraine recovered her pike, the long shaft looking almost fragile in her hands. But Dar knew that the elf warrior’s mettle belied her appearance.

The fighter's expression was a sculpture of intensity as he tore off his gauntlets, and placed his bare hands flat on the top of the battlement. The others were quiet as he stood there, silent, listening, and feeling.

Dar frowned. "No tremors," Aldos said. "Shouldn't we feel it coming?"

Dar waved him to silence. He looked down at the town, where the flickers of light coming from those gathered continued to build, faster, more erratic. He stared at them for a long second, and then his eyes drew up, to the dark night sky. His eyes widened in sudden realization.

"It's flying!" he yelled, even as his eyes were drawn to the black shape that detached from the clouds above, a massive dark form that descended upon them like a shade of Death itself.

Chapter 449

CLASH IN THE SKY

Letellia and her companions had not been lax in their watch, although it took a few seconds for them to realize that the threat was coming from above, and not below. In that time, the Ravager had closed to within a few hundred feet of them, gliding on broad black wings.

The night sky came alive with blasts of lightning and fire that lanced out and engulfed the oncoming creature. The concentrated barrage of spellpower would have given most foes pause, but if the Ravager felt pain or discomfort from the assault, it gave no sign.

One of the half-dragon war mages surged forward to meet it, swelling with power as it laid wards upon itself, culminating in a *polymorph* that shifted its form into that of a golden dragon. The Ravager shifted course subtly, toward the incoming foe, and the two collided in a violent crash. The Ravager was the clear winner of the battle of mass and momentum, losing just a few score feet of altitude before its powerful wings were able to stabilize its course. The dragon tore at it with claws and bite, but then the Ravager seized its neck in its huge jaws and bit down, and the transformed mage's assault became a wild but aimless thrashing.

The half-dragon's companions came to his aid, flying closer as they continued their magical assault. The other war mage flung a second *fireball* at the Ravager, exploding it near the rear of its body, to avoid harming its cousin. A series of white lances of power fired from Lyllalya's bow stabbed into it, but while the lillend's accuracy was exceptional, none of the shots penetrated the Ravager's insanely thick hide. A second

empowered chain lightning from Letellia definitely caught the creature's attention, and as the blue flashes of electricity flared through its body it tossed its captive aside, after sucking one last draught of life energy from its crushed body. The half-dragon tumbled awkwardly as it fell, fat gobs of blood scattering around it from the vicious wound in its neck. Once the Ravager shot past its cousin dove toward him, using magical flight to accelerate his descent.

The Ravager changed course, moving with surprising speed and grace for a thing of its bulk. Its huge wings caught the air as it regained the altitude it had lost, driving it straight toward Letellia and Lyllalya. The lillend darted to the side, but was buffeted by one of the Ravager's wings before she could get fully out of the way. The blow was just a glancing one, but it knocked the archer roughly aside.

Letellia made no effort to evade, merely lifting her staff as she waited for the creature to reach her. It opened its jaws as it shot forward over the last few lengths separating them, jaws big enough to swallow the human woman in a single gulp.

The sorceress waited almost until the last second, then opened a *dimension door* that placed her slightly above and behind the Ravager. She fired another *chain lightning* after it as it shot past, but Ravager merely absorbed the hit as it had absorbed all of the damage wrought upon it thus far.

"It is... a force of sheer destruction," Lyllalya said, as she flew back up to rejoin Letellia.

"We must stop it," the sorceress said. She looked down at the square below, at the brilliant orb of *daylight* surrounded by the flickering ghost-lights that rose from the people gathered there. "We can evade it in an aerial battle, but I don't believe that we can inflict enough damage upon it to destroy it. It needs to be brought down to earth."

"Agreed, but I am not certain how that is to be managed!" the lillend cried.

The Ravager had continued on past the battle and had begun to curve back around in a broad arc. Its course had taken it through a pair of pseudonatural air elementals summoned by Dra Mak Mor, but whether the creature found their alien life forces unappetizing, or simply did not consider the summoned beings a threat, it had merely shot by them, leaving even the speedy elementals racing to catch up. The Ravager was giving up altitude, now, picking up even more speed as it completed its turn. Its objective was instantly obvious.

"It's going for the town," Letellia said. "The ritual is working... come on!" Hefting her staff, she descended after it, the lillend flying first behind her, then pulling ahead as her superior speed began to tell. But it was clear that neither of them was going to catch the Ravager before it reached its target.

Chapter 450

COLLISION

The Ravager descended toward the town square, drawn by the flickering tendrils of life energy that radiated out from the gathered townspeople, soldiers, and spellcasters who were packed into that confined space. The creature had drawn its wings back close against its body now, and it glided like a quarrel shot by a ballista, straight toward the lush fodder that had drawn it up out of the underworld, back to the sunlit surface where life blossomed everywhere, ready to be taken to feed the thing's unnatural and never-ceasing hunger.

It barely seemed to notice the dark figures that rose up out of the town to block its way. To its senses, attenuated to the ebb and flux of life energy, these two were like black abscesses, empty spots in a living world. They were in its path, but the idea that two tiny specks like these could stop a being like the Ravager seemed rather unlikely.

Talen, burdened with a bulging sack of old canvas, looked at Shay. "The beast is distracted; get its attention. Don't miss."

His vampiric consort snorted. "I never miss," she said, lifting a compact but powerful bow, and drawing a red-fletched arrow to her cheek in a practiced motion.

Her shot lived up to her words, slicing through the night to impact the Ravager squarely in the center of its bony, protruding forehead. The arrow failed to penetrate that bony ridge, but the impact triggered the spell laid upon the missile, and a bright *fireball* exploded around the Ravager's head, drawing an annoyed shriek from the creature but disrupting its flight for only a moment. It recovered quickly, and adjusted its course slightly to take it directly through the pair that had deigned to hurt it, if only slightly.

"Come to father, you big bastard," Talen said, lifting his sack. Shay drifted back and to the side, leaving Talen to face the creature's rush alone. Like Letellia before, the vampire lord made no move to dodge or evade; he merely lifted the bulky sack in front of him.

This time the Ravager did not open its jaws to swallow him; rather it looked as though it would merely go through him to its destination.

And then, in the scant instant before the Ravager struck, Talen thrust his hand against the bottom of the sack, inverting it.

Fifteen hundred pounds of alchemical goo erupted from the interior of the *bag of holding*. The mixture, painstakingly prepared by duergar alchemists, flew out in a dense gob that almost immediately began to spread as gravity drew it down and away from Talen. It struck the Ravager near the joint where the leading edge of its left wing met its

body, and stuck there, while the long trailing edge slapped down across its body, forming a new anchor each time the substance touched it. The mixture, known to surface alchemists as *tanglefoot*, continued to play out in longer strands as the creature's movement and the flaring wind of its passage spread it across more and more of the creature's body, with long tendrils starting to form in its wake, trailing behind it.

There was no chance of Talen evading impact; he struck it solidly on the belly, and almost immediately got tangled in one of those long strands. He started to fall away from it, but as he passed toward the rear of the creature he hit one of its hind legs, and another strand of the spreading goo. He would have thus followed it to the end of its flight, save for the fact of what he was. Within a few seconds his body began to dissolve, and in *gaseous form* he parted from the Ravager, trailing back behind it in the air.

The Ravager was strong, immensely strong, and given time it could have easily won free of the entangling mixture, which was already starting to harden in the brisk rush of air. But there was just too much of it to avoid in the moment, and within a few seconds the stuff had engulfed its entire left side like a large bug falling into a spiderweb. As its wing became fouled its flight became erratic, complicated by the increased drag caused by the dozens of trailing filaments.

The Ravager plummeted, its momentum carrying it low over the town. As it passed above the square, the flickering light surrounding the gathered citizens finally flared one last time and died.

And with it, almost all of the gathered people there disappeared. All save a handful, including an elven archmage, who sagged against the support of a graven black staff, and a human healer who fell to her knees, driven past exhaustion by the effort of channeling positive energy into the illusory constructs created by the power of Sultheros, his *staff of the magi*, and the ritual crafted by the lich Amurru. Maricela looked barely better off, kept standing only with Kiron's support, and the other three clerics of Soleus who had been supporting Allera collapsed as the ritual did, slumping to the ground, unconscious.

The Ravager issued a sharp, bestial cry, but whether it was anger at its current circumstances, or out of some awareness of having been tricked, was unknowable. It struggled one last time to free itself, twisting awkwardly in midair. It barely cleared the outer wall of Highbluff Castle, knocking bricks and bits of stone flying as its wing clipped one of the towers jutting above the wall. It then slammed into the top of the keep. The creature, far heavier than any rock that could be thrown by a trebuchet crafted by the hands of man, crashed through the roof of the keep, vanishing within in a cacophonous noise that echoed over the town, accompanied by a plume of dust and debris that briefly obscured the entire fortress from view.

As the swirling detritus in the air began to ebb, Corath Dar became visible, floating through the air by means of a *fly* spell cast by the elven apprentice, Callyse. In his wake, Mehlaraine, likewise empowered, approached behind him. They headed toward the great opening in the roof of the castle keep, moving swiftly but warily. But before they could reach their destination, Letellia dove down from above. Another *dimension door* had hastened her pursuit of the Ravager, and as she reached the gaping hole she raised her staff and channeled another stream of liquid lightning down into the building. She started down into the ruined structure, but Dar forestalled her with a shout.

“Letellia!”

She paused only long enough to yell back. “We must strike before it can recover!” she cried, then vanished from view in a swirl of blue robes and curls of dust in the air.

“Damn it!” Dar yelled, surging after her. Before he could reach the opening, however, there was a howl of wind around him, and he was buffeted by the rapid passage of Dra Mak Mor’s pseudonatural elementals. They vanished into the keep in a violent flurry. Dar started after them, ignoring Mehlaraine’s shouts behind him, but as he neared the gap, he could already hear the crumbling sounds from below, moments before the entire front half of the keep collapsed in upon itself, launching another plume of dust that washed over both warriors, obscuring the space below for a second time.

Chapter 451

TRANSFORMATION

Dar descended cautiously, one arm raised in front of his helmet to shield his eyes from the swirling debris writhing around him. He had drawn out his *everburning torch*, and held it before him, driving back the darkness that gathered deep within the remnants of the keep interior. When he emerged from the dust cloud, however, he couldn’t see much more than he had before.

A considerable swath of the castle keep had come down; a forty-foot swath of wall had collapsed inward, taking with it a sizeable portion of the roof. The great hall was now a jumble of rubble, pieces of stone ranging from the size of a wagon down to a man’s fist, tumbled throughout with roof tiles, bits of wood from smashed furniture, and other debris. There was no sign of the Ravager, or of Letellia. Or of anyone else.

“How long?” Mehlaraine asked, drifting down to hover beside him.

“Not long,” Dar returned. And as if to echo his words, there was a faint noise, a subtle vibration that seemed to radiate from the pile of debris. “It’s not safe in here; the rest of

this building can come down at any minute. Get above, see to Sultheros and the others.”

The elf woman nodded, and shot up into the sky. Dar followed more slowly, watching and listening. He wanted to go with Mehlaraine, wanted more than anything to go to his wife, but he lingered, knowing what was coming, but needing to see it with his own eyes.

Down in the square below, a scant bowshot distant from the ruins of the castle keep, another scene was developing that was almost as grim. The vast gathering of townsfolk and soldiers had vanished with the end of the ritual that had lured the Ravager here, leaving less than a dozen people remaining. The square that had seemed to crowded just a few moments before seemed almost eerily lonely now, the cluster of individuals collected under the bright light of Maricela’s *daylight* spell looking almost dismal as they reeled from the aftereffects of the Ravager’s disruptive passage.

“Get those clerics inside that building!” Kiron yelled, grunting with effort as he half-dragged the semiconscious Maricela to the dubious shelter of an empty market stall at the edge of the square. Petronia started to move to help him, but he stopped her. “Help Allera!” he ordered. The knight ran toward the healer, who was kneeling upon the stone tiles, her head bowed as though deep in prayer. She was better off than the clerics, who were all unconscious and unresponsive as his men lifted them in pairs and carried them toward the nearest structure. He looked for Sultheros, and saw the elf archmage still standing, though it looked like his staff was the only thing keeping him upright. The two fighter-mages who had supported him throughout the ritual were moving toward him, but they looked dazed, slipping sideways a step for every two they managed forward.

All of the spell-casters, incapacitated, he thought. He held Maricela’s head carefully as he eased her to the ground, lying her upon a small pile of canvas sacks that had been tossed into a corner of the stall. The priestess groaned, and she was conscious, but her eyes flittered wildly about, and Kiron knew that she wasn’t seeing anything at the moment.

His heart stabbed with concern for her, but he knew that they had bigger problems. He looked up toward the castle. He couldn’t see the keep above the outer wall, but he’d seen and heard the impact, and while he wouldn’t have put coin on another creature surviving such a plummet, he knew that whatever respite they’d gained against the Ravager was only temporary.

Dar was up there, he knew, and others; but the two people most critical to their plan were right in front of him, and in no condition to help right now.

“I’m sorry, love,” he said, letting Maricela go, and thrusting himself to his feet. For that matter, he wasn’t in such good shape himself; his legs resisted his efforts to rise, and his head spun for a moment as he steadied himself against the side of the stall. Part of

it was exhaustion, but some part of the backlash from the sundered ritual had likely affected him as well. Fortunately, he'd been less vulnerable to it than the magic-users.

Forcing himself to fight through the lingering mental haze, he hastened over to Petronia. "How is she?" he asked.

"I don't know," the woman knight said, her jaw clenched with frustration. Kiron could see her resisting the impulse to look up at the fortress atop the bluff; his own eyes kept being drawn there, like iron shavings to a lodestone. But there was nothing he could do about that, now.

"Did you try giving her your draught?" Kiron fumbled with the clasp of his pouch, but Petronia shifted to show him the bottle in her other hand. "Physically, she's okay, it's just..."

"Help me up."

Allera's command, though delivered in a weak, fluttering voice, nevertheless drew their full attention at once. Kiron came to her other side, opposite Petronia, and met her gaze. He was startled at how weak she looked, and while there was a vagueness in her eyes that mirrored what he'd seen in Maricela just a moment ago, as he watched he could almost see her steadying herself. She reached out, and grabbed his arm. "Help me," she repeated. "There isn't much time."

Kiron nodded at Petronia, and the two of them slowly lifted Allera to her feet. The healer almost swooned, but when Kiron hesitated, she seized his eyes with hers. "Give me a moment. Don't let me fall down."

Kiron looked over at Sultheros. The elf hadn't gone down, but his head was bowed until it almost touched the tip of his black staff. His assistants were speaking to him, but there was no sign that the archmage was hearing them.

"It was not... pleasant," Allera said, in answer to the question that Kiron did not ask. "We will... recover. But there is nothing that my magic can do... in this instance..." She took a deep breath, but her lips shook as she let it out.

"Water?" Petronia suggested. Allera nodded, and she drank of the small skin that the knight suggested. "Dar... the others?" she asked.

Kiron's answer was cut off by a noise of crashing stone. All of them save Sultheros and the unconscious priests looked up to see the gatehouse of the castle explode outward in an eruption of wood and stone.

The Ravager emerged through the storm of destruction that it had created. It had transformed itself. Thirty-five feet tall, its new form was a thing of nightmares. Its deep crimson hide and black teeth and claws it had retained, only now it had the look of an

ape, albeit an ape with an extra pair of arms sprouting from its shoulders. Muscles bulged under its dense hide, and its jaws opened to unleash a roar that shook the buildings around them to their foundations, an echo of the cry it had made when first it had emerged from its prison into the clean air of the world above. Crusted bits of dried tanglefoot mixture still clung to its body, along with patches of gray where shattered bits of stone had stuck to it. It strode forward through the wreckage of the gatehouse, and the new gap in the castle wall that ten men could have ridden through abreast.

The Ravager was pissed off, and ready to unleash some destruction.

Chapter 452

THE BRAWLER

Flames erupted around the head of the Ravager.

The half-dragon outsiders flashed by, keeping a good distance, throwing *fireballs*. The one that had been nearly killed by the Ravager's bite trailed behind, not fully recovered from its ordeal, but that did not stop it from flinging magic.

The Ravager ignored both of them.

It could not treat Corath Dar with such cavalier disregard, however. The warrior made his presence known with a diving attack that came at the Ravager from behind. *Justice* flashed in his hand as he slashed at the creature's skull, but at the last instant it shifted slightly, and instead of carving its left eye as he'd intended, he merely drew a shallow gash in the bony ridge under the socket.

The Ravager snapped at him, but while it failed to catch him with its viciously sharp teeth, one jutting side of its jaw clipped him hard in the side. Flung upward off his trajectory, the fighter hovered in the air, just a moment too long. Even as he started to recover, angling down and away, the Ravager slammed a fist into him with the force of a ram. Dar was knocked flying so hard that when he hit the side of the gatehouse tower, still clinging precariously to the remnant of the castle wall, he went *through* it, an armored projectile that vanished from view in a tiny plume of pulverized stone.

Lyllalya drifted down on spread rainbow wings, white flashes erupting from her bow as she dropped a steady barrage onto the Ravager. It ignored the attacks much as it had the ineffective *fireballs* from the draconic war mages, but as it turned back from its devastating punch against Dar, one missile caught it on the edge of one armored nostril, driving a stab of pain into the dim mind of the creature.

Reaching down, the Ravager tore into the remnant of the wall with its huge claws. Its brawler form was less conducive to excavation than its crawler incarnation, but that had not stopped it from burrowing out of the rubble of the keep, nor of demolishing the gatehouse. Its strength proved quite adequate to tearing free a hunk of stone the size of a draft horse, which it hurled at Lyllalya with a massive snap of its muscled arms.

The lillend was fast and agile, but the stone came at her almost as fast as a bolt fired from an arbalest. Lyllalya dove out of its path, but was clipped hard on one wing. She screamed as the missile broke the wing, and was barely able to control the path of her descent as she fluttered down behind the bluff, toward the sluggish-moving river below.

A bright blaze of blue energy stabbed through the pre-dawn gloom, knifing into the Ravager's chest like a dagger. *That* got the creature's attention, and it focused its baleful stare upon the square at the edge of the town below, at the elven mage who stood supported by a black staff that radiated power. Sultheros's *chain lightning* had hurt it, but its body was already beginning to repair the damage that the spell had wrought.

Sinking into a half-crouch, the Ravager sprang into the air. The arc of its leap was impossibly high for a creature of its sheer size, but again its sheer strength made such mundane considerations unnecessary. For a moment it was just a dark shadow in the air, and then it landed, smashing down through a chandler's shop with enough force to shatter the sturdy structure of wood and stone into splinters and rubble. Several other buildings nearby collapsed from the concussive impact of its landing, and windows shattered all around the square. A crack appeared in the ground, running out into the square for twenty paces, and flagstones an arm's span across toppled into it. Those few left on the far side of the square were thrown roughly to the ground.

The Ravager tore through the remains of the chandlery and stepped out into the square, doom burning in its black eyes.

Chapter 453

PAIN

Dar stirred, grimacing as pain tore through the lingering shreds of unconsciousness. He became aware of a sharp odor, and drew his head back, only to bang it hard against the stone wall behind him.

"Take a care," a calm voice said. "You have an ability to absorb damage that matches few men I have encountered, but even you are mortal, Corath Dar."

Dar looked up to see Setarcos standing above him. "How long..."

“Just a few seconds. The creature has moved down into the town, but I fear that this tower will collapse at any moment.” The aged monk held out a tiny metal box, which was the source of the stink Dar had detected. “This is a potent stimulant with curative properties, I recommend that you...”

Dar reached out and grabbed the box, downing its contents in a single gulp. A sudden shot of energy seemed to flow into his body, along with fiery tongues of pain that almost made him cry out. Every bone in his body felt like it was broken, but he was able to stand. He realized that the *fly* spell was still active, and he lifted a few inches off of the ground as he summoned the magic again.

“Can you manage...”

“I will be fine,” Setarcos said. “Fight well, Corath Dar.”

Dar nodded, and shot up toward the gaping hole in the side of the tower ten feet above.

Petronia almost fell again as she staggered to her feet, and started to pick up Allera. On the far side of the healer, Kiron was getting up as well. “We have to get her out of here!” the woman knight exclaimed. “We can’t stand against that thing!”

“We have to,” Kiron said, but his voice betrayed his own feelings, that Petronia’s words were only stating the truth. His hand dropped to the heavy bronze hilt fastened to his belt. “Get her to safety,” he started to say to Petronia, but to his surprise Allera looked up, her eyes clear and determined.

“No, my friend,” she said. “We all stand here.”

There was a flare of light as Sultheros unleashed another spell in the direction of the Ravager. The monster unleashed another cry of rage that was almost deafening, even coming from a few hundred feet distant. A hulking thing emerged from the rubble building behind it, a massive earth elemental of pseudonatural origin that rose up and wrapped huge arms around the Ravager. The elemental was nearly as large as its opponent, but the Ravager reached around with its extra arms and pulled the summoned entity off its back as though it were a child. The elemental slammed a fist hard into the Ravager’s chest, the *thump* of it like the booming of a rockslide. But the Ravager merely took it in its claws and tore it apart, striding forward through the cascading rubble. A pair of *scorching rays* flared with red fire across its shoulders as one of the half-dragon mages flew over; the Ravager did not even look up.

Kiron had not looked away from the creature since its unholy cry. “What do you need?” he said to Allera, without turning.

“Time. Just a little time,” she said, her voice quiet, yet somehow audible over the din.

Kiron nodded, and took up his sword. "Protect her with your life," he said to Petronia, and started across the square, toward the Ravager.

A few of the other knights started after him, but Petronia held them with a shout. "Ward your charges!" she said, directing them back to their positions protecting the vulnerable clerics. Maricela, lying in the open stall, had started to stir, but the others remained insensate. "Remember your duty this day!" she yelled, taking her own position at Allera's side, supporting her as she reached out to her magic. "The Dragon Knights hold the line!"

There was no answering cry, no shout of challenge. In the face of the Ravager, any such declarations would have seemed foolish bravado. Instead, the men and women of Camar held their weapons, and waited for death to come to them.

In the ruined gateway of the castle above, Selanthas cursed as he looked down at the scene above. Fortunately for him, he'd taken his rest in the South Tower, and not in the castle keep. Behind him, Callyse and Setarcos emerged as well, the elf woman helping the old man navigate the last steps of the wrecked staircase leading down from what was left of the gatehouse tower. The elf archer lifted his bow, but then lowered it without firing. Even at this range, he could make the shot easily, but what hope did he have of actually harming the creature? Selanthas was a calm man by temperament, but at the moment he felt like gnashing his teeth in frustration.

Behind them, a noise of movement drew their attention back to the ruined gate. They turned to see a man clad in tattered clothes, sodden with blood, carrying the limp form of Letellia. Selanthas recognized the man as the prisoner that they'd taken at Rappan Athuk, and he started to lift his bow again, before recognizing the futility of it.

"She lives," Duke Aerim said, and that finally got through to the elf, who reached into his pouch for the potion there before hastening to the aid of the wounded sorceress. She was unconscious, and it took some doing to get the healing draught into her, but it worked quickly, and the woman stirred as it completed its work.

It wasn't until she started to wake that Selanthas looked up and realized that Aerim was gone.

Seeing Allera recovered and casting, Sultheros joined in the effort to delay the Ravager from reaching them. The elf summoned a *wall of force* across the square, the spell forming a glowing barrier some thirty feet high and nearly fifty feet across. The Ravager slammed a fist into the *wall*, but did not waste time pounding uselessly upon it; instead it started moving around it. The end nearer the creature culminated in front of an inn, a centuries-old two story structure with a high stone foundation. To the Ravager, this proved barely an obstacle as it came around Sultheros's *wall* and tore through the front of the inn, ripping off the entire second story as it passed. Denied its rich feast of life by the trick played on it via the vanishing population of Highbluff, it seemed intent now on at least slaking its thirst on the magic used by these few remaining foes. It was focused

on Sultheros, but as it drew nearer its black stare shifted to Allera, who had turned away from it, and who seemed utterly unaware of her surroundings as she closed her eyes and lifted her arms. To the Ravager, she glowed with a brightness that far outshaded the globe of *daylight*, and it eagerly looked forward to consuming that glow, to ebb at least for a moment the ravenous hunger that drove its existence.

Thus focused, it completely ignored Kiron, at least until the knight, who narrowly avoided getting trampled beneath its ground-shattering stride, drove the epic sword given to him by Amurru through the monster's right heel, slicing through its flesh all the way to the bone.

The Ravager screamed in real pain. It lurched to the side, falling against a leatherworker's shop next to the inn it had destroyed. Its weight collapsed the building, and two of its four arms vanished inside the structure as it leaned precariously over.

Kiron pressed his attack, but before he could draw near enough to strike again, the Ravager lashed out with a left arm, seizing the knight in its huge paw, crushing him as it made a fist. Kiron struggled in vain against that steel grip, while the monster righted itself, leaving another structure in wreckage behind it. Already the wound at its ankle had stopped oozing fluid, although the gash still gleamed wetly as it slowly knit itself shut.

More spells splashed across the monster's back, but the creature paid them no heed. Mehlaraine shot in, trying to help free the knight, but the Ravager merely swatted her almost casually with claw before she could draw close enough to strike with her spear. The elf warrior's momentum was abruptly reversed, and she finally slammed into a roof some two blocks distant, dazed and bleeding, both of her arms broken and dislocated from their sockets.

Maricela, staggering out of the stall where she'd laid unconscious, screamed as the Ravager lifted Kiron in its fist, and bit off his head and a good-sized chunk of his body. His right arm, still holding his sword, went flying through the air, landing in the square in a bloody mess just behind the creature. Opening its fist, it thrust the rest of Kiron into its maw, swallowing the remains in a greedy gulp. Its meal seemed to fortify it, and when it stepped forward, its damaged leg withstood its weight without difficulty.

That distraction resolved, the Ravager started forward again, toward Allera and the others.

Chapter 454

PORTAL

Maricela's agonized scream echoed across the square, and became words of power, an invocation that sent a raging *flame strike* down upon the Ravager. If sheer grief and hatred could have empowered the spell, it would have reduced even that monstrosity to a cinder; as it was, it scorched the dense hide covering its shoulders and the back of its head, but did little else.

Sultheros stepped forward, and raised his staff. At the call of the eldritch magic within the artifact, another elemental rose from the ground in the middle of the square, a massive thing of the deep earth, its body covered in the displaced flagstones like blotches on its skin. This one was greater than the pseudonatural monster that Dra Mak Mor had conjured earlier; it stood taller than even the Ravager, and the ground shook as it stepped forward, sixty thousand pounds of earth gathered into ambulatory form.

The Ravager was not interested in it, but it could not easily get around the thing, so it went *through* it.

The two titans collided in a violent clash. For a moment it looked as though the Ravager might actually lose the initial contact, as the elder elemental smote it across the side of its head with a massive fist. But the Ravager merely lunged and dug its claws into the elemental's body, then pulled it into a close embrace. The elemental was too big for the Ravager's jaws to seize hold of it, but it still managed to tear free a considerable chunk of its squat head. Clods as big as boulders fell from its body as its claws dug deeper, tearing big rents in the elemental's body.

Allera was unaware of the battle raging a stone's throw behind her. Fighting through the disorientation and pain that had followed the collapse of their spell-weaving, she had reached out again for the full power of her healing magic. Exhausted as she was by the lengthy ritual, grasping the power was more like trying to get hold of a rushing river than the usual soft, welcoming flood that she was used to. But grasp it she did, and as she surrendered herself to that flow, she once more reached deep inside herself and parted the barrier that separated worlds.

Another *gate* opened, but unlike the dramatic portals she'd opened in their last clash with the Ravager, this one seemed almost muted, a doorway opening with a white glow, its brightness overshadowed by the continuing radiance of Maricela's *daylight* spell. The whiteness grew, until an opening the size of a barn door hovered before her, a few inches above the ground. A shadow appeared within that luminosity, a vague shape that took on humanoid form as it approached its threshold.

Allera felt the cost of holding the *gate* like a knife rubbing against the boundaries of her consciousness, but she forced herself to ignore it. She paid the price, maintaining the portal until the other could reach her.

He stepped through. Clad in a flowing robe, he bore only a large shield, a slab of metal the size of a serving board, covered with a simple drape of pure white cloth. An ageless wisdom shone in his eyes, and something else—peace.

That did not stop him from looking over Allera's shoulder and taking in the decidedly *unpeaceful* scene resolving in the open space of the square behind her. The newcomer shook his head.

"You two just can't manage to stay out of trouble, can you?" Licinius Varo asked.

Chapter 455

VARO'S BLESSING

The elder earth elemental that Sultheros had summoned came apart in an explosion of dirt and stone that scattered across the width and breadth of the square. The Ravager stormed through the remnants as they scattered on the morning breeze.

"Well. Let's get its attention, shall we?" Varo said, summoning a *firestorm* that rose up in brilliant white sheets from the ground around the Ravager.

The Ravager roared in fury and stepped through the flames, the scorch marks covering its legs and flanks already starting to fade as it picked up speed. Its size was such that less than ten strides separated it from Varo and the others. Sultheros raised his staff, and Allera lifted her hands, limned with a soft blue glow, but Varo gestured for them to hold as he stepped between them.

"Get back," he said. "Remain behind me."

The elf shared a glance with the healer, who said, "Do as he says! Fall back!" The others did as bid, although they could barely keep their feet with the ground shaking under the Ravager's tread. Eight strides, seven, six, the monster looming over them like a tidal wave.

Varo lifted his shield, and drew back the white sheet.

"Witness truth," he said to it.

The Ravager looked upon the rune scribed upon the shield.

The monster roared again, lifting its head. It lost its stride and staggered to the left, but its momentum kept it going, through the square, into the buildings beyond. Heedless of what it was doing, it clipped Varo with one foot, knocking the cleric back twenty feet to

land hard against an overturned wagon. The heavy shield was torn free, and skittered wildly across the square. The others were able to get out of its way, but Allera fell to the ground as it passed, and Sutheros quite nearly joined her. Only sheer luck kept it from crushing the building holding the incapacitated clerics and their knight guardians, although one corner collapsed, and the warehouse beside it was completely devastated. It kept on going, through a second building into the street beyond, and then through a pair of small houses beyond that. Only then did its charge start to abate, but the incredible noise of its cries continued. It started lashing about with its arms, the claws taking off nearby roofs as though they made of straw.

Dar flew down from above, as Allera ran over to where Varo, grimacing, was starting to get up. He landed beside them, shaking his head at the swath of destruction left by the creature. He looked even more surprised to see Varo, but he recovered quickly. "What did you do?" he yelled.

Varo's expression remained calm. "I drove it insane." As if to punctuate his words, the top of a chimney landed in the square about ten paces away, spattering them with pieces of broken bricks. The Ravager roared again.

"You... *what?* Are you mad, priest? What can we possibly hope to gain..."

"It will no longer be able to act in a coordinated manner, nor will be able to escape you for a second time. If you act quickly; the spell is permanent, but I suspect that the creature's innate powers will allow it to shake off the effect in time. In very little time, perhaps."

Dar stepped forward, and for a moment it looked as though he would seize the priest. With his white robes torn and mussed, he no longer looked like a celestial emissary, but again a mere man. At least until one got a good look at his face, and his eyes.

Allera grabbed Dar's arm to forestall him. "How do we kill it, Varo? We've been able to damage it, but it regenerates far too quickly."

"And if you say that we need to have faith, I swear I'll feed you to it myself!" Dar growled.

Varo looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Can you summon the Host once more?" he asked Allera.

The healer shook her head. "No. Fueling the ritual drained most of my powers. I could barely manage that one *gate*; I had thought to bring the solar once more..."

"Yes. And you ended up with me, I'm afraid."

"Can't you do a *gate* of your own?" Dar asked. "I remember before..."

“I am afraid I cannot,” Varo said, cutting him off. “My writ here is more circumscribed than before. As an agent for outside forces, my abilities are limited by the Compact.”

“What the fuck then are you...”

Dar was interrupted by a loud noise from several streets over; more buildings coming down. Above them, their allies continued their magical attacks against the Ravager, but from what they’d been able to do thus far, it was doubtful that they could do more than slow its rate of regeneration.

Letellia drifted down from above, accompanied by Lyllalya, who looked pale despite the magical healing that had restored her broken wing. Sultheros stepped forward to join them. “I am surprised to see you here,” Letellia said to Varo.

“Likewise,” Varo said.

“This situation is untenable,” the sorceress said. “Dra Mak Mor and Koros are keeping it busy, but they can’t really hurt it. Our spellpower is depleted, and the thing has gone through the best we could dish out with barely a scratch.”

“Varo has fucked up its mind,” Dar said. “But we don’t have any way of knowing how long it will be affected.”

Letellia nodded. “We can remain out of its reach, but I doubt that our magical firepower alone will be enough to overcome its regenerative abilities.”

“Bring it back here,” Varo said. As everyone turned to face him, he said, “Between those buildings, there,” indicating the main street that fed the square.

“What trick do you have up your sleeve?” Dar asked.

Varo shook his head. “Nothing you haven’t seen before, Dar. We can only pray to the gods that it is enough.”

“Why were you sent back here?”

“Because I am a part of this world as well, Dar. Even now.”

Allera stepped between them. “We don’t have any time.”

Dar nodded, without turning from Varo’s gaze. “Do it,” he said. Sultheros nodded, and lifting his staff, he uttered a spell and rose into the air. His attendants followed behind him, their cloaks fluttering out behind them as their *fly* spells lifted them above the wreckage of the square. Letellia and Lyllalya followed behind them. Dar lingered just a moment longer. “Stay in cover,” he said to Allera. “If there’s nothing you can do, don’t try to be a hero.”

"I cannot hide from it; it senses my power, I believe," she said. She touched Dar's arm, and said, "We all have to do what we can." Healing power flowed from her, easing the fighter's wounds. It was a trickle compared to the power she typically wielded, but he touched her face, and smiled as she met his eyes.

Dar stepped back and lifted back into the air, following after the spellcasters toward the noise of the mad Ravager's passage through Highbluff.

"What can I do?" Petronia asked.

"Let's see what we can do for the other clerics... wait, where's Maricela?"

They looked around, but the priestess was no longer anywhere within the square.

Flying high above, Talen and Shay floated on invisible threads of magic. "Interesting," Talen said. "I didn't expect to see *him* again." Below, they watched the Ravager rampaging through the town, driven to madness by Varo's spell.

"Do we intervene?" Shay asked.

Talen shook his head. "Let's see what they do first."

Shay glanced back at the horizon to the east, which was steadily brightening now with the light of the coming dawn. "You *do* see that, right?"

Talen nodded. "This will be settled, one way or another, very quickly. And then we will need to decide for ourselves what has to be done."

Chapter 456

MAD BEAST

The Ravager, beset by madness, was taking out its frustrations upon the empty town of Highbluff. But as it wrought destruction through a swath of ruined buildings, torn up streets, and cluttered rubble, it wound its way back toward the square facing the citadel, where it had first entered Highbluff.

Those flying above were doing their best to abet this course, but it was the Ravager itself that set it, for even through the haze that Licinius Varo had laid over its senses, the creature still craved the life energies of those defenders who had taken shelter there. Allera's presence it could still taste like a predator scenting a hint of roasted meat on the wind, and now the presence of Varo offered something more, another lure to drag it on.

And something else as well, something not quite distinct, something... familiar.

Lightning and fire engulfed the Ravager, driving it into a rage, but it could not counter the attacks from below. Normally canny enough to adjust its tactics to meet such challenges, in its current state the creature could neither seek another transformation nor create and hurl missiles at those above as it had against Lyllalya earlier. Instead it lunged at its foes, leaping high enough so that it seemed it must catch even those flying high above, before gravity inevitably dragged it back down, usually destroying another building or two as it landed.

Those above were able to inflict damage, but it seemed that nothing could hurt it enough to overcome its incredible stamina and regenerative powers. Dra Mak Mor flew over it on his little carpet after one failed leap had left it lying on its back in the wreckage of an inn. He drew out a small object from within his robes and dropped it, muttering a word of command as it trailed away from him. As it fell it grew, the *shrink item* spell unraveling to reveal the item as a bulging barrel, gaining speed as it fell, finally exploding as it struck the Ravager squarely upon the chest. Its contents were revealed as a cascade of fine material sprang up in a plume. It glittered in the predawn light, hanging in the air for a moment, but fell back to earth too quickly to be mere dust. It covered the Ravager's body and much of the rubble around it in a fine layer of sparkling material.

"Look away," Letellia warned Sultheros and his coterie, flying next to her.

The half-dragon war mage Koros flew past and hit the Ravager with a *fireball* from his wand. The spell itself lacked the power to harm the Ravager through its considerable resistances, and in fact the tongues of flame died out even as they touched its flesh. But the heat of the spell was more than sufficient to ignite the metallic powder that the alienist had dropped.

Night became day as a blazing plume of brilliant white flame obscured the Ravager, the inn, and everything around them. For long seconds none of them could see anything, and they had to avert their eyes from the intensity of the display. They could hear the creature's noises of pain, but when they could look again, they saw its form, outlined in the white fire that still enveloped it, rising up once more.

"Stubborn bastard," Letellia observed, hitting it with another *chain lightning* that vanished into the glow. She knew better than to try to *disintegrate* it; the thing's fortitude was insane, and she may as well have tried to vaporize the Great Cathedral in Camar. Beside her, Sultheros hit it with a spell of his own. His *bolt* failed, sizzling into nothing against its resistances. The elf bit off a curse, but like Letellia knew that its protection against magic was sporadic and almost random; they just had to keep hitting it.

The burning white flare faded as the Ravager stormed forward, still trailing bits of flame. The inn remained a pyre, and several of the buildings nearby had already started to catch. One way or another, it looked like Highbluff was not going to survive its encounter with the Ravager. But with much more at stake, those fighting here held nothing back.

Dar flew low over the Ravager, careful not to come close enough to risk a grapple. He knew better than to attempt an attack now, especially with his allies firing off area spells left and right. He felt the thrum of power from *Justice*, and knew that he could hurt it, if infinitesimally. But likewise it could hurt him, and it was pretty obvious who would win in that exchange.

Still, as the creature approached the square once more, his hand tightened on the hilt of his weapon.

Varo had set up a whirling *blade barrier* across the entrance to the square. But as the Ravager entered the intersection that joined that street, another figure stepped out of the shadows between two of the buildings that fronted it. As she lifted her mace, divine light shone from it.

“Face the judgment of Soleus, beast!” Maricela cried, invoking a *righteous might* spell. As she grew in size the Ravager turned to face her.

“Maricela, no!” Dar yelled, but the cleric paid him no heed, stepping forward to face the creature that had killed her beloved.

Chapter 457

FORCED ASIDE

The Ravager lurched forward eagerly to do to Maricela what it had done to Kiron earlier. The cleric did not shy from its fury, but drew back her mace to strike, her guttural cry echoing the loud roar of the creature.

Dar dove toward the priestess, but there was no way he would reach her before the two foes clashed. But Letellia was faster, and in the heartbeat before the Ravager’s long claws would have torn into her, the sorceress called down a *wall of force* between them. The transparent barrier crossed the intersection like a knife, rising a full forty feet into the air, forming a diagonal line between two of the four corners.

The Ravager hit the *wall* and rebounded off it like a sling stone striking a shield. It fell onto its back but was up again in a flash, shrieking with fury. Maricela was no less

angry, slamming her mace against the barrier, looking up with frustrated grief twisting her face.

Given a moment to consider, the Ravager could have easily gotten around the barrier; the buildings that fronted the *wall's* termina were stout two-story structures with sound foundations, but that just meant it would have taken the beast four seconds instead of two to get through them. But its attention was drawn anew down the street, as Varo called a *flame strike* down upon the creature. The Ravager could sense the source of the magic that burned it through the haze that lingered over its mind, and it turned to the easier target, lurching down the street toward the square. The street, the broadest in Highbluff, was still a bit small for it, and its claws tore deep gouges in the facing buildings as it came. A wagon, left behind with a broken wheel in the middle of the street, was crushed into kindling by one tread of its huge feet.

The Ravager went through Varo's *blade barrier* without breaking stride. The whizzing blades of force bit into its flanks, for the most part merely scratching its hide, but a few droplets of black blood were left splattered on the paving stones, seeping into the gouges left by its claws in its passage. The creature burst through the *barrier* and stepped into the square.

And then it got to experience the spinning blades again, for Letellia had raised another *wall of force* on the far side. As it had before, the Ravager rebounded off the *wall* and fell back, right into the midst of the spinning blades.

The Ravager got up, leaving more blood upon the stones. It was looking like a mess now, its crimson hide smeared with blood, both its own and that of others, bits of debris from the buildings it had destroyed, black smears where spells had struck it, and a few lingering gobs of tanglefoot mixture that hadn't fully crusted off. But it continued to regenerate, and it was starting to recover from the mental fog that Varo's *symbol* had laid upon it.

Once back on its feet, the Ravager took the most direct course around the *wall of force*, tearing through a line of buildings fronting the square. A tavern, a cabinet maker's shop, a brewery, and two houses were destroyed in quick succession, and then the creature emerged once more into the square, sheer murder burning in its black eyes.

Standing to face it, on the far side of the square, his tattered robe billowing around him, was Licinius Varo.

The Ravager started forward once more, and this time, it would not be turned from its prey.

Chapter 458

KEEN INSTINCTS

Spellpower blasted mercilessly into the Ravager. Letellia launched another *chain lightning* through her staff, relying now on her higher-order capacity to fuel more of the destructive bursts of electrical energy. Sultheros had used his own staff to summon a trio of avorals, to whom he directed brief instructions before flying ahead to circle around the Ravager. The bird-like outsiders twined into a gliding line formation that circled broadly around the monster, firing pulsing streams of *magic missiles* into it. A good number of the force bolts vanished as they struck, but most scored, inflicting slight wounds that nevertheless slowly added to the tally of wounds suffered by the beast. With his own summoning spells mostly depleted, Dra Mak Mor added his own firepower to that barrage, hurling flickering green bolts from his fingertips that flashed brightly as they impacted the back of the creature's head.

The Ravager ignored the attacks.

Varo held his ground. He lifted a hand, and fired a beam of *searing light* into the creature's face. The divine radiance was empowered by the touch of the sun god, but to the Ravager it was just another irritation.

Varo's gaze shifted as he sensed another enter the square. Recognizing the newcomer, he nodded to himself, then turned back to regard the onrushing foe.

In the shadows of a doorway nearby, Allera started forward, but Petronia grabbed her arm, stopping her. On the far side of the square, Dar and Maricela emerged through the wreckage of the line of buildings that the Ravager had crushed, unable to do anything more than watch.

The Ravager, bursting through a last ineffective *fireball* from the half-dragon mage Koros, lunged forward to seize Varo, who still had made no move to evade. The Ravager's claws passed right through the cleric... or rather, through the figment he'd created via his *mislead* spell. He'd remained in the place of the illusory double while spell-casting, but after he'd fired off the beam of *searing light* he had moved away, protected by a cloak of *improved invisibility*. It was a familiar tactic for the priest, who had a canny understanding of battlefield tactics.

But the Ravager was possessed of incredible senses, even distracted as it was. It turned and lashed out with another arm, bending to extend the length of its reach. Its claws smacked into something, and a moment later that something landed hard on the stone a good twenty feet distant, leaving a slick of blood upon the flagstones. More droplets fell from the air as Varo got up, grunting with effort.

The cleric looked up to see the Ravager bearing down on him, intent on finishing what it had started.

Chapter 459

RAVAGES

Duke Aerim stepped into the path of the Ravager. He held the epic brilliant-energy weapon, recovered from where Kiron had dropped it, still attached to the remnant of his arm. The blade had shifted slightly, still a greatsword, but taking on the form of the sword that they'd found with Aerim, when he'd been captured in the vault under Rappan Athuk. Its glow cast a ruddy hue over the Duke's features. Clad in torn clothes covered in gray dust from the collapse he'd survived, the Duke still somehow managed to appear noble and confident as he lifted the weapon in one hand, pointing the blade unerringly at the Ravager's head.

"You and I have business, beast," he said simply.

The Ravager paused. It sensed something odd coming off the body of the man defying it, but it certainly recognized the sword that had wounded it earlier. It lashed out with a claw, intending to remove the threat quickly.

Aerim stepped into the attack and spun in a blur, the sword coming down in a two-handed grip that met the descending claw. The sword carved deeply into the Ravager's limb, taking off three fingers and a good part of the hand behind them. Black blood jetted out, spraying over the Duke's torso and arms, but he merely shifted his position and lifted the sword once more into a defensive stance.

"You will have to do better than that," he said.

The Ravager gave him his request, lunging forward, smashing down with two of its intact limbs, crushing the Duke between them. Aerim swung the sword again, and again bit into the claws that sought him, but he could not avoid being caught up, and lifted into the air. The Ravager did not hesitate this time, opening its jaws wide and thrusting the man into its gullet whole, swallowing him with a single gulp.

A wedge of pain shot up the creature's leg, as Varo delivered a *harm* spell. The creature's will was such that it resisted the full force of the magic, but the attack had certainly gotten its attention. Varo was still *invisible*, but as the Ravager stomped its foot in reaction he was again knocked flying, and this time he had no sooner bounced on the hard stone than he was snared and lifted in the creature's iron grip.

Lightning again flashed into the creature's blunt skull, and the *magic missiles* that descended into it formed a bright halo, a constant flickering of light as the bolts struck the creature in a steady patter. Sultheros had added to his coterie attacking the Ravager, imitating Allera's earlier tactic of summoning lantern archons to the cause.

Four of the creatures now dipped in to fire their blasts of holy light, each forming a perfect white circle on the creature's hide that was slow to fade.

Dar shot forward, carried again by the power of the *fly* spell cast by Callyse at the start of the battle; the spell was starting to wane, but the fighter did not hesitate as he streaked straight for the Ravager. A beam of light shot past him, but Maricela's *searing light* dissolved as it hit the creature. The priestess charged after it, but Dar reached it first, diving in with *Justice* a gleaming blur in his hand. He dodged under one claw, taking a glancing blow that did not dissuade him from his target. He stabbed the blade into the thick web of flesh connecting the thumb and forefinger of the fist that held Varo captive. It was like trying to hew open a steel manacle with a toothpick, and just as effective.

But before the creature could consume Varo as it had Kiron and Aerim before him, the Ravager suddenly convulsed. It opened its jaws wide again, but instead of another roar, a gout of black blood rose from inside it, splattering out in a fan that darkened the churned-up ground at its feet. Its distress was only momentary, but it loosened its grip enough for Dar to yank the cleric free. The respite was only momentary; the Ravager struck out with another long arm, smashing both men hard with its raking claws. Dar and Varo fell together, finally coming apart when they struck the ground some fifteen feet away from the creature. Their momentum carried them a bit further, and they finally slid to a halt, battered and bruised, but alive.

The Ravager smashed its lower set of arms into the ground, shattering flagstones and sending bits of stone flying across the square. The hand that had been ruined by Aerim's sword had stopped oozing blood, and the buds of new fingers had just begun to appear, but the damage it was taking now was exceeding its ability to regenerate. It roared up at the flyers circling it, or rather tried to; only a choked sound and another gout of blood came out of its jaws.

"What the fuck is happening!" Dar yelled, having to shriek over the noise of the creature's wild gyrations.

But Varo only pulled himself up on one elbow, clutching his other arm—obviously broken—against his body. "Now!" he cried, his voice sounding like Dar's over the din. "We must strike it now, with everything that we have!"

He lifted his own hand, and fired off another beam of *searing light* that lanced into the creature's flank. Maricela rushed past them both, the tread of her *might*-enhanced boots making ponderous thumps on the ravaged ground. She cried out as she swept her mace around in a heavy arc, but the Ravager proved that it was far from crippled a moment later, intercepting her with two claws that smashed through her guard, and knocked her roughly onto her back. It turned toward her, bringing its other claws around to finish her off, but it did not get a chance.

The beast shook again, but this time no blood issued from its spattered jaws. Within its gut, almost as armored and durable inside as without, Aerim had continued his attack. The weapon of epic power that he held responded to his thoughts and his need, reforming into a long-curving dagger that he used to open gashes in the Ravager's stomach. But even as he inflicted distress upon the creature, the fluids that covered him worked their way into his flesh, burning, penetrating into his ears, his nostrils, and his mouth, wreaking damage that mercilessly punished his every motion. By the time that the Ravager struck down Dar and Varo, he was blind, and as much of his blood as that of the beast accompanied his persistent strikes. The white of bone showed through the bright red covering his fingers, clenched in a death-grip onto the haft of his weapon, and more became visible as the flesh melted from his face. Still, he kept attacking, a noise that was not human issuing from deep inside him.

"...not... yield..." he said, his last words, as he thrust one final time, with all of his remaining strength behind it. The dagger penetrated flesh and stuck into one of the monster's ribs; a moment later, the glowing red blade flickered and died.

Chapter 460

A LEGACY OF BLOOD

Duke Aerim. The Bloodwraith. A man bound by a failure centuries old, bound to a fate he had not chosen, but had been sealed to nevertheless. As the Bloodwraith, he sought life but could not live; as the man, he had sought death but could not die. When Ghazaran Jawad had brought Aerim back to a semblance of life, he had used the power of the Bloodways as part of his ritual, letting him steal the soul of the Duke away from its torment, to make him a stronger ally in his quest to free the Ravager. Allera had masked that bond, allowing him to be taken from Rappan Athuk without tearing him apart. But for all that he looked and sounded a man, the power of the Bloodways still flowed through him. He was a part of it, and it a part of him, one and the other fundamentally the same.

That bond had allowed him to survive the collapse of the castle keep, and even after the Ravager swallowed him, it had continued to pour life into him, to restore his body. But the power of the Ravager proved too much for the curse of blood under which Aerim existed. Aerim's body faltered, and failed.

And the power of the Bloodways, suddenly losing its anchor, flowed out of that receptacle in an unrestrained flood.

Outside of the creature, just a few strides distant, Maricela lifted her mace and waited for death. But as the Ravager loomed over her, it abruptly clenched, its head coming

back, jaws stretched wide in a soundless scream. Its claws dug into its own flesh, opening rents that oozed tendrils of red vapor.

And from its mouth, a cascade of swirling, eager mists, long fingers of crimson far deeper than the creature's natural coloration. The fog, as dense as though they were the true digits of some corporeal thing, twined around the Ravager's body like strands of creeping ivy. It kept coming out of it, vile, sinuous, the threads tightening until the Ravager wore them like a second skin.

For a moment, the defenders of Camar could only watch in fascinated horror. Then Varo shattered the silence with a loud cry.

"Now!" The priest yelled, his voice cracking with the effort, though his words echoed clearly through the square. "Strike it down!"

Cascades of magical fire, lightning, and bolts of force slammed into the Ravager from every direction. Each impact penetrated the cloak of vapors around it, blasting into the flesh beneath. Whatever was happening to the Ravager, it seemed to have drained its defenses. It tried to get up, to surge forward to fight, but a film of red had fallen over its eyes, and it was clear as it thrashed wildly that it could no longer see. Arrows lanced into it; Selanthas had come into the square, and a few of the knights had taken up their bows as well, some faint hope creeping up to replace the despair they had felt earlier.

"AAAAAAAAAAA!" Dar yelled, drawing the creature's head around as he dove in. *Justice* carved a deep path, and this time he hit his target, cutting through the creature's right eye as though it had been a melon. The creature jerked back, now almost pathetic as it coughed up a final plume of red mist, and then staggered to the left, then forward, then left again. As the skeins of fog began to shift around its body, they could see the monster's hide, the brilliant red now cracked and oozing black. The monster took a faltering step, no longer toward those souls whose richness seemed now to taunt it, but away, anywhere it could go to escape the destruction ravaging it from within and without.

Maricela had regained her feet, and now walked around the creature, moving ahead of it before coming back around toward its head. She lifted her mace to strike, but the blow never landed.

A huge fist of white energy slammed down into the Ravager, striking solidly in the center of its skull. Letellia's *clenched fist* caught it like a hammer, and the creature suddenly went limp, leaning forward slowly until it passed a certain point of balance and toppled forward onto the ground with a loud thud. It lay there, inert. The last of the blood mist trailed away, revealing a carcass riven with incredible amounts of damage. Black fluid oozed from cracks that spiderwebbed across its hide, and trailed from the slits of its nostrils and ears. The eye that Dar had lacerated pulsed several goutts of sick ochre goop that trailed down the fallen monster's cheek, and then it too became quiescent.

Dar stood there, watching it, when Varo came up beside him, limping heavily.

"Is it dead? For good?" Dar asked, without turning toward the cleric.

"Yes."

Allera emerged from the nearby building, half-supported by Petronia until she saw Dar; then she broke free and ran toward him. Those flying above descended slowly, hovering over the creature warily. Their summoned allies began to wink out, one by one, as they returned to the planes of existence from whence they had been drawn.

"I must depart, as well," Varo said. But Dar turned on him.

"First, I need an answer. What the fuck just happened?"

"Duke Aerim was bound to the power of the Bloodways, an ancient font of dark magic that had been linked to Orcus, but which became independent upon the demon's fall. When he died, that power flowed out through him, overcoming the Ravager. It would not have been enough to destroy it alone, I think, but it made it vulnerable."

Dar's expression darkened. "You knew, as always. If you or your god had seen fit to just tell us this earlier, we could have fed the Duke to that fucker straight off, and a lot of good people would still be alive."

"Kiron," Maricela said. She had returned to her normal size, and there was a haunted look in her eyes as she came to stand before them. Blood still slaked the side of her face where the Ravager had struck her.

Varo's expression showed pity. "Kiron Tonnoth's soul was sheltered by the hand of the Father, and was not consumed by the beast. He stands at the side of the Father, but his work here is not done. He will return."

"Is that your answer for all this?" Dar said. "Just *raise* the hundreds who died? Just rebuild the lives shattered by this destruction?"

Varo looked up at Dar. "The gods are not omniscient, nor are they omnipotent."

"Bullshit."

"Of all people, I thought you could understand, Dar." Varo's smile was sad, but he did not turn from Dar's anger. "If that were the case, then the Choice that we... that *you* have as mortals would be meaningless. We would all be mere tools of the gods, and life would be without purpose."

"We're all just tools, anyway," Dar said, but it was he who turned aside, staring at the broken body of the creature. Allera took his arm.

“It is not so,” Varo said. “Someday, you will understand.”

A bright glow began to surround him. He walked past Dar, pausing to lean toward Allera. He whispered something, and then continued walking, the glow brightening as he drew further from them. By the time he had covered a few steps, it was so strong as to force them to look away, but that was only for an instant; when they looked back, he was gone.

“What did he say?” Dar asked Allera.

“He said to remember, that no one is ever truly beyond redemption.”

As she finished speaking, the dawn broke, and a bright glow of sunshine crested the eastern horizon, shining down the long main street of Highbluff, reaching through the piles of scattered rubble and wrecked buildings to cast a warm glow over those gathered in the town square. They stood there for a long time, looking at the wrecked hulk of the Ravager, now diminished in death, just sharing their collective presence, and reveling in the simple fact of being alive.

Chapter 461

A SINGLE THREAD

Parethi had once been a bustling seaport, back when the Drusian Empire had been an empire in deed as well as name, and sleek white galleys had carved the world's oceans in its name. People of a dozen races from twice as many nations the world over had walked its streets, visiting the five huge markets where it was often said that any item fashioned by civilized hands could be found.

But those days had long since faded from memory into history and legend, and now Parethi was a backwater, a quiet place where people came when they wanted to avoid the bustle and chaos of the world.

One such man sipped strong coffee in a café just off the waterfront. He was lean, angular, looking a bit haggard despite the obvious quality of the tunic and long leggings he wore tucked into knee-high boots. He carried no obvious weapons other than a long knife at his hip, but the other guests at the café gave him a considerable berth, avoiding his table without seeming to actively do so.

A figure approached the table from the side. The rough-looking man could not have seen him directly, but he said without looking up, “I’ve been waiting for you. You, or someone like you, I guess.”

The newcomer came around the man, not quite entering his reach, and stood above the far chair. He looked more like a Drusian than the first, with olive skin and a neatly-trimmed black beard that came down to a lightly oiled point below his chin. He too was clad in clothes that bespoke coin, and his eyes were penetrating, the sort that gave men pause. He said nothing, and barely shifted when the other man suddenly leaned forward in his chair, slapping his palms lightly on the table in front of him.

“Well, I wondered how I would respond. I’m not going to make it easy for you; that is not the kind of man I am. But I am tired of running, tired of... all of it.” With those words, the man seemed to relax, and he even managed a small smile as he leaned back in his chair. Suddenly the place seemed more dangerous despite the lack of obvious change, and several people at nearby tables left coins for their drinks and took their leave hastily.

“You mistake me, sir,” the olive-skinned man said. He gestured toward the chair before him. “May I?” At a gesture and an amused look from the other, he sat down. “I presume that it is Jasek Haddar to whom I am speaking?”

Jasek’s eyes narrowed, but finally he nodded. “Yeah, I suppose it is. If you’re here to kill me, I’d appreciate it if we could skip the preliminaries; I dislike drawn-out scenes when it comes to such matters. And if you’re not going to kill me, I hope you’ll do me the favor of telling me what you *do* want with me. As I said, I’m tired.”

“Understandable, for a man who’s been running away as long as you have, ser Haddar.”

Jasek’s expression darkened a shade further. “Such a man is not generally one to poke at, ser...?”

“You may call me Alzoun.”

“Well, you still haven’t told me what you want, Alzoun.”

“I offer a choice. To stop running.”

Jasek snorted, and shifted in his chair, as if to rise. “I’ve got plenty of choices, and none. If you’ll excuse me...”

Alzoun looked up, and pinned the other man with his eyes. “I had a friend once who used to say that we *always* have a choice. It’s what makes us mortal. If you choose to depart, ser Haddar, I will leave you to your running, and will not trouble you again. But if you would like to hear me out, I believe that I can offer you an alternative that will challenge a man of your talents. A way you can live without having to run any more.”

Jasek hesitated, just for a moment, then sank back into his chair.

Alzoun gestured, and a man came over with a tray on which a tiny cup of *caff* rested; steam rose from it with a tiny wisp. It wasn't until Alzoun had taken the cup and nodded in thanks that Jasek noticed that the man wasn't the same server who had attended to him earlier. This man was muscled under the loose fabric of his *zurqa*, and moved with the simple grace of a trained warrior. He noticed Jasek's attention, of course, and as their eyes met he gave a simple nod of acknowledgement.

Jasek looked back at Alzoun, and laughed. "So much for choices!"

"We all get to make choices," Alzoun said, as he sipped the *caff*. "We just have to accept the consequences of those choices."

Jasek chuckled again, wryly. "So I suppose I will listen, now that you've made your position clear, and I've made my choice."

"Fair enough," Alzoun said, and he made his offer.

Jasek Haddar chose to accept it.

Chapter 462

EPILOGUE

A wind blew in fits and starts over the hillside graveyard. It whistled faintly as it slid between the stone markers, most of them still new enough for the chiseled lettering they bore to be clearly visible. A neat fence, kept in good repair, bordered the entire site, and bundles of flowers were laid out on most of the graves, staked down to protect against the wind.

A single man lingered there, keeping a solitary vigil, kneeling beside a grave that was obviously new. The others that had come with him had long since retired, but he remained, like a tree taken root, his head bowed, saying a difficult and personal farewell. He was old, and gnarled almost like the vines that had started to creep up onto the surrounding fence, but he did not let the cold or the wind touch him. It was not clear if he even noticed either.

When he finally rose, the day had all but fled, the sun vanished beyond the western horizon. As he made his way to the gate near the base of the hill, a man emerged from the small shack of whitewashed wood perched alongside the road. He was half the other man's age if not younger, and clad in a long coat that didn't fully cover the suit of mail he wore. A sword with an exceptionally carved hilt rode at his hip. The older man was not armed, but his hand drifted to his belt as if expecting to find a hilt there as well.

A pair of horses were tied up alongside the shack, and looked up as the men met at the gate.

“What are you still doing here?” the old man asked.

“The First Citizen asked me to wait, m’lord.”

“Bah. I may be old, boy, but I’m not some feeble wretch needing a nurse to carry me to the shitter.” He waved a hand expressively. “I thought you Dragon Knights were busy these days. Seems I heard something about a new chief of the hill giant tribes thinking he might make a good king.”

The young man cracked a slight smile. “Well, word is that when Chief Drugga heard that Corath Dar was in the area, he took his wench and fled for safer lands.”

The old man stabbed a finger into the younger man’s chest. “Don’t sass me, Cael. I tossed you over my knee more than once, and you’re not so old that I can’t do it again if need be.”

“Of course, m’lord baron,” Cael replied, with a serious half-bow.

“Gah, and stop with the fucking titles. Bad enough that those kneeling sycophantic wretches down in the town won’t let up when I’m trying to take a fucking nap, I don’t need you joining in. Don’t just stand there gawping, get the horses.”

Cael recovered the mounts, and brought them. He found Dar staring up at the hillside, a distant look on his face. He stood, and waited. It was several minutes before Dar started and looked back at him.

“Well? Gods, boy, you aren’t going to make much a knight if you’re always standing around, crowding people. Get back and give me some room.”

He mounted, with difficulty, although Cael knew better than to offer help. The two rode back together, the wind tugging at their cloaks possessively.

The road wound only a short ways before the hills parted to reveal a considerable town nestled in the vale below. Lights beckoned in the upper storeys of the homes and inns of Hope, the bright glow strongest around the wings of the hospital, shining like a beacon against the deepening night. But instead of heading down into the town, Dar directed his mount onto a trail that split off and headed back into the hills, following a stream that bubbled down a rocky course toward the town.

“You’re not going down, m’lord?” Cael asked. He started to add something, but clamped his mouth shut.

They're expecting you down there, Dar heard, as clearly as if the younger man had said the words aloud. Well, fuck 'em. He was the one who'd lost his wife, and he'd grieve her in his own way.

Cael followed, and Dar didn't say anything; he knew that the man would follow regardless of what he said. Kiron seemed to think that there were still people out there who would be happy to see Corath Dar dead. Dar snorted; if so, then he probably hadn't met them. The last serious assassination attempt had been seven years ago, and the bastards had made the mistake of thinking that Allera was less of a threat than he was. That had been a big mistake, for them.

Thinking of Allera drew a fresh edge across his grief, and the pair rode in silence the rest of the way. Finally the trail deposited them in front of the house that rose along the crest of the hill overlooking the town. It was a beautiful place, looking far older than it was in reality, as though it had always been here. The marble had come from Camar, along with the craftsmen who knew how to shape it, along with metalsmiths, carpenters, and other artisans. Allera had protested at the size of the house, which extended deeper into the hill than it first looked, but she had eventually gotten absorbed into the work, doubling the size of the herbcellar, and adding a subbasement where she could grow several varieties of mushrooms with medicinal properties.

Several of his people came out to greet him. He shoed them away, and caught Cael making gestures behind his back. He left them all with the horses, and entered through the side door through the kitchen. He was hungry, and he grabbed a sandwich from the stack laid out on the sideboard—they knew him better than most, he supposed—before retiring to his private study.

The place was calm, a sanctuary, but now it just reminded him of her. He was about to go back for a bottle when a voice out of the darkness startled him.

"Hello, Dar."

Dar belied his age in the speed with which he reached the mantle over the hearth, and took down the sword that hung there. "Who is it? What do you want? By all the gods, if you're looking for a fight, I'll give it to you."

"I'm not looking for a fight, Dar."

"You..."

A globe of light appeared, hovering over Varo's outstretched hand. The cleric looked exactly as he had the last time they'd met, almost thirty years ago, now. "I don't want anything from you, Varo," Dar said, lowering the sword with what might have been a bit of reluctance.

"I know. But she's waiting for you. There's no need to keep her waiting, not now."

Dar muttered to himself as he put the sword back in its place. "You come to me now? After all this time?"

"Would you have gone with me, before, had I come?"

"No, I suppose not. Had a few things left to do."

"You've lived a rich life." He looked around. "Nice place."

Dar snorted. "They call me 'baron' now. Can you imagine, me, some noble priss in silks and lace? Me, the asshole that the Duke tossed down into Rappan Athuk? Well, I showed that fat fuck. Made him choke on my sword, I did."

Varo smiled. "Yes. You showed the Duke, and Orcus too. You showed all of them what it was to cross Corath Dar."

"Aye, and I've still got some fight left in me, if any of those other bastards try anything. I heard that there's this hill giant, been stirring up some trouble up north. I'm half tempted to take my sword and go up there and show that bastard..."

"No, Dar. Your battles are over. You've fought well. Now it's time to rest."

"Rest?" He stopped pacing and looked at the cleric. "You said she's... she's waiting for me?"

"Yes, Dar. It's only been a short while, but she doesn't want to wait any longer. Come with me, and I'll take you to her. I'll take you home."

Dar came forward. Varo extended his hand, and Dar started to take it, but paused. "Don't think this means that I'm not going to kick your ass one of these days. You've earned it, over the years."

Varo smiled. "Agreed."

The two clasped hands, and a brilliant white light flared, obscuring everything.

When it had faded, Corath Dar was gone, having returned home.

THE END

Bonus Selection: the Path Not Taken

Originally posted in the story thread at ENWorld:

Okay, readers!

The fate of Camar is in *your* hands. As I stated before, when I got to this point I paused. I had originally planned on one ending (I won't say which one), but as I thought about it more, I found myself drawn to the other, ultimately vacillating between them. I have sketched out two plotlines going forward, one where Dar and Allera agree to sacrifice themselves for the good of Camar, and one where they elect to fight the Ravager to the death of one side or the other. Neither choice will be quick or easy for the Camarians, I fear. So which will it be? I'm going to start a poll thread so that my readers can weigh in on the question.

I'll resume the story on Monday, June 30!

Poll thread posted at ENWorld:

This thread is for readers of my *Doomed Bastards* story hour, which has taken a group of unlikely heroes through the superdungeon Rappan Athuk and beyond. I've been writing that story hour for quite some time now, and as I approached the end, I reached a point where the finale could have gone in either of two directions. I couldn't decide myself, so I finally thought I'd push the burden of choosing onto my readers!

At the current point in the story, an ancient creature known as the Ravager, imprisoned for centuries, has begun to stir free of its prison. Corath Dar and Allera Hialar, the heroes of the story, have been given a choice. They can sacrifice their lives in an attempt to restore the monster's prison, an attempt which is not guaranteed to end in success. Or they can attempt to rally the diverse peoples of Camar in an attempt to battle an entity so devastating that its creators could not destroy it, only contain it.

So if you're familiar with the story to date, or just want to read the last few posts in the story thread and weigh in, I welcome your input in this poll. I have already written a number of chapters down each plot line, and will resume posting the story on June 30.

Here are the chapters I wrote for the "Dar and Allera Say Yes" plotline:

Chapter 432

DECISION

"It ends here," Dar said. "We will complete your ritual, guardian. Even if it fails, Camar will be no worse off for the loss of one man and one woman."

Allera held onto him, but her gaze was no less determined. "It is a sacrifice that must be made, weighed against what would be lost if we did not make it."

Amurru made a slight motion of its head. "So be it. We must begin at once, there is no time to spare."

"What about this friend of yours, this Obares Sin, who you said you needed to restore the prison?"

Amurru nodded again. "Our companion was stolen from us, many thousands of years ago. He is near, within the complex outside of this vault, but has forgotten his identity and his purpose."

A realization flared in Allera's mind. "The Oracle. It's the Oracle."

Dar nodded. "Okay, we know where that is. We can find your friend, but it might be a bit of a press against your deadline, lich."

"The two of you cannot leave. You must remain here, to begin preparations for the ritual. Your bodies and spirits must alike be acclimated to the transition, or the core of what you are will be torn apart by it."

"We understand," Allera said.

Dar turned and looked at Kiron. "Then it's up to you, knight."

Kiron's face betrayed his feelings before his expression snapped into rigidity. "Are you sure about this, general?"

"You were about to volunteer yourself for this fucking fuck-up just a minute ago," Dar snapped. But his eyes softened as he looked down into Allera's face, and saw the conviction, the trust in her eyes. "We are only two, Kiron. We've had a pretty good run of it, all things considered. But even if that big bastard in there *can* be killed, a lot of people would lose their lives in doing it."

Allera looked at Amurru. "Will we... will we remember who we are, what we... what we feel?"

The lich regarded them. "A part of what you are will remain. But in time, even that will fade."

"We will find a way to free you," Maricela began, but Dar cut her off with a snap of his hand. "No. What you will do, is forget about this place, and see that the world outside forgets that it even exists. There will be no mention of Corath and Allera Dar, other than that we died fighting for the people of Camar."

“It has to be that way,” Allera said. “Or others like that cleric will come here, and try again.”

“What about them?” Kiron asked, indicating the prisoners with a nod of his head.

Dar hesitated for a moment, but only a moment. “Leave them here. You have a mission, and you’d best be about it.”

The knight nodded, and saluted. He and the others gathered their gear, and prepared to depart. Zethas and Tertius checked the bindings of the prisoners, then moved to the entrance. Selaht did not even have a robe, but the monk did not seem to feel the chill of the cavern. Allera took Maricela aside, and gave her directions to where they had last encountered the Oracle. They had maps, copies of the ones made by Licinius Varo those years back, but even the best maps could not fully replace the memories of one who had actually walked those passages. Maricela made a few marks on one of the parchments as Allera finished, then nodded and took her place back at Kiron’s side.

“May the Father watch over you both,” Kiron said. He started turn turn away, but Dar forestalled him.

“Wait.” As the knight turned back, Dar suddenly unbuckled his sword belt, and offered *Justice* hilt-first to him. Kiron’s eyes widened slightly, and he hesitated a moment before accepting the sword.

“You’ll probably need this more than I,” Dar said, his jaw clenching slightly as he finished speaking. “Don’t forget, we cut a fucking swath through Rappan Athuk, but this place has had twelve years to recover. Complete your mission, and get back here soon.”

The knight nodded and saluted them; Dar responded to the gesture crisply. The five survivors of the expedition from Camar turned to leave, occasionally glancing back at the pair standing before the lich, framed by the pale blue glow of the slowly collapsing prison where the Ravager stirred in its uneasy slumber.

Chapter 433

SEEKING THE ORACLE

“Is everyone all right?” Kiron said, flicking *Justice* with his wrist to get some of the dark blood off of it. He drew out a cloth to finish cleaning the blade, hiding a grimace as the motion sent a stabbing pain up his battered shoulder.

The responses he got were all affirmative, although laced with pain. Maricela did not bother to respond, intent as she was on healing the grievous injuries that Tertius and Zethas had suffered in the brief but violent encounter. Selaht merely grunted, staring out into the darkness as if expecting it to come alive again with foes. The monk slowly unclenched his fists, and the bright nimbus of magical flames that surrounded them flickered and died. The darkness of the cavern seemed to rush in to fill the gap, although the magical torches carried by Tertius and Maricela kept it from completely enveloping them.

The knight looked down at the carcass of the monstrosity that had ambushed them. Zethas hadn't spotted it, but Kiron could not blame the man; none of them had detected the umber hulk, half buried in a mound of fungus growth that had filled the air with a sick, musty stench. The cavern distorted sound, the swift passage of the underground river creating a constant background noise that made it difficult to make out other sounds.

They'd slain the creature handily once the battle had been fully joined, but at its start the matter could have gone either way. The creature had erupted from the mound without warning, batting Selaht away like a child discarding a toy. It had caught Tertius and Zethas with its confusing gaze, leaving them staring helplessly as it had charged forward to engage them. It went through the pair like a farmer's scythe, sending both men to the ground with bloody wounds. Maricela was there in a flash, dragging Zethas out of the creature's reach before it could reach down and tear him to pieces. The monster had caught her with a claw that had clipped her helmet hard, but she did not let the attack divert her from aiding her companion.

The thing would have pursued, but then Kiron was there. He'd been farthest from where the hulk had emerged, but he made up for his late arrival by driving *Justice* up under its armor, delivering a vicious blow deep into its body. The umber hulk turned on him and unleashed a devastating full attack, seizing the knight and dragging him up to where its mandibles could bite. It nearly caught him by the neck, but he'd managed to get his sword arm up, jamming the blade into the joint on the inside of its powerful jaws.

The advantage had been temporary, but it provided enough time for Selaht to reenter the fray. Tertius's adled mind had given way to a violent rage, which he directed at the adjacent hulk. His sword slid off of the armored plates covering its lowered body, but it helped to distract the creature, so that it did not even see the monk leaping in from the opposite flank. Selaht sprang into the air, flames exploding from his fists as he drove them into the hulk's right elbow. There was a loud snap as the joint gave way, and then Kiron was falling, dropping free as its grip abruptly loosened. The hulk roared and dropped its head to bite again, but Kiron was ready, and a two-handed thrust of *Justice* pierced its skull, spitting its tiny alien brain.

That had not ended the battle; he and Selaht had immediately had to help Maricela restrain Zethas and Tertius until the *confusion* wore off. Tertius, still lost in rage, nearly

stabbed Kiron until Selaht had disarmed him, and the two were able to hold him until he finally slumped in their grasp, his mind clear once more.

“We’d better get moving, before the noise of battle draws other things looking for a snack,” Kiron said. He started to turn, but Maricela came up and grabbed his arm. “You’re wounded,” she said.

“We need to find cover first—” he began, starting to turn again, but she refused to release him. She kept her voice low, so it would not carry to the others, but there was more than a little iron in her look, despite the fact that he loomed a full foot over her.

“And if we should encounter another foe before we find said cover?” She didn’t wait for an answer, stabbing a wand into his injured soldier as though it was a dagger. Even through his armor, Kiron grunted. As the healing magic did its work Maricela continued, “I realize that stubborn self-denial is an ineffable male trait, and tends to become particularly concentrated among new commanders, but I am sure that your instructors at the Academy taught you about the foolishness of rushing into an unknown situation while at less than full strength.”

Kiron’s expression had softened into a wry grin during the harangue. “Well I guess I can’t argue with...”

But she cut him off, saying, “There, all done.” Tucking the wand into her belt, she said, “Now, your orders, captain?”

Muttering to himself about who was really in charge of the operation—his words belied by the warm look he sent at the cleric—Kiron gestured for his meager company to set out once more.

Some distant noises separate from the constant low background of the river accompanied their progress forward through the cavern, but no further enemies came forward to accost them. The passage south was right where the map said it would be, and they moved into a complex of worked corridors and rooms that were thick with cobwebs and dust. Kiron hoped that this was a sign that this part of the complex remained untraveled, but as they pressed on, they encountered more recent signs of occupancy, gnawed white bones, faded bloodstains, and bits of discarded filth. Nothing emerged out of the shadows to threaten, but the five of them remained highly alert.

“We’re getting close,” Maricela said, pausing to check the map as they moved into a small room with several doors offering exit. She pointed to one, and Kiron gestured for Zethas and Selaht to take up flanking positions. Only when they were ready did he come forward, the clanking of his heavy armor dispelling their odds of achieving an advantage of stealth over what might lay behind the portal.

Nothing they could have done, however, would have prepared them for what they found when they opened the heavy wooden door.

The door opened onto a cool portico, surrounded on three sides by arched openings that overlooked a sprawling green landscape of gently rolling hills broken by the winding brown lines of roads. White buildings could be seen in the distance, including the tall spires of a cathedral, while the faint outlines of mountains could be seen along the horizon behind them. The sky was a starkly brilliant blue, and a gentle breeze could be felt, taking the edge off of the heat of the day.

The floor was blue marble, flawless enough so that they could see their faces reflected in its surface. A number of hanging plants provided decoration around the archways, and a thick smell of flowers hung in the air. A number of padded couches and folding chairs had been arranged at the far end of the portico, and several small trays laid on folding stands displayed a selection of viands and beverages.

As the companions stared in wonder at the scene, a man rose from one of the chairs, and turned to face them. He was tall and powerfully built, clad in finely cut silks in shades of blue and gray. He wore a closely-cropped beard without even a hint of gray, although he seemed too experienced to be very young. Something in his eyes, perhaps. He was not armed, but a belt bearing a rapier in its scabbard was slung casually across the back of one of the chairs, not far from his reach.

His smiled as his gaze traveled over the companions. "Welcome," he said. "It is not often that I receive such notable guests in my demesne."

Kiron's hand had remained on the hilt of *Justice*; while he did not draw, his suspicion was evident in his eyes. "Who are you?" he asked.

If the man was offended by the blunt question, he did not show it. "My name," he said, with a slight chuckle, "is Lord Scramge."

Chapter 434

ORDEAL

Dar's return to consciousness was sudden, and accompanied by pain.

Everything swam red before his vision, and it seemed like an eternity before he could even begin to discern forms within the field of crimson. His body was present only as a mélange of unpleasant sensations. It felt as though someone had stripped away his flesh, and had stabbed him with a thousand tiny needles.

Groaning, he got up. Or at least that was what he told his body; without tactile feedback he could not be certain what he was doing.

Gradually clarity slowly crept back. The vertical lines ahead of him coalesced into the pedestal in the center of the room, now bare, empty. He was on his knees, facing it, the tunnel exit directly behind.

The chamber's shape was as it had been when he'd first come here... how long? Amurru had not offered much in the way of clarity to Dar's questions. The lich's oblique manner had given him pause, but Allera had trusted it, in a fashion, and he trusted Allera, so he had submitted. She was not here; he wondered if she was experiencing a similar torture, in the chamber with the yellow pedestal.

It was a struggle to rise to his feet, with new pains accompanying every slight movement. But he did it, even though his teeth clenched hard enough to spark new pain in his jaw.

The chamber was rough, irregular, and clods of earth striated with color lay all around him. The place where he'd knelt was the only clear space within the room. The place had been completely collapsed not long ago. Amurru had conjured some magic that had restored the room; he could not begin to understand. He did grasp that the collapse of two of the three beams had disrupted the magical power that had allowed the complex to regenerate all damage wrought upon it.

He wondered again how much time had passed. Had Kiron and Maricela completed their mission? He knew all too well how long it took to navigate the twisting tunnels and passages of Rappan Athuk, and the knight and his companions would have to traverse one of the treacherous river tunnels to get to the part of the dungeon where the Oracle resided. Maricela possessed the means to bypass that obstacle, through her divine magic, but the times that he'd *water walked* over those rivers had never been pleasant.

Making his way back down the round tunnel did little to clear his thoughts. The blue glow of the Ravager's prison became visible well before he reached the huge chamber that housed it. That was something, at least. It offered little solace, serving as a reminder of the fact that he was about to die to repair that barrier.

He exited onto the mithral gantry. He started moving around the edge of the room, relying on the railing for support. He still felt stiff, although the movements were starting to loosen the needles stabbing into his muscles. His mind felt like it was in a fog, so it was not surprising that he did not see Allera until she was almost on top of him.

"Are you all right?" he asked her, taking her shoulders with his hands. "Are you all right?" he repeated, fighting to clear his thoughts.

"I'm fine," she said. "Gods, you look terrible." She channeled a minor healing spell through him, which eased his pain somewhat, if not the lingering cloud over his thoughts.

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t exactly fun. What happened with you?”

“I could bear it,” she said. “But this... can’t you feel it?” She lifted a hand and swung it out over the room, a look of startlement on her face.

“I can’t feel much of anything except that it feels like I took a beating,” Dar said. But at her words, he *did* begin to notice it, behind and within and part of the distortion flaring within his mind. An... *awareness* wasn’t quite right. “The barrier, it’s weakening,” he said.

Allera nodded. “When I woke, I could... this whole place, its part of one organic whole.”

“And it’s dying,” Dar said. His eyes continued drifting, following what that *other* sight was sensing, until they settled on a part of the pyramid near the floor. To his normal vision, it was just another part of the prison, but he suddenly knew better.

Allera had sensed it too. “A breach...” she said, her face growing pale as she clutched at the rail for support.

“Where’s the guardian?” he said, looking around, unnecessarily, for he suspected that his new awareness would have extended to the defenders of this place. Amurru was not here, and he doubted if the lich could have done anything in any case, to stop what he was sensing develop.

“We have to stop it,” Allera said. Dar was already reaching for his sword, but his hand closed on empty air where the hilt had been. Suddenly, giving *Justice* to Kiron did not seem like such a good idea.

The barrier quivered, and now they could see as well as sense the bulge that began to swell outward, twisting as blue energy flared around the disruption. And then there was a tear, which he sensed as a grating rip, like the back of a tent being torn open.

The two of them could only watch in horror as one of the ravager spawn appeared through the rent, clawing and thrusting. Its bright red hide contrasted garishly with the blue glow of the prison, and its black teeth and claws glistened wetly in the odd light.

The rent began to close almost immediately behind it, but before it could seal, another spawn appeared, pushing through in the wake of the first. The first one, meanwhile, had recovered from its ordeal, and as it lifted its body up on its hind legs, its dagger-shaped head swiveled around, scanning its new surroundings.

Until it abruptly came to a stop, pointed directly at Dar and Allera.

Naturally I had to end it on a cliffhanger! I'd like to thank all of my readers, who supported this story on ENWorld, and who have provided great feedback in posting responses to this and my other stories. If you haven't already read my other stories, including Travels through the Wild West and The Shackled City, you can find them at ENWorld.org, or at my Web site, lazybones18.tripod.com.