



# PLAYER'S GUIDE

Sample file

# CREDITS

## EARTHDAWN® PLAYER'S GUIDE™ REVISED EDITION RULEBOOK

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# PROLOGUE: INHERITANCE

*When the Scourge ended, we were determined to reclaim our heritage.  
But we were not yet ready to pay the price.*  
—Tolan Oddear, Historian of Landis

*Yes, it is a fine axe, and tempered in many battles, my friend. Its head has even tasted the blood of a Horror. How did I gain possession of such a fine weapon? Well, fill my mug with more of that fine dwarf stout and I'll gladly tell you the tale. 'Twas during an expedition to the lost city of Jalendale. I shall never forget it. We set out on a cold, wet day, much like today—the elven magician, myself, and the warrior who wielded this mighty axe, the troll called Lorm ...*

▲ ▲ ▲

I ran up the steep, rocky slope, breathing in steam-  
ing gasps. Over the din of rain pelting the nearby  
rocks, I could hear the ork scorchers below. I stum-  
bled and rolled down a few lengths then regained  
my feet, strands of moss now clinging to my sweat-  
ed red beard.

As I fumbled to put my helmet back on my head,  
arrows hissed past, striking rocks upslope. Fear gave  
my legs new strength and I quickly crept up the hill,  
diving for cover behind the boulder I had seen my  
companions use earlier.

Glancing up, I saw Lorm's green wart-covered fist  
holding his huge axe a finger's width away from Mes-  
toph's face. The hair tufts in Lorm's large ears twitched  
and his nostrils dilated.

His rough tongue rimmed his left tusk, and his yellow  
eyes glared from the slits formed by his pock-  
marked eyelids.

Lorm was one unhappy troll.

"Where's all the gold? Where's this lost city? *Where  
is Jalendale?*"

Mestoph shook his long white hair away from his  
face, revealing an ugly sneer. He stared at Lorm with  
the orb of magical amber that served as his left eye.

I wheezed over to Lorm, reached up and tapped  
him near his belt.

"Wouldn't you rather kill some scorchers?"

"No thanks, dwarf."

"Then perhaps you would consider killing some  
scorchers before killing me?" Mestoph asked.

Lorm blinked at the elf's question, then pulled his  
axe away from our magician. Mestoph slumped away  
from Lorm into a puddle, rain dripping from his aquiline  
features.

Noticing that Lorm and Mestoph had leaned their  
packs against the boulder, I took mine off too. As  
feeling returned to my shoulders I looked downhill.

The ork scorchers had taken cover about halfway  
up the hill. Apparently they were concerned about  
what sort of defense we would concoct and wanted  
to consider the possibilities before charging up the  
last open stretch of ground. They were giving us more  
credit than we deserved.

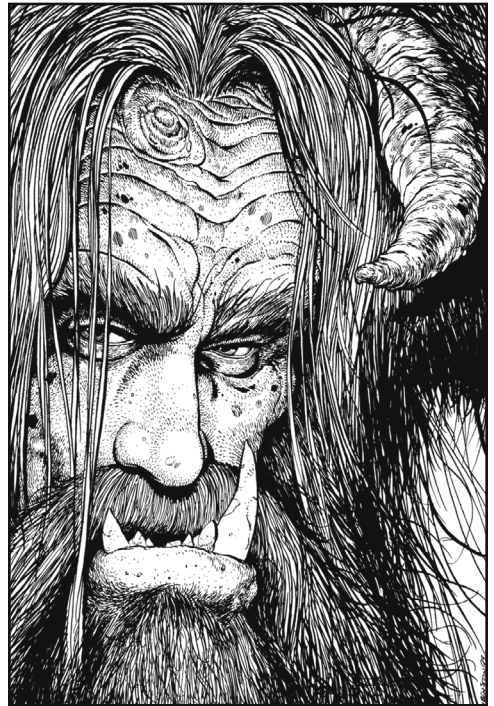
I took a step toward Mestoph, and the elf fixed me  
with his amber eye. "I swear the maps put Jalendale  
here or close to here."

"Well that's great. How about whipping up a spell  
to take care of a few angry scorchers?"

"I am afraid my 'destroy angry ork' selection is  
limited."

"Then how about something from your 'take action  
to make angry troll happy' collection?"

Mestoph nodded. He squatted and crabbed along  
the ground, careful to stay behind the boulder as he  
gathered a few pebbles and began to weave a spell.



Lorm and I had seen this one before. I drew my short sword. Lorm grabbed his axe with both hands.

Suddenly the sky above us darkened and within minutes we were enveloped by a blackness so deep we could barely make out the stones at our feet. This was midnight dark, copper-cavern-no-lamp dark. This was Mestoph's darkness. I crouched and waited.

A few moments later we were back to the murky-storm light. A quick glance told me Mestoph had cast the darkness on the pebbles, then tossed the pebbles down the hill at the orks. Confused shouts now came from three large bubbles of darkness where the orks had stood.

Lorm and I scrambled down the hill and waited at the edge of the darkness. An ork stumbled out. Lorm smashed him and the scorcher fell back into the darkness, leaving a trail of red on the rocky slope.

Apparently unable to coordinate their movements in the darkness, the orks kept wandering out haphazardly. Lorm and I took care of as many as we could. As soon as four orks made it out of the darkness at the same time, Lorm and I rushed back up the hill.

The plan now called for Mestoph to take care of the most determined ork pursuer or two with a different spell. Nothing happened.

Lorm strode on ahead while the orks gained on me. They say never look behind you when you're in a close chase because it slows you down. I looked. The orks were maybe fifteen of their strides back, swinging their swords across their bodies as they pumped their arms in time with their legs. They looked angrier than Lorm had looked. Two of them stopped to draw their bows.

I heard Lorm yell, a peculiar fading yell. The lead ork made an extra effort, and I promptly did the same. I reached the crest at top speed and dived for the cover of the boulder. I remember thinking, "That doesn't look like Mestoph's darkness spell," then falling.

Darkness again surrounded me as I fell, interrupted by an occasional flash of blue light ahead of me. Then I hit something, more gently than I expected, and my descent stopped. A blue glow enveloped me, then I was falling again, but not too fast. Another hit. Another blue glow. Another fall.

Soon I realized I was inside some type of shaft carved into the hill, and the blue glows were coming from runes carved into the shaft's walls about every three body lengths. I passed about a dozen levels of runes before landing on the rocks at the bottom of the shaft.

As I checked for broken bones, a flame sputtered, died, then another sputter turned into a warm yellow glow. Mestoph had lit a torch. While Lorm just sat there, looking a bit dazed, Mestoph walked over and handed me the torch. He took another from his pack, but this one took some time to light because

it was damper than the first. The torch popped and hissed as it caught, illuminating my pack lying a few feet away. Lorm was already picking his up. Mestoph cleared his throat. "An illusion hid this shaft until one of my spell castings revealed it. Rather surprising."

"Mestoph, take a look at this," Lorm said, pointing to the section of wall near his pack. Mestoph walked over and leaned toward the wall, holding his torch just above his head.

After a moment of exploring the wall with his fingers, he shivered, pulling his hand back. He took a deep breath. His fingers went back to the wall.

The wall was covered with curving lines just slightly thicker than my fingernail. They were carved into the rock to different depths, some as deep as a finger length. Pacing around the shaft wall, I saw that the lines covered nearly every inch of its surface, except for occasional palm-sized blank spots. I counted out seventy paces to circle the shaft. The curlicues rose perhaps five or six dwarf-lengths from the floor of the shaft. The lines were deepest near three pitted, metal triangles hanging above a pillared entrance. We had found Kaer Jalendale.

Stone doors four dwarf-lengths tall lay cracked on the ground. Apparently, we were not the first to discover the city.

Mestoph pointed at the triangles.

"Those metal triangles look like they contain orichalcum. They must have been the wards protecting the town."

Lorm ran his axe across the wall. The rasp was just loud enough to hear above the splatter of rain overhead.

"And this?"

"I think a Horror etched all this. Every single line has an astral image. I think these designs sapped the magic from the wards. But carving these lines would take a year at the very least, and probably closer to five."

"A Horror spent five years breaking into Jalendale?" My voice rose in pitch as I spoke. I thought of something carving a few lines, stepping back, then carving a bit more, scratching lines a jeweler would be lucky to make as precisely. Something carving day after day, year after year, just waiting to get into the town. My desire for treasure was lessening.

"Did they know?" Lorm asked.

"The citizens? Probably not at first, not until the first ward failed. And by then it would have been too late to do anything."

Lorm took a long look through the doorway. I decided to check out my short sword. Mestoph laughed, a quick, high-pitched sound.

"We can wait for the monster out here or look for treasure inside." Mestoph spun in a half turn, then walked over the broken gates. I took a swig of water



and thought a bit. I suppose only a desperate dwarf thinks on water. Lorm hurled a stone as far to the shaft as he could, then followed Mestoph inside. I made my most gallant “after you” bow, before crunching over the broken rock just behind our trail.

The town smelled dry, musty, like leaves during a parched autumn. I thanked the Passions for the dry part. Mestoph’s map showed a Jalendale built along dwarf lines. The large central marketplace housed the guild building, the courts and jail, and the Passions’ temple. Eight streets radiated out from the market to the edge of town, bisected by evenly spaced cross streets, giving Jalendale’s road grid the appearance of a spider web.

Give humans and orks a couple of centuries, however, and they can foul up any dwarf plan. My first clue was the rope ladders and hemp-and-slat bridges above us. Jalendale’s population must have been larger than planned, and the settlement had expanded up rather than out. A few buildings were even hewn from the rock of the cavern ceiling and used as supports to suspend thick cables and ropes. These ropes, in turn, held platforms and precarious dwellings.

Other shacks stood on platforms resting on pillars set atop the roofs of Jalendale’s original buildings. An incomprehensible series of ropes, rods, and beams connected the entire construction.

I found a night post with a light quartz that still responded to touch, and Lorm fashioned a lantern

from the quartz, some rope, and one of his sacks. It gave off better light than the torches, but Mestoph and I kept ours lit. Light frightens some things, but fire hurts more of them.

Mestoph tried to lead us to the guild building. We started down the main avenue, but an array of pillars and cables supporting the city overhead blocked our passage before we had walked even fifty paces from the gate.

Blocking the main avenue seemed downright ork-stupid. Then I realized that once the gate was sealed, it wouldn’t matter if they blocked the avenue this far from the market. Nobody would be coming through the gate until the day the Horror came along, that is. The walls all around the jumble showed more of the scrolling lines, even more intricate than the writing outside the gate.

Mestoph tried another street. It was blocked by shanties. His next choice got us closer to the marketplace before a thicket of stone spikes closed it off. A few of the spikes penetrated the walls of nearby buildings. We backtracked, Lorm wandered from one side of the avenue to the other, peering into buildings. I squinted in the glare of the light quartz as he walked over to me. Lorm shifted the lantern to his other hand, then whispered, “Where are all the bodies?”

“Maybe the Horror ate them all.”

“Even all the bones?” Lorm blinked his eyes.

“Maybe it’s a very tidy Horror. Maybe it stacked all the bones in a corner somewhere.”

“Thief, take a look at these.”

I heard the strain in Mestoph’s voice. He was standing at the mouth of an alley. Five cracked crystalline shells lay next to a heap of pottery shards. I took a few steps toward them.

A sharp odor stung my nose as I held my torch close enough to one of the empty shells to see the gray-streaked ooze. The shells were cysts. Whoever was in charge had just awakened a welcoming committee.

The shadowmants attacked us when we were nearly halfway to the center of Jalendale. I heard a fluttering sound and looked up just as two dark shapes swooped at Lorm. Blunt heads fanned out into pairs of sleek, featherless wings. Bodies tapered to scorpion-like tails that curved along the under of the creatures. Crystalline-pointed stingers tipped the tails.

Lorm roared, swinging the light over his head like a sling, and the creatures rose out of sight on silent wings.

As I drew my sword, four more of the creatures plunged from the darkness above. Mestoph performed a nimble dive-and-roll to avoid the dark shapes, and I heard him begin a spell.

I had my sword out and up, hoping to impale a swooping shadowmant, but the dark form in front

of me furiously beat its wings, halting its forward motion in time to avoid my blade.

I parried its tail strike, the stinger coming within an inch of my face. I stabbed upward without looking and struck something soft. The shadowmant fluttered back a few paces, then came at me again. I blindly thrust my sword again and felt the thud of its stinger against my hardened leather breastplate.

The shadowmant dove at me again. I swung my blade and the creature wobbled back. I crouched low, and when I heard the flutter I struck, driving as hard as I could with my legs and arms. I felt a weight on my blade writhe for a moment, then become still, and I began congratulating myself just as Lorm howled.

I spun to see a shadowmant flopping at his feet, an axe embedded in its dark flesh. Another fluttered over the troll, its stinger lodged in Lorm's neck. I ran and hacked the tail off and the shadowmant careened away.

Lorm dropped his axe and fell to his knees, head to the ground, left hand opening and closing spasmodically, right hand clutched to his neck. I pulled out a poultice.

"Don't touch me, worm beard!"

I stepped back, hands to my shoulders, palms facing outward and my fingers apart. Lorm needed the poultice, but I could wait until he felt less like pulling off my arms.

Three shadowmants lay on the ground. Mestoph eyed two dark shapes circling above his head. He spoke and the shadowmants spiraled up and away from us.

Lorm nodded to me. Mestoph walked toward us, but when he saw what I was doing, he turned away. The elf made a big display of studying his map.

I drew one of Lorm's knives, testing it on a plucked beard hair to make sure it was sharp. I tried to cut a small slit near Lorm's wound.

"Ahhoww!"

"Sorry. If troll skin were a little less tough, this would be easier."

"If dwarf hands didn't shake, it would be easier."

I finally managed a clean cut. I applied pressure around the wound with both hands, then tried to suck the wound clean. I felt his neck buzz as he spoke.

"Have you ever seen a Horror?"

I pulled away, remembering to spit. I didn't know whether the bitter taste was the poison or the troll blood.

"No. You?" I went back to the wound.

"Years ago my father's captain received a mind-plea from some Caucavic kin. We launched our ship, flew all damn night, arrived exhausted. We found all the adults dead, lying all about the place in different stages of rot. The children were alive, except for the babies who died from neglect."

I spit a second and third time. Lorm kept talking.

"I was scouting for survivors when I saw the Horror. It was like a slug, mottled yellow and white. It was only half my size, around a corner and two steps away."

"You mean twice your size?" I started shaking the vial containing the poultice. It began to warm.

"No, half. I caught myself thinking, this can't be what killed all these people. It didn't make sense. I took a step toward it. That was as far as I got. Glittering silver lines appeared where its eyes might have been, and I stopped dead. It looked at me, then turned away, moving slower than I could ever walk. I couldn't move until it was out of sight."

I took the poultice from the vial. Warm and moist, it smelled of basil. I carefully placed it into the wound. Lorm flinched very little.

"We took the children back home with us. As time passed, the Horror touched each of them, one by one. One's voice became painful to hear, another congealed mead when she got too close. One by one, we threw the children out of the hold. A couple left before we had the chance."

"Can you sit up?" I helped the troll as best I could by getting a good grip on his shirt near his shoulders.

"I remember thinking that the Horror had gotten two holds."

"Can you stand?"

"Not yet. I always wondered what would have happened if I could have taken that second step."

"Probably it would have blown you to flaming bits. Come on, let's try the standing thing now."

I put my back to his hip, planted my feet and pushed. Lorm pushed back, sliding up my back to a standing position. He leaned forward, hands on his knees, gasping for breath.

"Sure your poultice is going to work?"

"Should. I chose these carefully."

"Doesn't feel right yet. Just like this place. This whole place feels wrong. The smell."

"Smells like leaves to me."

"Dry leaves. It's pouring outside. It's desert dry in here."

"Maybe," I stopped talking. None of my maybes sounded good. I finished with a weak, "You should be fine."

Lorm took a step. He winced, a funny expression on a wart-covered old troll. One tusk poked through his familiar, lopsided grin.

"Maybe. Thanks for your help, Ragnar."

I blinked. The three of us had met in Throal. Somewhere on the road to Jalendale they lost "Ragnar." I became "dwarf," sometimes "thief." It struck me that a person's name was the only thing you could steal by refusing to use it.

"If the short and the tall are ready to go?" I matched Mestoph's mocking bow up with one of my own.

Mestoph led us, which is to say he walked a few steps ahead of us. Each time we found the way blocked, Mestoph would then stand and contemplate the next direction to try, and thus we lurched through the maze of Jaldale.

While Mestoph pondered, Lorm and I poked around in nearby buildings. The shops were in ruins. Not the buildings themselves, just the items inside. A porcelain shop with every plate pulverized, every vessel shattered. A goldsmith's every case shattered, every flattening hammer bent, every foil knife broken in two.

I saw not one undamaged piece of furniture, not one whole item of merchandise.

Lorm spent less time searching than sitting down. He was still breathing, so the poultice must have had some effect. Ragged breaths said it was not yet enough.

Following Mestoph's latest direction, we came to a cross-roads that led to the marketplace. The intersecting road was gone, replaced by a trench some twenty-five paces wide and, well, much deeper.

As Mestoph and I approached the trench, lights winked on in the square across the way. New lights appeared with each heartbeat, revealing a massive shadow. Mestoph and I gazed at the marketplace. A huge, irregular structure stood where Mestoph's map showed three buildings. Built like a primitive mound, stones of all sizes formed its walls and roof. Soon the open plaza shimmered with the sheen of iridescent blues, purples, and silver-whites.

"Cadaver men!"

Until Lorm's shout I had been unaware that I was staring at the plaza. Mestoph had three steps on me by the time I turned around and saw eight shapes walking toward us.

Lorm had taken cover in an empty shop. He sat inside the doorway, axe lying on the ground beside him.

Mestoph stopped running and crouched in a defensive posture, walking crab-style toward the nearest building. Apparently he'd decided he wasn't going make it past the cadaver men. My heart and legs thought it was worth a try, but my mind told me to stick with Mestoph. I sidled along with him. My sword only shook a little.

The cadaver men had been orks once. Two still had their ornamental gold tusk-caps. Their braided black hair was dusty and their mummified flesh creaked more than the leather armor they wore. The two with the tusk-caps carried swords and had backpacks slung over their shoulders. Six more staggered along with spears in one hand, rope or wood in the other. They smelled of pepper and rot, as if a chef had tried to conceal the smell of a bad piece of meat.

They walked right past us.

Let me say that again, in case you missed it. Eight cadaver men had us pinned, and they walked right past us. They walked to the edge of the trench. They dropped two coils of rope. The rope twitched, then snaked its way through the air to the other side of the trench.

Mestoph inhaled sharply. His face was contorted in pain. Little by little, he regained control of his expression. His features calmed. "The Horror is close."

Lorm joined us. We watched the cadaver men as they moved away from the trench one by one. One lone cadaver man pounded in a final stake. He finished his task with a ringing strike, then gathered his tools and rejoined his companions.

The eight cadaver men blocked the road we had taken coming in, and I knew they would stand there forever. Lorm wrung the haft of his axe as if it were a wet cloth.

"Ragnar, when a Horror asks you to visit him, is it foolish to say no?"

Mestoph stared blankly at the bridge. His amber eye went milky, as if the color of his hair had somehow bled through. His eyebrows furrowed, then shot up high on his forehead. He started toward the bridge.

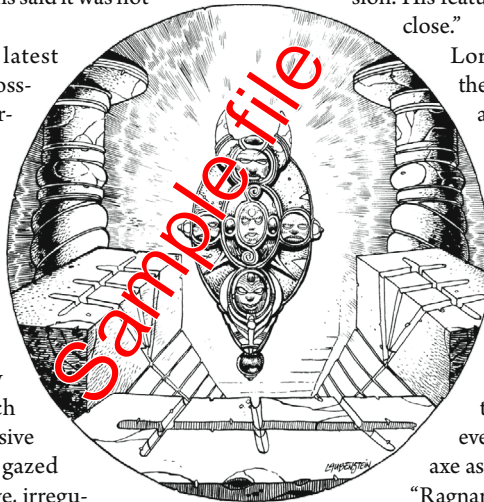
"If he wanted us dead, the cadaver men would have attacked. He wants something from us he cannot get if we are dead."

"So he kills us after we do his bidding," I said.

Mestoph stopped for a second, legs apart and arms raised. "We can try to out-think him, out-wait him, or out-fight him. I know which is my best chance." He turned and began walking again.

Lorm took one wobbly step, steadied himself, and followed Mestoph. So did I.

Hundreds of carvings like those by the gate covered the plaza. Our boots made a scratching sound as we walked, as if we were sliding across invisible



sand. Each step was like a knife-edge gliding along the soles of my feet, feather-soft yet sharp.

We made our way toward the mound in the center of the plaza. It seemed the only place to go. I could see a pointed archway. Inside the mound was a cool darkness.

I blinked, then it was next to Mestoph.

Twice as tall as me, it wore high boots the color of burnished brass. Six-fingered gauntlets curved into moving tendrils the size of my little finger. Each tendril ended in a clear, sharp gem, each with an edge finer than a knife-blade.

A brass breastplate of at least a finger's width covered its torso, and gritty, dun-colored smoke seemed to flow from the breastplate to form its neck and limbs.

The face froze me in my tracks. The whitish-gray color of mushrooms and tree-rot, it looked like a skull built entirely of worms. The worms squirmed in a pattern most active around its eye sockets. A single worm protruded from the center of each socket.

Two droplets of blood burst from Lorm's wound, drawn by magic to the Horror. They exploded with a white flash and sizzled on its armor. The Horror flinched and the worms of its face twitched and rolled a bit faster. It opened its mouth to speak, revealing the writhing mass of its tongue. When it spoke my lungs burned and my mouth dried.

"The one who brings me the small orichalcum shield shall live. The others ..."

The Horror swept his hand past me. One of the gems on his finger-tendrils touched my face and a bolt in my legs snapped. Blinding pain accompanied popping sounds as muscle disconnected. I fell forward. Several of my ribs twisted and snapped.

I screamed, I blubbered, I tried to crawl away, but I could not control the spasms of my body. I spit up a mouthful of vomit, bitter bile spilling over my lips and matting my beard. My legs jerked wildly. I could not even beg.

Then the pain stopped. My body was mine again, impossibly whole. The Horror stood over me, watching me carefully.

I ran. I ran in a blind panic toward the mound. I slammed into a wall, bounced and fell. I got up, slammed into the wall again, still screaming. Lorm reached out of the mound to pull me the few feet sideways to the door. I lunged inside.

I do not know how long I sat rocking myself. I remember Lorm persuading me to drink something and Mestoph asking me questions.

"I think our dwarf is with us again."

Mestoph knelt beside me, then handed me one of his flasks. I took a sip of wine, passed it back to him.

"You have been out for some time. Welcome to your new home."

"Where are we?"

"We are in the biggest mausoleum I have ever seen."

The sweep of Mestoph's arm took in the entire building. Atop eight pillars sat light quartz illuminating perhaps forty box-frames, each nearly fifty arm-lengths high. Each frame was like a gigantic library shelf, filled with bodies rather than books. Most were wrapped in burial shrouds, a few in robes or armor.

The place smelled overwhelmingly of cloves, with just a hint of dry rot.

Mestoph rose, gesturing to me to follow. As I walked behind him I noticed a couple of new books in his backpack.

In the middle of the mausoleum, eight altars surrounded two sloped, square pits, each pit deepest in the center. One altar stood on each side of each square. Each altar was carved with troughs leading to the pits.

The troughs fed into notches running to the center of each pit, each holding a brilliant golden shield.

The light struck the shields, flowing and dazzling in a way impossible even for pure gold. Orichalcum.

Mestoph brushed a lock of hair away from his ear.

"The shields are magical protections. The magic was strengthened by the blood of the citizens."

"They killed themselves?"

"Sacrificed, almost down to the last man. Last few

here took poison. The larger shield protects this tomb from being entered or harmed by the 'destroyer of our brethren' or his 'unliving servants.' The smaller prevents the 'destroyer of our brethren' from moving more than a few hundred yards away from it."

"Destroyer of our brethren?"

"I think they enchanted eight of their citizens, left them outside this tomb. Their deaths triggered the magic in the shield."

"Those are the cadaver men?"

"Yes, but they would have been alive then."

I thought about the citizens of Jalendale. A Horror gnawing his way through the town's defenses. No magic strong enough to stop him from coming in. But they had one desperate way of preventing the abomination from harming another town.

"They left plenty of loot." Lorm nodded toward a wall. I could see the gleam of neatly stacked gold. Items in chests and bins, weapons laid out in a panoply. It all looked attractive. But not as attractive as I thought it would.

"Pick something light." Lorm held up a gleaming dagger. Its pommel was carved into a wolf's head and its blade gleamed with the same fire as the shields. "Our plan requires speed."

I walked toward the treasure. Lorm directed me to a small pile. "Mestoph separated out some of the more promising items."

I started sorting through the loot. I rejected a sword with five matching emeralds in its hilt, but paused to consider a helmet that was as clear as glass and lighter than ten coins.

"Those bracers," Lorm said, pointing to finely hammered copper bracers adorned with jade and lapis lazuli, "probably have defensive magic. Might as well take something that will help you get out of here."

I fingered the bracers, but took the helmet. Lorm grinned. I tried it on. Fit was a little big, but the helmet felt cool and somehow reassuring. I stashed my old helmet in my pack.

Mestoph was reading one of the books when we walked over. Lorm nodded in his direction.

"While you were worthless, Mestoph read. He's already reversed the levitation magic in the shaft. It should now push us up and out."

"How do we get past the Horror?"

"Mestoph starts working on a spell. I take the shield outside. When creepy comes for the shield, I whack him long enough for the spell to finish. You run out and throw the shield back in here, out of his reach. Elfie throws the spell. While creepy recovers, we head out of town. Got it?"

"I have my doubts about running out there to get the shield. And serious doubts about you whacking creepy long enough for Mestoph to take a breath let alone finish a spell."

Lorm swung his axe in a lazy arc, stopping the axe in mid-swing. He loosened his grip, letting the haft slide down until his right hand rested just below the axe-head. His left hand tested the edge.

"This is my axe. My grandfather made it for my father. He told my father the axe was destined to blood a Horror, perhaps slay one."

"Sure, once the Horror kills you, he can use your axe to whack his friends."

A page rustled.

"You are unduly pessimistic, dwarf."

"Name's Ragnar."

Mestoph closed his book and regarded me with that amber eye.

"Ragnar. The good people of Jalendale did not die in vain. They left detailed records behind, and so we know this Horror is somewhat vulnerable to life magic. Are we ready?"

Lorm nodded vigorously. I shrugged. Mestoph reopened his book. Lorm set his axe down. He drew his newly acquired wolf-handled dagger and carefully cut his left forearm three times. He sheathed the dagger. The troll picked up his axe and began to apply his own blood to the blade.

I walked back to the pit and got the smaller shield. When I returned I saw Lorm had spread a generous coating of blood on his axe. He looked up.

"Just in case things go wrong, I want you to know the poultice finally worked. You chose well."

"What could possibly go wrong, Lorm?"

The troll snorted. I handed him the shield. We watched Mestoph work his way through the spell. The elf spoke softly, his fingers moving in time with his words. His right eye was closed. His left eye swirled with light. He began to speak more slowly.

"That's the signal."

Lorm took four steps out, then dropped the shield and stood on it.

"Here's your cursed shield!"

The Horror appeared a yard from Lorm, its tongue flailing like a snake on fire. Lorm stepped toward it, swinging his axe. The weapon found the Horror's breastplate, and the blood on the axe flared into white fire. The Horror hissed and screeched. Lorm roared.

I finally remembered to get the shield. I scrambled for it, picked it up as Lorm rang another blow off the Horror's armor. I carried it back into the tomb. Once inside I saw Mestoph fling his arms up and heard him hear three elven words.

Thousands of droplets of water appeared, then coalesced into dozens of spinning blades. The blades flew around Lorm, striking the Horror. The screech turned into a scream. The blades tore whisps of dun-colored smoke from its legs and arms and sliced a tendrill off its left hand. They rang and sizzled against its breastplate. The Horror spun around. Two of the blades caught it in the side of his head, sending shreds of white worm through the air.

Mestoph was already running, and so I followed his lead. Lorm took one last swipe then brought up the rear.

"Follow me! I found more maps in the tomb and I think I can get us to a clear avenue!"

We crossed the bridge and turned left. We ran past a plaza with four brass poles, through dusty alleys, down a road with shops with blue doors, then turned right at a dry fountain with lion-head spouts onto a broad avenue.

Mestoph's laugh boomed down the dead streets of Jalendale. The magician slowed to a walk. I caught up. Lorm was huffing half a dozen paces behind. Lorm bellowed.

"Whacked him pretty good, I'd say."

The Horror appeared next to Mestoph. Its left eye-worm twitched uncontrollably as it reached out to touch the magician. Mestoph tried to dodge, but the elf reacted too slowly. A sucking, tearing sound came from within him and he began screaming. Then his hair whipped up and forward and his screams suddenly grew strangely muffled.

I screamed too, a dry, pitiful noise. I was staring at Mestoph's eyes and mouth, which were on the side

of his face. The Horror had torn the skin loose from muscle and was shifting it around the elf's body.

Mestoph's blood did not flow so much as gush toward the Horror, transforming into burning white ribbons that wrapped around the entity. The Horror's triumphant screams drowned out our own.

The Mestoph-lump collapsed to the ground. The left side of the Horror's face was a smoking, ruined mass. It pointed at Lorm. "Get me the shield."

Lorm started to run. He took five fast steps, then stopped and turned around. His eyes shone with a silvery web.

The Horror hissed.

"Once Horror-touched, never free. Get me the shield!"

I tried to tackle the troll as he started to move, but he batted me aside. The Horror turned his gaze on me.

"Nothing more from you."

I was frozen to the ground. The Horror stared at me with his one good eye. Its seared tongue wiggled back and forth, as if it tasting my fear and anguish.

Apparently the Horror's momentary distraction provided Lorm a brief second of self-control, because he suddenly flung himself at the entity, the wolf's-head dagger flashing in his outstretched hand.

The Horror snapped its head around and Lorm crumpled to the ground with a strangled cry. Blisters boiled up on the troll's green skin, releasing rivulets of blood as they burst.

"Noooo!" I do not remember whether that was my scream, or the Horror's. The entity tried to reach the troll, but the blood now pooling on the ground sparked when it approached. The Horror staggered back and began to hiss rhythmically.

I struggled to gain control of my legs, then knelt by Lorm. His cloudy yellow eyes met mine for a split second then darted toward the axe at his side.

I grabbed for the weapon, but could barely lift the damn thing. Finally I worked the blade around the pool of troll blood. Lorm's breathing rose and fell in time with the Horror's hiss.

When I charged, the Horror looked up but did not move; its hiss just grew a little louder. The axe wobbled a bit at the top of its arc and my resolve wavered, then I crashed the weapon onto the thing's head. I felt a jolt, heard a brittle crunch and smelled the odor of rotted wood.

The Horror lurched back. I held onto the axe, which jerked free as the Horror moved. The creature had no working eyes. But it kept hissing. I could no longer lift the axe. I looked over at Lorm, and saw he was dead.

I clutched the axe to me. The hiss told me to leave it. I turned around. This hiss told me to stay. I took a step. The hiss grew louder, almost strident. Another step. Then another. The hiss grew weaker, thinner. Then I could no longer hear it.

I found my way back to the shaft. Struggling to climb up to the first blue rune, I was dimly aware of the cadaver men entering the chamber, climbing after me. I heard them scabble at the wall.

I reached the rune. A warm sensation lifted me, then hurtled me upward. I passed from rune to rune, gathering a little more speed with each.

I shot out of the shaft, over the unsuspecting sentries the scorchers had posted. They might have pursued me if the cadaver men had not appeared to keep them busy.

I walked as far as I could, reaching the village of Twin Chain well into the next morning. There I stopped and slept for days. I do not think I let go of Lorm's axe the whole time.

▲ ▲ ▲

*Many years have passed since that night, and I have survived my share of adventures. But one task remained unfinished, one I believed I would take undone to my grave. Tonight I walked into this tavern and saw you and heard your tales, the stories of your adventures. Now I have hope that it will be completed. Take this axe. It is Lorm's axe. His grandfather made it for his father. It has blooded a Horror. Perhaps now it shall slay one ...*

