

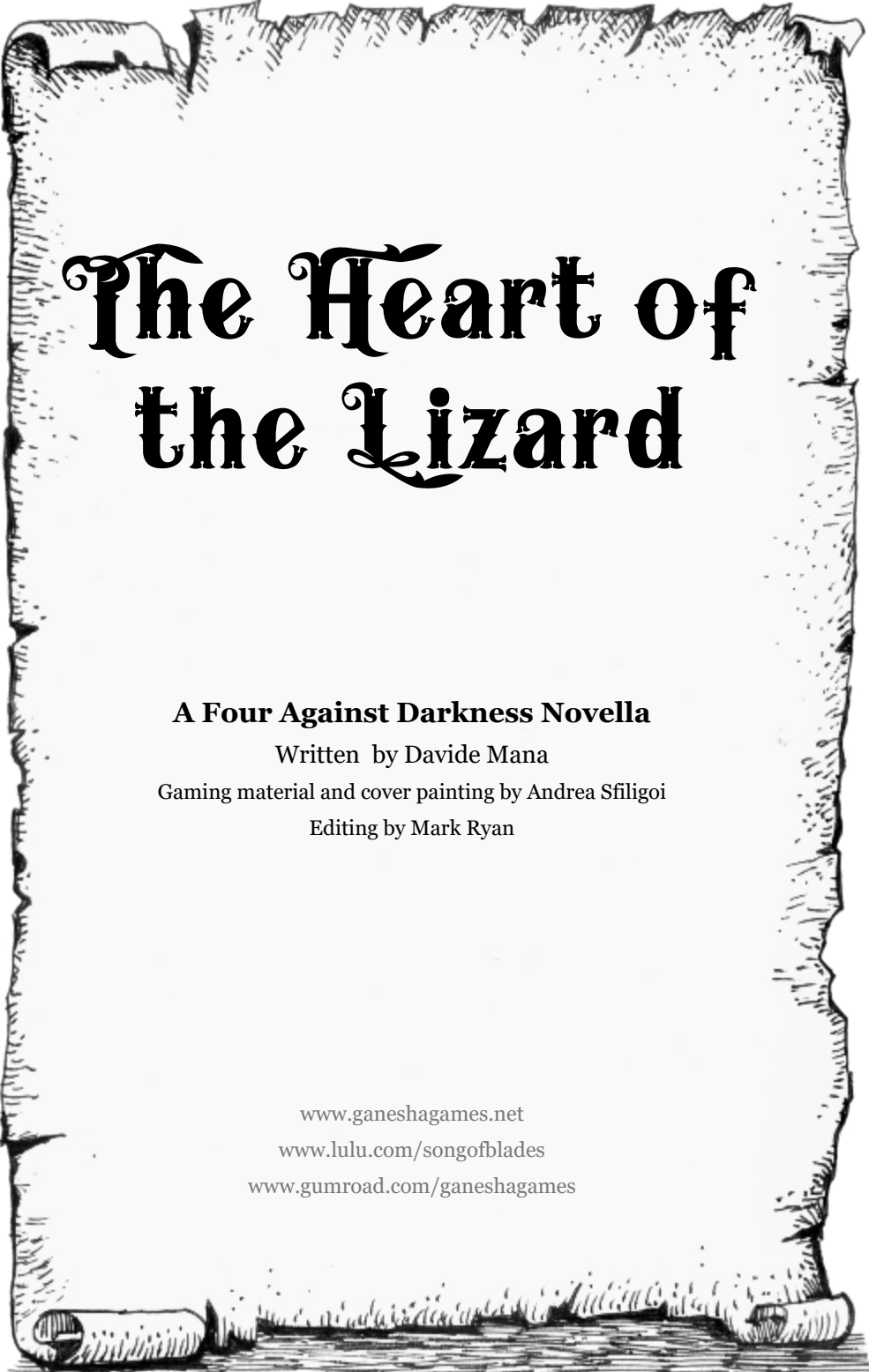
Davide Mana

Heart of the Lizard



A Four Against Darkness novella

With a gaming appendix by Andrea Sfiligoi



The Heart of the Lizard

A Four Against Darkness Novella

Written by Davide Mana

Gaming material and cover painting by Andrea Sfiligoi

Editing by Mark Ryan

www.ganeshagames.net

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This story is for Dave Duncan, who was a gentleman storyteller.



Trust in human nature is acceptance of the good-and-bad of it, and it is hard to trust those who do not admit their own weakness. (Alan Watts)

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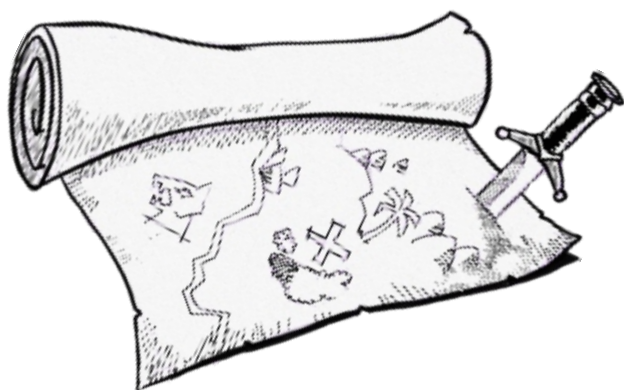


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Davide Mana – The Heart of the Lizard

Contents

One – The Map	4
Two - Goblins	15
Three - Temple	26
Four – Dungeon	32
Five - Goo	42
Six - Gate	52
Seven – The Heart of the Lizard	60
Eight - Filgar	67
Epilogue - Riches beyond imagining	74
Gaming Materials	78
How to use these materials	78
New Class: Fire Mage	79
New Monsters	81
Red Goblins	81
Dorantian Giant Slug	83
Black Goo	85
New Spells	86
Fire Globe	86
Tongue of Flame	86
Fire Lantern	87
Shining Flame	87
Pillar of Flame	87
Boil Water	87
Fire Gazing	88
Flame Jet	88
New Treasure	89
The Heart of the Lizard	89
About the Authors	91
Davide Mana	91
Andrea Sfiligoi	91
About Four Against Darkness	91



One – The Map

Azzam the Lamé, also called Peg-Leg Azzam, was said to be so good with a knife nobody tested the rumors. He had been a pirate in the Sea of Storms, where he had acquired his most distinctive feature, and a smuggler in the marshes south of Dorantia; but everybody knew he had also pursued less honorable careers. In the Hangman's Tavern, where he spent his nights in varying degrees of alcoholic stupor and intoxicated rage, everybody gave him a wide berth; but, that did not mean the customers in the Hangman's were above placing a bet on the outcome of one of Peg-Leg Azzam bursts of violence. It was a form of entertainment which occurred once or perhaps twice a night. The Hangman's Tavern was that sort of place, after all.

«Five pieces on the one-eyed woman,» the barbarian said to the black-haired elf handling the bets. She glanced at him and arched an eyebrow. He grinned back with a big-toothed grin. In the

lamplight, his skin had that greenish tinge that spoke of orcish ancestry. He jangled coins in his big scarred hand.

«She's mean,» he said, his northern accent thick as his biceps. «I like her.»

The elvish woman stretched a long-fingered hand and deftly pocketed the money in one smooth, languid motion.

«The odds are even,» she said softly.

But of course, Peg-Leg Azzam also had a peg leg, and so, when he lunged forward with a serrated blade in his hand which glinted in the tremulous light of the oil lamps, One-eyed Haq just took a step back to avoid the cut, turned on her heel, placed the open palm of her left hand on a table for balance, and kicked him, hard, just where the wooden leg connected with the stump.

The wood snapped, loud like a crack of thunder. As his snarl faded into a strangled gurgle, Azzam staggered, lost his balance and fell. His head connected with the edge of the counter in a sinister thud. Azzam's eyes rolled back into his head. He collapsed on the ground and was still.

The tavern became silent. Noone moved.

In a flash, Haq dashed for the door.

«Move it,» she hissed to the elvish woman as she passed.

The elf frowned, "Yes?"

«Hey, my winnings—!» the barbarian yelled.

«Move it!» Haq repeated. She was already halfway through the door.

The tavern erupted in shouting.

The barbarian stared goggle-eyed at the spot where the elf had been. With a crash, an oil lamp fell to the floor and a table caught fire. Punches were thrown, and the barbarian reacted by punching back. The room became a surging mayhem of arms, legs and biting mouths. He picked up a stool by its leg and used it as a

club, giving as good as he got, until assorted mismatched hands grabbed him, and the northerner was ejected through a window. He landed on the flagstones outside, square at the feet of an officer of the Guard. The officer eyed him critically, rubbing his chin.

«What do we have here?»

#

Four blocks away, Haq'avan the Thief, also known as One-eyed Haq, stopped and leaned against the wall, holding her side. She was breathing heavily.

«We better keep moving,» the black-haired elf said as she caught up to Haq, who looked at her, touching the black patch on her right eye, and shook her head. «I'm too old for this sort of things, Kil,» she said, her voice a soft croak.

Zor Kildei, sometimes known as Flaming Kil, arched her fine eyebrows. Pallid and long-limbed, in her fine purple silks and silver jewels she stared with pale, dead eyes, looking like a the sort of woman that hands out cursed rings and deadly quests to the unwary. She had that cold, aloof expression all the members of her race shared, and that was the cause that the peoples around the Inner Sea were fond of burning down elvish villages.

«Guards will come,» Kil said.

Haq scoffed. «They're too busy kicking butt in the Hangman's to pursue us.»

«You sure?»

«Why pursue us and lose an opportunity to extort some extra protection money?» Haq caught a deep breath and straightened her black leather corset. «It's not like we have a price on our head, right?»

Kil stared at her in what Haq had learned was the elven equivalent of a shrug, and asked: «You got it?»

«That's why we were there, right?»

Haq pulled a balled piece of parchment from her coat pocket and grinned.

«Hope it was worth the effort,» Kil said as she turned and walked down the alley. A stray cat rummaging in a garbage heap jumped and hissed at her. Kil did not deign it of a second glance as she glided by.

Haq shook her head, and pocketed the parchment.

Pursuing the elf, she asked: «How much did you make with the bets?»

«Enough,» Kil replied without turning.

#

Karre's watering hole was a quieter than the Hangman's. People huddled around tables, minding their own business, talking in hushed tones, and keeping their hands close to the hilts of their daggers. This was not a place for rowdy entertainment and mindless brawling. One wrong word in Karre's could mean the end of a life. It was the right place to catch a breather, Haq had said.

Kil had sighed.

Haq stretched the parchment over the tabletop and smoothed the creases with her fingers.

«Here it is,» she said.

Kil glanced at the map.

It was the torn page from some old book. The thought of someone ripping a book apart gave her a rare stab of emotion. Kil picked up her mug to hide her emotion behind it while wetting her lips.

«Filgar is going to pay good gold for this,» Haq said.

Kil put down her drink.

«What?» Haq asked her.

«I dislike him.»

Haq looked around. «Who? Filgar?»

A nod.

The one-eyed thief scoffed. «Like you ever liked anyone.»

«I *strongly* dislike him.»

Haq drained her cup and took a deep breath. «Listen, the guy is paying us enough to get out of this cesspool and back on the road, right?»

Kil responded with the arch of a single eyebrow.

«Don't give me that eyebrow thing,» Haq hissed. «What's bugging you?»

«Why us?»

«Why us, what?»

«For the job. He's got men.»

Haq shrugged. «I guess Filgar's goons are well-known in town, and he needed some new faces for the job.»

«To steal a scrap of paper from a drunk.»

«A drunk with a sharp blade,» Haq replied. She showed the side of her leather corset, where a long cut spoke of how close Azzam's blade had come to her skin.

Kil shook her head. Her hair fell across her face, hiding the right half of it. She and Haq shared a brief one-eyed look.

«What about my winning?»

They both turned slowly.

There was a huge man towering over their table blocking out the light of the oil lamps.

Kil crossed her arms. Haq placed a hand on the map and gently pulled it out of the way. Or tried to...

«My money,» the man said, placing a ham-sized hand over Haq's wrist. His palm was rough and his teeth, when he grinned, had a dangerous hint of sharp fangs.

The room became very quiet.

«This is not the place,» Kil said.

«You know this guy?» asked Hag.

«At the Hangman's,» the elf said. «He bet on you.»

«Five pieces of gold,» the man said, with a dry, threatening tone.

Haq gave the man a bright smile. «Well, stranger, that was mighty kind of you. Let me buy you a drink.» She gestured for one of the serving wenches, who stood still and gave her a dubious look.

The man let go of her wrist, and laughed. «Why not?»

He dropped his bulk on the bench by Kil's side, pushing her further against the wall. Haq could see now his face was a map of ripening bruises, yet his grin was a white flash in what looked a mass of thunderclouds.

«Rough night, uh?» she asked and smiled. She shot a glance at Kil, enjoying the elven woman's discomfort.

The man shrugged. He was wearing a thin tunic, barely holding itself for all the rips and tears. «You should see the other guys,» he said.

#

In the end, Haq would admit that it had been the northerner's uncouth manners and booming laugh which grated on Kil that had most attracted her to befriend Gresskar the Savage. Everything about him irritated Kil. Her contempt dripped from her eyes.

«So, let's say we have a map to a treasure—» she stated.

That comment brought a sudden flash of expression to Kil's half-hidden face. Haq repressed a chuckle.

«Those are half a copper the dozen,» Gresskar said. «In this town, everyone's got a treasure map, a potion or a sister to sell.»

Haq shook her head. «This is the real thing.»

Gresskar snorted. «Sure.»

«Stolen from the Archon of Zamidar's library, fifteen years ago.»

«By you? During school break?»

Haq smirked. The wine was making her cheerful, and for sure the barbarian had a golden tongue. «I'm not as young as I look.» She poured more wine in her cup. «And it wasn't me anyway.»

Kil closed her eyes. «*This. Is. Stupid.*»

The northerner looked at her. «Who is?»

Kil sighed, and spread her hands. «All of this.»

«You said yourself you don't trust—» Haq bit her tongue. «Our client.»

«I don't,» Kil admitted.

«Then let's do it ourselves. We've got the map. We've got the skills. Then, we sell the stuff instead of the map and make quite a larger profit. Three brave souls can do it.»

«My people sez elves don't have souls,» Gresskar said. He shook the cup in his hand, drained the last of his wine, put it down and looked at Kil.

Kil gave him a look so cold and inhuman, it seemed to confirm the statement. «The human or the orc side of the family?» she asked.

He grunted.

«Fine. Then, two brave souls and whatever elves have instead,» Haq conceded. She was enjoying all this enormously, and the idea of richer gains was making her impatient.

«What sort of treasure are we talking about?» Gresskar asked, cautiously. Haq could see he was coming around.

«An emerald the size of a fist—» Haq said.

«Cursed,» Kil said.

«—Inside an old temple filled with riches—»

«Haunted,» the elf interjected.

«—One day's ride from town—»

«A cesspool,» the sorceress added.

«—South, in the hills.»

«Where the goblins dwell.»

«Goblins!» A big grin split Gresskar's bruised features. «This is getting better and better. When do we start?»

«Song of the Universe,» Kil whispered.

Haq arched an eyebrow. «I didn't take you for a religious sort,» she laughed.

Kil shook her head. «We'll need any help we can get.»

Haq's single eye widened. «So. You're coming along?»

The elf's lips curled into something that was not a smile. «Of course.»

#

«I tell you, she is just what we need.»

Haq scratched the back of her neck. Morning had brought a horrid hangover, and the noises and colors of the marketplace were doing nothing to make her feel any better.

«Do you have to shout?»

«I'm not shouting,» Gress said. «But you know we are going to need a healer, out there.»

«I need one right now,» Haq groaned, while squinting in the harsh light of the morning.

There was a young woman, looking around while standing on the corner of the market, looking like she was a castaway on some forlorn beach. Her tunic was a pastel blue and pink. Her hair was done in a neat braid that fell on her shoulder. There was a pile of bundles nicely arranged at her feet.

«She looks like she just fell off the turnip cart,» Haq said.

«She's a healer,» Gress repeated. «Come—»

Haq watched him cross the street. Then, he cast a glance at Kil, that stood impassive in the shadows.

«It was your idea,» the elf said.

Haq sighed, paused to let a yak herder pass by with his beasts, and then followed the barbarian.

«You should do something about those bruises,» the young woman was saying. She was on the plumpish side, and ruddy-cheeked.

«It's nothing,» Gress grinned.

She bent down and rummaged in her bags. «I have something here that should help you.»

«We have a business proposal,» the barbarian said.

The woman looked up at him. «What sort of proposal?»

She caught Haq standing there, gave her a once-over, and smiled. «Hangover cure?»

Haq squared her shoulders. «Sorta.» She smirked, then winced as a pain stabbed in her head.

«You look like a wash rag,» The woman stretched her hand and placed it on Haq's neck. «Here.»

«Hey—!» the thief said, moving back, hand dropping to her knife. Then, «Hey!» she exclaimed. She shook her head, rolled it this side and that. She opened and closed her mouth, inhaling deeply.

«Better?» the healer asked. She handed a small jar to Gress. «Use this, for the bruises.»

Haq stretched her arms over her head. «It's completely gone!»

«Hangovers are easy,» the woman shrugged. «That's the first thing we get learned in the temple—»

«Taught,» Kil said.

«Sorry?»

The woman stared at the elf, that had seemingly appeared out of thin air. Kil looked at her with her pale eyes. «Taught. Not learned.»

Another shrug. «Whatever. We don't have time for those sophistries, in the temple—»

«What temple?» Kil asked.

The woman stood straight in all of her modest stature, and then bowed a little stiffly. «I am Varda Guyin, an adept of the temple of the Three Sisters.»

«The Triad,» Kil said, managing to sound both disinterested and contemptuous at the same time.

«I thought the Sisters took care of childbirth, not hangovers,» Haq said. She was taking deep breaths and looking around, still shocked at the way her headache had dissolved.

«The Three Sisters heal all suffering. Where I come from, hangovers tend to be more frequent than birthing pains.»

«Sounds like an interesting place,» Haq said.

«Sounds like a boring place,» Kil said.

«I am sure there is a connection between hangovers and boredom, yes,» Varda conceded. «But, you were talking about a business—»

Gress had been snuffing suspiciously the contents of the jar. He grunted then said «My party needs a healer.»

«Your party?» Haq asked.

«My name is Haq'avan,» Haq said, «and this is my partner, Zor Kiltei—»

«Kil,» the elf said with a nod.

«We are leaving for the wilderness,» Gress announced, puffing his chest, «in search of treasure.»

«Louder, please,» Kil hissed.

The barbarian ignored her. «And we need a healer.»

«We actually hope not to need one,» Kil said.

«But better safe than sorry,» Haq added hastily, casting a barbed glance at the sorceress.

«That would be wonderful!» Varda exclaimed.

Haq and Kil looked at each other, and then they gave a look at Gress. «You're in?» Haq asked. «Just like that?»

Varda shrugged, and smiled. «Yes,» she said, simply. «When are we leaving?»

Two – Goblins

«This place is like an overgrown graveyard,» Gress said.

«It really is,» Haq said. «A graveyard, I mean.»

Gress kicked the stone with his sandaled foot. He realized that what had appeared to be a moss-covered rock was a chunk of gravestone, wrapped in crawlers. More remains of graves dotted the forest like broken teeth. A few yards away, a gnarled tree grew over a boxlike mausoleum, its roots hugging the pale stone like the tentacles of a sea beast. A road had once gone through the valley, but now it was just a memory of tilted flagstones and yellow grass. Birds called in the distance. The air smelled moist and laden with decay. The barbarian adjusted the strap that held his shield in place on his back, and turned his head around, frowning.

Haq wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was hot, and the thin mist hanging over the undergrowth increased the impression of being beneath the sea. «The temple priests maintained a large necropolis here in this valley, back in the time of Emperor Mòrtian the Wise. They made good money. The priests did. Keeping the dead of the richest families in Dorantia.»

«A stiff business,» Kil said. She had replaced her flowing purple robe with a pant skirt and high boots, and a wide-sleeved jacket. Her hair was in a thick ponytail. Of the whole party, she was the only one that appeared fresh after the day-long march.

«You can say so, yes,» Haq grinned.

«Zur is an ancient god,» Varda said, softly. She was holding their pack mule's harness, and seemed short of breath. She had hitched up the skirts of her dress, and was rubbing a calf where a bug had taken a sampling of her blood.

«The one we all must bow to at least once,» Gress said.

Kil chuckled.

«Some of us, at least,» the barbarian said.

Haq pointed at a faint animal track going up the slope. «Let's try and find a high spot and get our bearings.»

#

The party had reached the summit of a hillock, bare of trees and windswept. In the distance, they could make out the remains of the temple, shrouded in greenery and sunken in the mist that flooded the valley below.

«The night the temple burned,» Haq said, «they saw the flames from the city. Like a strange sun dawning in the south, they said, red light reflected in the clouds. The place burned for days, and the smoke was like a thundercloud hanging over the hills.»

«You tell it like you were there,» Varda said.

Haq smirked. She shuddered, the cool wind making her wet shirt stick to her back. «My grandmother used to tell me the story of the Burning of the Temple of Zur,» she said. «Long time ago, when I was a child. She had heard it from her own grandmother.»

Gress drank some vinegar water from his waterskin, and offered it to Kil. She dismissed it with a flick of her wrist. Varda accepted a drink. The mule watched them with his big quiet eyes, impassive.

«The highborn families had their dead brought to the House of Zur, for the ceremonies to be performed as fit,» Haq said. «The valley was one huge city of the dead, tended by the priests of the Reaper, with soul-candles burning like a cloud of fireflies. It was a peaceful place, or so they say.»

Gress slapped a mosquito on his neck. «And then it all went up in smoke.»

«The riches remain,» Kil said impassively.

«And that's the reason we are here,» Haq nodded.

«You mentioned goblins,» the barbarian said.

«Why, are the mosquitoes not enough?» the one-eyed thief retorted.

«Bloodthirsty pests,» he rumbled.

«I doubt we will meet goblins,» Varda said. «We are very close to the city—»

An arrow hit the ground in front of Gress' feet and quivered.

Haq gave him a wide-eyed look.

«Me and my big mouth—» the barbarian said, pulling his sword from the scabbard and slipping his shield off his shoulder in a smooth and practiced motion.

#

A small war band of half a dozen red goblins burst from the vegetation. They were wearing mismatched pieces of armor and scraps of clothes and animal pelts. They fired a useless volley of arrows and charged uphill, bristling with blades and screeching murder.

«Stupid,» Kil said.

She put her hands together, intertwined her fingers and stretched them, making her joints snap. Then with a flurry she extended a hand and spoke a single word of power.

A bubble of purple fire detached from her fingertips and swirled downhill, engulfing the foremost attacker. The creature stopped, his eyes mad in surprise, his toothy grin stretched in a silent scream. His leather armor blackened and started crumbling into a mist of black ashes, and then the bubble burst with a loud bang and a flash, and the pale bones of the goblin collapsed on the ground. A heavy smell of burnt hair and charred meat rippled onwards.

His companions stopped in terror.

Gress the Savage charged and hit them like a boulder down a mountainside, slamming into their formation, sword whirling. He slammed one of the goblins back with his shield and slashed with his blade, beheading a second assailant.

The tumbling goblin slammed backwards into his companions. They fell in a tangle of arms and legs. One of the creatures struggled to stand, but was hit squarely in the maw by Varda's iron-topped mace. Teeth flew as the goblin went down on his knees. Varda hit him again, on top of its round head. There was a sound like a squashed melon.

One of the goblins rose up. He tried to stab his short spear around Gress' shield. The barbarian parried, pushed the shaft to the side, and ran through the goblin's body with his blade.

The two survivors traded glances and turned on their heels. Kil cast another one of her fire bubbles, and sent it after the running goblins. The goblins and the pursuing flame disappeared into the trees.

Gress placed his foot on the neck of the dead goblin and freed his blade.

«Thanks for the help,» Kil said, looking at Haq.

The thief shrugged. «You were having so much fun... Why spoil it?»

Gress slapped his arm. «These foul buzzing things still prefer my blood to the goblin's.»

«Yours isn't green and sticky,» Haq said.

#

«Is it still far to the temple?» Gress asked.

«We are there,» Kil replied.

The barbarian looked at her. «What?»

The sun was high. They were standing in tall grass. The elf gestured towards a chunk of column wrapped in ivy. «The moat,» she said.

They stopped and took stock of their position.

«Yes,» Haq said. She dug with her heel and underneath a thin layer of soil, she revealed a blue and gold mosaic, an eight-pointed star catching the rays of the sun. «This is the moat that surrounded the temple. A shallow channel. And that over there is one of the pylons of the Bridge of Life that led to the artificial island on which the temple proper sat.»

«It looks like a lawn,» the barbarian said. «And a lot of rocks.»

«The roots cannot dig deep,» Varda said, «so no trees grow here. Only weeds. The moat represented the River of Night, that we all cross twice, once when we are born, and once when we die.»

«And that's the entrance to the temple proper,» Haq said.

A dark cave on a small rise loomed through a shroud of vegetation.

«It looks like a mouth,» Gress said.

«It is,» Kil said.

«The Bridge of Life led the pilgrim past the River of Night, and into the Mouth of Birth,» Varda said.

They stared at her. She shrugged. «They teach us these things,» she said.

Weapons ready, the party started up to the hill towards the opening.

#

The adventurers passed through the mouth-shaped passage into a courtyard where a single great tree grew. It was leaning to one side and its roots stretched over a flight of wide steps. The full foliage cast a dark shadow over the mosaic inlaid floor. As they entered across the courtyard, they started a flight of birds. A second gate led deeper into the complex. A bell house sat at the left of the entrance, its roof shattered, the bell long gone. The main building of the temple loomed ahead, statues and friezes still visible through the vines and leaves.

«Not much left to steal in this place,» Gress said.

«This temple has many secrets,» Haq replied.

The barbarian picked up something from the ground. He showed it to her. A human skull, bone-white, and missing the jaw. «Secrets that kill,» he said.

«Where's the rest of him?» Kil asked.

«Good question,» the barbarian said.

«You afraid?» she asked.

He grunted, shrugged, and casually dropped the skull. «Only fools have no fear.»

Varda nodded. «Good point.»

«Fear is the little death,» Kil said.

«That keeps us from a big one,» Gress replied. «If we are able to listen.»

Haq clapped her hands together. «Nice philosophical discussion, guys, but we are here to do a job. So let's keep our eyes open, our blades handy, and mind where we put our feet.»

«Traps?» Kil asked and raised an eyebrow.

«Not here. But this place's been going to hell for centuries. No need for traps if a wall can just, like, collapse on you.»

«Which way, then?» Gress asked.

Haq placed her hands on her hips and looked around. «We are looking for a staircase down. That way,» she said finally, pointing at the inner gateway.

#

«This place is creepy,» Varda said.

Kil turned her pale eyes on her. «Why?»

They were marching in single file, following a corridor that hopefully led to the main temple. The walls were stained with faintly glowing moss and encrusted with ugly black fungus. Pale tendrils, like a hag's hair, hung down from the vaulted ceiling, forcing Gress to walk hunched. The floor was covered in dirt and shards of pottery interspersed with mushrooms.

Varda glanced over her shoulder, towards the brightly lit gate. «It's too quiet,» she said as she squinted at the light.

The elf nodded. «True» and paused to pull a strip of paper from inside her bag.

Varda eyed her, then she readied her mace.

Haq hastened her pace to join Gress at the front of the line. «We have company,» she said, softly.

He nodded.

Haq turned and gave a knowing look at Kil.

Without slackening the pace, the elf slapped the strip of paper on the wall, and caressed its surface with the tip of two fingers while whispering.

Just then, they heard a scampering of feet and the clicking of metal on metal. Screeching in fury, a mob of goblins poured into

the corridor. A mass of dark shapes with arms and teeth, waving an assortment of cutting implements stood glaring in hatred.

«Stupid,» Kil said.

Just then, a second band of humanoids came running from behind the party, cutting their retreat... Or so the goblins thought.

Gress charged the group to the front. He pushed the goblin's rusty blade aside, and cut through his arm with a powerful chop. The creature screamed and went down, instantly replaced by two more. Haq stopped the slash from one of them on her short blade, and kicked him in the abdomen. Gress smashed his shield in the other's face. Two more pushed forward.

Varda let out a bellow that startled her companions as much as her adversaries and jumped into the thick of the goblin band. Her mace swung this way and that. One goblin went down, another retreated. A third stood poised to strike the cleric from behind just as Haq danced behind the goblin and slipped a span of steel into his kidneys.

«Move it!» Haq shouted.

Kil spun and parried a blow from one of the attackers from the rear. She retreated, keeping her light sword swirling in a smooth yet beautifully deadly pattern in front of her. The creatures squinted and sniffed at her. Their traditional hatred for the elven folk kindled their blood thirst, but the fear of the steel held them still.

Haq was parrying with her short sword and her dirk. A particularly big goblin, wearing a fur cape, carrying a dented shield and wielding a square-bladed butcher's chopper, pushed her against the wall of the corridor.

The leader of this band, she guessed. «Kil!» she shouted.

«Time,» the elf replied.

Varda brained another goblin and turned around, panting and looking for her next enemy. Gress stood by her side, glancing at her warily. The goblins grouped together but kept their distance.

«*Tamasshii*,» Kil said, her voice suddenly echoing in the corridor. It was the Elvish word for “now”.

The strip of paper on the wall burned blinding bright for an instant and then erupted into a purple explosion of flames that engulfed the goblin rearguard. The creatures screamed as the flames filled the corridor. The grey tendrils hanging from the ceiling caught fire and in a moment the violet flames spread, roaring as they rippled across the stones.

Gress cursed, ducked, and covered his head with his shield. He encircled Varda’s waist with his arm and dragged her away from the conflagration. The fur on the shoulders on the big goblin that had cornered Haq caught fire. He screamed and tried to get rid of his cloak. Haq stabbed him in the throat and then fled in the direction her party members had gone.

The three humans and the surviving goblins spilled into an inner courtyard, just as flames and smoke exploded behind them. Gress pushed Varda down and covered her. Haq rolled behind a chunk of masonry, and the humanoids ran away screaming in panic.

When the heat and smoke dissipated, Kil walked slowly out of the tunnel, cleaning her sword with a piece of rag, with slow, elegant moves.

Gress stood, and helped Varda to her feet. She patted her clothes, trying to dust them off. Her hair had come loose during the fight, and fell across her face.

«What the hell was that?» Haq screamed, standing up.

«Fire spell,» Kil gave her a flat look.

Just then, there was a sinister creaking sound and the corridor collapsed in a cloud of brick dust. Embers and black smoke billowed outward.

«Well, they won’t come through there anymore,» Gress said as he looked around.

Haq sheathed her dirk. A lone chunk of rock rolled down the pile of wreckage and she stopped it with her boot. «Unless they scamper over the ruins.»

#

Looking around, they realized they were in a smaller court. The flagstones of the pavement tilted this way and that, like pieces of some giant child's game. The temple proper stared at them with the empty eyes of a colossal face that adorned its facade. Long vine hair framed a perfect oval with high cheekbones and highly arched eyebrows.

«I didn't know the Reaper was an elf,» Gress said, casting a glance at Kil.

«Gods are gods,» she said with a faint shrug.

Varda took a few steps to their right. She was trying to collect her hair back in a bun while holding her hair clip between her lips. «There's another face up there,» she said, as she pushed the clip in place. «Looks human.»

«This is the Tower of Life,» Haq said. She opened her satchel and rummaged in it. «It carries the faces of all living beings, because they all must, you know—» she pulled the map out of the bag, «die and stuff.»

«It is said that the Cutter of the Thread greets us with a face that is familiar to us,» Varda said.

«That really makes the business of croaking a lot different, I guess,» Haq mumbled. She unfolded the map, and the others crowded around her.

«There is a passage inside,» Haq said, pointing at a scratch on the parchment. «It leads down, three levels down. That's where the inner chamber is. And the treasure.»

«The fist-sized emerald,» Gress said as he scratched his chin.

«Among other things,» she replied.

«And you need a map to find it, this passage leading underground,» Gress said. His voice dripped with doubt.

«It's a little more complicated than that,» the one-eyed woman said.

«Let's do this,» he grinned, nodded and gestured for her to lead the way.

Three – Temple

The temple hallway was a forest of columns, stretching as far as the eye could see. Some were cracked, others broken.

The adventurers' steps echoed around the great hall. A thin dusting of rubble fell from the darkness in which the ceiling and the top of the columns was lost.

Gress instinctively pulled his shield over his head.

«This place is falling to pieces,» he said. His voice boomed in the vast emptiness. More pieces of masonry fell in the distance.

Haq gave him a hard look and then turned to squint at her map in the weak light.

She pointed somewhere in the darkness. «In that direction. The staircase down is there.»

They moved slowly through the colonnade, without speaking.

Varda stopped suddenly.

«Look at this!» she said, pointing.

The floor was splattered with a foot-wide stripe of wet silver. It glinted weakly in the half light. Haq knelt down and touched it. She rubbed the substance between her fingertips, and sniffed at it. It was sticky but slimy at the same time.

«Any idea?» she asked over her shoulder. The viscous goo stuck to her fingers.

Kil extended her hand. «That.»

Gress hissed and spat. «Destroyer of Fear,» he said.

A huge, massive snail was coming towards them. Smoothly flowing across the floor with a sickening wet sound. On its back

a large spiral shell, pale ocher and brown and black. Its long body was a light tan color, with a marbled pattern, and the head, had two arm-long stalks, topped by spherical eyes. The eyes moved this way and that, like the hands of someone fumbling in darkness.

«Let's keep away from it,» Varda said. «Snails are slow.»

The creature increased its speed, coming straight at them. It reared up its head, and a square mouth, filled with needle-like teeth, opened and let out a pining sound.

Four tentacle-like feelers snapped in the air around the mouth, probing.

Gress brought his shield up, and approached the beast.

Haq cursed, and pulled out her sword, moving to his side.

The barbarian's first slash bounced off the creature's leathery body, and the man grimaced at the impact.

As Gress retreated one step, Haq lunged forward, and pushed the tip of her dirk into the exposed white flesh underneath the gaping mouth. The blade penetrated to the hilt. The snail lurched back, and Haq let go of the weapon. The creature swayed to and fro, like it was trying without too much conviction to dislodge the blade. It advanced some more, its shell hitting a column and causing a big chunk of stone to fall down and slam on the floor between Haq and Gress.

«Now what?» the barbarian asked.

The giant snail stretched its neck and wrapped its feelers around the edges of the man's shield. The fist-sized eyes peeked above the rim, staring the barbarian in the face.

He tried to keep his balance as the creature pulled back, dragging him along. With a loud gasp, he cut with his sword from left to right, and cut off one of the beast's eye stalks.

The thing let out a loud piping sound, and lurched back, and Gress had to let go of his shield or lose his balance.

The slug tossed the shield away and kept bleating, while the amputated eye stalk started stretching and waving.

«It's growing a new one!» the barbarian exclaimed, in open surprise. More detritus fell from above. Haq danced away, cursing.

With an unholy scream, Varda came in running, her mace gripped in both hands, high above her head, and with half a jump she brought it down between the surviving eye stalk and the regenerating one. The beast's flesh absorbed the hit, deforming itself like clay, and then spat back the weapon. It slumped forward, and it pushed the cleric on the ground. With supreme indifference, it trapped her legs beneath its abdomen, and started rolling over her.

Kil put her hands together and rubbed them, her eyes two burning slits. She uttered a single syllable, and a single tongue of purple flame leapt from her hands, snaked through the air, and hit the advancing slug.

It bellowed in pain, and in a surprisingly swift movement, retreated into its shell. Haq was ready to pull Varda away.

«You fine?» she asked.

The cleric nodded. Gress hurried to recover his mucus-soaked shield.

«Won't be long,» Kil said. She was gazing with unusually open irritation at the giant slug.

«Let's get out of here,» the thief said.

#

«The exit's that way,» Gress said.

«But the staircase down is this way,» Haq replied.

They ran through the columns, trying to ignore the creaks and snaps of the stone around them. The sudden twittering sound behind them put a new spring in their legs.

«Here,» Haq said.

They were in a small clearing in the forest of pillars. Much of the space was occupied by a fallen column, that had smashed and fractured the tiles of the floor.

Haq looked down, then up and around, trying to get her bearings.

«It's coming,» Varda said.

Haq cursed.

Right underneath the fallen pillar, a slab of stone was cracked in two. The two halves had tilted under the weight of the pillar, revealing a dark passageway.

«No way down,» Gress said.

Haq knelt by the crack and peered through. «Mistress of Rooftops,» she cursed.

She glanced at the barbarian, but he shook his head. «The damn thing's too heavy,» he said.

With a high-pitched whine, the giant slug was on them again, its eye stalks turning this way and that, tentacles snapping. The barbarian and the other two women joined Haq, placing the fallen pillar between them and the monster.

«We've got to get out, now,» Varda said.

«Or find a way to kill the slimer,» Gress said.

Haq looked up, over the column. «Or a way to use it,» she whispered to herself. «Stand back,» she said.

«What are you doing?» Varda gasped.

The one-eyed woman jumped on top of the fallen pillar, and unsheathed her sword.

«Crazy,» Kil said. She stepped back from the column.

Gress gave her a questioning look, and the elf shook her head.

Haq leaned forward, and with the tip of her sword she cut at the base of the good eye stalk. The scalpel-sharp blade bit into the creature's leathery flesh, and the eye stalk detached and fell on the floor, squirming.

The slug let out a high, piping howl, and rushed in the direction of its assailant. Haq jumped away just as the massive body slammed into the column. The others shouted and cursed as the chunk of pillar moved under the impact, rolling on the flagstones with a hollow rumble.

The giant snail was pushing out a new set of eye stalks.

Haq eyed her dirk, still sticking into the pallid body.

Behind her, Gress grabbed the edge of the broken flagstone and pulled it up, revealing a downward passage.

«Get in!» Haq shouted.

The barbarian squeezed in the narrow space, followed by Varda.

Kil traded a glance with Haq.

The slug slammed in a nearby column. It rocked. Debris fell from the ceiling. The elf disappeared down the staircase, and the one-eyed thief followed her. The slug let out a screeching wail.

Haq rolled down the steps, protecting her head with her arms, as a thundering crash announced the collapse of part of the ceiling. She finally stopped at the foot of the staircase, in a cloud of dust.

Varda helped her up.

Chunks of rock and rubble cascaded down the steps.

«I hope there's another way out,» Gress said.

Haq coughed, and massaged a knee. They were on a narrow landing. The steps plunged down in the darkness before them.

With a sound like two hands clapping, violet light flared in Kil's hand. They all squinted. The walls were covered in strange designs and thick mossy mats. Something scuttled away on the floor, and disappeared in a crack.

«This can't last long,» the sorceress said. «Get your lamp.»

Haq coughed again, and opened her satchel. She pulled out a small collapsible lantern, and a bottle of oil. She handed them to Varda.

The yellow flame cast a weaker light than the elf's magic fire, and painted deep tremulous shadows on the walls.

«I guess the only way is down,» Gress said, peering in the shadows.

Haq nodded. «Two more ramps of steps.»

Four – Dungeon

«This was what, some kind of storage space?» Gress asked.

He had taken the lead, Varda one step behind him., carrying the lamp.

«Under the temple's main gathering hall?» Haq said. «I doubt it.

They were walking down a corridor, doors on either side at regular intervals, some closed by iron doors, some open.

Varda stopped, and shone her light in one of the rooms. There was a small dais in the middle of the room, and iron stanchions on the walls. «Some kind of mourning chamber,» she said.

Gress was waiting for her. «Mourning chamber?»

She nodded. «This is the place where the final rites were celebrated. The main temple of Zur's cult. People came here from all over the land to have their loved ones blessed. So they would place the bodies in these chambers, for the families and friends to give them their final goodbye. Before they were brought up in the main hall for the ceremony, and then carried outside and buried in the gardens.»

«Which is a good thing,» Haq said.

She was lagging behind. Her limp had accentuated, and she was bathed in sweat.

«How so?» the barbarian asked.

The thief leaned against the wall. «Because there's no way they could carry a dead body down that narrow spiral staircase we

used. There must be another passage somewhere, wide enough for an embalmed body to be brought down here, and up again.»

Varda came closer. «Let me see your leg.»

«It's fine,» Haq said.

The priestess snorted. «I am a healer, remember? That's why you wanted me along.»

«She's right,» Kil said. She was standing in the middle of the corridor, arms outstretched, fingers touching the walls.

«What's it?» Haq asked her.

«Nothing,» the elf said. «Let the healer do her job.»

With a sigh, Haq sat on the floor and pulled her trouser leg up, with a grimace. The knee was bruised, and so swollen it was hard to pull the pants over it.

«You are silly,» Varda said, almost tenderly. She placed the lamp on the floor, creating a pool of golden light. She ran her fingers over the purple-black skin. It was hot, and pulsating. She also noticed the scar along Haq's calf, and the obvious mark of an iron ring around the ankle. Both scars were old and beyond her powers to heal. But she could work on the knee.

She pulled her sleeves up, and rubbed her hands together.

«I don't think—» Haq started.

Varda shushed her. She placed her hands on the damaged knee. Haq gasped, but then rested her head against the wall. «That feels good.»

«It certainly feels better than walking around with a bad leg,» Varda said. She just kept her hands on the injured knee for a few minutes. The others paced around, and peered into the gaping doors.

«Here,» Varda said finally. She stood, and helped Haq up. The knee was no longer swollen, and the bruise had receded to a faint shadow. The trouser leg fell in place without the need to push it.

«I have a salve here somewhere,» the healer said. «When we stop next, I'll give it to you.»

«Thank you,» the one-eyed woman said. She tucked her trouser in her boot.

When she straightened up, Varda was again holding the lamp high. They started along the corridor again.

#

«Well, this is interesting.»

There were iron bars, blocking the corridor. Twelve of them, parallel to the ground, and as thick as a man's wrist.

«Your job,» Kil said.

Haq tapped her knuckle on one of the bars. «No evident opening mechanism,» she said.

Gress grabbed one and tried to pull and push. It did not budge.

«They either slide in the wall to the left or to the right,» Haq said. She placed her satchel on the floor and gestured for Varda to hand her the lamp. She examined where the iron met the stone. «Or they did. This thing's been here forever.» She traced with her fingertips the stains of rust on the wall.

«Which means—?»

She glanced at the barbarian. «That there's a hidden mechanism, and it might not work at all.» She straightened her back, intertwined her fingers, and turned her hands palm out, to stretch them. «Let's see what we have here.»

She walked slowly along the wall, five, six steps the way they had come. She touched the wall lightly, and she came back, scanning the floor.

«What are you looking for?» Varda asked.

«The lock, or the switch,» Haq said. She moved to the other side of the corridor and followed the same routine, first studying the wall, and then the floor as she came back.

«It stands to reason,» she said, slowly, «that whatever commanded the opening of the gate was close at hand for anyone walking down the corridor.»

«Maybe the lever, or what not, is only on the other side,» Gress said.

«I'd rather prefer it to be on this side,» Haq admitted. «But of course we don't always get what we want—»

She stood real close to the bars, and squinted at the corridor on the other side. «And indeed there is a lever over there—» she mumbled.

She stepped back and made a face. «These are the moments one would love to have a ten foot pole ready at hand,» she said.

«The elf,» Gress said.

Kil gave him a look. «I don't do mind over matter,» she said.

«Who cares,» the barbarian said. «You're slim enough to push through the bars and get to the other side.»

«You sure?» she said.

He leered at her. Kil shrugged and approached the bars, measuring the width between them with her extended fingers.

«What's that?» Varda asked.

The others turned to her. «Listen!» she said.

Kil took a step back. «Rats.»

A cloud of fiery red eyes burned in the darkness beyond the iron bars, and the scampering of hundreds of little clawed feet grew in the corridor.

Kil put her hands together and squinted in the darkness, but before her lips could form the words, a seething mass of black

slick bodies crashed against the barrier, vent through and overwhelmed her. She screamed in disgust and fell.

A crawling carpet of rats covered the floor, squeaking and running around. Gress was trying to help Kil up. He shouted, and kicked off one of the vermin that had bit in his ankle. The rat rolled away only to be replaced by two more. The barbarian squashed one under his heel and retreated.

Kil pulled one of the rodents off her shoulder, with a moan of disgust, and then tried again to weave her spell. One of the animals jumped at her from one of the bars, and she hissed and pushed it back, again losing her concentration.

Haq was standing in the middle of the corridor, two daggers in her hands, doing a strange dance in which he kicked and stomped on the rats, and stabbed and killed those that, bolder or more desperate than the others, tried to jump at her.

Gress used his shield to press down on the floor the rodents, all the while retreating.

Varda came forward. A bubble of pale light floated around her, and her hair was teased by an invisible breeze. The rats were giving her a wide berth, crawling over one another to get out of her way.

«Get in there!» she said, pointing at one of the doors in the corridor. She was now by Kil's side, and her aura was rubbing off on the sorceress, keeping the rats at bay.

Kil was shuddering, like in a fever. Varda placed her hand on her shoulder, and she pulled back, gasping. Then the two women looked each other in the eye.

«Out of the corridor!» Varda said.

«Do it.» Kil nodded.

Haq grabbed the barbarian by his arm and pulled him inside one of the small mourning chambers. Once inside, Gress tried to kick the door shut but it didn't budge. Haq pushed him against the wall and joined him. Instinctively, the man pulled up his shield,

covering them as a blinding violet light flared in the corridor, followed by a gust of burning hair and a roaring river of flame. Tongues of blue fire poured into the mourning chamber, carrying the screeches of burning rats and the smell of scorched fur and roasted flesh.

It seemed to last forever, as Haq and Gress huddled behind his shield, the heat brushing their legs. Then it was silence, the dim corridor outside crawling with uncertain shadows.

They came out of their hideaway, and found Varda kneeling by Kil. The sorceress was sitting on the floor, arms hanging limply at her sides, her head bent over a shoulder.

«Is she all right?» Haq asked, joining them.

Gress lagged behind, kicking around the blackened carcasses of the rats. Strands of sickly vegetation were still burning along the walls and the floor, casting an uncertain glow in the corridor.

«She overexerted herself, I think,» Varda said. She too appeared to be fatigued. She wiped the sorceress' brow clean with her sleeve. «She needs to rest.»

«We all do,» Haq said.

She kicked the burned remains of her satchel, on the floor. A toasted rodent rolled out of the blackened leather.

The iron bars still blocked the passage.

#

«I hate the things,» Kil said.

Haq smirked. «We had guessed as much.»

The elf closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. They had lit a small fire with roots and scraps of wood collected in the other chambers. It provided little light, but a certain comfort.

«I've been knowing you for, how long?» Haq asked, without looking at her. She was rummaging through the contents of her bag. A lot of stuff was burned beyond recognition. «It's the first time I see you —» she shrugged, «you know, show some emotion.»

«Really?»

The one-eyed thief turned to Kil. «I'm not saying you don't have emotions,» she said. «Only that you are—»

«Like a wooden plank,» Gress said from the other side of the room.

They had shackled up in one of the mourning chambers. Cracking the lock on the door had been easy, and it was good to have a door between them and whatever was out there while they tried to catch some rest.

Both women stared at the barbarian.

He waved a hand. «A nice plank, of good quality wood,» he said.

«Rat eater,» Kil replied.

Gress had proposed early on they eat the fried rats for dinner, extracting another burst of emotion - disgust, in this case - from the sorceress, and a cutting remark about his orkish blood.

Haq laughed out loud.

Varda moaned softly and stirred. She was fast asleep, curled up on her cloak. She had used her powers to clean the food and water, and that had burned out the last of her energies. She had handed a salve to Haq for her knee, and then had rolled over and fallen asleep, her hands in fists, like a baby.

Haq left the man and the elf at their staring contest, and packed what was still viable in her kit - the silk rope, the lock-picks, the metal mirror. The lantern was burnished but still all right, but all the lamp oil was gone in a single burst of flames that had burned her diary and her writing tools. She had saved the metal nibs and a small pen knife, the handle blackened but the blade still good. She kept her diary in her hands, and the blackened pages dissolved in a cascade of black flakes.

«You carry a spell-book?» Gress asked. «You can read?»

«She read the map, right?» Kil asked, with a smirk. «And she keeps a diary.»

The barbarian's eyes widened. «You can read and write?»

«I'm not just a pretty face,» Haq said. With a sigh, she dropped the charred leather cover on the floor. «But right now I have more urgent problems.»

She stood, and dusted off the bottom of her trousers.

«I'll go check that iron gate,» she said. She picked up a piece of burning wood to use as a makeshift torch. «You two don't kill each other.»

Gress frowned. «Why should I kill her? I like her.»

Kil just gave him a look.

#

There was the burnt carcass of a rat hanging from one of the iron bars. Haq winced and used her dagger to dislodge it. The light of her makeshift torch wasn't enough to see the lever on the other side. She turned. The question remained. Where was the lever on this side?

There had to be one.

She walked down the corridor, careful not to step on the charred remains of the rat horde. She eyed the walls, that Kil's flames had cleaned of all the moss and detritus.

There were bad reliefs etched in the stones. Animals and men and creatures in-between. A frieze of long-necked, long-legged creatures danced over the doors of the mourning chambers.

She stopped. She approached the wall and ran her fingers along a groove in the stones, wide enough for her thumb to go into it. She turned. She could barely see the bars in the dark.

She unsheathed the foot-long dagger she carried at the small of her back, and delicately ran its tip in the groove, up and down, twice, her eye closed.

She dislodged some dirt and the metal made connection with something. She put the flame close to the groove, and looked inside.

Was this it? A wooden lever, snapped off by some accident?

How to work it?

Again she probed the dark recess with her dagger.

There was certainly something there. Slowly, closing her eye again, she explored the thing's shape and position, building a mental image of its shape and position. It could well be the remaining chunk of a broken off lever.

She pushed the dagger beneath it, and tried to push it up.

It was useless.

She would have needed a pair of slim pliers, to grab the thing and maneuver it.

She cursed.

She tried pushing her blade into the broken wood lever. She had to place her hand on the pommel of the dagger, and pushed steadily. The dagger penetrated about three inches, creaking.

She took a deep breath, and tried to push up, grabbing the hilt like it was the lost handle. The mechanism didn't budge. She could imagine decades of dust, dirt, cobwebs and rust blocking the machinery.

She jumped as Gress materialized by her side. He lifted his sword and hit the hilt on the wall repeatedly.

«Try now,» he said.

She tried. The hidden workings gave a little, with a creaking sound. Haq turned to the iron bars. Kil and Varda were staring from the door of the mourning chamber. The cleric had wrapped

a piece of rag around some wood, and fashioned a more efficient torch.

Again Gress hammered the wall. «This could dislodge some of the grime,» he said.

Haq held her breath, and tried again pushed the hilt up. The mechanism gave a long creaking sound, and the dagger moved halfway up the groove.

A rumbling sound echoed in the corridor, the floor shuddering. With painstaking slowness, two of the bars started retreating into the wall.

Haq pushed some more, and felt the wood crack and splinter, and the dagger jumped up, free. The rumbling and the bars stopped. There was now a space wide enough for them to go through.

«Let's make it fast,» she said, sheathing the blade.

As she passed in front of the mourning chamber, Kil handed her the blackened remains of her satchel. She shouldered it, and followed Varda through.

Gress and Kill joined them, moving hastily, eyeing the iron bars with suspicion.

«There should be another passage down,» Haq said. «And we'll be there.»

Five – Goo

«This is interesting,» Kil said.

They had found a spiral staircase and had come to a square chamber. An trembling light bathed the walls and the ceiling, coming from crystals resting in small niches along the walls. Some of them were broken, and some appeared to be dead, but the surviving stones radiated a warm golden luminescence.

The floor of the room was covered by about five inches of murky water.

«I don't like those things,» Gress said, as Varda smothered the flame of the torch.

«Why?» Kil asked. She stretched a hand towards the closest bright crystal.

«I knew a guy,» Gress said. «Found one of those somewhere. Livelier, brighter. He carried it in his pouch, and used it when he—» he cast a glance at Haq. «When he went by his business.»

«Fascinating,» Kil said. She touched the surface of the crystal. The light wavered, and seemed to coalesce under her fingertips.

«Yeah, right. Then he started feeling not so well,» the barbarian went on. «Started losing clumps of hair off his head, and cough blood, and also—» he glanced at Varda. «Anyway, he went to the temple of Mother Fari, him being of the dwarven persuasion, and the priests there tried to set him straight but—» he shook his head. «Destroyer of Fear, was it an ugly thing.»

Varda shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and Kil retreated her hand, rubbing her fingers together. «Did he die?» she asked.

«What? No, of course not. Those short guys are like made of stone. But he was weird for the rest of his life, and of course he lost his beard. Ugly, as I said.»

Kil stared at him, while Varda and Haq tried to suppress a laugh.

«Where did this water come from,» Gress asked.

Haq coughed, trying to keep a straight face. «We are deep under the artificial island that houses the temple. In the old times, they drained the water from the ground and poured it into the moat—»

«The River of Night,» Varda said.

«Whatever. I guess now that the place is abandoned, the drainage is back the way it was before the temple was created, and this is just water pooling along the old natural cracks in the rock.»

«We'd need your dwarven friend,» Kil said. «To tell us.»

Varda chuckled louder.

The sorceress pointed at the door on the other side of the room. «After you,» she said, her dispassionate eyes on the barbarian.

He grunted, and started wading through the dark water.

«Careful where you step,» Haq said. «I'm limp enough for the whole party.»

«Of course,» said Gress. Right then he slipped, stumbled, and fell face first into the water. A thundering oath followed the splash.

«What—?»

Gress stood and stepped back. He pulled a big black writhing thing from his arm, and threw it away, cursing again.

«Leeches!» he said, and jumped back on the steps of the spiral staircase, where the others stared in horror as the previously still water boiled with a mass of bloodsucking slugs.

Varda checked Gress' arm, and made a face.

«It's not good pulling the things off like that,» she said. He replied with an obscenity.

«They drink a spoonful of your blood, and then they let go,» she said, shaking her head. She produced some linen bandages from her bag, and proceeded to wrap the arm. «But if you pull them out forcibly, you'll keep bleeding.»

«It's something in their mouth,» Haq nodded. «Assassins often smear the blades of their daggers with the juices extracted from leeches. This way they cuts bleed longer.»

«Filthy creatures,» the barbarian spat.

Kil sighed. «Step back, rat eater,» she said. «You like boiled leeches?»

«No!» Varda said. «They are not bad creatures.»

Kil arched an eyebrow.

Varda knelt down by the edge of the water, closed her eyes, and started whispering a prayer.

Kil gave a look at Haq, that shrugged.

The water boiled for a moment, and then it was still.

«We can go in,» Varda said. And she walked into the water. She stopped in the middle of the room, and turned to the rest of the band. «Are you coming?»

They traded glances and followed her.

«What do leeches have that goblins and giant snails have not?» Gress mumbled.

Haq answered with a shrug.

#

They sloshed through a short corridor, in the uneven light of the glowing crystals, and came to another room.

As Varda stepped in, she felt the floor give under her feet, and gave a brief shout, floundering. Gress grabbed her from the neck of her tunic and pulled her back.

«Tilting floor,» Haq said. She stretched a hand and Varda frowned. «Your staff,» the thief said.

She took the staff and used it to push the chamber's floor down. It moved down about five inches, then she could not push it any further. «The most stupid trap in the world,» she said. She handed the staff back to Varda. «Your weight causes the floor to tilt, and you fall in the pit below.»

«Where spikes await,» Kil said.

«Or you just drown, in this case,» Haq said.

«Now what?» Gress said.

Haq handed her satchel to Kil. «My bet is, the mechanism is so rusty, the thing can't tilt all the way.»

«What if you lose your bet?» the barbarian asked.

«She dies,» Kil said.

Haq gave her a full-toothed grin, and pulled two daggers from her boots. «Don't be so emotional,» she winked.

She stood on the doorstep for a moment, and then slowly placed her foot on the chamber's floor. The floor tilted, water coming up to her calf, but then it stopped.

She turned, cast a glance over her shoulder at her companions, and took a second step.

There was a hollow creaking sound, and the floor tilted another inch or two. Varda gasped.

The floor stopped. Haq stood with water up to her knees. She took a deep breath. «See?» she said, turning her head.

With a metal groan the floor fell off from under her feet, and she splashed in the dark water below.

#

Haq broke out through the surface spluttering and cursing by the Fifteen Gods of Enotria, in a random order. Gress stretched his hand and grabbed her by the wet hair, and pulled her out of the

pit. She knelt in the low water of the corridor. She was soaked through, smeared in some oily black goo, and her leg was bleeding.

«You and your bets,» Kil said.

Varda took a look at the gash in the thief's leg, and grimaced. «We need a dry place where I can dress the wound,» she said.

«There were iron spikes,» Haq admitted.

«You'll get a fever,» Gress said. «I knew a guy—»

«How do we cross?» Kil asked.

The floor was stuck in its open position, the farther end almost scratching the ceiling, the closer end sunken in the dark pool.

«I guess the mechanism is rusty,» Gress said. «You were right. Sorta.»

«How do we cross?» the elf asked again.

«We need to clean that wound, and quickly,» Varda said.

«You risked an inglorious death,» Gress observed. «That is not smart.»

Then they all fell silent, watching each other, as a sound of something heavy echoed in the corridor, and with a nerve-racking creak, the floor fell back in place.

Haq waved at them from the other end of the room. Then she shouted.

The bleeding one-eyed woman in front of them let out a howl and jumped up, closing her long-taloned fingers around Kil's neck.

The sorceress pushed her arms inside her attacker's grasp, trying to break it.

The real Haq ran back across the room

Varda's mace slammed into the head of the false Haq. The cranium collapsed, the neck bending at a weird angle, but the thing kept squeezing Kil's neck. Her arms wobbled and bent like wet clay. The sorceress planted her foot in the creature's abdomen, and the boot sunk in with a wet sound.

«We need fire!» Haq shouted.

But she was close now, and used her dagger. The blade went through the monster's flesh like it was butter, but it did not cause any visible damage.

Kil closer her eyes.

The monster loosened its grip.

Kil's eyes flared open just as she burst into a column of fire.

The creature let out a gurgling sound, its head dangling, loose and deformed, over its shoulder, and it let her go, pushing her back.

Her foot still halfway trapped, Kil fell back on the flooded corridor, her flames crackling, the water boiling.

Gress and Haq kept stabbing the creature.

It bellowed another of its colossal burps, and then in front of their eyes it melted like a tallow candle. They jumped as it flowed around their ankles, swam into the room, and seeped into the crack between the false floor and the walls.

A stream of elven obscenities sounded in the corridor as Kil stood, dripping, panting.

She pointed a finger at Haq. ««You and your Latecomer-cursed bets!»»

A sad wisp of smoke rose from the tip of her finger.

Haq was leaning against the wall. Her leg was bleeding.

«Shapeshifter demon,» Gress said, and spat. «You were right when you said this place is cursed.»

«And I was right when I said I have to dress that wound,» Varda said.

«There are spiked in the pit. Rusty,» the thief said. She shuddered. «I came out on the other side. Found a lever—»

She touched her eye-patch, and then ran a hand over her face. «They are not demons anyway,» she added. «Not that it makes them any more likeable.»

«You need to lie down and get dry,» Varda said. She eyed Kil. «You too.»

Gres nodded. «As I was saying before we were interrupted, you don't want to get a fever. I knew a guy—»

The one-eyed woman managed to laugh. «Another of your dwarven mates?»

Kil wrung the water from her hair, and shook her head.

#

There had been statues in niches along the corridor, but they were long gone. The adventurers occupied two of the empty recesses, facing each other, about two feet above the submerged floor. Varda and Haq on one side, Kil and Gress, uneasily, on the other.

In the dim light, the thief and the sorceress shed their wet clothes, and Varda examined Haq's wound. She shook her head and snorted.

«You will get another scar,» she said. From her bag, she took bandages and jars.

«Might improve my looks,» Haq replied.

Varda snorted again.

«You're lucky this place is warm,» Gress said, glancing at Kil, huddled in a corner, her arms wrapped around her knees.

She gave him a sideways glance.

«Have you ever wondered why as you go deep into the earth, the air becomes warmer?» the barbarian asked, to no one in particular.

«Going down,» Haq said through gritted teeth, «you get closer to hell.»

«My people's hell is a frigid wasteland of perennial ice,» Gress said. «In which long-tusked, woolly demons roam.»

«Fascinating,» Kil said, and yawned.

«Such is the way the world was made,» Varda replied, without taking her eyes from the wound, her hands working rapidly as she bandaged the other woman's leg. «The deeper you delve, the hotter it gets.»

«But why?» Gress asked. «Why was it made so, and not differently.»

«Who knows the mind of the gods?» the cleric replied.

«You should,» Kil said. «Isn't that your job?»

Varda sighed, patted Haq's leg and nodded.

«That's not so easy,» she said then, sitting back. «It is not like—like you make friends with the gods, and they tell you about their secrets, what they ate for lunch, or what's their favorite puppy. For instance, we that serve the Three Sisters—»

«I was joking,» Kil said.

There was a long moment of silence.

Then Haq started chuckling. «Frigging philosophers.»

#

«This is criminal,» Kil said.

They were in what had once been a library, and now was a nightmare of creepers and vines and mouldy remains of scrolls. The walls were lined with beehive-like enclosures, where the scrolls, thin bamboo laths held together by silk chord, had been kept. Now all that remained was an ugly detritus on which rats and other dwellers of the underground had fed.

«Such a loss,» the sorceress said.

The roots of some mighty tree had broken through the ceiling, and formed a tangle in the center of the room. The broken remains of tables and chairs littered the floor, emerging like shipwrecks in the still water. Waning light crystals sat in small niches in the walls.

They rummaged briefly through the wreckage.

«Back to the junction,» Haq said.

Kil gave one last look at the crumbled books, and followed them. They walked back to the junction from which they had come, and took the other corridor.

Here the statues had not been removed, and soon they came to a tall marble warrior, his sword on his neck broken, laying across the passage, its feet still in the recess where it had once stood, the shoulders and a broken arm pushing against the opposite wall.

The body was stained with moss, and badly chipped.

Gress ran his fingers on the stone surface. «Somebody used this as a barrier of sorts,» he said.

It didn't do them much good,» Haq said in turn, pointing.

In the statue's niche sat the pale skeleton of a man. The bones in the legs were shattered, and the upper body was stuck to the wall by a shroud of cobwebs and a length of rusty metal. The rags on the remains had faded to the point that it was impossible to tell their color.

«It was long ago.» Gress picked up the statue's head from the water. «He was attacked and used the statue as a defense.»

«It was long ago,» Haq agreed, «but that's no reason to be careless.»

«No more bets?» Kil asked.

«A girl needs some fun,» the thief replied. She ducked under the statue, and waited for the others to join her.

#

Further down, they found two other bodies. Both were nailed to the other side of the door at the end of the corridor. Arrows held the bodies in place.

Haq cursed.

«This is heavy,» Varda said as she moved the door.

«This is wasteful,» Kil said.

«What do you mean?»

«Why didn't they recover their arrows?» Gress replied. The sorceress nodded.

«There's almost a full quiver-worth of arrows here,» the barbarian said. He grabbed one of the shafts and pulled it off. The skeleton rattled and its head fell on the floor, causing a splash.

«Good arrows,» Gress said, testing the tip with his thumb. «Iron heads. Expensive. You don't leave behind—» he counted «—seven perfectly good arrows.»

«Unless you're in a hurry,» Haq said. «Can you tell the make?»

The barbarian shook his head. «Not goblins.»

They left the door ajar and marched on. The corridor climbed gently, and it was good to finally have their feet on dry ground.

At the top of the ramp, the corridor widened. On the right, a vertical chimney let in a single shaft of early daylight. Haq walked in, stretched her arms, measuring the empty space. She looked up at the shard of sky above her, framed by overhanging tree branches. «Here's where the water comes in,» she said.

She pulled some vines off the wall, and revealed a rusty iron rail. «And this is where the bodies were brought in for preparation,» she said, «and our way out.»

Six – Gate

There was one final reminder of those that had preceded them in those corridors. Piled against a double iron door were a small mass of mixed bones. Pragmatically, Kil counted the skulls, and came to the conclusion they had been seven.

«Two of them from my race,» she said.

There was no sign left by weapons on the bones. The bones still wore fragile rags and chunks of rusty armor, their weapons still in their sheaths.

«Help me move them,» Haq said.

Varda gave her a horrified look. «Can't we just—?»

«What?» Haq asked, «go the other way around and use the back door? Oh, sorry, I was forgetting, there is no back door.»

She kept casting glances at the shadows in the corridor. Whatever had killed the seven men, could still be around.

Her jaw set, Haq started pushing with her feet at the remains. Gress grunted, bodily moved her aside. With a sound halfway between a grunt and an oath, he picked up the carcasses and threw them behind them. A thick cloud of dust and cobwebs rose up in the corridor. They coughed, cursed and retreated, giving the cloud time to subside. While they waited, they shared a skin of water, to clean their mouths and throats.

When the dust settled, they went back in.

The door was caked in grime and rust. It was twice the height of Gress and wide as his outstretched arms. The two halves of the gate were so closely sealed that not a breath of air could escape. Haq used her dagger to scrape away the covering dirt, and

exposed five dial-like mechanisms, two on the left half of the door and three on the right.

«And now comes the hard part,» she said, putting her blade back and extracting the map.

Gress looked over her shoulder.

The parchment was damaged and blurred after being soaked, but remained readable. «Does it say how we open it?»

Haq made a face. «This map—it is not a map, it is more like part of a riddle. The other part being—» she pointed at the door.

Each dial on the door carried five symbols. By turning a flat key, it was possible to move a pointer so that it marked one of the five signs.

«Anyone got any idea about what this means?» the barbarian asked.

Varda and Kil drew close, trying not to cast their shadows over the devices.

«This one is the symbol we use for birth,» the cleric said, pointing at one glyph. «It's very ancient.»

«What does the map say?»

Haq snorted. «Enter the domain of Zur, where beginning and end are one, and the same silence awaits both emperor and clown.»

«The sign for birth is the same as beginning,» Varda said.

«So you think,» Gress said, «the signs might mean, I dunno, beginning, end, silence, emperor and clown, and that's the sequence that opens the door?»

«This one looks like a crown,» Haq said, tapping the door. «Might mean the emperor.»

«That's Orgil in Elvish,» Kil said. «And it means mountain peak.»

Haq eyed her. «Well, thank you.»

«These are all Elvish ideograms,» the sorceress said. «Orgil, the mountain peak; Yamaa, the goat; Zoogch, the stick; Tsang, the sundial and Luuvan, the carrot.»

«You are pulling my leg,» Haq said.

Kil arched an eyebrow. Haq cursed.

#

«There's another way, of course,» Haq said.

She rapped her knuckle on the iron door.

«Cracking it,» Kil said.

«Yes. Who cares for the resolution of the riddle? I can simply lock-pick the mechanism.»

«What if the wrong sequence triggers something bad?» Varda asked.

Haq arched her eyebrows. «How bad?»

«Bad as in there were seven dead men piled in front of the door,» Gress said.

«They have a point,» Kil admitted.

«They do,» Haq said. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. «But it's a little like rolling five dice, and hoping to get a perfect sequence.»

«Impossible,» Kil nodded.

«Spoilsport.»

#

«The question is, why should they use Elvish ideograms?» Haq asked.

Gress crossed his arms. «Because nobody else could read them?»

«Yes,» the thief said, «but they are just squiggles—»

Kil scoffed.

«No offence intended, of course.»

«They are also sounds,» Varda said.

Haq turned sharply towards the cleric. «What?»

The short woman took one step back. «I mean, they are not just squiggles, they represent a concept. The stick, the carrot and all the rest—»

«No, you said sounds.»

Varda shrugged. «Well, yeah. Kil said them words aloud, but I can't remember them.»

Haq looked at Kil. «Say them again.»

«Orgil, Yamaa, Zoogch, Tsang, Luuvan.»

«Turn them around!»

Kil frowned.

«Say them in the inverse order,» Haq said, her one eye open wide.

«Luuvan, Tsang, Zoogch, Yamaa, Orgil.»

«Again,» Haq said. She pointed at Varda. «And you listen carefully!»

Varda and Kil traded a glance. The elf repeated her words, pronouncing clearly every syllable. Then Varda swallowed, took a deep breath and «Lyuvian, Tseng, Zigoch, Yamaha, Owrgil.»

«Again!» Haq said, a wild grin on her face.

Varda duly repeated the mangled words, while Kil cringed.

Haq turned her eyes on them all. «Well, isn't it great?»

«You hit your head when you fell in that trap—» the barbarian said.

«No, she's right,» Kil said. She gestured at Varda. «Mangle my people's language once more, slowly.»

Varda gave them a scared rabbit look, and then repeated the words slowly.

«It's ancient Dorantian,» Haq said.

«Really?» the cleric asked, eyes a-goggle.

«No, it's not,» Kil said.

«But it sounds like it,» the one-eyed thief insisted.

«Joining of extremes, emperor and jester unspeaking,» the sorceress said slowly.

«It can't be a coincidence,» Haq said. She turned to the door, her hands on her hips. «Now we just need to find out the sequence of the dials. Left, right? Top, bottom?»

Gress lifted his arms and sighed a curse.

#

Gress was the first to hear it coming.

«We've got company,» he said, pulling his sword.

The others turned from where they had been debating which dial was to be set first.

It was like the shadow at the end of the corridor was expanding, slowly flowing towards them. A thick smell of swamp filled the air, accompanied by a sickening wet sound.

«What in the Seven Hells—?» the barbarian whispered.

Haq nodded at Kil. «Buy me some time.»

The sorceress joined the barbarian and squinted at the advancing darkness.

«It's your old friend from the pit, Haq,» she said.

The liquid creature was smeared across the floor and the walls, and it dripped from the ceiling as it advanced. Faces floated on

its black dull surface, vaguely outlined features, men and women, their mouths agape, black-on-black eyes wide open.

Haq punched the door.

Think, she said to herself. Think.

Two on one side, top and bottom, three on the other, halfway in between, and a division between them.

She thought about the river of night, that is passed twice, at birth and in death, and the three ages of man. It was a gamble.

Kil turned to Gress. «Come closer,» she said.

The barbarian frowned, but did as she said.

She ran her long fingers down his sword, and the blade caught fire, violet flames crackling. «It won't last long,» she said. «Use it to cover me.» Then she stepped towards the protoplasmatic horror, with a tight grin curled on her pale lips.

«Is life an ascent from birth to death, or is it a descent?» Haq whispered.

Varda stared at her. «What?» Behind them, violet light flashed, and an ear-piercing screech echoed in the corridor. The stench of decay was overwhelming.

Haq repeated her question, louder and hurriedly.

Varda stuttered. «Life is always moving upward—» she said, repeating one of the precepts of her religion.

«Fine!»

Haq started turning the dials, from top to bottom.

Meanwhile, Kil's fire blasts stopped the creature's advance. Gress stood behind her, hacking and slashing at tendrils of liquid darkness as they tried to close on them from every side. Foul smoke rose from the places where the walls and the ceiling had been scorched clean.

The last dial snapped into position. The door shuddered for two heartbeats. Then the dials moved back to their original position. Nothing happened.

Haq cursed.

«What's that?» Varda asked.

Slots had opened in the walls at both sides of the passage. Haq cursed again, kicked the door, then went back to handling the dials. «Gas!» she gasped.

A strand of mucous black substance wrapped itself around Gress' wrist. He tried to maneuver the flaming blade and slash at it, but another ensnared his legs and pulled him to the ground. His flesh burned where the creature gripped him.

Varda ripped her sleeve off and used it to stuff one of the slots. A persistent hissing sound came from the other. She turned, and ripped off her other sleeve too.

Kil shouted a single word, that sounded like the peal of a bell, and a wall of flames pushed into the corridor, driving the fluid creature back. The flames brushed by Gress, and a strand of his hair caught fire. He cursed. The thing let him go. He smothered the flame.

With a resounding clang, the door behind them opened.

«Get in!» Haq shouted.

The sorceress helped the barbarian up and ran past the doorstep and into a brightly lit chamber. She staggered and fell, rolling on the ground in a tangle of arms and legs with Gress. The barbarian's blade clattered on the floor and the violet flame died out. Haq and Varda pushed the doors closed again. A tentacle-like strand of black goo was caught in the doors. It dropped on the floor, writhed for a few moments, and then dried up and turned into a dark stain.

Haq leaned panting with her back against the door, and slowly slid down to the floor.

Varda stared at her. «It was the other way around,» she said.

Haq nodded. «All life descends in death.» She looked at the other two. «You all right?»

Gress was massaging his wrist. «I got frostbite,» he said. «Weird, uh?»

Kil just nodded, then pushed herself up.

«I always wonder,» Gress said, while Varda took a look at his injured wrist, «who does the maintenance in these places.»

Kil turned to him. «Meaning?»

«That was a poison gas trap out there, right?» the barbarian said. He grimaced, a sharp intake of breath, as Varda pushed her finger against his skin.

«Yes,» Haq replied. «I tried the wrong sequence, and—»

«How long has this place been abandoned?» he asked her. «Centuries, right? And the guys we found piled against the door, they were probably killed off when they triggered the trap, right? So who filled up the poison gas again afterwards?»

«You have more urgent problems,» Varda said.

He looked at her. «What?»

«It's spreading,» she said. «I can't stop it with a blessing, and the taint is spreading.»

Gress looked at the bruise around his wrist. The patch of damaged skin was growing larger. He moved his fingers and cursed.

«I can try and slow it down, but we need to get out of here fast. I think I can find some herbs and other things out there in the woods, but here—»

Haq stared Gress in the eye for a moment, and then nodded. «Let's make it fast, then.»

Seven – The Heart of the Lizard

The domed room was no less than thirty steps across. It was bathed in the weak amber light from light crystals set along the circular wall. Around a central dais, eight marble tables formed the arms of a star. There were bodies on five of the tables, wrapped in shrouds. Closets and chests lined the walls. A mosaic was painted on the floor in a complex pattern of interlocking rings.

«Morbid,» Kil said, sniffing at one of the bodies.

«This was the embalming chamber,» Haq said, checking her map.

«This is the place where we should be?» Gress asked. A grim Varda was holding his wrist, trying to slow down the expanding bruise and frost burn.

«Yes,» Haq said. «They prepared the bodies; then, they carried them along the corridors to the Mourning Chambers.»

She stepped up on the dais and looked around. «The head priest stood here, and instructed his minions, working on the bodies.»

«And they kept their riches in the embalming room?» Gress asked.

«Morbid,» Kil replied.

Haq kicked at the marble under her foot twice, and then stepped back. With a rumble, a hatch opened in the dais, and up came a plinth. The room was suddenly bathed in a bright green light, as the crystals along the walls changed color. Varda gasped, Gress cursed, Kil's eyes widened.

On top of the plinth sat an emerald as clear as water, multifaceted and the size of a grapefruit.

«Behold the Heart of the Lizard, the fabled gem!» Haq said, leaning closer to stare into the depths of the stone. «Brought here in times immemorial from the southern wilderness where the lizardmen rule. One of the most fabled jewels in the Dorantian legends. Thought lost when the raiders set the temple on fire, but in fact--» she clicked her tongue, «it's been sitting here waiting for us all these years. And isn't it a beauty?»

She smiled and stretched her hand to take it.

«Hold it,» Gress said.

«What?» she asked, without turning her eyes from the stone.

«I mean,» Gress said, freeing his arm from Varda's hold. «This is not one of those situations in which you pick the jewel, and the whole temple crashes down on our head, right? Because I knew a guy—»

Haq snorted and picked up the stone, hefting it in her hand.

«See?» she said, turning. «No crashing down.»

The barbarian grinned. «Then let's get out of here before—»

Kil shouted. In front of her, the body on the table had sat up. So did the other four.

The dead ripped off their shrouds and stood on creaking legs. Their leather-like skin, almost black in the green light, split at the joints as they moved forward. Exposed white bones creaked. The dead advanced; two towards Kil; the others spread, going for the rest of the party.

«I'd rather had the temple fall on us,» Gress groaned.

He slashed at his opponent. Too slow to dodge, the corpse lifted an arm to protect his head, just like a living man would. The blade sheared through the arm, just below the elbow. The dead man was driven back, staring at Gress with marble-like eyes. His hand advanced and grasped the barbarian's ankle. Gress cursed.

«At least they are not armed,» Haq said with a smile while stabbing her opponent in the chest and kicking it backwards.

Kil drew her thin blade and prodded at her two assailants.

There was an unholy bellow, as the corpse attacking Varda collapsed into a pile of ashes.

With a crash, the doors slammed open. A horde of dead, all bones and rusted armor, moving mechanically and drawing their weapons marched into the chamber.

«These are armed,» Gress said. He kicked the severed hand off his leg, and turned to engage the skeletons.

Kil's thin blade was stuck between the ribs of one of her attackers, and she let it go as the body stumbled and fell back. She turned briefly to Haq. «Put it back!»

The one-eyed thief shouldered one of the dead out of her way and jumped over one of the tables. She leaped on top of the dais just avoiding a blow from a rusty axe that rang on the stone like a broken bell.

She took the emerald and placed it back in its cradle. She turned, kicked the axeman skeleton in the head, sending its helmet rolling on the floor. She pressed again the push-plate. With a low rumble, the plinth supporting the emerald started descending.

Haq again dodged the axe by rolling across the floor.

Meanwhile, Varda was keeping a skeleton at bay by whispering a dirge-like prayer and shaking a rosary in its face. Another dead body tried to grasp her. She placed her hand on its forehead and it burned like paper.

Gress took a hit on the shield and shook his head. He was panting. His eyesight was swimming. The blackening hand was pulsating. The two skeletons in front of him pushed him back. He faltered and lost his grip on his sword.

Haq parried another axe blow, using her short sword and a dagger, crossed. Then she cursed as she noticed the plinth had

stopped halfway down. The rumble had been replaced by a clanging sound of broken machinery. She ran back to the dais.

The armor on Gress' skeletons crashed to the ground in a rain of disparate pieces, as their blades simultaneously shattered like glass. The barbarian looked up and saw Kil giving him a nod. He nodded back and he slammed into the naked skeletons, smashing them with his shield and his momentum.

Haq's leg was hurting. She gritted her teeth and jumped up on the dais, did a somersault and landed standing on the plinth. Her sudden extra weight caused it to move about an inch. The sound of broken machinery stopped and the plinth froze in its place. The emerald remained still exposed.

Haq looked back. Varda staggered. Kil put an arm around her waist and held her up. Gress stood in front of them, holding his shield in both hands and using it to clobber the assailants.

The thief picked up the gem, turned on her heels, and as she pushed the stone inside her shirt. Then, she took a giant leap, landing square on the shoulders of the axe skeleton, vaulting into the air, and landing badly. She grimaced, cursed, rolled on the floor, shouted «Let's get out!» and dashed for the doors. The others followed her.

#

They burst into the corridor, the undead staggering behind them.

«Kil!» Haq shouted.

The sorceress created one of her flame walls and pushed it into the corridor. The black goo shapeshifter creature retreated from the heat and they ran on the cleared pavement. Gress' shield was held over their heads to protect them from the darkness dripping from the ceiling.

The dead marched into the black fluid and were engulfed.

«They're gone!» Varda gasped.

«Keep running,» Kil hissed.

They reached the junction, tarrying only for a moment of breath, and then ran towards the shaft that led to the surface and safety.

They stumbled into the chimney-like passage, blinking in the daylight. The top seemed to be a lifetime away. «I can't make it,» Varda said.

«What do you mean?» Haq said, as she was shedding any unnecessary equipment. By her side, Gress had cast off his dented shield and was testing the vines on the wall. Kil had pulled off her boots, and tied them around her neck.

«I can't climb,» Varda said. «My people—we're plainsmen.»

«I'll give you a crash course in climbing,» Haq said.

Kil opened Haq's satchel and took the silk rope. Then she snorted and started climbing up the vines. She seemed to flow up the greenery, her hands and feet finding holds with ease.

«What sort of course?» Varda asked, squinting suspiciously.

«That sort,» Haq pointed with her thumb behind her back.

Along the corridor, a dark mass advanced, armed and armored skeletons that had been given new flesh by globs of black matter. The horde stared at them with sinister green glows in their eye sockets and advanced with renewed vigor.

Varda turned. She was alone. She gasped, and looked up. Haq was hanging six feet up the wall, holding on to the rusty rail. She stretched a hand. «Come on,» she said.

The cleric took her hand, and the thief helped her up. She tried a foothold, slipped, fell, Haq groaned. Gress grabbed Varda's other arm and helped her up. They started inching upwards, Kil by now already halfway up.

«Keep going,» Haq said, her voice broken.

Her leg was giving her a stab every time she leaned on it. Varda's weight was about to tear her arm out of its socket. The priestess held on for dear life to Gress' black and purple hand. He grimaced without complaint. Kil was close to the top. She hung by a hand, her legs dangling in the void, and looked down at them with a faint smile on her lips.

Another foot up. The rusty rail was cutting in Haq's fingers, and the vines were wobbly and menaced to let go at any moment.

Kil's smile vanished.

«Hurry!» she said.

Haq closed her eye. Don't look down, she said to herself. Do not look down. Varga screamed.

Haq looked down. The undead had started climbing. Slow but unstoppable. She increased her speed.

Haq and Gress advanced like some strange contraption. Haq would go up one foot while Gress carried most of Varda's weight; then, she would stop, anchor herself as best as she could, and pull Varda's weight while the barbarian crawled upwards.

The rustling of leaves and the clatter of the bones below them drew closer.

Finally, Kil vaulted over the edge and disappeared. In five heartbeats, she tossed the silk rope down to them. They tied into the rope. Climbing became easier as she assisted the ascent.

«Keep going and don't look down,» Haq commanded, with what little breath she could manage to squeeze out of her lungs.

Just then, a hand closed on her ankle!

She looked down into unblinking green eyes and kicked. Once, twice. The monster would not let go. She was suddenly relieved of Varda's burden. Grasping the rail with both hands, she kicked harder, her legs sending blue shocks up her spine. Finally the skull snapped off the neck, and it fell, still attached to the rest of

the carcass by a long tendril of dark fluid. Yet, still the thing did not let go.

Above her, Gress pushed Varda up over the edge, and then she and Kil helped him up.

With a curse, Haq twisted and turned until she was able to slip out of her soft boot. The undead finally fell back, clutching the boot, silent until a crash announced it reached the bottom.

Another skeleton replaced him, but the thief was already scampering safely up the wall. She rolled on the grass, in the shade of the trees, and gasped for breath. On all fours, her head hanging down, she tried to whip a last ounce of energy into her aching limbs.

She frowned.

That was when she noticed a pair of boots.

She had never seen those boots before.

Or had she?

A horse neighed nearby.

Eight – Filgar

«Well, now the party is complete,» the man with the shiny boots said, crossing his arms.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, not as massive as Gress, but more menacing, and more obviously orkish. The dozen goons brandishing weapons behind him made him even more menacing. His head was shaved bald and he had wide bovine eyes that betrayed a nasty temperament. His mouth was slit by a cruel smirk.

«Filgar,» Haq puffed. She stood, slowly, keeping her arms away from her body.

«One-eyed Haq'avan,» he said genially. He gave a look to Kil, who stood by Gress and Varda. Three men were covering them with their crossbows. «And her girlfriend, Flaming Zor Kiltei.» His voice dripped with poisoned honey.

Filgar's grin widened into a leer, tusks glinting. «And two new friends.» He pointed at the barbarian's hand. «You better get that looked at by a sawbones, boy, or you'll lose it.»

Gress scowled and kept massaging his wrist.

Haq snorted. «You shouldn't have bothered—»

«You have something that belongs to me,» Filgar said. All his glee and nicety vanished.

Haq shook her head. She pulled up a leg and tore her remaining boot off. A man with a crossbow brought up his weapon. She laughed and threw the boot into the pit. The crossbowman smiled and relaxed.

Then she moved.

She slipped by Filgar's side, shouldering him out of the way. She was inside the crossbow man's guard. She slammed her elbow in his throat, took the crossbow from his hand, turned, and shot a quarrel square in the chest of the first undead out of the pit. The steel tip smacked in the monster's sternum. The creature stretched its arms to keep its balance, and fell back.

The men shouted.

«Lamp oil?» Haq asked.

Filgar was staring at her, wide eyed. He gestured. One of the men came forward, with a large flask of oil in his hands.

Haq stepped to the edge of the pit and poured the liquid down. «Come bless my flame, priestess,» she said.

Varda joined Haq and pulled a small tinderbox from the folds of her ragged dress. She cast a few sparks, while she chanted a dirge in a flowing, musical language. All the while, two men kept their weapons on her.

Flames crackled in the pit as the vines ignited. There was a sound of metal tumbling down the shaft and the piercing screech of the black gooey thing as it fled the flames.

Varda sighed and sat on the ground, exhausted.

Haq crossed her arms. Her pale hair had escaped her pony tail and fell on her shoulders in a disordered bundle, caked with grime and sweat. She swept them back, casually.

«Sorry I kept you waiting,» she said to Filgar. «You were saying?»

He dusted off his clothes.

«Always the same cheeky harlot,» he grinned. «What was that thing?»

She shrugged. «A thing. The sort that doesn't like fire.»

«You have something that belongs to me.»

«Really? And what might that be?»

Filgar snorted. He gave his men a knowing look, and they chuckled. «A map,» he said.

«Yours?» Haq smirked. «You mean Azzam the Lame's map I stole?»

«You stole it on my behalf.»

«But you never paid me.»

«Because you never brought it to me.»

«I can give it to you now, but it would be useless.»

She pulled the green stone out of her shirt, and held it up. «It's this you are after, not the map.»

Filgar's eyes filled with greed. «You damned—»

Haq stretched her arm over the pit. The emerald cast a greenish light on the smoke rising from below. «You should be more respectful,» she said.

«Don't be stupid,» Filgar said. He took a step forward.

«I'm about to be dead, stupid is better than dead. You kill me, the bauble drops down and shatters—»

«You don't value your friends,» the man grinned.

«I have no friends. Dead people have no friends.»

She let go of the stone and caught it again with her other hand. «Oops!»

«What do you want?» Filgar asked. The men behind him were fanning out. Five in total had crossbows. Three were busy keeping Gress and Kil covered. The others carried swords.

«Our lives,» Haq said. «And four horses. Are those horses I hear, right? Four of them, and make it snappy,» she smiled at him, «this cursed stone is damn heavy and I don't know how long I can hold it.»

Filgar gave her a poison stare and then gestured. One of his men left the group.

They waited. Filgar gestured for the crossbow men to release the elf and the barbarian, and they joined Varda and Haq.

Presently the man came back leading four horses. The beasts appeared to be scared, and they tossed their heads and rolled their big eyes. Wise beasts, Haq thought.

Haq arched an eyebrow. «No saddles?»

«Don't tempt me,» Filgar said.

She nodded. Her companions went to the horses.

Gress helped Varda up, and then vaulted on his beast.

«Go,» the thief said. «I'll follow.»

«Stupid,» Kil said, softly. They did not budge.

Haq and Filgar stood, facing each other, her arm still outstretched over the shaft.

«And now what?» the man asked.

Haq shrugged. «I throw you the stone, and run for the horse. You scramble to get the stone, your friends with the crossbows try to kill me and my friends, we get away, you get the stone, everybody's happy.»

«My men are good shots.»

«But they are easily distracted,» she said, and threw the emerald high up in the air.

Time stopped, then sped up as everything happened at the same moment.

Most of the men looked up. The emerald shot through the canopy and fell back, like a burning, falling green star. Only one goon fired at Haq, but she was already running to her horse. Filgar shouted. Gress slammed his foot in the face of the man holding Haq's horse reins as she vaulted on the animal's back. The horses leapt and started running towards the edge of the clearing into the trees. Haq held on for dear life. A volley of quarrels hissed behind them. Kil was hit in the shoulder but kept riding. Soon the

forest swallowed them. They ducked between the remains of the temple, keeping low on the horses' necks.

«Let them go, I've got it!» Filgar's voice echoed in the clearing. His men cheered.

#

After they had covered about a mile, zig-zagging through the trees, «Slow down,» Gress said. «We don't want to cripple a horse on these stones.»

Haq had led them in a wide circle, out of the dried moat and past the hillocks overlooking the burial grounds and the ruins. «We better keep moving,» she said. Her horse was nervous. She was too.

Varda checked Kil's shoulder. «She'll live.»

«I'd rather die,» Kil said. «It hurts like hell.»

«I need a place to cut her shoulder and extract the quarrel,» Varda said.

«No way,» Kil said. Her speech was slurred.

The cleric sighed in exasperation. «She can't ride with that thing inside.»

«Why not here?» Gress asked. «They will not follow us.»

«They won't, but the others might,» Haq said.

With a rough movement, she pulled Kil from her horse, and sat her in front of her, holding her up against her chest.

«What others?» the barbarian asked. «You fear the goblins?»

The thief slapped the horse's rump, and the beast bolted, neighing wildly, and soon disappeared into the trees.

«Think,» she said. She scanned the shadows among the foliage. «Think about what happened. Think about where we are.»

She kicked her horse's haunches, and guided the horse through the chunks of walls and the cracked flagstones of the temple's remains.

Behind them, a high, wailing scream rose. The horses snorted and picked up speed. Kil moaned, and Haq held her tighter.

«What in the seven Hells—?» the barbarian hissed.

«The stone,» Haq said. «I don't know if it has the power to raise the dead, or the power to keep them down if handled in some way. For sure, considering what it did in the temple's dungeons, I don't want to be caught with it in the middle of a fracking graveyard.»

Gress did not reply, and just kicked his horse into an easy canter. Kil had fainted. Haq felt her brow, and then prodded her horse on. The others followed the barbarian's example. They kept as far as possible from the old temple's grounds, and made good speed towards the old Imperial road and sanity.

Behind them, a distant sound of battle soon subsided and died.

#

A band of goblins ran parallel to them, along the Imperial road. The party noticed their hunched silhouettes. Two score of haggard humanoids, running for their lives as fast as possible, as far as possible, away from the ruins. They had a mule with them. That put Varda at ease as she had been worrying for their pack animal.

In the late afternoon sun, the groups traded looks. A couple of goblin archers released listless arrows that went nowhere near the party. Then, their leader barked an urgent command and they started running again. The leader stared at them, down in the

valley below, hooves clattering on the road's pavement. He held a hand up in a salute between honorable enemies and was gone.

«He should be grateful,» Haq said. «He's likely the one that got the post because we toasted his predecessor on our way in.»

Epilogue – Riches beyond imagining

«You're really going to drink that?»

Kil arched an eyebrow. She was holding a goblet in her left hand. Tiny blue fishes swam in the pink liquid.

«What should I do?» she asked. «Dip my hands in it?»

Gress frowned. He was sitting in front of her, his right hand submerged into a big bowl filled with beer. According to Varda and a bug-eyed surgeon they had consulted upon arriving in town, that was the best way to fight the infection caused by black goo's touch.

«And should it fail,» the crazy-looking surgeon had said, «you can always drink the beer. It will help you relax during the amputation.»

The barbarian had not found it funny. He had shown his lack of appreciation by punching the doctor in the mouth. Now, he sat in a dark booth in the Bottom's End tavern, nursing a tankard and bathing his throbbing, itching hand in ale. Kil, her shoulder tightly bandaged, had splurged a few silvers on a bottle of elvish vintage in which fishes swam. The quarrel had scratched her-shoulder blade. Varda had a hard time pulling it out, but the surgeon had been uncounscious at the moment. Kil would not have allowed him close anyway.

The sorceress took a sip and nodded appreciatively. «I missed that.»

The party laid low for about a week while the elf's fever subsided, and the barbarian's hand got marinated in beer. They had shacked up in a storehouse owned by a guy that owed some favor to Haq. This was their first outing.

«You think they made it?» Varda asked.

Kil glanced at her. «Who?»

«The Filgar character and his men,» the cleric said. She had ordered a herbal infusion, which had brought a weird look on the serving wench's face.

Kil shrugged and grimaced. «As if I care.»

«They would have killed us,» Gress said. «What about we order some food, too?»

«We wait for Haq,» Kil said.

«But to die like that,» Varda said. She gazed in her bowl of herbal tea. «It's horrible.»

«Filgar was a horrible man,» the elf said. «And whoever worked for him—»

«You and Haq were working for him,» the cleric interrupted.

Kil chuckled. It was not a pleasant sound. Her brief chuckle, Varda thought, was the sorceress' least human trait.

Haq dragged a chair on the wooden floor and sat down.

«Now we order food,» Kil said.

The barbarian was looking at the thief. «How did it go?»

She shrugged. «Got some good news, and some bad news, but some good news again,» she said. Before she could go on, Varda had flagged the serving wench and they ordered a cheap but substantial dinner of broiled eggs, beans, bread, two carafes of wine - cheaper than Kil's drink - and a couple of roast chickens served on a big bowl of rice.

«You eat rice after beans and bread?» Haq asked. Gress munched and nodded.

They ate for a while, exchanging only comments about the food.

«How's the hand?» Haq asked.

Gress pulled it out of the bowl. It didn't look so bad anymore, or so she thought. «I was about to pick you up a nice silver hook, at the market—»

He choked on a mouthful of rice. Haq slapped him on the back while Varda poured some wine for him.

«He's touchy about that,» Kil said.

«I sold the horses,» the one-eyed woman said. «Got a good price.» She pushed her dish aside and dropped a handful of gold coins on the table.

Both Gress and Kil groaned.

«It's better than nothing,» Haq said, and started counting each one's share.

«And in Filgar's place?»

Haq snorted. «The place's been ransacked. I guess his lieutenants, or his women, or both, helped themselves and did a runner as soon as it was clear the master was not coming home any time soon.»

She eyed the remaining half chicken on the plate at the center of the table.

«You don't eat that?» she asked Varda.

The cleric shook her head. «I don't eat meat,» she said.

«This is not meat. This is chicken,» Haq replied, putting the half chicken in her dish.

«So the place was empty,» Kil said.

Haq munched happily on her chicken and shook her head. «Cleaned like a melon's rind,» she said.

The sorceress and the barbarian both hissed an oath.

«But!» Haq said, raising a finger. She eyed it and then sucked on it. «But, there were some places where they did not look.»

She tapped her nose with the finger.

Then she cleaned her hands on the front of her shirt, and she pulled up a new bag. «I spent some of our little treasure on essentials,» she explained. She did not mention her new diary, and the leather case with her new writing implements. She took

two big leather pouches from the bag, and placed them on the table. They jangled in a pleasant way.

«I think this was Filgar's getaway money.»

«How much?» Kil asked.

«Not the price of three horses,» the thief smirked. «More like the price of sixty.»

Gress whistled. The serving wench gave him an appreciative look, and he winked at her.

«But there's more,» Haq said, lowering her voice. She took out of the bag a rolled scroll, the bamboo slats clicking as she unrolled it.

«As far as I can tell,» she said, pushing the remains of the chicken out of the way, «this is a map from back in the time of Emperor Tyron the Usurper—»

«Who?» Varda asked.

«Doesn't matter. What matters is this map shows the way to a ley gate, that leads to a place—» she ran her finger on the flowery script, «a place of riches beyond imagining!»

«And where would this be?» Kil asked.

«Andamon.»

«Get lost,» Kil replied.

«Come on, riches beyond your imagining!» Haq exclaimed, and then lowered her voice again, and looked around. «What else could we ask for?»

The four of them were silent as the wench collected the wreckage of their dinner. «Anything else?»

«Do you have a dessert list?» Varda asked.

The girl looked at her, and then at the others, her eyebrows arched, an ironic smile on her lips.

«Sweet pie,» Kil said. «For all. And more wine.»

Gaming Materials

Here are a few gaming rules inspired by this story that you can use in your games of *Four Against Darkness*.

How to use these materials

You are free to use these materials as you wish. Our suggestion is to use the new monsters to replace normal encounters from the tables in *Four Against Darkness*. For example, the first time that you roll up an encounter with goblins in 4AD, you could choose to meet the Red Goblins described hereinafter instead.

As the characters in the story are all 1st level, with the exception of Kil (we imagine her to be a third level elven fire-mage, a new class described below), these encounters are balanced for beginning level play (1st to 4th level characters).



New Class: Fire Mage

Traits: A fire mage, also called a pyromancer, is an elven wizard specializing in fire spells. The fire mage can use only fire-based spells (spells that have the words *Fire*, *Fireball*, *Flame*, *Heat*, or *Steam* in their names), adding her level to the spellcasting roll. She can cast other spells only from scrolls and magic items, adding her level to those rolls as a standard wizard would.

Armor allowed: None.

Weapons allowed: Light weapons, sling

Spells: The fire mage begins the game with three fire-based spells, plus one per level, so a first level character begins with 4 fire-based spells. For all other rules, see the wizard character in *Four Against Darkness*. The spells are written in a spellbook as usual, and the fire mage carries the spellbook at all times.

Fire Strip: A fire strip is a mini-scroll containing a fire spell designed for enclosed spaces, like dungeon corridors. A fire mage may write one fire strip between adventures, spending 10 gp in materials (rare components go in the ink and in some alchemical preparations needed to make the scroll waterproof). The mage may carry a number of fire strips equal to half her level, rounded up. For example, a 5th level fire mage may carry up to 3 strips. During the game, the fire mage may spend one attack action to pin the fire strip to a wall. On the mage's following turn, the fire strip will cause the effect equivalent to a fireball spell. The spell can be cast only in a corridor, and will potentially affect all the enemies in the corridor (assuming the spellcasting roll is high enough).

Fire strips may be used by other spellcasters as well. Other spellcasters may learn to create fire strips as an Expert Skill if they have any fire-based spell in their list of available spells.

A fire strip may also be used outdoors to fell trees and burn vegetation, following the rules for cutting trees found in the *Crucible of Classic Critters* book.

Some fire mages use silk ribbons instead of paper strips to create fire strips. In game terms, the effects and costs are the same.

Fatigue Casting: A fire mage who runs out of spells may cast one additional spell, at the cost of great fatigue. The spell must be the same as one of the spells that the caster had prepared. As soon as the spell is cast, the fire mage should roll $d6 + \text{Level}$. On a 7+, nothing happens. On a 6 or less, the fire mage loses 1 Life and is knocked out until revived by a friend. If a knocked out mage is attacked in combat, she is automatically wounded.

Starting Equipment: Light hand weapon (typically a thin, elven sword), writing implements, spellbook.

Starting Wealth: 2d6 gp.

Life: $2 + \text{Level}$. A 1st level fire mage has 3 Life.

Expert skills (from *Four Against the Abyss*): same as a wizard, plus Acute Hearing, Combat Acrobatics and Danger Sense.

Saves: The fire mage saves as an elf or as a wizard, whichever is better according to the description of the save roll.

Hatred: The fire mage is an elf, so foes who hate elves will count her as a hated target.

New Monsters

Red Goblins

Number encountered: $d6+3$

Type: Level 3 minion

Life: 1

Treasure: a roll at -1, plus the weapons described in the text

Morale: Normal

Habitat: dungeons, forests, ruins, hills

Reactions (d6): 1-3 bribe (5 gp per goblin including champion, 10 gp per leader), 4-6 fight. Roll at +1 if the party includes any elves, including any subraces like Fire or Ice elves, half-elves, etc.

Hatred of elves: Red goblins hate elves. If there are any elves in the party, they have a +1 on morale rolls and on Reactions.

Leader: When a group of 5 or more is encountered, there is a 2 in 6 chance that they will be led by a goblin chieftain that counts as a Level 4 Boss with 3 Life points. Until the chieftain has lost at least 1 Life point, the red goblins will not roll any morale roll, not even for fear-inducing spells. The leader has the equivalent of a shield, light armor (that can be worn by halflings only) and a light melee weapon (roll d6, 1-4 it is a slashing weapon, 5-6 it is a crushing weapon). Chieftains typically wear some sort of heavy fur capes as a badge of rank. After a thorough cleaning, the furs can be sold for $2d6$ gp.

Champion: When a group of 7 or more red goblins is encountered, there will also be a champion, armed with a short stabbing spear that counts as a slashing hand weapon if picked up by a character. The spear may also be thrown in ranged combat at -1 (light ranged weapon). The goblin champion will not throw the spear. This information is only for PCs who pick up the spear as loot.

The champion is a level 4 minion.

Forest Ambushers: If the encounter happens in a forested area, one third of the red goblins (round up, do not include the chieftain or the champion in this calculation) will be armed with short bows (light ranged weapons). The archers will loose their arrows at the party before the combat begins.



Dorantian Giant Slug

Number encountered: 1

Type: Level 5 weird monster

Life: 7

Treasure: none

Morale: Normal

Habitat: dungeons, plains, swamps, ruins

Reactions (d6): 1-3 bribe (3 food rations), 4-6 fight.

Rubbery Skin: Melee attacks with crushing weapons are at -2 against a giant slug.

Regeneration: At the end of any turn, after all characters have acted, roll 2d6. If the result is lower than the slug's current Life points, the slug heals 1 Life. The slug may not regenerate damage inflicted by throwing salt (see below) or inflicted by fire or electricity-based magic attacks (fireball, lightning, etc).

Slow: Unless the slug is encountered in a corridor or in a room smaller than 9 squares, the party may flee the combat without receiving an attack, even if there is no door to slam shut between them and the slug.

Weakness to Salt: A bag of salt (2 gp to buy at any town market) can be thrown at a Dorantian giant slug and automatically inflict 1 Life damage that the slug cannot regenerate. The wounds inflicted by salt are excruciatingly painful to the slug. If a slug loses at least 1 Life to salt and is forced to make a morale roll, the morale roll is at -1.

Alchemical components: The Dorantian giant slug has d6 eyestalks or other sensory organs that, at the end of the combat, can be harvested as material components by wandering alchemists (Wandering alchemists are an optional class described in *The Courtship of the Flower Demons*). Each eyestalk is worth 2d6 gp and may be used as a material component in potions to heal eye wounds and temporary blindness.

Shell: When you encounter a Dorantian slug, roll d6. On a 3 or better, it has a shell and it is called a giant snail. When a Dorantian giant snail fails a morale roll, it does not run away, but retreats in its shell. The shell is hard and attacking it counts as hitting a level 8 monster. The snail will fight back as a Level 4 monster while retreated in its shell. If left undisturbed, the snail will remain in the same room and the party will be allowed to move through the room without risk. However, if the party goes back into the same room later, the snail will be completely healed and ready to fight once more.



Black Goo

Number encountered: 1

Type: Level 5 weird monster

Attacks: 2

Life: 4

Treasure: none

Morale: +1

Habitat: dungeons, ruins, sewers

Reactions (d6): 1-2 bribe (1 corpse/large animal or at least 10 rations), 3-5 fight, 6 fight to the death.

Protoplasm: Due to its fluid nature and physical structure without a central brain or a nervous system, the black goo is immune to spells like Sleep. Exploded die rolls may not inflict additional damage vs. a black goo (in other words, an attack will always inflict a maximum of 1 damage, with the exception of Lightning spells that inflict 2 damage).

Copy: If any party member is separated from the party when the party encounters the black goo, the black goo will adapt its body to resemble the missing party member. In full daylight, this has no chance of fooling the other characters. In a dungeon, however, this will give the black goo the advantage of surprise.

Animate Corpses: If the black goo moves through a room where minions have been killed by the party, or where the room description states that there are (unanimated) skeletons or corpses, the bodies will be engulfed by the black goo, that will give them new life and make them part of a giant super-organism. The black goo receives an additional Life point and one additional attack per every skeleton thus collected. The stats of the original creatures are ignored.

New Spells

These new spells are available to fire mages or can be found on scrolls. These are considered common, beginning level spells, so whenever you find a magic scroll on a standard dungeon, you may select one of these spells at random.

Fire Globe

The fire globe is a low powered fireball that performs two attacks. The first attack is like a regular Fireball spell, but the caster adds only half his level, rounded up, to the spellcasting roll. If the fireball does not explode (that is, you do not roll a 6 on the spellcasting die) and there is at least one foe standing, the fireball does not dissipate at the end of the attack, but remains in play and will attack a second target on the caster's following turn.

The second attack works in the same way but the spellcaster's level bonus is halved and rounded DOWN, not up. The second attack may hit only a single creature (including a creature that is fleeing because of a failed morale roll) and the second die roll may NOT explode. The globe dissipates as soon as the second attack is performed.

Tongue of Flame

This spell may be cast only if the caster has both hands free. The mage rubs her hands together and a tongue of purple flame leaps from her hands. Add the spellcaster's level to the spellcasting roll and count it as a ranged attack that inflicts 1 point of damage. This damage ignores regeneration abilities and armor effects (all those rules where you roll a die to determine if the target absorbs or deflects the hit).

Fire Lantern

The spell may be cast before entering a room. It requires one free hand. It may be maintained until the caster has to use her hand to attack or pick up an object or casts another spell. A flame appears on the caster's palm. As long as the spell continues, the caster counts as carrying a lantern and her unarmed melee attacks count as fire-based damage (this may be handy against creatures vulnerable to fire, such as mummies). If the caster is turned to stone, falls asleep or is knocked out or killed, the fire lantern disappears. The fire lantern counts also as a source of fire for a character who wants to light up a bottle of flaming oil.

Shining Flame

As soon as the spell is cast, a globe of shining flames floats from her hands and moves toward the ceiling. The room where the Shining Flame is cast is now considered well lit. The party does not need a lantern in this room. The flame remains in place even after the party leaves the room, for a duration of a full day. If the party reenters that room, they will not need a lantern there, and any wandering monsters attacking the party in the well-lit room will gain surprise only if the creatures are invisible.

Pillar of Flame

The body of the caster becomes shrouded in a pillar of flames that do not damage the caster's clothes or equipment. Until the end of the combat or until the mage casts another spell, the caster adds her level to her unarmed attack rolls (the -2 for unarmed attacks still applies). This counts as fire-based damage.

Boil Water

This fire spell may be used to attack water-based creatures, inflicting 1 damage to them and to any character immersed in water. All the creatures in a room will be attacked, so this spell is ideal to get rid of vermin living in water pools, including rats

and alligators swimming in sewer waters. The spell may also be used to turn polluted water (including chaos-infected water) into drinkable water by boiling it. Assume each casting of the spell will disinfect enough water for (caster's level x 2) persons/day.

Fire Gazing

Casting this spell requires relative calm. The caster may cast this spell only in an empty room with the other party members guarding all the exits into the room. The spell may be cast only once per adventure/dungeon. For every 4 points in the spellcasting total, the caster receives one clue. Round fractions down. In addition, the caster may spend these clues to negate the advantage of surprise to one wandering monster encounter.

Example: Kil, a level 3 fire mage, cast the Fire Gazing spell and rolls a 6. The die explodes, so she rolls another d6 and scores a 4. The total roll is $6 + 3 + 4 = 13$. $13/4 = 3$. Kil receives three clues.

Flame Jet

The caster performs a ranged attack that hits for 1 point of fire-based damage. The attack requires extending one free hand towards the target. At level 5 or above, if the caster has two free hands, he can cast TWO flame jets per turn, performing a separate attack roll for each flame jet. The two flame jets may be directed at the same target or at two different targets. The caster may decide where to direct the second flame jet after determining the effect of the first flame jet.

New Treasure

The Heart of the Lizard

Lizardman clerics of S'sikliss (the goddess of reptiles and dragons, married to the god of chaos Xichtul) have imbued this fist-sized emerald with a powerful curse. The Heart of the Lizard may be found only once in a campaign, by buying a Secret. You must spend three clues to discover this secret, only after having destroyed at least one boss or weird monster.

The gem can be sold for 1000 gp. Its enormous value is obvious. During an adventure, it may be used as an automatically successful bribe to any living creature that has “bribe” listed in its reactions and would accept gems or coins. Creatures found in the same room where the Eye is found may not be bribed.

Once the party takes the Eye of the Lizard, however, all the creatures that the party has killed in the last three encounters rise as undead and start chasing the party. If you did not keep track of how many you killed, just reroll their number. If there aren't at least three encounters, just roll three encounters with skeletons (minions table, p.36 of *Four Against Darkness*).

These undead enemies will start to chase the party. Every time the party goes through a room or corridor, roll a d6. On a 1, the undead catch up with them and attack them, gaining surprise, just like wandering monsters would do.

If the party manages to get out of the dungeon without meeting the undead, the undead will attack the party in the last room. The party may run away and avoid the fight by successfully defending against the undead creatures. Any characters failing their defense rolls are caught and must fight to the death with their undead chasers. Characters who successfully defended are out of the

dungeon and running for their life and may not help those who remain in the dungeon.

The undead have the same stats they had in life, have no treasure, and never make morale rolls.

Undead and artificial or unliving creatures (golems, elementals, robots, automata) will NOT be revived by the Eye of the Lizard. If there is a mixture of creature types (vermin, minions, bosses, weird monsters), use the same rules you would use for an encounter with minions led by one or more bosses, as detailed in *Four Against the Abyss*.

Reactions, morale and treasure stats of the original creatures are meaningless: the undead have no possession (probably the PCs have already looted them if they had any!) and will fight to the death. If the creatures had weapons and the party has taken them, you can assume that the undead somehow replenished their resources or had a hidden stash of weapons somewhere.

About the Authors

Davide Mana

Davide Mana was born in Turin, Italy in 1967. He pursued a career in science, with a degree in paleontology and a PhD in geology. A specialist in environmental data analysis, after a number of odd jobs he was a teacher and a researcher.

Since 2013, he's been making a living as a writer, translator and game designer, publishing both in Italian and English.

Currently based in the wine country of north-western Italy, Davide writes full time, and takes some moments off to cook for his family and to maintain his blog, Karavansara.live.

Andrea Sfiligoi

Andrea Sfiligoi was born in Terni, Italy in 1968. He has worked as a screenwriter and storyboard artist, and became a full time game designer in 2007. He currently resides in Ukraine. He is the author of many wargaming titles (*Song of Blades and Heroes*, *Advanced Song of Blades and Heroes*, *Power Legion*, *Swatters*, *Mutants and Death Ray Guns*, *Of Armies and Hordes*, *Battlesworn*, *Fear and Faith*, *Sellswords & Spellslingers*) published by Ganesha Games, and also of three wargames published in the Osprey Wargames series (*Of Gods and Mortals*, *A Fistful of Kung Fu*, *Rogue Stars*). He also designed *Four Against Darkness*, wrote many roleplaying games (*Familiars*, *Tales of Blades and Heroes*, *High Stakes*, *Furies of the Barrens*) and card games (*Fortebraccio*, *BriarMaze*, and the upcoming *Hexenhammer: Rise of the Witchfolk*).

About Four Against Darkness

Four Against Darkness is a popular indie adventure game designed for solo play. It has been frequently at number 1 in Amazon in the solo rpg category, and it has been at n.1 on the hotlist on BoardGameGeek.com. It can be played solo, cooperatively, or as a traditional roleplaying game with a game master and 1 or more players.

Four Against Darkness. And what in darkness dwells.

Heart of the Lizard is a novella set in the world of *Four against Darkness*.

Follow Haq, Kil, Gress and Varda in the abandoned remains of the ancient Temple of Zur, the god of death, on the trail of a fabled, mystical treasure.

“What sort of treasure are we talking about?” Gress asked, cautiously.

“An emerald the size of a fist—” Haq said.

“Cursed,” Kil said.

“—inside an old temple filled with riches—”

“Haunted,” the elf interjected.

“—one day out of this town—”

“A cesspool,” the sorceress added.

“—South, in the hills.”

“Where the goblins dwell.”

A big grin split Gress' bruised features. “This is getting better and better,” he said. “When do we start?”

A gaming appendix gives full descriptions and stats for new monsters, treasures, spells, and the Fire Mage, a new character for use with the *Four Against Darkness* game.

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