

City of Dead Jewels  
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Prince Darin was dead. He lay on his back upon a bier of shields, cold and clammy to the touch. In the prince's absence, Hegendour, his former hearthguard and protector, had taken the lead. The words from his cut lips were as bleak and dark as the tunnel the dwarfs lingered in.

'The beast is hunting us now,' he said. 'Its spoor litters the way ahead but was left deliberately.' Hegendour's voice was as cold as his demeanour. He turned to the others, showing them a muscled, barrel chest, riddled with self-inflicted wounds. 'It wants us to follow.'

'Only a fool would willingly chase a monster into its lair,' declared one of the dwarfs. He was a lode warden and carried the hunting party's lantern. There was no flame within the fetters; its light came from rune magic wrought into the metal. A pair of boots was slung over one shoulder, a sigil engraved in the dark leather.

'Only a fool or an honourless Slayer,' muttered another, as he eyed Hegendour's shorn beard and naked torso with disdain. This one was lightly armoured in the manner of a hill dwarf, but festooned with weapons, mainly throwing axes and a crossbow that was also rune-inscribed.

'Afraid of a troll are you, Cravenhelm?' asked a third thane.

The hill dwarf answered belligerently. 'It is no troll, this thing,' he snapped at the armoured mountain of a warrior alongside him. He was shorter than the gatekeeper, and his iron pot helmet only came up to the other dwarf's chest. 'And my clan name is Ravenhelm.'

'Cravenhelm suits you better, elf-friend.'

'At least I am no kinslayer, Magnin, son of Thord!' Raglan Ravenhelm pulled out a bearded axe that glowed dully in the half-light in empathy with its bearer's anger.

Magnin, the gatekeeper, hefted a two-handed mattock with a hammerhead twice as big as the hill dwarf's skull.

'And so the moment of grudgement has finally arrived, eh grumbaki?' Despite his outward belligerence, the gatekeeper couldn't hide the shame in his eyes. He glanced at the bier of shields where Prince Darin laid in repose.

'Leave it!' hissed Vorgil. The miner was shining the lantern up ahead, coaxing more light from its confines with soothing imprecations to the runes. 'Enough have died to foolishness already,' he added bleakly, whispering, 'I see something...'

Vorgil had better eyes than any dwarf of Karak Azgal. As a lode warden, he had spent most of his life in the darkest, light-forgotten hollows of the earth. Even without brazier or lantern, his dark-sight was almost faultless. 'Here,' he said, pouring on a little more light with a muttered invocation so the others could see it too. Dour ancestor faces glowered down on the dwarfs, stern and disapproving. They were hewn from the rock, massive, magnificent but denuded of the gemstones that once

adorned their beards, torques and circlets. Only hollows remained, empty and forlorn. The gargantuan statues had been picked clean. The entire hold was now little more than a hoard of scattered, lost treasures fought over like carrion.

A shadow loomed in the tunnel ahead of the dwarfs, reminding them all of the creatures that coveted their gold and jewels.

Here in the undervaults, the darkest catacombs of the Ungdrin Ankor, shadows were everywhere. They often chattered or snarled; some growled or shuffled, trying to be silent on padded feet or paws. This one was massive and it exuded almost palpable menace.

'It is no troll,' Raglan asserted again in a breathy whisper. He'd sheathed his axe in favour of a crossbow, whose bolt tips shone like pellucid silver despite the gloom.

He and Magnin had been charged with dragging the bier of shields, but dropped the tethers wound around their fists in favour of facing the monster in their midst. Prince Darin seemed not to mind.

'I say we return to the hold gate and get more warriors,' said Raglan, backing off a step.

'There are none to get,' snapped Vorgil, 'save for those bloody barbarians. Unberogen or not, I trust dwarfs over men and would see the treasures of Izril go to its heirs. Not umgi, not grobi.'

'Nor elgi,' muttered Magnin with a scowl.

It had been over two thousand years since the Great War between the dwarfs and the elves, but memories amongst the sons of Grungni were long: clan heritage and ancestral debt made it that way. The War of Vengeance, when it was declared by High King Gotrek Starbreaker, was not universal amongst the clans. Some, those who had forged friendships with the elves, between whom trade flourished with the eldritch race, sought a peaceful outcome and had no desire to fight. The hill dwarfs, those that lived over ground instead of under the mountains, were the staunchest of those objectors.

Raglan ignored Magnin and gestured to the dilapidated hall crumbling around them.

'Look around you. This is the City of Jewels no longer.' He used his arm to take in the broken statuary and tumbledown pillars. 'It is the lair of beasts and monsters, the dark denizens of the deep earth...' He trailed off as if expecting these creatures to claw their way from the darkness at any moment, drooling saliva and baying for dwarf-flesh to sate their bestial appetites.

Once, when Karak Azgal was known as Karak Izril, the passageway where the dwarfs waited would have been lined with gemstones and chased gold. It treasures had long since been stolen by rat-kin, greenskins and even fouler beasts.

'We will all die in this place,' said Vorgil, though he showed no sign of wishing to flee. 'All of us, doomed.'

Raglan glanced at the lode warden; between him and Hegendour the mood was becoming increasingly fatalistic. His upper hold on Krag Tor was

still prosperous. He had only agreed to this venture because of the excessive gold in prospect, that and fealty to a king of a sundered realm he had once called hold. 'We should go back,' he said, 'gather more warriors from the northern holds. Perhaps we can find dwarfs from the Vaults or Black Mountains. I have heard clans are settling there.'

Magnin sneered. The gatekeeper was cut from much older cloth. He could trace his clan legacy all the way back to the Blackbeards. 'Rinns and ufdis. Barely a proper dawii amongst the lot of them.'

Raglan insisted, 'We need more axes.'

'Aye,' scoffed Magnin, 'and cannon too, and mules to pull them, but we four are thanes enough to kill this beast.' He looked down his nose at Raglan. 'Well, at least three of us are. I expect a clan of turncoats like the Cravenhelms to choose cowardice over honour.'

Raglan ground his teeth but resisted the urge to bite. Despite his anger, the gatekeeper was his better in a fight.

'What about Prince Darin?' asked Vorgil, glancing at the corpse.

The smirk on Magnin's face vanished at mention of the prince's name.

'We should leave him behind,' said Raglan.

'He is the king's son!' hissed Vorgil.

'Not in the open, kruti,' Raglan snapped behind his hand. He was watching Hegendour. The hearthguard looked as if he was about to do something rash. 'We leave him in one of the old tombs. Least he'll be with his ancestors that way. Once we're done with the beast, we come back and get him.'

'Quiet, you fools!' Magnin was gesturing down the tunnel with his hammer. 'Smell that?' he asked, once the other two were silent.

The waft of something deeply unpleasant pricked the dwarfs' nostrils. It carried the reek of sulphur.

'Trollish bile-acid,' said Hegendour, scowling. He had two axes, one in each hand, and bared his teeth in a challenge.

'What say you, lad?' asked Magnin, suddenly uncertain of his own convictions but unwilling to trust an elf-friend or a grief-mad hearthguard. He glanced over his spiked shoulder plate at the dwarf behind him.

The last of the hunting party was no thane, nor was he even a warrior, at least to Magnin's mind. He was brown-bearded with youthful grey eyes, a beardling. He wore a helm like the others: it had a studded nose guard and iron-banded crown. He also wore robes but interwoven with mail and a pair of runic vambraces.

His trappings were that of a runesmith, though the lad did not feel worthy of the mantle foisted upon him.

'My dead master's body carried the same stench,' Skalf said quietly, and held aloft a runic talisman that hung around his neck on a

chain. It gave off a pale, green aura that coloured the darkness around it.

'Well, smith,' demanded the gatekeeper after an answer wasn't immediately forthcoming, 'What say you?'

Vorgil muttered behind his black, soot-thickened beard to Raglan.

'We should not have brought a beardling to this place. I don't care who his master was.'

The hill dwarf glanced at the runesmith too, and nodded in agreement with the lode warden.

Skalf ignored them. He was watching the light around the talisman as it changed from green to visceral red.

'Very close.'

Hegendour was at the edge of the lantern's light, just within its penumbra.

'It is the beast,' he decided, and ploughed into the tunnel. 'Sing my lament to Grimmir and all the Ancestor Gods. Tell them Hegendour, son of Hegengrim, approaches their hold halls in the underdeep. My doom awaits.. Uzkul!' he cried, forging into a run as the darkness claimed him.

'Hegendour, wait!' the runesmith's warning came too late. As soon as the hearthguard stepped beyond the glow of the lantern, there was the sudden shriek of displaced air, followed by the crunch of bone.

Vorgil was next in line, and got splattered with blood. His face and beard were crimson with it, and he swore aloud, unsheathing a shimmering pickaxe.

A host of rune weapons glowed between them. They were weapons of the great age, before the war with the elves, but they seemed like daggers against whatever was in that tunnel.

A tense moment of silence fell before something flew out of the darkness at them.

Raglan threw a hand axe, unwilling to waste a silver-bolt until he knew it was worth loosing.

Half of Hegendour's body, a hand axe embedded in its chest, landed in front of them. Steam billowed off the bloody, chewed end of his torso. From the waist down there was nothing. The grimacing hearthguard still clung tenaciously to his axes. They weren't even notched or bloodied.

'I think he was already dead, brother,' said Vorgil.

Magnin chuckled despite the hideousness of Hegendour's remains.

A low, reverberating growl that shook grit and dust- motes from the broken ceiling of the tunnel prevented an immediate riposte from the hill dwarf.

'That was big,' he uttered when it was over.

The sulphurous air grew thicker by the second. It scalded the dwarfs' leathern skin.

Skalf grimaced. 'Sound is made louder in these corridors.' Even so, he had pulled out his warhammer. A master rune of his own forging glowed dully in the stone head and down the haft. 'There will be no going back now. It has our scent, whatever this creature is.'

A vast tremor shook the ground beneath them, sending statues toppling. Cracks split the carven faces of the ancestors, souring their stony demeanour further still. Sundered rock rained from the subterranean ceiling of the tunnel, bringing cascades of dirt with it.

Magnin raised his great shield to ward off the worst of it.

'We stand and fight.'

None amongst the small throng gainsaid him.

'Doom...' Vorgil muttered. He was barely a step away from taking the Slayer Oath himself.

The shadow of the beast grew closer, snorting and growling.

'It is no troll,' whispered Raglan as a massive crack jagged along the ceiling and the tunnel collapsed in on the dwarfs, bringing darkness and death.

'It is a troll, nothing more.'

The king's declaration echoed loudly around the abandoned gate hall. In times gone by, the liege-lord of Karak Izril would have held forth in a richly appointed throne room, a king's chamber worthy of the name. Fabled brynduraz would have lit the scene and made the clusters of gemstones sparkle like stars refulgent. Such days were confined to dust and memory. Azgal, the Hoard Peak as it was now known, was a ruin.

Instead, the lord of Azgal sat upon a wooden throne with a handful of his armoured retainers, his hammerers, arrayed behind him in silent, grim-faced ranks. That King Durik had managed to give audience in one of its upper hold halls was remarkable, but the old dwarf was a cantankerous and stubborn bastard.

Skalf knew the king, he was his liege-lord, and he knew the strain that leaving his ancestral hold to grobi and rat-kin had cost him. Once, Durik had been strong and vital; now he was grey and wraith-like with skin too thin and a patchwork beard. Still, the lord was proud.

'My cousin Fendril claims to have found the beast's lair,' ventured one of the thanes kneeling before the old king. He wore gromril mail and carried a pick and lantern, marking him out as a lode warden, one of the miner clans. 'He said he saw the trappings of a drakk.'

King Durik was shaking his head, his wrinkled leather face screwed up into a venomous scowl. 'There are no dragons in Karak Azgal,' he said. 'See there!' He slapped his shoulder hard where a scaled mane unfurled down his back. The magnificent cloak ended in a dragon's head, still attached to its flesh, glassy-eyed and very dead.

'Graug the Terrible!' he declared to his audience. In his rage, he began to cough, spitting bloody phlegm into his hand. A pair of the hammerers, one whom Skalf recognised as the champion Belgrad, were about to intervene when Durik gave them such a baleful glare as to freeze the warriors to the spot.

'It was the last of the drakk,' he said once recovered, and became solemn. 'And though it killed Daled Stormbreaker, I have avenged him with its foul blood. There are no more dragons in Karak Azgal. Few in all of the Worlds Edge,' he added. 'Elves,' he spat, 'tried to rouse 'em during the Great War. They'll not flock again.'

At the mention of elves, another of the thanes bowed his head. He was lighter armoured than the rest, but carried a raft of weapons in his belts. Skalf counted half a dozen hand axes, a double-bladed axe and a crossbow, not to mention various daggers and other small blades. On his pot helmet there was a crest of a black bird.

The lode warden was insistent. 'Fendril was very specific, thane-king.'

King Durik rounded on him. 'No more dragons!' he bellowed, and every other dwarf present looked to the darkened corridors beyond the gate hall, fearing the grobi would have heard and come running.

None did, but the king's ire was slow to fade to embers. He was coughing again, more blood on his hand and tunic. When he continued, his voice was low and wearier than before.

'It is a troll, a wyvern perhaps. Nothing more.'

'We shall slay it, my king,' said a dwarf lord with a regal bearing. He was Darin, the king's son and prince of Karak Azgal, and knelt with deference before his liege and father.

King Durik hobbled down from the wooden throne upon which he was giving audience to speak to his son directly. The hand upon Prince Darin's shoulder was neither firm nor steady any more but it conveyed the king's heartfelt emotion.

'You are the last,' he breathed in a voice fit for the tomb, like old parchment cracking. 'If you die, the lineage of Karak Azgal dies with you,' he said, vehemence and fear warring in his old, rheumy eyes. His hand shook with it but Prince Darin was quick to still these emotions with his own gauntleted hand upon his father's.

'I will kill it for you, father, and Azgal shall be restored.'

It was a flawed pledge, but one the son believed.

The last of the hunting party beat his chest in approval of such bold oath-making.

'Whatever this creature is, be it troll or wyvern or some other horror of the deep world, it will trouble the bowels of Azgal no longer once we find it,' he said, 'so declares Magnin, son of Thord. We of the Stonehaft clan have ever been protectors of the gate. Be it Azgal or Azul, south or north along the Worlds Edge, our dawli blood is thick and unpolluted.' He glanced at the hill dwarf, he who had been shamed at the king's mention of elves.

King Durik was nodding, pleased and approving of the warrior-thanes before him.

'Find it,' he hissed, appraising them all with his gimlet gaze. 'Kill it.'

The dank air of the inner gate hall was heavy with the stink of vermin.

Vorgil prodded one of the furred corpses with his boot, scowling.

'Rat-kin,' he announced unnecessarily. 'Dead.'

Magnin snorted derisively. 'Thank Grungni you are our scout and guide,' he said, swinging his mattock to rest against his bulky shoulder guard.

Vorgil gave him a dirty look but continued.

'Blade and cudgel wounds by the looks of it,' he added, pulling the entwined bodies of the skaven away from one another with his pickaxe.

It was hard to tell how many, so badly battered were the corpses. The furred creatures were diminutive and had the aspect of men but one horribly conjoined with rats. Their stooped backs, pink tails and fang-filled muzzles looked particularly sinister in death. The clustering of the rank bodies suggested an ambush, but there was no sign of the ones who had perpetrated it. If any had died in the attack, they'd been dragged away into the darkness.

'Grobi?' asked Raglan. He was standing sentry at the arched entrance to the cavern. Here, like elsewhere in Hoard Peak, the gate was stripped of its gems and gilding. Even the hall itself, which would once have shimmered in the lode warden's lantern light, was cold and bleak. Its hearth was empty, barring the skaven's droppings and the bones of lesser creatures picked clean by the hungry ratmen. Several of the columns supporting the vaulted ceiling were broken and sat in untidy heaps of rubble, strewn across the shattered mosaic floor.

The dwarfs were barely an hour from the upper gate hall and the king when they'd discovered the slaughter. Soon, even the upper levels of Azgal would be overrun. Then where would King Durik hold forth?

'Or some other interloping creature,' declared Prince Darin. He was standing atop a fallen statue, loftier than the others in every way. A second arched doorway sat opposite the first. The thane-prince stared ahead into its darkling depths. In the lambent glow cast by Vorgil's lantern, a set of broad stone steps could be discerned. 'It is down there, waiting for us.'

There was something tainting the prince's voice. Not fear, his sense of utter conviction eclipsed that. Rather it was uncertainty, or so Skalf thought, that he would not be up to the task of vanquishing the beast and restoring Karak Azgal to former glories. Skalf knew the weight of expectation like that; it was the mantle of his master's death.

'You will honour your father,' said the runesmith from below the prince. Despite Skalf's best efforts, the words sounded hollow.

Legendour, the hearthguard, was stoic and silent on the other side of the statue but clearly believed in his regal charge and nodded slowly.

Prince Darin turned to the runesmith and the same fatalism that affected the king's demeanour was visible in his eyes. It was echoed too in the chamber's desolation.

'I must,' he said, 'I am all that's left.'

Vorgil had stopped examining the dead skaven to consult a map that he'd unrolled from one of his many pouches.

It caught Magnin's interest. 'I didn't think there were any maps left of Azgal, leastways, not useful ones. Perished during the Time of Woe, so I heard.'

'This was Fendril's,' said Vorgil, without looking up. 'My cousin drew it before he last ventured into the deeps.'

'And left it to you?' Magnin looked confused. 'Wouldn't he need it to get back?'

Now, Vorgil looked up. 'He drew a great many maps. No lode warden worth his pickaxe needs a map to a place he's already been. This was left to me so I could find him, if...' he trailed off.

'If?' Magnin was about as subtle as the mattock slung over his shoulder.

'If he didn't come back, ufdi,' snapped Raglan.

Magnin rounded on the hill dwarf, who was still peering the way they'd already come.

'And is that what concerns you, elf-friend? Are you worried that this hunt is beyond the skill of your silk-swaddled, pointy-ear loving clan?'

Raglan snarled. 'I am every inch the dawî that-'

'Enough!' The prince's voice wasn't loud, but it was commanding as he leapt down off the column. 'We press on.' He looked to Vorgil, 'Lode warden, do you have our bearing?'

'Down, my liege,' he said, and the words echoed around the musky cavern, 'down until we reach a fork.'

'And then?'

'We delve deeper.'

Even in the fuliginous atmosphere of the forge, Skalf could tell the master was glowering at him. He heard the banded torques on his arms clank together as the rune lord folded them across a barrel-like chest, the clink of ingots woven into his beard as it bristled with displeasure. Smoke already filled the heady chamber but it intensified with every frustrated puff of his master's pipe.

'Again, beardling.'

Skalf looked at the chunk of rock, limned by the ruddy orange glow of the forge fire, and frowned. The young dwarf was wearing a leather apron over a simple cloth shirt and breeches. Sleeves rolled up to his elbows, his thick forearms pulsed with muscle and exertion. He'd lost count of the hours.

'But it is unbreakable.'

The master exhaled a long and perturbed breath. A gout of smoke came with it, prickling at the beardling's nostrils. With a jewelled dagger he picked at a piece of roast boar still trapped between his teeth from the great feast. Skalf had been forbidden admittance. His stomach growled in sympathetic exasperation with his face.

'Again,' said the master, sternly.

Wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his soot-stained hand, Skalf did as asked. Placing all of his considerable strength into the blow, he struck. It was only when he opened his eyes that he realised the chunk of rock was untouched. It wasn't even chipped.

'How is this possible?' he breathed.

The master grunted, and used his bulk to muscle Skalf aside. His mailed armour was hot and stung the beardling's unprotected skin.

'Move your weakling arse!' he snapped, and like lightning his hammer was in his hand, the old words upon his lips, and he struck.

The rock split evenly and within was a shimmering rune blade of purest gromril.

'See?' he said to his apprentice. 'It can be done.' The master gestured to the two sides of the sundered rock with his hammer, 'Karadurak, the ever-stone, drawn from the heart of the world. Only a runesmith can break it, with but a single blow. Use the words as they were taught you, beardling. You can engrave the rune of stone without assistance, and have even wrought master runes under my watchful eye, but you have yet to split the karadurak. Only here, in the deep rock, is where you'll find the veins of old magic. It is powerful, but to wield it you must break the ever-stone. Until you do, you will never leave this forge!'

He gestured to another piece of karadurak, sitting upon a second anvil. It was fathomless black, flecked with silver like iridescent star-fires and more unyielding than hardest obsidian.

'This one is yours alone,' the master promised, turning his back.

A plume of smoke spilled in his wake as he left the chamber.

Skalf balled his fists impotently.

'How will you know I have broken it with a single stroke if you're not here to witness it?' he called to his master's departing shadow.

'I will know,' a voice echoed from the darkness. 'You will not be able to break it any other way. I will know,' he repeated. 'Speak the words,' he said, voice fading, 'as they were taught to you. Again!'

Skalf obeyed and struck again. But the karadurak would not yield.

Vorgil had the map in his hands again. After the first hour, he'd removed his gloves. His soot-stained fingers, black beneath the nails, worried at the edges. Scratching at his head, he muttered, 'But Fendril is an excellent mapwrought...'

Raglan had made a small fire and was keeping the flame low within a ring of stones. The dwarfs were deep, much deeper than before. A few skirmishes with a band of greenskins had whetted the dwarfs' weapons, but little more. A chill pervaded in the gloom, worsened by the desolation of the hold around them.

'Worse than the damn grobi, this cold.' Raglan rubbed his arms to nurse some heat back into them.

'Just like a Cravenhelm,' chuntered Magnin. 'Too long spent above the earth.' For now, he was tired of openly mocking the hill dwarf. His sturm had been robbed by the hollowness of this low place. They'd seen other bodies on their route into the darkness of the world. Dwarf corpses. Hundreds of them. It was a bitter reminder of their faded glories and robbed the warmth from their hearts faster than any chill ever could.

'Can you decipher your cousin's script?' asked the prince.

They were at the bottom of a very long and wide stairwell. It was broken in places, gaping pitfalls leading to certain doom in the blackened crags below, and made for treacherous footing. No light penetrated this deep and the only illumination came from Raglan's fire. Its cast was weak and flickering, barely painting the flagstone basin where the dwarfs waited in greyish monochrome.

'This is a bleak place,' said Hegendour to no one in particular. 'A hold hall should have blazing hearths filled with the smell of meat and beer-scent, not shadows and dust. Where is the sound of the clans, the ale songs and revelry? Where is the drone of the mines felt through the rock, in time with my beating heart-blood? Where are the dawi?'

'Dead, brother,' said Prince Darin softly, though Hegendour already had his answer.

Vorgil was scratching his head. He was standing between three forks. Two went off to the left and right, a third disappeared into abyssal darkness as the way ahead ended at the broken lip of the plateau.

'Left, I think...'

The prince was firm, 'You think or you know?'

Vorgil rolled up the map again. 'Definitely left. I'd stake my silverlode on it.'

'There's a wager I'd take,' muttered Magnin, still belligerent but glad to be on the move again.

The dwarfs were gathering up their gear and dousing the fire when Skalf gestured for stillness. The slow scrape of blades and hammers slipping from their sheaths sounded. The taut string of Raglan's crossbow creaked as he loaded a quarrel.

'What is it, lad?' asked Prince Darin.

'Can't you hear that?'

He was standing at the left fork, stooped with his ear pressed towards the darkness.

'Hear wha-'

The stink arrived before the din. It was noisome and thick, like tar.

Magnin sneered. 'Grobi...'

A high-pitched chittering overwhelmed the greenskin grunts and whooping.

'And something else,' said Prince Darin.

'How many?' asked Raglan as he tried to target something in the blackness. His breath was coming quickly and fogged the cold, subterranean air in white gusts.

The opening was wide enough for all of the dwarfs to stand abreast of one another. They did so, shoulders together and shields uplifted.

'Scared of a few rat-kin, elf-friend?' said Magnin.

'Bring the lantern forwards.' Ignoring the bickering thanes, Prince Darin waved Vorgil up.

The shrieking and grunting in the blackness was almost deafening. The stink made the dwarfs want to retch but all held their nerve as the runic flame drew back the veil of darkness.

'Grimnir's hairy arse...' Vorgil spoke for them all.

There were hordes.

It was difficult to discern greenskin from skaven they were clustered so close together. Red-eyed, swathed in dirty black robes and cowls, the goblins were in the vanguard. No, that wasn't right... The greenskins were panicked, shrieking in agitation and fear. They were running from the ratmen who were almost on top of them. Whickering arrows, loosed blindly from bent short bows, met slung stones and hurled daggers. The efforts of the goblin archers were in vain as the teeming skaven hordes overwhelmed them in a bloody instant of hacking blades. Some of the greenskins, the better armoured or simply more desperate, resisted. Together, the creatures almost boiled towards the archway with teeth champing and weapons flashing. Green, leathery flesh, hook-nosed and cruel; black-furred, mange-ridden and cunning, the goblins and skaven were almost intertwined, kicking, biting and cutting at each with crude blades and spears.

Creatures were dying in the frantic charge, mostly goblins but the greenskins were killing skaven in their frantic fervour to escape too. Gore and blood spattered both warring parties as bodies were opened up and left to spill loose in the carnage. The vermin rolled towards the dwarfs in a wave. No thin line of shields was going to break it up. It

would wash from the left archway and spill over onto the plateau. Anything caught in that swell would be smashed aside, possibly over the edge and into the waiting abyss.

Prince Darin saw the danger.

'Retreat, into the other chamber!'

'The gatekeepers flee from nothing,' snapped Magnin, ramming his massive shield into the earth and bracing himself behind it.

Legendour seized him firmly by the shoulder. 'You'll flee for this. Obey the Prince of Azgal.'

The others were already withdrawing across the plateau and making for the portal behind them.

Magnin looked as if he was about to resist but then grunted and tramped noisily after the rest.

The dwarfs had barely breached the second chamber, a dilapidated hold hall much like everywhere else in Karak Azgal, when the first of the goblins burst through the cracked entranceway.

Magnin crushed the skull of one that made the mistake of getting close enough to his mattock. He rolled a second up the front of his shield and slammed it into a broken half column jutting from the flagstone floor. Its pulped body peeled away and was lost amongst the tramp of booted feet.

Falling back on instinct, the other dwarfs rallied around him, creating a circular wall of shields and weapons that faced in every direction. Only Raglan, who didn't carry a shield, stood apart from the wall of iron. He scaled a shattered statue that provided a high vantage point over the chamber and used his crossbow to pick off stragglers. He sent an iron-bolt into the eye of a skaven thrall-leader, punching most of the creature's brain out of the back of its skull in a welter of gore. He pinioned a goblin through the neck, spinning the greenskin with the impact and cutting off its straggled death cry.

At the core of the ring of dwarfs, Vorgil's lantern shone out like a beacon. He'd attached it by a length of chain to a spare axe he had sheathed on his back and it swung wildly, creating bizarre and monstrous shadows, as he fought with his rune pick.

It was the only luminescence in the lightless chamber, that and the magical glow from the dwarfs' ancestor weapons. Red pinpricks shimmered like living, malicious rubies in the blackness outside the lantern's influence... hundreds and hundreds of them. The dwarfs were surrounded and would soon be overrun.

'Lock shields!' Prince Darin had to bellow above the frantic chatter of the warring skaven and greenskins. He cut a burly skaven from groin to neck, loosing its guts across the flagstones.

'Defilers!' Magnin bellowed, incensed at the creatures' sacrilege and trespass. He slammed a goblin in the face with his shield, shattering its cheekbone and pushing its crooked nose into its brain, before slamming his hammer into a skaven behind it. The ratman crumpled under

the blow as its clavicle was reduced to splinters and much of its chest cavity crushed by the fearsome dwarf.

In his eagerness to kill everything rushing into the hold hall, Magnin had stepped out of the circle. His mattock was smashing bloody arcs through the creatures and his almost inviolable bulk could take the meagre blade cuts of the goblins and skaven, but it left a crucial gap in the dwarfs' defences. As a gatekeeper he was well used to tackling innumerable odds but that was usually in a tunnel with a small aperture, a bottleneck that could easily be protected.

'Back into the circle, ufdi!' shouted Hegendour, hewing a goblin in half through the torso before decapitating a skaven with the reverse swing.

Vorgil scowled in the vainglorious gatekeeper's direction, but said nothing. He was concentrating on fighting, and living. He wrenched his pickaxe from the top of a skaven's skull, releasing a jet of dark fluid, and roared to vent some tension.

Trapped within the confines of the circle, Skalf could see the creatures' numbers were waning.

'They are thinning out,' he shouted, pummelling the kneecap of a skaven and finishing it with a blow to the temple as it collapsed, squeaking in pain. Its brawny neck jagged sideways, Skalf's forge-born strength enough to push bone through skin. More were coming, surrounding them in an ever churning, ever chattering morass. There was a strange flow to the fight, though, as if the creatures were billowing past the dwarfs rather than pitching in to fight and kill them. It allowed a small moment of respite, which the runesmith exploited.

Skalf muttered a word of a power and a flash of lightning arced from his vambraces. It cut a ragged cleft in the hordes still spilling through the archway and the air was immediately filled with the stench of burning meat and fur.

As the fire-bright runes on his vambraces were fading again, he realised something.

'They're not attacking us.'

Prince Darin half-turned as he bifurcated a goblin's skull. His armour and tunic were wretched with gore.

'What?'

Skalf smacked a skaven with his shield. The ratman couldn't slow his momentum and ran into it. He stomped on the fallen creature's neck to kill it.

'We are just in their way. They are more concerned with fighting each other.'

Aside from the odd opportunistic blade thrust or cudgel swipe, the goblins and skaven weren't making a concerted effort to kill the dwarfs. Prince Darin drew his shield back.

'Hold. Shields high and together,' he said. 'Weather the storm.'

Magnin was still outside the ring of dwarfs, still fighting his own battle.

Prince Darin fixed him with an imperious glare.

'Gatekeeper!' His tone brooked no argument.

Magnin swore but began his slow retreat to the others.

Something moved in the horde. It was revealed as the skaven ranks thinned. Shadow-swathed and sinuous, it was no ordinary ratman.

Skalf cried out. 'Brother!'

Magnin was turning, lifting his weighty shield as the ring of dwarfs parted to accept him. The assassin creature had already bypassed his defences when a silver-bolt lodged in its throat, ending it. The skaven crumpled, its green-tinged dagger mere inches from the gatekeeper's unprotected flank.

The arrogant self-assurance on Magnin's face faded when he saw his saviour's ironic salute. Raglan looked pleased with his kill as he loaded another quarrel and brought a fresh target into his iron-sight.

The dwarfish ring of iron was still breached as a second black-clad assassin slipped into the gap, obscured by the first. Prince Darin grunted and Skalf caught the grimace on his face beneath his helmet before Hegendour decapitated the skaven. Its headless body fell back as the head caromed off into the dark. It was festooned with sharp-bladed stars, daggers and other jagged knives. Every piece of its serrated arsenal glowed with an unhealthy lustre.

'My lord...' Hegendour reached for his liege.

'Hold together,' snapped the prince, though his voice was ragged and breathy. A greyish pallor was affecting his skin already. 'It's a scratch, nothing more.'

Magnin reached the other dwarfs a few seconds later and the circle of iron closed again. Heads down, the dwarfs huddled together and became as one. Each of the warriors crouched down and put their shoulders behind the insides of their shields, weathering the barrage of goblin and skaven slamming against them.

Peering through a crack in his shield, Skalf caught glimpses of the creatures partly illuminated by Vorgil's lantern. It was frenetic, bodies blurring by in a cacophony of screaming and clashing iron. A jet of blood and saliva lashed against his peep hole and he turned his cheek at the stink.

One thing was certain, the greenskins and ratmen had no interest in the party of dwarfs. They were almost beneath their notice. This was a war for territory, and it was one in which the sons of Grungni had no stake.

Behind the wall of locked shields, Skalf met face-to-face with Prince Darin.

His eyes told the runesmith everything he needed to know about the prince's inevitable fate. The heir of Azgal knew it too and slowly shook

his head at Skalf. He was faltering, a crucial link in the dwarfs' collective armour about to buckle. Prince Darin's skin had turned from grey to alabaster white and was veneered in feverish, lustrous sweat.

'Keep me... on my feet, lad.'

Skalf shored up the prince's failing body with his shoulder, supporting him. With some difficulty, he took a stoppered flask from within the confines of his robes and pressed the uncorked lip to the prince's mouth.

'Drink, my liege,' said Skalf, as he muttered an incantation. The rune engraved on the side of the flask, hidden until that moment, blazed for a few seconds and was lost again. The short flare of power indicated the salve's lack of healing potency. It would keep the prince on his feet, but not for much longer.

'Hold!' he croaked, and there was some defiance in the heir of Azgal's voice.

Gradually, the battering against the dwarfs' locked shields lessened and the chattering diminished. Magnin was first to stick his head up and found a few stragglers left to kill that Raglan hadn't already shot with his crossbow. The hill dwarf had come down from his perch and was commencing the grisly work of retrieving his bolts, finishing off any creatures that still lived with his hand axe. He was ripping the blade from a goblin's skull when he caught Skalf's gaze.

'We'll need every one before this is done,' he said. 'We should have gone back, brought more warriors.'

For once Magnin didn't chide him.

He cast around at the corpses of ratmen and greenskins, frozen in death, their blades jutting out of one another.

'Barely knew we were here,' he muttered in a half-whisper. 'Since when did we dawi become the vermin?'

He grew quiet and sullen, taking no pleasure in dispatching the injured creatures that were left in the hold hall. The hill dwarf had saved his life, and that was one thing - to be rescued from death by an elf-friend was cause for dismay enough - but he knew he had also allowed the prince to be injured, possibly gravely. It was plain on the gatekeeper's grizzled face that he was ashamed.

Hegendour was tending to his lord when Skalf approached them.

'Can anything be done?' asked the hearthguard, without looking up from the pallid, gaunt visage of Prince Darin.

There was a lump in Skalf's throat as he replied, 'I've done it, brother. There's no greater craft I possess that can heal him,' and in a quieter voice added, 'the legacy of Azgal has ended.'

'Dreng tromm...' Hegendour's lament was heartfelt. 'I did not protect you well enough, lord.'

Prince Darin smiled, though it was more of a grimace by the end. He slipped, fell to one armoured knee. The metal clang was doleful and

echoing. Skalf and Hegendour reached out to catch him before he collapsed.

'Lay me down,' said the prince. Green-black veins ran across his almost skeletal face and neck as the skaven's poison taint entered its final stages of virulence.

The dwarfs did as ordered, slowly setting the heir of Azgal on the cold ground even as Raglan and Magnin gathered around to witness his passing.

Prince Darin clasped Hegendour's hand in a firm but desperate grip. It was the last of his strength. The hearthguard placed the prince's axe in the other hand, bent his fingers around the haft for him. He then leaned down as the prince motioned to speak but all that escaped his lips was an agonised rasp.

'And on this day so passes Prince Darin, son of Durik, last heir of Karak Azgal,' uttered Skalf, standing and bowing his head. 'Let it be known that this deed was wrought by the rat-kin and a heavy toll shall be exacted upon their race in grudgement of it.'

'There are not enough tails and snouts in all of the Hoard Hold,' snapped Hegendour, rising. 'Not enough to atone for my shame...' He removed the straps holding his cuirass together then the greaves and vambraces, the chainmail vest beneath and his tunic. The others watched in silence as the hearthguard divested his body of its armour and stood before them naked from the waist up. He cast down his helmet and though he had no lime to fashion a crest, cut a wound across his arm and used the blood to paint a rune of Grimmir upon his torso. Then he walked into the dark to make his Slayer's Oath.

'What do we do now?' Raglan kept his voice down and one eye on the distraught Hegendour just a few feet away.

Even Magnin, ordinarily so pugnacious, was uncertain.

In the end, Skalf answered. 'We go on, find the beast and kill it as the king bade us.'

'His son is dead, the prince...' Magnin's guilt was obvious as his voice faded to silence.

'We should go back,' Raglan said again, 'and return with more warriors.'

Magnin bristled, finding his resolve. 'There is no back! There is only forwards into the deeps or there is death here, in this place.'

'But--'

'A beardling shames you, elf-friend!' the gatekeeper snapped, though Skalf suspected some of his anger was directed inwards.

Realisation crept onto Raglan's face. His shoulders sagged. There was no other choice. They were, all of them, bound to this fate now. They would find the beast, be it troll or wyvern or whatever dark monster had taken up in the ruins of Azgal, and kill it or die in the attempt. Suddenly, his prosperous mine holdings seemed very far away and the gold he had come here to claim cheap and sullied by comparison.

'Into the darkness then,' he said. 'At least we have our guide.'

Magnin frowned, looking around. 'Where is that chuff-eater?'

Skalf found him. Vorgil was kneeling just outside the hold hall in a long, wide gallery that had seen much better days. Tattered strips of cloth that might once have been banners draped the walls, fluttering like ghostly fingers as a draft from the upper levels disturbed them. Of the skaven and goblins that must have passed through it there was no sign. There was some natural light here. It came from the small chips of brynduraz, or brightstone, that the verminous creatures had had either missed or were unable to prise loose, and flickered weakly in the gloom.

Vorgil's face was bathed in its pearlescent glow. It made him appear cold and desolate, his humours melancholic. The lantern, now sat beside him, had faded to a dulled ember much like the lode warden's mood.

'I was wrong,' he said, turning something over in his hands that Skalf couldn't see with the miner's back to him.

'About what, brother?'

Skalf reached the miner's side and saw that Vorgil was cradling a pair of battered, slightly scorched boots. A small chain of runes was engraved in the leather and the gromril toecaps still shone when they caught the gleam of brightstone.

'It was the right fork,' he said, holding out the boots so that Skalf could see them. 'Fendril's zharr-klod, his fire-boots...' Vorgil tipped them and ash poured from within to make a pile in front of him. 'My cousin is dead.'

The heat of the fire hadn't lessened. It had intensified. Skalf's arms were burning too, but from exertion and not the heady atmosphere of the forge. He had pumped the bellows, fuelling the heart flame with as much fury as he dare. Sweat lathered his body, coiling off his skin in upwardly rising motes of steam. His fingers were grimed with soot, his hammer scorched black. He struck the ever-stone again.

It didn't yield. There was no visible mark against it at all. Nothing.

The hammer head was broken, split down the middle with a gaping fissure that exposed the weakness of his craft rather than the fuller's construction. Wiping his bone-sore hands on his apron, he went to the rack to grab another.

'Kruti-eating, wazzock pissing...' he swore, seizing a particularly large and broad-headed mattock. 'Grungni's hairy arse...' he went on muttering, gauging the heft of the heavier hammer.

At a chink of metal touching metal, Skalf looked up from the blacksmith's rack and saw the master was watching, brooding. A thick plume of pipe smoke gusted from his mouth, occluding his disapproving face from view for a moment before he spoke through clenched teeth.

'It is not the tools, lad,' he rumbled, chewing at the end of his pipe. 'It's you.'

'We shall see,' muttered Skalf, tightening his belt and fixing his enemy, the defiant chunk of ever-stone in his sights.

'Speak the words... strike... split the karadurak if you are worthy.'

Skalf ignored the master's gibes directed at his back. He was breathing hard, trying to channel his wrath into a pure blow, one that would shatter the ever-stone.

The incantation tumbled over his lips like the first fledging rocks presaging a landslide and, taking the forging mattock in a two-handed grip, slammed into the chunk of ever-stone with every ounce of strength he could muster.

A flash of fat sparks spilled from the hammer's head, followed by a loud crack that foreshadowed the haft splitting in half. As the mattock hung broken and useless in Skalf's clenched fist, he looked on at the inviolable ever-stone, still untouched, taunting, mocking him...

Skalf roared.

He ripped a stout mallet from the rack and smacked it into the rock, then another and another. By the end of his rampage, two heavy mallets, one sledge hammer and a mattock lay ruined and shattered around the anvil where the seemingly indestructible ever-stone still sat.

Heaving breath back into his body, near choking on the smoke and heat, his eyes watering with the effort and his muscles ablaze, he glared at the master.

'It... will not... break.'

The master glowered, his old eyes like chips of napped flint.

'Either it will or you will, lad.' He unfolded his arms, revealing the brawn in his muscles and the clanking panoply of his torques and bronze knot-bands. A gromril breastplate encased his barrel chest and there was a weapons belt attached to his waist. The scabbard of the master's rune axe was strapped to his back, the leather-bound haft and dragon's head pommel jutting above his armoured shoulder. 'I am summoned to battle, beardingling.'

Skalf's face brightened but the master's dour expression quickly dashed his nascent hopes.

'Urk and grobi amass at our southern gate, doubtless come from Azgal's ruins. The Hoard Hold overflows with their stink,' he spat. 'You will remain here, but upon my return I expect the karadurak to be broken.'

Skalf's protests were cut off before he could voice them.

'You are no use to me as an apprentice if you cannot do this. You are no use to your hold as a runesmith if you fail.' The master paused, appraising the young dwarf with a hard, unforgiving expression. It was not so dissimilar from the ever-stone, that look. 'Wrath leads to ruin, lad.' He gestured to the broken tools that Skalf had sundered in his rage. 'You cannot break it that way.'

'It is unbreakable, lord.'

The master's eyes were pitiless as he turned. He had a heavy cloak upon his shoulders, attached to his pauldrons and furs beneath his chainmail undershirt. It must be winter. Skalf had been a prisoner in the forge for months, sustained on stonebread and dregs-ale. It was a foul, brackish brew, more tar than beer, but it was fortifying.

'Hammer the rock, use your craft. Split the rock,' said the master as he was leaving. 'You have until I return from the southern gate, Blackhammer.' He sneered the last word, using the honorific derogatorily. It was Skalf's namesake. He looked down at his blackened hands, the scorched and broken hammers strewn around the anvil and recognised it for what it was - a slur.

He would restore its honour. Determined not to be found wanting, he picked up a mallet and struck again.

It had once been a feast hall. The smell of roasting boar and cured meats, the tangy aroma of slow-cooking mountain goat and the redolence of ale should have filled this place. Only the stink of death, the slow decay of flesh and the reek of mouldering cloth lingered now. It had become a tomb, populated by revenants and the rancorous whispers of the long dead.

A vast hearth dominated one wall, still discernible through the dust and grime. Murky shadows lurked in the ancestor faces carved in its sweeping arches and stout buttresses. Voids in the dirt in the shape of weapons suggested where ancestral heirlooms had once lived above the mantle. Stripped in the name of desperate defence, of a final stand against impossible odds, these blades and hammers were lost to vagaries of fate and the capriciousness of nature.

Rubble lay about where parts of the ceiling had caved in or at the site of a collapsed column or statue. Underfoot, the mosaic slabs were chipped and cracked. A great fissure ran across the ground, cutting the dwarf helm icon that had been painstakingly rendered in the stone in two, like a jagged axe wound.

The dwarfs kept to the fire. They encircled the small flame, muttering quietly, lost in their thoughts. It was a vast chamber but they kept to one side; the other sloped downwards badly, the foundation stones having given way and the floor sunken.

Vorgil had said it must be on account of undermining, for no dwarf foundations would ever capitulate due to age. Such things were made to last, to outlast. Except Azgal hadn't outlasted them: it was a ruin and one overrun with the creatures dwarfs once thought of as vermin.

'No troll could have done this,' said the miner, moribund and forlorn. He had Fendril's boots in his hands and was turning them over and over as if trying to find some meaning in the pattern of the leather. 'Fendril was nought but ash. Nought but ash...'

'I have heard some trolls can spit fire, others that are made of stone,' offered Raglan, unhelpfully.

'It's likely a wyvern we are hunting,' said Magnin, scowling at the hill dwarf. 'No troll I ever fought could breathe fire,' he scoffed.

Raglan got to his feet, weapons clanking together as he rose. 'And you have fought all the trolls of the underdeeps have you, Magnin, son of Thord, bloody thane-king of all the wazzocking gatekeepers, eh?'

'Down, elf-friend,' the other dwarf replied, paying him no mind. 'Seems imminent and certain death suits you. At least you are bolder.'

'Nought but ash...' muttered Vorgil.

'Daled Stormbreaker ventured into these deeps to kill a drakk,' said Skalf, shivering despite his furs and cloak. All eyes turned to regard him, glittering like dead jewels in the lambent firelight.

'Speak up then, lad,' said Raglan, sitting down again. 'Tell us of this hero. What became of him?'

Magnin nodded, eager to have his mind occupied by something other than guilt and fatalism. He gestured for Skalf to go on.

The runesmith cleared his throat. 'My master told me of him once. He was a great warrior-thane and treasure hunter, an orphan of Sundered Karak Drazh, the Black Crag. He wore a gilded helm of griffon feathers. His axe carried runes of sharpness and beast-slaying from before the War of Vengeance, when our race was at its peak. His shield, fashioned from drake scale and banded gromril, could turn aside any flame and endure any blow. It was Daled that slew the urk chief, Gargut, and mounted its head on the spiked wall of the greenskin's fastness; he who banished the blood-fiend of Hel's Talon and destroyed the Crooked Tooth grobi tribe of Death Pass; he who vanquished the serpent-wyrm of Black Water.'

Skalf's face darkened as he recounted the next part of the saga. 'But these deeds did not prepare him for what he faced in the cold dark of Karak Azgal. When the southern holds fell, Daled led an expedition into the mountains. He hoped to make his fortune and restore some of the lost heirlooms of the hold but he did not return from the journey. There are... rumours of the beast he encountered in the long blackness, of the drakk that finally ended his legacy.'

'I had hoped for something cheerier, beardling,' said Magnin. 'Perhaps with a song or bawdy ditty.'

'Graug...' whispered Raglan, daring not to speak the name aloud, as if doing so would somehow summon the creature from the depths.

'A wyvern or troll could not do this,' said Vorgil, offering up the boots as evidence of his words, 'they could not burn my cousin down to his boots like kindling!'

'Keep your voice down,' hissed the hill dwarf, his nervous gaze alighting on Hegendour. The hearthguard was sat apart from the rest, eschewing the warmth of the fire on self-punitive grounds. Skalf noticed that despite his lack of cloak or armour he did not tremble in the cold, not even slightly. He was as still and unfeeling as the dead rock surrounding them. Poor, dead Prince Darin was laid next to him in repose atop a bier of shields the dwarfs were using to carry him with.

Despite the impracticality, Hegendour had insisted upon it.

Vorgil would not be silenced. He got to his feet, brandishing the last of Fendril's trappings like an accusation.

'Burned,' he cried, 'to his boots!' Spit and phlegm speckled his quivering beard. 'It was a drakk, it could be nothing other.'

A deep, echoing voice came from the darkness outside of the fire's glow.

'It is no drakk,' said Hegendour. 'It cannot be.' The thick muscles in his back bunched as he got up. He rotated his shoulder blades, stretched the stiffness from his neck and arms. 'We've rested enough. It's time to move on and find this monster.'

'Why cannot it be a drakk, brother?' asked Vorgil, unafraid of the slayer's distemper.

Hegendour turned and his granite face was creased with repressed anger.

'Because our king told us it was not! Are you saying he's a liar? Graug is slain. Its pelt adorns my liege-lord's back. It is a troll or wyvern, and we shall kill it.'

'What if it was spawn?' asked Skalf. He was the last of the dwarfs to stand, and maintained eye contact with Hegendour as he did so. The former hearthguard had changed over the last few hours, become mercurial and unpredictable. Many who took the Slayer Oath were affected in the same way. It made them dangerous.

Skalf took a moment to slow his racing heart.

'The king is no liar,' he said carefully, 'he did indeed kill a drakk but what if it was not Graug? What if the hide he had fashioned into his cloak was actually kin to the beast, its young?'

The chamber was filled with a sudden, tense silence as Hegendour considered the runesmith's proposal.

'It would explain much of what we've seen,' Skalf added.

Hegendour's face was almost unmoving.

'It is a troll, nothing more.'

Hefting his axes, the Slayer kneeled to speak a few words to Prince Darin and then moved on.

Spirits low, the dwarfs followed him, Magnin and Raglan taking up the bier of shields and their regal burden strapped to it.

'Nought but ash,' muttered Vorgil. There were tears in his eyes for Fendril as he stoked up the lantern. Its wan glow described the gauntness in his features.

'I know, brother,' said Skalf, patting the distraught miner's arm. He hoped that Hegendour was right, that it was just a troll grown large and terrible over the years spent in the darkness, but he doubted it.

As the dwarfs picked their way down the slope, careful to avoid the deepest pitfalls, a sense of doom settled upon them. It was one they could not shake.

The master was still, his broken breastplate unmoving, his beard matted with blood. Even in death he wore a scowl. Now lying upon the anvil, he had been brought down to the forge in order for Skalf to see him and make any final peace or oath he needed to.

A pair of hefty looking anvil guards stood to either side, ready to bear the rune lord to his final rest in the tombs of the hold.

Though no one had told him one way or the other, Skalf assumed the battle at the southern gate had gone badly. From what little he had heard, the urk and grobi were much more numerous than the dwarfs had thought. What had begun as a fight to cleanse the outer slopes of greenskins had turned into a desperate retreat and the sealing of the southern gate indefinitely. As the thane's own clan warriors, the Stonefists, had kept the armoured urk at bay, Skalf's master had wrought the runic locks upon the gate. Alas, he had failed to close them before an urk chieftain stove in his chest with an axe blade.

The wound was mortal, and the priests of Valaya were summoned shortly after the master shut the gate with the last of his strength and collapsed.

'You are Skalf?' asked a hammerer, one of the king's retainers. He and four other warriors had arrived shortly after the dead master. All were thickly armoured with full-faced ancestor helms and double-headed mattocks. 'Of the Blackhammer?'

Skalf looked down at his soot-stained hands and the blackened head of the forging mallet he was still dumbly carrying. He nodded mutely, one eye still on his master's recumbent body.

'The king has summoned you, or rather he had summoned your master but since he has passed to Grungni's halls...'

'It falls to me to honour his oaths,' Skalf said for him.

The hammerer nodded, approving of the beardling's outward courage and sense of duty. 'Are you skilled, young Skalf?' He appraised the thickness of the runesmith's arms and the length of his beard. 'Did your master impart enough of his knowledge before he was slain by urk and grobi filth?'

Skalf's ire rose at the mention of the greenskins, but he kept his anger checked.

'He taught me the craft and I have forged a master rune under his tutelage.'

'Good, you will have need of such arcane knowledge in the deeps of Azgal.'

With a clanking refrain from his armour, the hammerer was turning and beckoning the runesmith to follow when Skalf spoke up.

'Are we to venture beyond the upper halls then?'

'You are leaving this settlement behind, lad, and the upper halls of the hold proper too.'

Skalf quickly gathered his trappings and knelt to make a final imprecation to his dead master, nodding to the anvil guards that he was finished, before hurrying after the retinue of hammerers.

'To what purpose... er...'

'Belgrad,' said the hammerer, giving his name, 'and your purpose is with the Prince of Karak Azgal no less. A beast, lad, the king has a mind that it should be vanquished.'

Skalf swallowed, trying to mask the sound of his fear behind a faked cough.

Belgrad looked over his shoulder, not fooled. 'Don't worry, beardling, it's only a troll I am sure. Nothing to a seasoned runesmith like yourself.'

Nodding, hoping, Skalf gave one last look to the forge and his master before it was lost to sight. The anvil guards were lifting him reverently. In his wake, Skalf could see the other anvil and the ever-stone gleaming dully. It was untouched, unbroken.

'Yes, nothing,' Skalf answered, leaving the forge and his master behind.

There was dirt and grit in his mouth. It clogged his beard, made him want to choke. Darkness engulfed him and there was blood on his forehead, a long, warm trail of it that ran down his cheek and welled around his eye. He'd lost a boot and felt the scrape of rock against his stockinged foot like knife blades.

'Here!' The shout came from overhead. It sounded muffled, indistinct, but he could hear the words well enough. 'It's the beardling.. he's alive.'

A pinprick of light resolved somewhere above him. The aperture grew larger and Skalf realised he was partially buried alive under a mound of fallen earth and rock. He also remembered what had happened and the tunnel collapsing in on them.

Magnin's smiling face regarded him as he hauled Skalf to his feet again. The gatekeeper had lost his helmet and his armour was battered, but otherwise he looked little the worse for wear. Raglan was nearby and cast one of the rocks he'd been heaving loose to one side as he went over to them. Unlike the gatekeeper, the hill dwarf was solemn.

'Vorgil is dead,' he told them, 'crushed, along with Prince Darin's body. At least it is interment of a sort.' Raglan held up the zharr-klod, Fendril's boots, in one hand and the runic lantern in the other. 'I found these flung just beyond the rubble.'

'He was trying to save them,' said Skalf, taking the boots as Raglan offered them. The runesmith's own, at least the one that remained, was battered. 'By Valaya's golden cups, they fit,' he added as he changed out of the old pair and into the new. There were warm and made him feel lighter, bolder.

'Looks like the lode warden's lantern did not escape as intact,' said Raglan. It flickered and faded in his other hand, its magical embers

weakening. After each stuttering flare the surrounding darkness closed a little tighter, like a noose. 'Can you reinvigorate it, lad?'

Skalf examined the artefact carefully. His skull was thumping and he gingerly touched a bulbous contusion just above his brow, wincing. After a few moments, he shook his head.

'Without the specific Khazalid used to invoke its light, there's little I can do.' He muttered a few words of power he did know, tracing the runes with his dirt-encrusted fingers and igniting them with a dimming flame. The embers grew brighter but not by much.

Raglan nodded and went to find a way out of the half-collapsed chamber. Even with the lantern light it was hard to see much of anything. The air was choked with dust, slow to disperse in the close confines of the underdeep. Collapsed stone made footing treacherous and there were a great many cracks and crags.

'Be wary,' Magnin called after him, 'there is a chasm not far. I almost fell into it.'

'Is it deep?' asked Raglan.

'Deep enough. I couldn't see the bottom but there was a stench emanating from its bowels, sulphurous and acerbic.'

They exchanged a dark glance between them but said nothing further.

The mood between the two grudge-holding dwarfs had improved as their overall situation worsened. It was the dwarf way, to find solidarity through adversity. Skalf was heartened by it but he was also acutely aware their party was now down to three and they had yet to find the beast. He wondered about the chasm.

'It is a drakk then?' asked Magnin as Skalf was dusting off his tunic and adjusting his belts.

'Yes,' Skalf replied. 'It is Graug, I am certain of that now. It meant to kill us in that cave-in. Perhaps it even thinks we are dead and will return later for its feed.'

'Then we can use that to our advantage, sneak up on the monster in its lair. It cannot be far, such beasts do not often roam.'

Skalf was rebinding the leather strap around the haft of his hammer, about to agree with the gatekeeper when an awful hollering resolved on the dust-thick air.

'Grobi,' hissed Magnin, his mattock in hand. 'Elf-friend, you're needed.'

Raglan returned swiftly as the hollering grew to a shrieking roar.

'Urk, too, by the sounds of it.'

The hill dwarf had lost his crossbow when climbing out of the rubble; the wooden stock, even though it was fashioned from stoutest wutroth, had broken. It was part of the reason he still lived. On Raglan's back, it had acted as a brace when the rocks fell. He made do with his hand axes instead, one gripped in each fist as he eyed the dark.

The lantern's light was waning.

Fissures and crevices, unseen by the dwarfs at first, came alive with those same malignant rubies as before. Glittering and blinking in anticipation of the kill, the blood-red gems grew larger until they finally became eyes and the greenskins emerged into the half-light cast by Vorgil's lantern.

Diminutive but cruel-faced goblins presaged a horde of much larger orcs, draped in skaven pelts. Many had fangs strung around their brawny necks on threads of sinew. One particularly massive and thickly armoured brute wore a skaven thrall-leader's head on either hulking shoulder. Despite their earlier gains, it looked as though the ratmen had lost the war for territory.

'Get behind us, lad,' said Magnin, backing off.

Skalf had never seen the gatekeeper retreat, it was almost anathema to one of his conviction, but the greenskins were many.

A hand axe buried in the wretch's face arrested the charge of the first goblin. It was smacked off its rag-swaddled feet by the force of the blow and trampled into the dirt as others followed.

They swarmed, spilling over the crags and upon the dwarfs in cackling droves.

Mattock swinging, Magnin carved a swathe into the creatures and sent broken bodies tumbling. Down to his last axe, Raglan chopped at skulls and necks with the perfunctory ease of a woodcutter. Lopping heads, he growled at the runesmith.

'Find the beast, lad. Into the chasm. There's nothing left here but death.'

Skalf's reply was cut short by a grunt from Magnin. The gatekeeper snapped the end off the spear lodged between his greave plates and pummelled its wielder with a gauntleted fist.

'Back!' he snarled, biting back the pain through clenched teeth.

Raglan hacked down another goblin, cleaving open its torso and exposing bone.

'There is no back,' he replied, cutting into another.

Greenskin corpses encircled them, noisome and rank, in an ever-increasing mire.

'Then hold,' said Magnin, 'back-to-back and make your stand with me.' He turned and spat at Skalf. 'Go now, lad, into the chasm.'

Skalf nodded, and stumbled towards the back of the benighted corridor, feeling his way in the gloom so far from the lantern. The end of the tunnel was sealed shut by fallen debris but he found the jag of split stone Magnin had urged him towards. It was wide enough for a dwarf, but barely. And it was abyssal deep, almost bottomless.

As he delved into the darkling chasm Skalf's last image was of Magnin and Raglan, their backs together, cutting down goblins as the orcs came on. The lantern's light was dying, soon it would be black. Skalf descended below the lip of the crevice, finding hand and footholds through touch and blind experimentation.

He didn't hear the screams, or at least he chose not to acknowledge them.

It was hot in the narrow darkness of that cleft, jagged too. He swore as a jutting crag cut open his tunic and drew blood. And the stench. It was potent, enough to make his eyes water. Reaching for a fresh stub of rock, he slipped. Blood-red stars flashed before his eyes and he felt a deeper blackness claim him, all sound slipping into its endless, well-like depths, as he fell.

Pain brought him back around briefly, a stab like a dagger thrust in his back then one in his arm as his formless attacker turned frenzied. Then all was silence again and feeling fled from Skalf's body...

He heard dwarf song, the deep lament of the brewmasters, the sound of pipes and the beating of drums. He smelled rock and earth, roasting meat and the waft of ale. Warmth spread across his body and he felt the presence of others nearby. A place was made for him at the table, though it was not yet earned. The aromas changed just as the slowly resolving impression of the feast hall faded. They became acerbic, biting and unpleasant but there was something else too, something that had awakened him, something that was calling...

Skalf opened one eye and realised he was alive. He was lying on his side, his head wet but not from blood. Water dropped from a stalactite overhead, drumming onto his skull with the insistence of a thudding mace.

Rolling over, he patted his empty weapons belt. His rune hammer was gone, lost somewhere in the fathomless dark. A gloom surrounded him but it lessened farther up the narrow tunnel he was lying in. There were grooves in the ceiling where the rock had been worn away over time. Several of the stalactites were broken nubs of stone, ground almost flat by the passage of something large and unyielding.

Groaning with the pain in his back and arm, Skalf got to his feet and headed for the source of the light.

Within thirty paces of the refulgent glow at the end of the tunnel he smelled it. Like an intoxicating liquor on his tongue, like the scent of hops and fermenting yeast, like the comforting odour of soot and iron. It was better than all of these and sent a fire raging through the runesmith despite the danger he knew he was in.

'Gorl...' The word barely escaped his lips, groggy with half-drunken gold lust. This shining metal had been the undoing of many a dwarf. They had many names for it: bryn, that which shines lustrously; galaz, decorative or ornamental gold; ril, gold ore or that which has been recently mined. Each incarnation was as intoxicating as the last. It had driven prospectors mad with fever, causing them to kill their own kin in the worst cases, and here it was; an entire cavern of gleaming, shimmering gold.

'Gorl...' he said again and could not keep the glee from his voice.

Crowns piled atop ingots that rose atop sovereigns that surmounted doubloons. Gems of every facet, every hue, some the size of Skalf's brawny fist, littered the massive cave in abundance. Mounds of coins, minted in ages long dead, stretched almost to the vaulted ceiling and spread in vast swathes across the floor.

It took all of Skalf's willpower not to sink down into the glittering morass and bask. The urge to rub it all over his body, to drink in its heady scent was strong. He wanted to gather up as much as he could, fill his tunic, his knapsack, even his helm.

It would be folly, and yet...

In the end, it was the presence of something mired in the gilded sea before him that brought Skalf around.

It was not merely a treasure vault, this place; it was also a tomb.

At first he noticed an armoured hand, jutting from a tor of scattered coins, aureate bracelets, torques and gilded diadems. Two of the gauntleted fingers had rusted away revealing the skeletal wearer beneath.

Elsewhere, like a drowning man reaching for his final breath, a warrior's head peeked just above a lagoon of treasure. His corpse was not alone. There were several others, all dead, some with armour of the Empire; others wearing the heraldry and trappings of the haughty Bretonnians. They were knights, would-be dragon slayers, and they had all been found wanting.

Delving further, unable to shake the nagging sense of being watched, Skalf came across the bodies of dwarfs too. He recognised Slayers, and the brotherhood of ironbreakers and hammerers. In their hollowed-out eye sockets, their grinning rictus skulls, he saw the death of his comrades and his eventual fate should he linger in this place.

But he had sworn an oath. Not only to his king but to his master, albeit in death.

'Kill the beast...' he whispered, and began to search for a weapon.

Skalf was prising an axe - its edge glittered coldly in the lustrous glow of the chamber - from the dead fingers of a warrior-thane when he felt the coins beneath him begin to tremble. It was a trickle at first, a few crowns scattering like the disturbed scree from a golden mountainside. It swiftly became a landslide.

Abandoning the blade for easier pickings, Skalf half-ran, half-fell down the mound of coins. He was picking himself up when he caught the stink of sulphur, carried on a subterranean breeze wafting down from the upper world. It mingled with the reek of flesh, the foul odour of putrefaction. Soot and embers clouded above him like a pyroclastic thunderhead vented from some unseen caldera.

The eruption announced the arrival of a monster, a thing whose mere presence shook the very earth and made it quake.

Skalf had no shield, no weapon of any kind that could slay a magical creature as the dragon crested the largest of the gilded mounds. It was magnificent and terrifying, fear and wonder warring in the

runesmith's mind as he beheld the ancient creature. Wings enfolded, it scaled the cliffs of treasure with its talons and sat upon the summit in resplendent glory, slightly awkward despite its size and obvious majesty.

Scales of incarnadine red encased its muscular torso. The ribbed belly was softer and paler, like curdled milk, but still leathern and the match of any common blade or lance. A serpentine neck was punctuated by arching spines twice the length of an elven spear and twice as thick again. Its snout was long, ringed by jagged fangs and drooled smoke and sulphurous ichor.

But even as it unfurled its mighty wings, the membrane spanning the pinions as thick as mail and many times more resilient, it was the eyes that Skalf fixated on. They were jade green slivers of coldest ice, pitiless and malignant. As it emitted a reverberant bellow of challenge, Skalf realised it wanted to feed and he would be its morsel.

Skalf regarded the small forging hammer still tucked in his belt. Its head was blackened from his efforts in the forge. Such petty concerns seemed like a lifetime ago.

Fighting would be unwise. To stand was to die, so Skalf ran.

Presaged by the sharp intake of bestial breath, a plume of flame roared in front of the runesmith and he turned. Spuming fire cut him off again and he came up short. Molten metal surrounded him like a gilded lagoon in which he was the only island. Tendrils of flame flickered in the gleaming magma-gold, licking at the toecaps of his boots.

Graug bellowed again, a high-pitched sound that might have been mirth. Its shadow loomed, eclipsing the dwarf utterly. The dragon had him trapped.

Skalf turned to face it, defiance not fear written on his face.

'Grimnir!' he raged at the beast, which reciprocated with a roar of its own that swamped the air and thickened it with the stink of sulphur.

Rearing back a serpentine head, Graug snapped its jaws once in threat and then lathed the air with a long, leathery tongue.

Then it dived.

Despite being surrounded by a river of burning, molten gold, Skalf fled. The runes on the zharr-klod blazed bright as he ran, muttered oaths from the runesmith to Grungni and Valaya punctuating ever miraculous step.

Graug was unprepared. It thought its prey pinned by the mire it had fashioned. Too late it tried to pull out of its attack, but the dragon's massive momentum drove it into the patch of gold where the dwarf had been standing. Its wings and much of its scaled body were suddenly awash with molten gold. It thrashed as searing, gilt liquid rose up around it, embracing, burning. A bleat of panic escaped its lips, deep and ululating... and rage, rage that it had been duped.

It was hurt, and as he found a place to hide, Skalf smiled.

'A little sting to remember me by,' he said, crouching down on his haunches.

At the edge of the cavern, the gloom swallowed him. Skalf had run as far as he dared to put some distance between himself and the dragon. Self-preservation, the desire to make the beast hunt for its prey, burned within him. Though he couldn't see it, he heard the dragon's belligerent mewling. Tiny shrieks of pain were interleaved with longer, deeper roars of promise. It would rend him, this beast of the ancient world; it would prove its dominance over his weakling flesh.

Once the dragon had escaped, clawed its way to solid ground scarred and enraged, Skalf would be dead. It had played with him at first; now it knew the folly of that. Graug would not err again. Surrounded by the dead in this cavern of lost treasures, the runsmith would become just another failed hero amongst those interred within.

'Just as Daled Stormbreaker was...' he uttered mournfully then stopped.

In the dragon's rampage, pillars of coins and gemstones had been toppled, dense banks of gold had levelled out; the landscape had changed. Things long buried in the gilded depths had re-emerged like bodies bloated with putrescence or old bones arisen to the surface in a sudden swell.

Skalf caught sight of an axe handle. Discerning the icon upon its pommel, he crawled over to it on his belly. Graug had freed itself of the molten mire and was stalking him, trying to heave in the dwarf's scent through its flaring nostrils. A glimpse through the collapsed hoard just as he reached the weapon revealed the beast was partially blinded, one jade sliver turned milky white and ringed by burned, swollen dragon flesh.

It was drawing closer.

Gripping the axe haft, Skalf pulled. The broken lightning bolt icon on the pommel quivered but did not yield. A few more coins trickled away, tinkling as they rolled and settled.

They revealed a blade of purest gromril seized in a fist of black, glittering stone.

It had been almost a thousand years since Daled Stormbreaker had ventured into the mountains. Some say he met his end in Graug's lair. Skalf now knew that to be true. He also knew the nature of the thing that held the fabled dwarf hero's weapon fast.

'Karadurak...' Skalf's heart sank.

Brushing away more of the coins, heedless of the clamour they created, Skalf realised what he must do.

A skeletal face loomed out of the spilled gold. It wore a helm with a chainmail coif around the head and neck. Upon its ruined chest was a talisman with a broken fork of lightning as its sigil.

Graug's heavy tread sent tremors through the treasure mounds, scattering coins like rain. Its rasping breath was near enough to taste. The blow, if failed, would bring the dragon to him. There would be no more escapes after that.

Skalf met the empty, hollow gaze of Daled Stormbreaker.

'I beseech you...' he whispered.

Unhitching the forge hammer from his belt, he raised the weapon above his shoulder and spoke the words of invocation his master had taught him.

'Let me strike truly.'

A thunderclap announced the blow and a sudden, raucous crack of stone split the air moments later as the fabled rune axe came loose. Skalf wrenched it aloft in triumph, releasing a jagged fork of lightning from the blade.

The beast was almost upon him. A resonant screech escaped its lips, a death-promise for the dwarf-thing that had scalded and half-blinded it.

Skalf couldn't see it yet, but was about to show himself when he felt something brush against his open hand. A shield clad in a patina of dust but fortified by potent runes of protection sat within his grasp. This was Daled's shield. His icon was described upon the boss. Skalf hadn't seen it before but when he looked to the fallen hero, he hadn't moved; there was no response in his dead eyes.

'Thank you, brother,' he whispered, taking up the shield, hefting the axe and stepping out into the light.

'Beast!' he hollered, and saw the dragon. It was near, Skalf almost felt the malice shimmering off its scaled hide, but had to turn its massive frame to bring its baleful gaze upon him.

'Graag the Terrible,' Skalf declared. Swiftly and resolve were everything now. As the dragon came at him, Skalf knew he would be afforded just one chance. He turned his shoulder, shield to the front, the axe brandished behind him like a crackling talisman.

'Come forth and be reckoned!'

A burst of flame surged from the dragon's mouth and Skalf raised the shield, sinking behind it and praying that the engraved runes were still potent. Incredible heat crashed over him in a vast wave. He felt the edges of his beard smouldering with it, his skin prickling, but he endured.

When the firestorm abated, Skalf lowered the shield and saw that Graug was bearing down on him. It was immense, almost paralysing in its ferocity. Jaws extended, still drooling the fiery aftermath of its breath, the dragon meant to chew the runesmith in half.

Trusting Daled's blade, in the teachings of his master and the legacy of those brave dwarfs he had seen slain in this place, Skalf swung. As the axe's runic edge cleaved through inviolable scale, chewed into skin and then flesh, he roared. A great fissure opened up in Graug's neck and bathed him in its jettisoning blood. He cut again as the beast stumbled, a panicked bleat escaping from its lolling maw.

'Grimnir!' Skalf dug a rent into its shoulder. The return stroke hacked a wedge into the jugular. Anointed by ancient lifeblood, the gold

turned wet and crimson. A final blow split open the monster's belly, releasing shining ropes of intestine.

Graug's final death cry was a shriek that reverberated around the vast cavern, shaking it to its core. As it rolled onto its flank, heaving a last tortured breath, Skalf sagged and nearly fell.

It was not the battle he had envisaged. It was not the glorious moment of dragon slaying he had thought it would be. It was brutal and messy; it was almost honourless in its savagery. But Graug was dead and he had reclaimed the trappings of Daled Stormbreaker into the bargain.

It would suffice.

Sagas would be written of this moment, of that he was certain. They would not recount all that had transpired, they would glorify and aggrandise because all great deeds need a great tale to go with them. Skalf just wanted to return to the surface, to be reunited with what was left of his clan. The way back was denied to him, but ahead there was a small oval of light leading to an upper chamber. Like any dwarf, he could find a way marker and reach the upper hold halls again.

But he still had one more duty to perform before he could leave.

Strapping the shield to his back, Skalf took the rune axe in a two-handed grip and eyed the cleft he'd made in the dragon's neck.

'Still a little flesh to hew,' he muttered and lifted the blade.

The sound of steps echoing up the stairway to the upper hold hall had Belgrad reaching for his warhammer.

Behind him, his hammerer brethren rushed to make a line of dwarf iron between the slumped King Durik and the gaping portal to the lower deeps.

'Give your name!' he challenged when the steps were so close that the stranger's arrival was imminent.

The footsteps continued unabated but no answer was forthcoming.

'Give your name or face reckoning,' said Belgrad, casting an anxious glance back to the still king.

Revealed in the flickering brazier light at the edge of the portal, a diminutive shadow fell into the upper hold hall.

'Grobi?' asked Uthgar, the hammerer at Belgrad's left shoulder. He would be his champion's shield should the stranger be hostile and the dwarfs forced to fight.

'Nay...'

'Stay your weapons,' uttered a weary voice from the darkness, his tread slowing as he reached the summit of the lonely stairwell.

Skalf stomped into the chamber. Upon his back was a glittering rune axe and shield. Clutched in his hands was a rope tied to a massive dragon head.

'It is Graug,' he said without pride. His eyebrows raised when he saw King Durik and then immediately formed a frown. 'He is dead then.'

Belgrad had lowered his arms, as did his brethren, and was looking at the severed head before him.

'Aye,' he muttered, meeting the runesmith's gaze at last. 'He did not last long beyond you venturing into the depths. Your companions?'

'Are feasting in Grungni's halls as they have earned.'

'And Prince Darin?'

'Him too.'

'When did he fall?' Belgrad had gone back to surveying the dragon's head, glass-eyed and with its tongue unfurled between its broken fangs.

Skalf bowed his head and muttered an oath to Valaya for the dead king. 'Not long beyond us venturing into the depths.'

Belgrad nodded, as he'd already guessed as much.

When he looked up again, a fierce intensity blazed in his eyes as bright and fervent as any brynduraz.

'Graug is dead, so too our liege.' He kneeled, laying his hammer in front of him. The other hammerers followed their champion and soon all of the king's retainers were bowing.

'Long live Skalf Dragonslayer,' said Belgrad, his strident tones echoed. 'Long live the King of Karak Azgal.'

Skalf nodded. The clans were few but they were proud. They needed leadership, and deeds forged leaders.

'Rise,' he said, his thoughts with his master and all the lessons he had imparted. 'Rise, and find again the courage of Azgal.'

Hoard Hold was lost. It could never be recovered, but like a forge flame, the spirit of the dwarfs still burned.