

FORGOTTEN REALMS®

THE FIGHTERS

SON OF THUNDER

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Another bone cracked beneath Gan's foot.

"Ours wasn't the first army massacred in this place," the big hobgoblin growled at Thagalan Dray, one of the few humans sent on the most recent, ill-conceived expedition. Wearing a purple cloak over his scale mail, Dray was one of the Lord's Men of Llorkh, Zhentilar in all but name. So far as they knew, the two of them were the only survivors.

Dray ignored Gan and bent over to pick up one of the bones.

"Orc," he said, inspecting a thigh bone. He tossed the bone away and it clattered as it struck another one, half buried in the dirt. "This answers much."

"What do you mean?" Gan rumbled.

"This place used to crawl with orcs. Sometimes they'd come down and harass our caravans near

Parnast. But in recent years the activity has ceased. I think we've found the reason." The whole plain around them was covered with similar bones and rusted scraps of armor and weapons. A massacre had occurred here.

"The shades?" asked Gan.

"As likely a candidate as any," Dray said grimly. "But there are more than enough threats in this awful place."

The shades were the reason that Dray and Gan walked the battlefield on the western rim of Anauroch. Lord Geildarr had sent a force of Zhentilar troops into this gods-forsaken strip of moor—a place called the Fallen Lands. Their orders were to locate a Netherese ruin where the Empire of Shadow was encamped, and to excavate the site to discover ancient artifacts.

But Geildarr refused to commit his own men, beyond a few out-of-favor Lord's Men to serve as consultants. Instead he recruited humanoids—a local hobgoblin tribe that laired along the Dawn Pass, and some gnolls from the Southwood. This patchwork army never reached the ruin. The Shadovar forces attacked at night when they had all the advantages, and their smoky magic overwhelmed Llorck's troops in no time.

So Dray and Gan found themselves trotting through endless dead fields of the Fallen Lands, facing an uncertain future back in Llorck.

"What will Geildarr do when we return?" asked Gan.

Dray chuckled. "Return? We'd be mad to go back like this. He'll want explanations, and he'll want examples. We'll be hanging from a noose in front of the Lord's Keep the moment we set foot back in Llorck."

"I could return to my tribe," said Gan, more orc bones cracking beneath his feet.

"And are tribal hobgoblins more tolerant of failure than Zhentarim?" asked Dray. "Perhaps this place is the answer," he said, looking over the dead plains. "Everyone knows that the Fallen Lands are full of lost magic. If we could stay alive long enough to find some of it, that is. But if we could provide Geildarr with something new, he might forgive us."

"You say 'we,' human," the hobgoblin said. "If you find

magic of such power, why not wield it yourself?"

"The truly useful magic can be unlocked only by mages like Geildarr. Such power would be lost on us. This battle didn't happen so long ago. Perhaps there's something here worth salvaging. Geildarr sponsors groups of adventurers to search lost ruins and dungeons for old magic—jobs that he doesn't trust to Lord's Men like us."

Gan snorted. "With good reason."

Dray ignored him. "There's a group of adventurers Geildarr's nicknamed the Antiquarians—he often hires them to search ruins and the like. I think they're somewhere down on the High Moor now. Geildarr's mad about ancient artifacts, especially things Netherese. Apparently the Fallen Lands were once a Netherese survivor state called Hlondath." He frowned. "I guess our whole army died to satisfy his hobby."

They spent a long time searching the battlefield. Orc skeletons by the hundreds covered the barren ground. Near the center of the field they found a small ancient ruin, little more than a few broken and fallen walls concealing nothing of value. Curiously, amid the nearby dead lay the cracked exoskeletons of two umber hulks, and what they guessed were the bones of a giant snake. But any weapons of interest were broken or rusted. Dispirited, Gan and Dray limped home.

Soon after, Gan noticed something glinting in the distance and pointed it out to Dray. "A trick of the light," Dray said, but as he studied the flash, he judged that it was the distinctive shine of metal. He and the hobgoblin raced toward it to find a most curious discovery.

"Tymora smiles today!" cried Dray. A collection of weapons and armor lay strewn across the dirt or half buried. All counted, at least twenty items awaited discovery.

"Nobody lost these weapons," Gan said, looking down warily upon their find. "They were thrown away. Probably for good reason. They're cursed, maybe."

Dray picked up a small silver helmet with an unfamiliar emblem on the side, then he dropped it into the dirt. "No, not cursed," he said.

“Perhaps they were so damaged that someone wanted to get rid of them,” the hobgoblin offered. But the equipment, though covered by layers of grime, looked to be in fine condition.

“Or perhaps Cyric or some other power placed them here for us to find.” Dray attacked the pile, throwing aside shields and hammers. At the bottom, buried in dirt, he uncovered a battle-axe, heavy and with a huge head of glimmering steel.

It was a weapon to inspire confidence and intimidate enemies—a leader’s weapon. How many foes must have fallen to its thick blade? What battles had it seen? Gan could sense its age and its value, and he wondered what great heroes must have clutched it. Though the hobgoblin had only the faintest conception of such things, he wondered what dim forgotten age must have spawned it.

Dray anxiously rubbed off the dirt and then smiled up at the hobgoblin. “Does this look like a weapon someone would just throw away?” he asked. But as the Lord’s Man went to lift it, he found the axe was beyond his strength, and he dropped it with a thud onto the ground.

Gan cast Dray a glare as he mishandled the weapon, then reached down and scooped it up himself, comfortable with its weight. A stiffness filled the hobgoblin’s muscles as he held it, and a smile crossed his ugly face.

Dray inspected it closely as Gan held it up.

“Dwarven manufacture, I think. And look, it’s probably been here for years, and there’s no damage to the blade. I bet there’s some dweomer on this.”

“You think Geildarr will like it?” asked Gan.

“Well, magic weapons aren’t really his favorites,” Dray said, “but considering that if we stay here too long we’ll probably be eaten by leucrotta or slaughtered by shades, I think this may be just the thing to save our skins.”

“What kind of leader is Geildarr?” asked Gan.

“What do you mean?” asked Dray.

“Is he a strong ruler, worthy of service?”

“I suppose so,” Dray said.

Gan looked at him more closely. “You say that if we give

this axe to Geildarr, he will let us live? Grant me a place in his service?"

"What did I just say?"

"I just wanted to be sure," said Gan. Before Dray could react, Gan brought the axe down in the middle of Dray's head. The axe smashed his skull and cleaved deep into the soldier's chest. The purple cloak around Dray's armor snapped free from his shoulders and fluttered to the ground.

The hobgoblin dislodged the bloody axe from Dray's body and examined it. He snatched up Dray's cloak and used it to wipe the blade clean.

"A fine weapon, indeed," he said, tossing the gory rag aside. But something felt wrong. He felt unworthy of wielding the axe. It was for a hero of the epic sagas, not for him. Steel such as this could lead armies.

It must be taken to one sufficiently worthy.

Till I find him, Gan promised himself, I wield it on his behalf.

With the axe clutched tightly in both hands, he set off for Llorkh.