

UNBROKEN

STORY COMPENDIUM

*R.I.P. R & S
Victim 1000*

MONSTER STORY: FERAL HYENA

Little. Pain. Alone.
Lost. Shouting. Rocks.
Scared. Run.



Cave. Dark. Calm. Lie down. Breathe. Sleep. Lick wounds. Hurts.

Hungry. Find food. Must go. Metal jaw on floor. Snap! Terrible pain. Paw.
Little critter. Net. Drag. Dark.

Master. Little. Green. Smells bad. Feeds bad. Angry. Bite. Chain. Pain.

Long time. Master takes to cave. Feed on critters. Little ones. Big ones. No fear.
Hungry. Angry. Pain.

Master brings others. Laugh. Kick. Stick. Laugh. Bite. Finger. Good food. Master mad.

Whip. Pain. Chain.

Old woman. Brings terror. Not like others. Master scared. Growl. Fear. Food. Black
powder. Bitter.

Terrible pain. Bones twist. Grow. Pierce skin. Fangs hurt. Claws hurt. Grow strong.
Grow angry.

Master screams. Whip. Chain. Pain. Angry. Growl. Thrash. Chain rips. Run. Master screams.

Dark. Cave. Breathe. Not calm. Angry. Always angry. Hungry. Kill critter. Rip apart. Fresh.

Good food.

Long. Hunt. Tracks. Sniff. Follow. Master's friends. Growl. Rip apart. No laugh now.
Good food.

Caves. Dark. Angry. Long. Days. Chain. Sleep. Bitter dust. Always bitter. Always angry.

Steps. Smell blood. Smell fear. Someone here. Growl. Angry.

Sniff.

Rip apart.

MONSTER STORY: GIANT SPIDER

By Francisco Duarte

The thing moved with a strange gait – awkward, yet intimidating.



Predatorial. Primeval. Unnatural. Swiveling its many legs as if each had a mind of its own. In the darkness, it stalked down the tunnel.

I melded into the shadows, my handcrafted spear in my hand, my heart thumping whilst the creature approached. A rasping sound heralded its presence, the collection of shields and armor and metal fettered to the bulbous body with viscid silk brushing against the raw rock. It seemed oblivious to my presence, bouncing as it moved, shadows dancing over and around it. My attention was drawn in to its rhythmical movements as it deviously lurched closer and then jaunted away, time and again.

Then, it leapt. Suddenly, it was right in front of me, its mouth wide open like an abyss about to engulf me, frantically moving the massive fangs on each side, eager to reach for my exhausted body. I shook out of my daze and collapsed onto my shoulder, barely rolling out of harm's way as the creature crashed into the wall.

Silence blanketed the dark tunnel once more. Only my wheezing and the tussling of the creature against the rock while it turned around could be heard. My spear cracked when I dodged the attack. I threw away the useless shaft. The tip was still sharp, though, and I held it like a small dagger. My instincts were kicking in, preparing for a fight I had little chance of winning. I braced myself, whereas the thing advanced, its eight legs swirling disturbingly.

Again, my attention was drawn to the unnatural movement, the horror overtaking me while the creature drew nearer, the gaping hole in its front still open to accommodate the fresh new meal. At the last possible moment, I dove. The fangs and the mouth swept past me as I crawled under the beast. Here, my broken spear favored the tight space, so I stabbed, finding the gaps amidst the metal, until I felt the foul entrails cascade over me.

I dragged myself from underneath the monster, while it stumbled spasmodically to the other side of the cavern. Even then it made no sound, barring the metal clinging against the encircling walls. The hunger tormenting me was too much – some of the foul-smelling creature would have to be my next meal. Even after the butchery was done, its presence remained – unnerving, drenching me with irrational dread. Moved by a sudden urgency, I continued down the cavern, always looking over my shoulder, ever fearful that the eight-legged monstrosity would return.



MONSTER STORY: GIBBERLING

I cursed the fools
under my breath.

Quiet, I said, silent
as a mouse.

The lumbering oaf knocking over the stone pillars left and right. The insolent tracker who wouldn't up about all the dangers she reads in the prints on the floor. Bet she would be happy knowing all her track reading was spot on. If she'd still be alive of course, which is not the case.

Playing dead, the oldest trick in the book. It helped in the gutters when the rival guilds came. It helped in the raids when the guards showed up. It damn right helped down here, holding back ragged breath as the brutes savaged those stupid enough to put up a fight. The bloody slashes burn with pain – I was never good at bandaging. But I am alive and that's what matters. Get up. Stumble away. There are strange faint voices in the distance, ignore these – ears still ringing, must be hearing things.

Hours of limping, holding my side so that the guts don't spill out, keeping down the grunts of pain. Must be quiet. Silence is safety – even wounded I make no noise as I stalk the shadows. This is a lot like the streets after all, only difference is that your would-be murderers are not interested in your money, just in it for the fun. Charming.

The voices come back every time I stop to rest. A skittering, uncertain, spitting voice – a language I do not understand but even the awkward stumbling rhythm of the muttering is unsettling. I just want it to be quiet, damn it all to hell, so that I could focus. Can't rest, can't relax, always hearing it. Getting closer, then drifting away, can't tune it out, always there, in the shadows, at the back of my mind.

The rusted cage had a few jagged pieces that used to be bars sticking out. Bloodying my hands, I pry one off and use scraps from my torn cloak as wraps for a handle. I can't help but smirk. A most pathetic knife for a most pathetic warrior. No matter. I killed with a kitchen knife I can kill with this. As long as I get the jump. As long as it's quiet, which it's not. Again. Damned voice whispers now, taunting me – how does it never shut up?

It chases me, always there, not letting me rest, not letting me collect my thoughts, not letting me center. All these gibbering, sputtering words, murmurs, whispers – without end. Must shut it up, can't go on like this. I hear it's getting closer. Whatever it is – it must be coming in for a strike. Keep to the shadows, circle it, get in position. My chattering pursuer got careless and now I am the hunter.

I almost feel pity for the creature once I see it. Small, crooked wretch, a beastlike head on its stooped furry shoulders, a crude knife at the ready, sneaking to where it thinks I am. Its lips moving constantly as it mutters to itself – oh how I hate that squeaky voice now. Murderous gleam in its eyes. A lunge from my concealment, and my knife is buried deep in its back, blood flowing down my arm. I can't stop myself from stabbing it again and again, letting out all my frustration, all my terror, all my hatred of this place. Its body is limp on the floor in the spreading puddle of black blood.

I step away, hoping to finally find quiet solace. Yet the voice remains. I grasp my ears falling to my knees, trying desperately to block it out. I choke the corpse, shaking it violently – there is no breath left, yet the voice is lodged in my mind like a jagged blade refusing to slip out. I stumble away, carelessly, feeling my way along the crude cavern walls, rushing, tripping, getting up and moving on.

Knowing perfectly well that with this clattering voice in my head I will never know silence again.

MONSTER STORY: KOBOLD

Snap! Snip!
Little tiny trinkets
of mine, so sharp,
so hard to spot among
the little stones.



What a lovely sound they make when they shut shut shut, trapping, snapping like giving your stupid foot a big old hug! You poor thing, you lost some fingers, have you? Mine to keep, mine-mine-mine!

So many critters down here, must know, have to be careful, always careful. The big ones think they are so much better than us, cornered into the smelliest, nastiest parts of these tunnels. The warrens are not much, yes but it's home. They teach us the important things. Like how to sleep even though the shriekers are being noisy. Or not mind the trogs's stink. Or running faster than your friends so that you are not the one caught by a dark thing living deep in the smelly waters.

Many lessons. I used to learn. Now I teach.

You do not step here, you do not come to the warrens if you want to keep your fingers, snip-snap!

Goblins are greedy, yes, but they are the ones who trade us the sharp bits for the food we forage and they are good for that. Where do they scavenge it I ask myself? It looks like they cut it from something bigger, cut it with their poor shoddy knives and it comes out all jagged and bent. Good, perfect for traps I say!

The bigger ones dislike us, yes. They think of us as an annoyance maybe, but I show them! One day I make a trap so big, so devious, it will catch me a true prize – the mighty dragon that haunts the big caverns to the east. Laugh now, kick now – in the end with every finger I scrap off my traps I get better, in the end – I will be the last one laughing!

Snap!



MONSTER STORY: SHRIEKING FUNGUS

So far so good. I managed to staunch the worst of the bleeding and my strength is coming back to me, albeit slowly.

The time to mourn, the time to grieve will come later – for now I must escape at all costs. The caverns where I stumbled offered rest and some mushrooms that I could eat, once I sorted out the poisonous ones. There seems to have been a ruin of a bygone age in that cave. A rusted portcullis yielded a piece of metal that I managed to fashion into a weapon.

I heard shuffling steps and guttural voices in the distance. My assailants are not far off. While I have seen enough bloodletting to last a lifetime, I will defend myself if needed. I proceeded slowly, cautiously, trying to find my way in the darkness, cursing the cracked glass of one of my spectacles. Most unfortunate. A sharp pain pierced my leg and I slashed blindly towards it. A small disgusting mushroom-like creature was skittering, swaying across the moss, its deformed mouth-like opening smeared with my blood. A flesh wound, it bore no immediate concern.

The creature went in for another bite – awkward and stumbling it was not a formidable assailant. A strong kick sent it flying. To my utmost surprise, the impact seems to have provoked a piercing shriek from the fungus – enough to startle me as the echo carried far through the caves. This stirred a hint of knowledge – I believe I have read of such a creature. It could do little to harm me and so I rushed to carve up its robust stem for sustenance, as the wound I dealt with my initial slash was already healing rapidly.

The work was messy and so very loud as the creature emitted shrieks and yelps that I could not stifle. Despite my frenzied stabs, the little miscreant must have alerted all the denizens of these depths, erasing all my attempts at stealth. It stopped struggling. I stood up, assessing the grime and ooze covering my robes. The echoes of its screeching were still bouncing off the tunnel walls.

This was not so bad, I thought again, breathing heavily – my weapon has served me well and I was only a bit weary. With proper rest I could continue. A low, rumbling growl from around the corner made it clear I had no time for rest – proper or otherwise. The sound of claws clicking against the cavern stone and a bellowing roar announced a much more fearsome creature. I gripped my knife tightly, knowing the struggle would be futile. The time to mourn, it seems, would never come.



MONSTER STORY: WERERAT

Oh, my love.
How I suffered for you.
Brash and broad-
shouldered, how could
you not catch my eye.

Always busy, always chopping wood or carrying those heavy hay bales in the inn where you worked – so strong, so determined. How could you ever notice me, a malnourished unwashed street urchin peeking into the inn yard, being shooed away whenever someone noticed me. No matter. I knew that one day I would have your heart.

The sorcerer who came telling fortune promised he had something for me, something that would change the way I looked forever. The terrible things I did to deserve that favor, best not to remember, my love. I recall putting on the amulet, feeling its strange energy. The sorcerer was right, I changed. How glorious I looked in these days. Gone were my crooked gait, the rash on my face, the tangles of mud in my hair. I was a queen. And that's how you saw me. I remember you even stopped in the middle of whatever tavern brawl you were preoccupied with.

My charms worked yet little did I know about their dark price. As we kissed passionately in the light of the moon beyond the inn, the terrible curse afflicting the amulet came into its treacherous power twisting me into this foul rat-like form. The look on your face will haunt the rest of my miserable days. Shock, horror, disgust. You pushed me away, my love, called me such terrible things after what I did to myself for you.

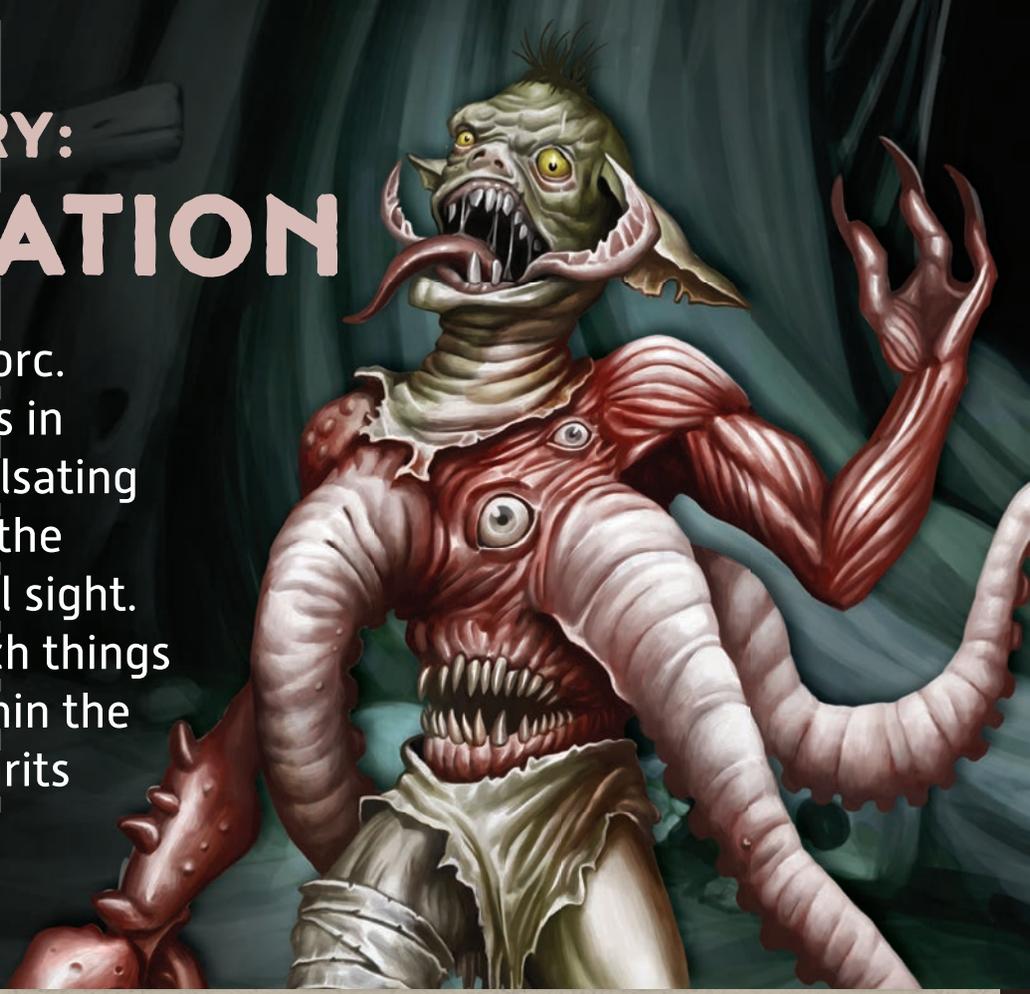
I ran, as fast as I could, knowing only death awaited me in the village in this form. The caverns would be my salvation – deep and dark they are, I could wait it out there. There are creatures that haunt these depths, true, but one learns a thing or two about staying unnoticed living in the streets. I tried to come back to the village, yes I did, but every night the curse came back, more consuming each time. Stones were thrown, curses uttered. There was no place for me now but down there in the darkness.

Years and years surviving on scraps and cadavers. Years being consumed by the accursed red glow of the amulet. My human shape comes back now and again, very rarely – a cruel reminder of all that I lost. All because of you, my love.

But fate is cruel to all equally. You are here with me now, in my halls – lost, wounded. Whatever you were seeking here, you are in for a surprise of the most unpleasant kind. Your big fists and your temper won't save you from my claws. You will pay for what you have done. It seems I would have your heart after all, my love – just not in the way I thought I would.

MONSTER STORY: ABOMINATION

The glow surprised the orc. He was used to darkness in these tunnels, so the pulsating purple emanating from the crevasse was an unusual sight. The shamans told of such things that could be found within the caverns and how the spirits insisted on reclaiming such relics.



He dug hard, trying to break the glowing shard away from the rocks trapping it. He was amazed by how much he wanted it. There was a loud, unpleasant snap of a breaking finger but he didn't care.

He thought briefly of sharing his find, but it was far too important. The others wouldn't understand, would try to take it away. It was safe in his hut, away from the prying eyes. He liked the glow, he liked the way the jagged edges of the shard felt to the touch, as if his fingers felt pierced by tiny needles. He thought it spoke to him. It filled his dreams with visions of victories and of towering might, of shamans of the tribe in awe of his worth and cowering beneath his ferocity.

He felt invigorated, making savage kills during the hunts, his new potential filling him, overflowing, struggling to break free. The scales appeared first, on the back of his arm, then spreading to his back. The finger he broke liberating the stone went limp and morphed into a strange tentacle. He hid the changes but the withered shaman noticed.

The exile was full of shame and pain. The cretins were banishing him, the best among them, the one meant to surpass them all. His tentacle dragged behind him as he limped away from the tribeland, his hoof making a clicking sound on cavern floor.

Only pain filled his days now. Pain of rejection, pain of isolation, pain of his body morphing into a broken, tormented mass of misshapen forms. At least the shard was there to share the agony and bring a measure of solace. He used it to carve symbols into his flesh so that he would remember his body before it would take yet another shape, in a new flash of blinding pain.

He no longer remembered what he was, as the torment consumed him. Stumbling in the dark, coughing curses and threats, the pain was the only thing left. Then, down the tunnel, he heard wary steps – steps that did not belong in these caverns. His mangled mouth broke into a bloody grin. The pain would not be his alone for long. He would share.



MONSTER STORY: CAVE BEAR

By EB Darwin

I am alone. I entered these caverns with two other hunters, on the trail of a magnificent beast – a bear of such massive proportions as to leave even the most stout-hearted in a paralyzing panic.

This creature would be my most ultimate trophy and I would end the terror it brought to our village. The hunt was on.

My companions and I followed the trail from the dark forest, tracking footprints with a span larger than two hands of a hulking man. Snapped twigs, bowed bushes, mountainous piles of scat, this beast did not move stealthily. It is an apex predator, hunted by nothing save humans, and even then, it would make short work out of the most skilled warrior.

The three of us knew what we were doing and we knew it would take our combined training, skills, and cunning to trap and slay this ursine monstrosity.

It led us to the dark caverns, a place that we knew to be infested with all manner of dark and foul creatures. We knew of the dangers that lurked within and we were prepared. A slit throat of a goblin there, one of the annoying shrieking mushrooms here. The hunt continued.

As our eyes adjusted the darkness, we could hear the beast not too far away, snorting, growling, plodding through the caverns, not a monster willing to step in its path. We entered a large cavern, high ceilinged, open ground. Here we would meet our quarry. It turned and stood on its hind legs. Such raw power, roped muscles twitching under heavy fur. It was scarred, one eye milky, having obviously survived many hunts. This would be its last, I was certain.

My two companions, giddy from the thrill of the hunt, advanced before we could signal to each other. The fools stepped forward, let arrows fly into the bear's hide. With a lightning strike of its enormous claws, the bear decapitated them. Their headless bodies, letting loose geysers of blood from their torn necks, collapsed to the ground. The bear snorted, almost taunting me, before bolting deeper into the caverns.

I pursued, foolish perhaps, but I saw it could be wounded. I tracked it deeper and deeper through the tunnels, beginning to wonder if I was the hunter or the hunted.

I came to a bend in the tunnel. Peering around, I saw that the bear stood in a colossal cavern nearly the size of a cathedral. This would be the last stand. I knew now it would not be easily vanquished, that it would in defeat still have fight left in it. I readied myself. The bear's maw opened wide, baring yellowed fangs the size of daggers, and bellowed an ear-splitting, earth-rumbling roar. Every foul creature in this gods-forsaken place would know I was here. If I survive this fight, it won't be my last.



MONSTER STORY: CRAZED SURVIVOR

By EB Darwin

This place is never-ending.
Dark and filled with evil, with
tunnels turning and twisting
and turning back again.

I stumbled upon these cursed caves many years ago in search of what I foolishly thought was a long-forgotten treasure horde. At first, I cowered, hiding in a hovel I discovered, away from the path favoured by monsters. I ate clumps of bitter mushrooms, drank from the rivulets of foul water streaming down the walls. I survived, but I was always ravenously hungry.

I killed a rat and tore into its still-warm belly. But the rat wasn't enough. Gremlins make for more filling meals. I can rip into their necks, feel their blood pour into my mouth, down my chin and neck, hear their gurgled cries before their eyes go dull. It's delicious. My new friend Kazan thinks so too.

Kazan came to me in a dream and now travels with me everywhere. He tells me what looks best to eat, where it's best to hide. He helps me sneak and steal to survive. He shows me my enemies' weaknesses. How to exploit them, to take what is now mine, to feed on them when I'm delirious with hunger.

Kazan tells me someone approaches. I can smell them. Their desperation. Their confusion. Their fear. They've been in these caves only a short while. They are weak, like I once was, before Kazan. I will take their weapons, I will smash their skull, I will feast on them as Kazan smiles. I must survive.

MONSTER STORY: GOBLIN

Look at this lovely thing, stuck here in between the stones. A thin scrap of metal, jagged on one side, oo, sharp, still sharp, though all rusty and bent.



No matter, into the bag you go, clank! Wonder what it used to be. Maybe hobgoblin spear tip or a piece of these ugly old statues you see crumbling here and there. No matter, no matter, we'll find a home for you. Every little bit finds a home, goes to use.

Junk they call it, scraps. Fools. All things have their use, even old and ugly. Just need to dust it off and bend it the right way, bang on it for a bit. Get enough of these and some leather straps and maybe a wooden plank or two from the rotting watchtowers and you have a sturdy shield! Take some of the torches that the humans throw out once they burn through, put some spikes through them and you have a good bashin' stick! Every little bit finds its place.

They despise us, I know. The hulking bugbears with their heavy armor. The mean hobgoblins in their clean huts, always ready for a kick and a spit. The orcs – so few of them here, but so angry, always angry. They all think little of us because we are so little. But they will see, yes, they will. My kind is patient and crafty. We keep grudges and we remember. Our warrens might be a foul-smelling place and the slugs and moldy mushrooms we survive on are disgusting, but every day we bring more of the things no one wanted. An axe handle there, an old crutch here, a stolen trap that the sadistic kobolds are so fond of on a good day. These last ones are hard to grab, true, cost my sister an arm once. I made sure to find a kobold who got too close to the warrens and bash his stupid head in for that one.

Bones, scraps, sometimes even the tiny little pieces of the dark stone – though no one throws that out, must go deep and look hard to find these. All goes to the Mound. Yes, we can make small things from it – some things to protect us, some sharp and jagged things to hurt our many enemies. But the Chief alone keeps the true purpose of the Mound, what we are really making, what most of these scraps go towards. And when it is unleashed – these caves will be ours, ours alone. No more kicking, no more spitting, no more nasty words. Humph. They will see yet.

What's that? An old bronze leg armor all cracked with the bones still rattling inside! Nothing goes to waste. Into the bag you go. Clank!

MONSTER STORY: IMP

By EB Darwin

I see him I do. Blunderin' along the pathways. He thinks he's alone an' each time he sits to rest, I stirs him. Toss a rock, throw a pebble, always keepin' him worried, full a fears. He knowd somethin' out there, but he don't know it's me.



I giggles now and then, watchin' him startin' to get all edgy and ragey. Big, dumb man, all bloodied and angry-lookin'. Head of rocks, nuffin' upstairs. He's not like me. Smart as a whip me paps father used ta say.

I been trampin' through these tunnels for ages and knows 'em likes the the backs of my tails. There's that one human with crazy eyes I stays away from - he feeds on us, he does. Fouls and nasties! but this one is dumb, dumb, dumb. Looks at him, standin' on alert, twitchin' at every noise in the caves, eyes still blinkin' to see in the dark.

All's I want is the shinies he has. Treasure! I loves the shinies. If he gives it up, I shall leaves him be. Just a coin or two, maybe a trinket, a polished gem, somethin' that catches the light, brings me joy. I knows better than to fight this one, too big, too strong, so if he'd just gimme some shinies, I leaves him with what's left of his dull wits... Maybe...

MONSTER STORY: TROGLODYTE

Splash. A red blot is drying on the wall of the cave. A bit of kobold blood, some guano, venom drained from a giant spider corpse. A good mix, perfected by years.



My claws spread the substance out, drawing uneven curved lines upon the rough stone. The markings tell a story – every one of them that I leave on these walls, every one of these painted on my own scales. This one is a warning to all those who would set foot on our land. They would die and their bile would be used to leave warnings to those who would follow.

I keep tracing the lines, curving them in tight small circles – it is a sign of anger, of fury. My people were slaves once – subjugated to serve the accursed dark elves in the under-cities of great depths. Their cruel magics bound our minds to their will and we toiled endlessly not knowing rest or pride. Many of my ancestors died harvesting the shade crystals – the source of the elves' power. The stories of their pain and death mark many surfaces here.

The markings allowed our elders to guide us to freedom – they told us who we are, allowed us to break the bonds of the elves' magic and to awaken our ancient pride. We have escaped, though many died in the attempts and during the journey upwards, for the path out of the great depths of the elvish cities lies through tunnels of unimaginable darkness where terrible things dwell.

We have settled these caverns and have called them home, as many others have. First the goblins and the kobolds did not understand the markings staking our claim. We made them understand with blood and pain. We bide our time as our territory grows, as the stories we leave through our markings grow. There are many tribes here – some are powerful and not to be trifled with. Others, like the hobgoblins are complacent and do not heed the warnings of the markings. Their time will come soon. And then there are the surface dwellers. They mean to encroach on these caves and we must not let them.

We have felt the tremors of the terrible earthquake above decades ago and have felt it to be the work of the same powers that the dark elves have called upon. Intruders from the surface seek to claim the riches of the caverns – secrets left behind by those who lived here long ago, secrets best left undisturbed. For, as our ancestors learned, no one uses this power for good once they obtain it – only to enslave and oppress. Never again. We will make sure of that and the markings will guide us and tell our story.



MONSTER STORY: BUGBEAR

The creature was not what I expected. The tracks in the moss were bird-like, but there was nothing avian about the body of the towering brute blocking my path.

A curse under my breath as I wished I had spent more time studying the prints as I usually did out in the woods. I would not have settled for my flimsy makeshift spear as a weapon of choice had I known my foe would be this massive.

The creature was panting heavily – its enormous bulk rising and falling visibly, its raspy breath visible in the cold, damp cave air. It seemed pleased to see me, relishing the violence to come, weighing its heavy club of rotten wood, as if trying to judge how many crushing blows I would take. Not many, I thought to myself, as I tried to center my attention.

Its face distorted by a wide, murderous grin, the giant launched towards me. It was slow, its steps heavy, but there wasn't much room for acrobatics. Dodging under its first swipe, my spear managed to slash through the straps holding its armor together. The inconvenience only seemed to amuse it as it threw off the hanging plate and advanced on me, its hardened flesh bearing the scars of many battles.

I stumbled as I tried to retreat, yet with my last strength I thrust my spear – again and again and again. All my desperation, all my hatred of this forsaken place went into the strikes that I hoped would be enough to bring the beast down. To my horror, the attacks left only flesh wounds as the monster let me wear myself out and become careless with my strikes. A crushing strike of the club caught me square in the chest, sending the world spinning. I felt a heavy impact of the cavern floor and barely managed to open my eyes. The brute was advancing, its grin widening. Its skull belt, it seemed, was overdue for a new trophy.



MONSTER STORY: DARK ELF

One could view these dismal circumstances with cruel irony to find humor I suppose. Less so a laugh and more of a smirk really, for even to a generously disposed mind the amusement is scarce.

A noble warrior, stealth and deadly grace personified. Daughter of a noble house, pride of its elders. Making her way knee-deep in filth, shaking down pitiful misshapen creatures in their vermin-ridden hovels. All to find that was stolen from us and to execute the trespasser who dared commit the crime.

For one does not rob the Dark Elves without consequence.

Steeped in shadow and secrecy, our marvelous cities lie deep beneath the earth, far away from prying eyes. We do not value guests, least of all the self-invited kind. Our magic is aided greatly by the sacred obsidian – glass stone, shade crystal – whichever of its many names you choose to apply. It is quite rare even down in our depths and almost impossible to find here in the upper caverns.

Many seek it for the power and possibilities it grants. Few know of ways to harness its energies, to avoid terrible corruption that can befall those who handle it lightly and ignorantly.

The elderly orc woman who raided our storage chamber was no fool. Her magic bypassed our wards and deceived our sentries. She knew of ways to extract and transport the crystals. She is devious and capable – bold in her defiance of our power. Her life must end.

Many volunteered to track the thief down. Worthy warriors, skillful spellweavers. It was decided that my abilities were best suited to track down and execute the trespasser. Rightly so.

I miss the tall spires and the vaulted ceilings of our homeland. It is but a distant memory here in these forsaken caves with the decrepit structures of the greenskins crumbling in disrepair. They live here like animals, wading in these disgusting puddles of stale water, among the rotten moss and the foul eruptions of the noxious gases. The unfortunate critters who cross my path share what they know – some under threat of pain, some with subtle help of a spell. Then they die. I am certain they are grateful that I grant them release from this pitiful existence. I would certainly rather die than wallow in this filth. I feel sad for them for they never knew anything more in life and never will in death. Some of them know of the old orc. Every slit throat brings me closer to my quarry.

Wiping my blade clean of Kobold blood I sense a presence. Like me it is out of place here. Unlike me it is a primitive creature full of fear. It is about to share its secrets and then receive the sweet release granted by my sword. A mind blanking charm to disorient the wretch and it will be at my mercy – easy to defeat in its stupor.

First this one and eventually the orc. The shade crystal will return to its rightful owners.

I will make sure of it.



MONSTER STORY: GNOLL

My one good eye is still not used to how dim everything is down here – still squinting, still coughing at the dampness of the air.

You can feel it thick-sick with spores of the pathetic plants that manage to survive here. Not that up where I came from is better of course. Scarred land they call it, ruined plains – miles and miles of wasteland marked by wrecks of long-abandoned buildings and settlements. Home.

I come down here often in search of a score. These tunnels are dangerous, yes, but they bring rewards to those smart and cunning like me, those who know where and how to look. The wretches that inhabit this dimness are so scared for their life – they are easy prey for someone who is only after their things. Yes, not all have something worth taking, but I make do. Sometimes the smaller and more pathetic creatures can help find a bigger prize – jealousy and ill wishes are plentiful down here.

Weapons, tools, bits of armor, even shiny bits that make the fur stand on the back of your neck – all will do. I take all of it – quiet where I need to be, quick when I wasn't quiet enough, deadly when I am not quick enough to get away. The hobgoblin stockpiles are easy to break in to and the slobbering bugbear guards are usually asleep on the post. And then there are the hated orcs. I spit and hiss even thinking of the bastard race. There are not many of them down here but I always draw a blade whenever I spot one. I like to make them bleed, choke on their own blood.

They hold sway over much of the Scarred lands above, all the good hunting grounds, all the good water. My pack fought them and fought them and we lose for we are too few and they are fierce in open combat. Many friends I lost to the orcs. My mate. I like to make them bleed, especially for that.

So now we scavenge for what we can – taking, robbing, stealing. We bring it back and then it is sold in the stinking alleyways of the remaining human towns, arranged through those who are not too picky to deal with us. We get rich. There are many in the Scarred lands who would spill blood for coin and soon we will have coin enough to spill a lot of orcish blood. The lands will not know such a bloodletting since the great cataclysm that scarred and ruined them.

But I must be vigilant, my prey is on the move again. She has a small bag with her – I hear some promising jingling but also a large mallet that she seems able to swing well. She seems to have gone to the section where the strange idols guard small trinkets – knowing the idols' power I dared not take these. Taking it from her will be much easier. All I need is the bag and the maul – I don't care if she lives, I can smell that she's suffered many wounds. Killing her would make the blood race faster but I must be careful – it is the prize that matters, something to bring back to the pack.

Every trinket is a coin, every coin is a mercenary, every mercenary is a dead orc bleeding into the Scarred Lands that will belong to the Gnolls once more.



MONSTER STORY: HOBGOBLIN

Patrol duty. Again.
No front line for me.
Shame. The battles, they
are becoming less and
less frequent.

It is as if the Khan is growing complacent of our territory, willing to share with the small filth and the wild brutes. It is not our way. Our way is war. Seeing the banner – proud, far and wide across these tunnels. That is our way. We were feared once; our banner was respected. The others knew their place, even if it cost lives. For what else is a purpose of a hobgoblin life if not to give it up in the service of the banner. I would do so. My brothers and sisters of the blade would do so.

But no. We idle and our armor rusts not seeing the battle it was made for. The battle we were made for.

These tunnels are vast. They could sustain a much larger colony. A guardsman in this crevasse, an archer post on that ledge and this cavern would be well-protected. More space for dwellings, perhaps some slave huts. We could harvest more of the food, we could subjugate the weaklings to take care of our armor as we would march on the larger ones. The orcs, the bugbears. Their ferocity is impressive, but they lack order, discipline, honor. Their rage would break on our shields like waves on the rocks.

But no. Patrol duty. Perhaps the defeat at the hands of the enormous obese monstrosity is the reason. I lost some fingers yes but it would be pointless to continue that fight. The cave he occupies is too close to the light, his armor is nearly impenetrable. Best left alone. Yet some say there is dishonor in that I live in my defeat. Let them. My life is mine to save so that it can serve as kindling on the bonfire of battle – true battle, line upon line of warriors, marching shoulder to shoulder.

The tracks betray a trespasser. Light steps, wears boots, dragging steps – probably injured. Yes, here is some blood. Seems to have rested and feasted on the mushrooms here. Not long ago. This is good. It may not be a true battlefield with the beating of the drums and the warcries filling the air. But a battle is a battle and this will do. They will know the banner. They will fear it once more.

MONSTER STORY: MINOTAUR

This bastard again. I remember him, his jagged hand blades ripping my friends apart, his horrible headbutts sending bodies flying.



Didn't think we had critters like that living down here – thought it'd be just the greenskins wallowing in their own filth.

But no, would you look at this one – all horns and hooves – his mother had a rough night with a bull or something. This whole thing was a mistake, right as rain, shouldn't have come here, not with these fools. Can't fight off all the critters when they jump us like a bunch of thugs in a dark alley, especially if one of them is a huge bastard like this.

Well now it's different, berk – now there's just you, now I'm ready for it and now I have this axe. Not much of an axe I'll admit, but I tied enough sharp bits to this stick for it to count. Just ask your goblin buddy – can find him a few miles off in the tunnel. Let's see how you do now. Loosening your wristblades, moving them in circles, warming up. You know what you're doing, I'll give you that.

I see your nostrils flaring – getting all worked up, huh? Is it that that someone dared challenge you with a weapon? Or are you more used to stabbing unsuspecting victims, you murderous pile of shit?

The blades clash and the sparks fly. I land a hit and so does he – the blade slices through my side and we are both bleeding badly. But if I would be afraid of getting stabbed I wouldn't come down here in the first place. This axe feels heavy or is it just the loss of blood? These swings are tiring me out and his horns catch me in the side again. Oof, that's going to leave a mark. Another scar for the drinking stories, thanks berk. Harder to move after that, damnation.

Catching my axe in his huge paw, pushing me away. Gotta watch for these horns, another goring like that and I won't be able to walk. Now I'm angry. Spit mixes with blood as I lunge at him with a yell – even this monstrosity knows it's in trouble now as I unleash whatever is left of my rage.

Putting all I got into this last swing I take his head clean off. His lumbering body collapses on its knees, the severed head rolling off into the darkness, the horns clattering on the floor. Limping I take off one of his horn decorations for keepsake. Another story to tell.

Damn, this pain in my side won't leave. I put some pressure on it – the shirt is soaked through with blood, and stagger on. Whatever is coming after me will have a nice trail of blood to follow. And I'll be ready to give them whatever is left of my strength.

MONSTER STORY: ORC BRUTE

I hate it down here. We are orcs, we are the proud masters of the Scarred Lands. Our nature is to roam freely, to feel the earth underfoot, the sky above. To find challenges worthy of our might and to take what is ours by force.



Not huddle in these musty caves like rats. Everything down here is sickly and deformed. The trees – gnarled and rotting. The moss-covered stones, crumbling with age. Even the creatures who live down here are pathetic like the surroundings – sadistic kobolds littering the floors with their sick contraptions, greedy goblins coveting every scrap they can get their stinking paws on. Killing them was only fun for a short while and now it is not even a sport. I feel my strikes getting less precise and powerful without proper opponents.

At least the gnolls in the wasteland above put up a fight. I hate their spotted hides and I enjoyed every skirmish, leaving a bloody trail in the wake of my axes. The screams, the growls, the pure fury of battle, scent of death in the air as the blood feeds the soil, honoring our prowess. That was the life. And it had to end and for what? Mother never explained fully as she led us to these caverns.

“Power beyond anything you could ever imagine” she said. Well, I wonder what shape this power takes. Is it like the power bestowed upon the poor deformed bastard who found one of mother’s precious shards? I shudder at the thought of my own body being changed like that. It is not the way of the orc – no honor in such ill gained strength, only torment. Our strength lies in the might of our blades, the fury of our hearts, not dark sorcery that mother is so fond of. Yet she is the shaman and you do not argue with the shaman.

So, I obey, as a good warrior does, as a good daughter does. I lead our warbands to crush the retreating hobgoblins to make sure they never reclaim the territory we took. I hunt the strange creatures of the caverns so that we have something to eat, even though I feel sick eating the moldy meat. I bide my time, I watch, and I listen.

Mother may have her own designs, but I hear the grumblings of the other warriors. These tunnels are no place for an orc. Soon, it will be time to forsake this path of corruption devoid of honor and pride. And when that time comes, a new leader will emerge to lead our people where they belong, upwards, to the Scarred Lands, back to the sky and the wind and to the glorious never-ending bloodshed.

“True power is taken, never granted”, she likes to say. She best watch her back lest she wants to find out how good of a student I really am.

MONSTER STORY: BASILISK

Damn this place, damn the beasts, damn my own foolishness. "You make mistakes, little one, you pay for them".



That's what me pa used to say – usually before a slap. Pa was never wrong. Damn him to hells too, along with the rest of it all. Let them eat their black hearts out – I am making it out of here one way or another, don't care whose bodies I step over on the way.

"Crafty, little one, you've got to be crafty" he'd say. Wonder what he'd think of this dagger I made. Ugly piece of work, all jagged and rusty, but with the right amount of anger and strength it stabs well enough. Leaves deep cuts going out too. Used some of the goblin's skin for the handle – the little bastard whimpered as he bled out. Can thank his buddies for bashing my idiot companions' heads in.

The exit can't be far now – I have retraced our path, through the crumbling ruins, past the strange statues – whoever thought that these poses would make for good sculpture. The bandages should hold, soaked with blood as they are, and I am ready to slit the throat of any critter that tries to hold me back.

A sense of unease slowly settles in as I walk past these contorted figures. Two hobgoblins here – whoever would make a statue of these? Feel like something is watching me, following. Clenching my teeth, not letting the panic take hold I spin around, trying to locate my pursuer. The giant six-legged lizard-like monster is certainly no master of stealth – awkwardly perched atop a crumbling mossy arc its forked tongue is darting in and out, anticipating a meal. Not so fast, you overgrown gecko.

"Look for a weakness, little one" – said pa – "every armor's got one, every bastard, no matter how tough, will bend over if you get the right spot". So, I do, as it stumbles down, regaining its footing, studying me. The neck. Definitely the neck – thin and vulnerable – if I get to it, the thing is dead.

Only now do I notice its eyes – wispy yellowish trails rising from these, as if drawing my sight. I can't help looking at these and as I do I feel my muscles tense up, breath stopping midway in my chest. What the bloody hell is this? I focus and shake it off, my red hair getting in my eyes. Now is not the time. I exhale sharply and launch myself at the thing, blade at the ready. A snap of its teeth – the thing is prepared to defend itself, but I am faster as I slice its ugly mug as I lunge past it – it hisses as it spits purple blood. Didn't get the neck this time.

The glow of its eyes grows more intense and I can't look away. I stare at my hand in disbelief, losing all control of the muscles. Is it the dim light here or is my maimed flesh starts turning stone-grey? With a growl I slice into the hand, drawing blood in a long uneven cut – that gets the feeling back and the stiffness subsides. The pain is jarring but the warm blood trickling down my fingers brings strange comfort. Another gaze like that and I don't know if I can keep moving.

Mustn't look at it but how do I get to something I can't see. Guess what, pa, it's time to be crafty again. I furiously wipe the blade down so that the rust and the dried blood peel away, making vague reflections appear on the dull metal surface. Let's see if I can follow you like that. It's awkward but its gaze no longer shackles my body. The beast sees it and angles for a charge – its claws and teeth are powerful enough even without the gaze. In the reflection I see it bolt awkwardly, off-balance, but closing in at surprising speed, scratching at the cavern floor.

I wait for what I know will be my only chance. Just as it's about to chomp down I spin and get around it – an erratic slash of its claws knocks the blade out of my hand but I'm right there by the neck. The weak point. I grasp it in a lock with both arms and apply the entire weight of my body to a powerful, desperate pull, using its forward momentum against it. I growl as I hear the bones break and the beast goes limp in my embrace. Breathing heavily, I come around and give it one last kick right smack into the center of its skull – my boots are steel-tipped and I hear another loud satisfying crack, as the wisps of yellow smoke exhaust themselves, leaving me with one last sensation of stiffness. I bend over to catch my breath, hands at my thighs, my body aching. Spitting in disgust at the monster's corpse I turn to continue my trek back to freedom.

Except I can't.

I stumble and fall as my left foot refuses to budge. Grasping it, feeling around it feverishly I realize that instead of my flesh I am feeling cold hard stone. No, no, no, no – I feel the lifeless, rocky texture crawling up my calf ever so slowly as I lose feeling. Chained to one spot I look around in desperation, and find my blade lying on the floor.

A terrible moment passes in absolute, deafening silence, as a dreadful solution comes to mind. I swallow.

I rip what's left of my sleeve and prepare another bandage. There will be lots of blood. Clenching my teeth hard I brace myself against a boulder and firmly grasp my jagged blade. Your little one sure learned how to get crafty, pa. You'd be proud, old bastard.



MONSTER STORY: OGRE

Hungry,
always
hungry.

The squealy critter was juicy, so tasty, good that it couldn't run far. Good meat on bones, red, bloody. Fur tickles me teeth but I don't mind. Too hungry to skin, must get to the tasty bits. The green ones run from me as I wander by their huts. They live like rats, delicious rats, always scurrying when there is something to fear.

And I should be feared. I remember the terror in the eyes of that little hobgoblin in the big mossy cave to the west. He looked so cocky at first. With his little rag flag and his armor. Hahaha, armor he calls it. A hit or two with the Masher and it was in bits and pieces and his stabs didn't even make a dent in my plate. I remember catching his arm and feasting on his fingers to tease, the blood flowing down my chin. He wiggled free and ran, ran like a bug, probably not tasty at all – all sinew and gristle.

Bones crack. It's what they do, if I step on them scattered on the cave floor. When I catch something with bones they crack as I gets ready to eat them. Sometimes the bones need help, when their owner is too attached to them. I am happy to help. Masher is happy to help. I love the sound – so crunchy, so promising. If bones crack – I will taste meat soon.

I like this cave right here. It's right by the cursed light, sure, but sometimes fools from the village leave their horses there and I get the juiciest meal of all. They find the leathery straps left over and think the horse ran away. Fools. There is a nice spring too – water tastes bitter and warm, that's where I found the big stone for the Masher. Look at it now, all banged up and bloodied from its work. Good Masher, good friend. What is that though? A stumbling piece of meat on its way to the light? All desperate-looking and exhausted under his hood. So determined, with his feeble axe in his shaking hands.

Come, Masher, come friend. It is time to crack bones. It is time to feast.

MONSTER STORY: SHAMAN

The responsibility of a leader is a heavy burden to bear. My tribe made a good life for themselves on the remains of the sundered world. The food was sufficient, if not plentiful, our enemies lived in apprehension, if not in fear.

It was survival, yes, but was it a life? Would we ever reach the glory promised to us by the spirits of the land whose voices I hear? The promises came, and I led my warriors into battle and they ripped our foes apart limb from limb, winning us a chance to survive another day, another week, another year. Survive. Nothing more.

It made the tribe happy for the hard-won spoils taste sweeter than they should, no matter how sparse they truly are. We settled for what we got and we persevered.

But I am no ordinary shaman. My essence is attuned to many kinds of voices, not just the spirits my people are accustomed to. The new whispers that entered my mind were dark and hollow, like a shadow sliding across a stagnant pool. Barely leaving a trace. The promises they made went beyond survival. They showed greatness, true greatness, like that of the colossal cities of the dark elves deep in the earth – things of legends. Terrible and glorious.

Such power was available to those who were willing to strive for it, for those willing to find the tools necessary and to have the courage to use these tools. The swirling energies promised to me made my past magics seem weak in comparison. I was no longer content to perform weather dances and battle rituals, healing the wounds of my tribe's warriors and interpreting omens. I yearned the true power, unleashing terror, inspiring awe. It was all possible but for that I needed something else in addition to my abilities. Obsidian. The shade crystal, the powerful focus of magical energies.

The surface has precious little of it and so my visions have led my tribe down into the depths of the caverns – a decision that was questioned by many and understood by few members of my warband. There we made a new home – finding a set of chambers, growing accustomed to hunting the strange subterranean beasts. Making peace with some of the inhabitants of the caves, slaughtering others. There was no shortage of violence to go around in these depths and that has kept my tribe happy. Such is the way of the orc.

All this time one thing was on my mind. Obsidian. The power it contained beckoned and I have charged my orcs with finding it at any cost. Some of those who did were deformed into wretched, mutated creatures as their weak bodies could not contain the crystal's glorious potential. Other shards have made their way to me. Every one of these, I have put to use. It grew my mystical power. I have experimented with granting additional prowess to some of the beasts that my tribe keeps with some success.

As far as my warriors know, we might have been squatting in a dank, moldy cave, but in reality we were sharpening the blade that would cut a bloody swath through our enemies old and new. There was but one thing left. Now that I knew the properties and a way to focus the energies of the obsidian crystals, I needed a large and stable supply.

The descent into the city of the dark elves was a difficult trial, even for me. The hollow voices guided my steps. The spells I have rehearsed proved effective on the sentries and made my passage undiscernible even to the powerful wards put in place by the subterranean masters of magic. I was able to infiltrate the obsidian storage of the great dark city.

I remember the feeling when I set foot in that room. Pulsating with energy. Unending power. Unlimited potential. Stack upon stack of the refined crystals – more than I ever thought could exist in one place without immediately causing a second cataclysm. I collapsed to my knees in awe and I couldn't help but weep in the sheer astonishment of what this meant.

I carried off as much as I could. The dark elves' vengeance would likely come for me but surrounded by my warriors in the upper caverns and with all this power at my disposal I now felt confident I could protect myself. The power emanated from my heavy bag – waves of energy so strong they created palpable distortions in the dark air of the caverns around.

This would change everything.

The obsidian was safely stashed in secret hiding places around the warcamp and harder to access parts of the tunnels. It was now only a matter of forming a plan of how and when to unleash the power at my command. My strolls through the endless foreboding caverns got longer and more pensive as I perfected my designs, immersed myself in them. I longed to put my newfound power to a worthy test.

It was then I heard stumbling steps up ahead. A dry smile cracked my withered lips as I grasped a shard I was wearing on my neck, feeling the energy course through me, hearing the echoes of the hollow voices in my mind. The poor wretch was doomed, whatever it was. Greatness awaited.

MONSTER STORY: TROLL

The stones sing to me.

Their songs are slow
and heavy like my steps.

They wait and they
remember.



I am of the stone, I am one with it. I came from it and I will return to it when the time is right. I do not know what that time will be and until then I will travel these halls and guard them from intruders no matter who they are.

Stone is strong. Patient. Ancient. It runs to the very heart of the world. Many would seek to abuse its treasures. Greedy humans with their tools of iron, seeking to rip the stone's treasure from its grasp. The thin creatures of shade and magic in their vast subterranean cities. Dumb little critters digging through, hoping to unearth things they do not understand. They are all weak. Soft. Not like stone. The stone shows its strength as their skulls crack against it, as the mush seeps out and is subsumed by stone as a sacrifice. A fitting apology for their insolence.

Some stones are angry. They bear the scars of the picks and the filth that was imposed by unwelcome squatters. These stones must be calmed. There is but one way to do so and that is through death. Death is cleansing. It restores things to the way they should be – quiet, rumbling, none of the scurrying or digging. The way stones want it.

And so, I will keep my watch. Lumbering from tunnel to tunnel, from cave to cave. One with the stone. Hearing its voice, its laments. Calming the stones with my presence. Scaring off the intruders no matter their purpose. If they are lucky and smart they run. If they are neither – their death pleases the stones. They try to slash and maim my flesh but it is of little use. The stone perseveres and so do I - before long only memories of the wounds remain - a dull pain, no more than a faint echo. And enemies of the stone can be certain that any pain I suffer I will return tenfold.

Crack. Another intruder gone, another dull echo in the eternal primeval song of the underworld.

MONSTER STORY: VAMPIRE

I miss home. Shrouded as my memories are by the constant hunger, I still see glimpses of my past. The vaulted halls of our proud keep. My beloved husband.



I no longer recall whether there were children or not for the thoughts of young blood bring the red mist that veils my memories further.

So instead I dwell on what I remember of these bygone days. The walks on the parapet, our fields stretching all the way into the horizon. The sensation of wind in my hair. The setting sun – something I shall never feel again. All these moments – grains of sand, worn down by the merciless tides of time. That was well over a century ago.

I do not remember much of the cataclysm itself. A deep rumbling, seemingly shaking the very foundation of the keep. Screams of terror. Falling debris, people being crushed. The grey winds came soon after – strange, corrupting, harmless to some and deadly to others – picking its victims seemingly at random, some who inhaled the ash-like dust would convulse and cough up blood, dying within hours.

Walking dejected around the corpse-littered ruins of my former home, along with what was left of our people. Certainly, we've heard warnings of the dire consequences that the sorcerers' meddling could bring. Seduced by the power of their dark craft few cared. I did not. What the dark crystals and their magic made possible was worth any risk and now we were paying the price, greedy fools.

For most in my predicament the transformation itself is memorable. Not for me. After I have left the ruins of my keep wandering the decimated countryside, many dark creatures were emerging from the shadows. One such creature was the vampire that gifted me my immortality, ending my miserable living existence. I did not want immortality, I wanted release. I loathed my new form, I loathed my master and after a time, as his power over me waned, I have made arrangements to collapse a wall, exposing his hiding place to the cleansing rays of the sun. It screeched as it turned to ash.

The cataclysm has shifted the landscape of the countryside that was once familiar to me into a twisted and misshapen form. Murderous bands of greenskins roamed these scarred lands, living in constant strife. They made for easy prey at night and my survival in this new form was never under threat.

Years passed. Long years of solitude, of beastlike excitement of the hunt, the bloodlust overwhelming whatever was left of me. I gained notoriety as the deathly presence that haunts the shadow. I enjoyed being feared. It gave me purpose. I traveled south to the edge of the scarred lands to spread my legend until one day I came upon a hamlet – first sign that people were staking a claim for these lands once more. My curiosity was piqued.

That night I stalked the alleys of the hamlet, listening to the murmur of conversation in the inn yard, the singing, the rare burst of laughter. These sounds made me feel nothing, yet they fascinated me as a relic of my past. I fed well that night too – the greenskin blood is vile and humans offer much more agreeable sustenance. Finding the hamlet made me feel a connection to a place that I have not felt ever since the destruction of our keep and I decided to make it my new hunting ground.

A nearby complex of caverns offered a place to hide from the sun's deadly rays. It is a dangerous place with twisting tunnels leading into treacherous depths, with many hostile monster tribes vying for control over the more livable caves. Dark and terrible secrets lie within the moss-covered ruins that litter these caverns – ruins that remind me of the terrible events of that faithful night over a century ago.

But no matter. I am no longer a victim of the shadows – I am the shadow, I am the threat. The creatures of these depths will learn just what kind of creature I am. Their blood will sustain me along with the visits to the human settlement. And that delightful little hamlet will learn to love and fear their new Lady. I have finally found it. Twisted and blood-soaked, this will be my new home.



MONSTER STORY: WYVERN

I knew I was much too old for this when they asked me to come along. Come, Elder, we will protect you, your wisdom will guide us to unimaginable riches and secrets you could only dream about!

Went for it like a mush-brained youngling. Well, no need to dwell on it, can't keep it against them now that they're all dead.

My knowledge has served me well and knowing the tongue and customs of the greenskins came in handy as I bribed the goblin with my makeshift dagger and bartered my life from the marauding hyena-like creature who was more interested in my possessions than my life. Yet for the last few hours I felt a presence stalking my path – something big, though yet unseen. You don't live as long as me in places where I lived without learning to feel when you are being watched.

So that is how it feels to be prey. The screech of claw against the rocks, slithering of scales against the stone – a giant lizard of some sort? I try to keep to the shadows but I know the beast has my scent. My many wounds bleed and I am not hard to track.

This large cavern is taking me in the right direction. On the opposite side of it, high up on a ledge I see dim light filtering into the darkness of the underground. Safety at last! I rush to make my way up the slope, towards the light where I can see the exit, but it is now that my stalker makes its appearance – as I grab at a stone to pull myself up, I hear a barely audible slither and a terrible pain in my foot as mighty jaws chomp down on it. Screaming in agony I tumble down and find myself face to face with a monster of legends. A wyvern! I have read much about the poisonous tail spikes of these insatiable predators but my predicament does not leave much time to ponder lore.

I roll aside just in time to avoid a powerful claw strike – these are razor sharp and sink into stone as if it was a trunk of a tree. I shudder at the thought of what would happen if these were to rend my flesh. As the beast struggles to free its winged arm I take my chance and take a wild swing with my club – all that was left of my walking stick. An audible crack and a hiss of pain tells me the beast felt it, yet now it is free and I must flee. As I rush off, a whip of its spiked tail catches me in the back – the wound is not that serious but it burns. Taking cover behind a boulder I feel the bloody gash on my back – indeed, blood is mixed with the emerald venom on my fingers when I examine my hand. Time is short.

Limping, I make way to a small crevasse in the cavern walls – the beast rushes to chase me but I make it just before it catches up to me. Panicked, my vision blurring from the venom taking effect I think, my mind racing feverishly. Of course! The damned thing will eat anything. Reaching into my pack I take out some of the snake meat that I was saving for later and the little bag of the poisonous herbs I found earlier. Wyverns will eat anything without thinking – I throw out my improvised bait and sure enough the beast, gulps it up, the chunk of meat disappearing instantly in its giant maw. It still scratches and thrashes against the small opening where I am hiding, trembling, but now I know it's only a matter of time before my own poison works.

Indeed, soon I hear the mad struggle give way to a hiss of agony as the huge winged shape thrashes on the floor, its insides set aflame by the herbs I mixed. Now is my time! I rush out, my club swinging, going for its head. In its mad erratic movements, it does not try to evade me and I get several mighty blows in – it is as if the strength of my youth returns in this desperate hour. Its tail, waving around chaotically catches me again and again, the spike leaving bloody gashes on my arms and chest. I pay no attention to it as I strike the monster's head until a loud crack echoes through the caves and its mad struggle subsides.

I let go of my club, resisting the consuming desire to fall to my knees in exhaustion. For a moment I consider taking samples from the monstrous corpse in front of me but quickly decide that survival is the only thing that matters now. Swaying, my vision swimming I make several uncertain steps towards the ledge – where I see the pale daylight seeping in, promising salvation.

Step, another step. Pushing myself to the very edge of my strength, beyond it, just to get to the light. The burning of my wounds becomes too much to bear. The venom coursing through my aching body finally overcomes me. I stumble and fall, coughing up blood, everything going dark.

I raise my head to look at the light one last time. So close, yet an infinity away. I knew I was too old for this.

CHARACTER STORY: BRAWLER

Never lived in a same place for more than a year. Never thought this pathetic village would be the first patch of land that I'd call home that long. Then again, I never thought a lot of things would happen and I'll be damned if that ever stopped them from happening.



I guess life just has a way of working out like that. "My little Templar" – my pa would say after I'd come back from dishing out another beating to a boy who thought too much of himself, my red hair tangled in a mess of mud and blood. Pa was a bastard if ever there was one. Stole for a living, was too cheap to pay the guilds and was always on the run as a result. Never more than a year in the same place.

He'd rush into whatever hovel we huddled in, panicked, half-drunk, shut the windows with a paranoid gleam in his eyes and start telling me how "they" are after us again. Always thought of "them" as these big bad men when I was little – crooked knives, crooked grins. Now I get that he was just as bad if not worse. Same as me now, really. The world is just a mud pit and we're all rotten, biting and clawing, scrambling over each other's heads to crawl out, not knowing that we're all going down together. They don't call it the Dark for nothing.

All his hair-tussling and nicknames aside I think he truly believed I was going to be a Templar. I'm not sure how much he knew of them outside of the fact that they were all women and they could fight – both fit me well enough. For once I don't think he understood how the girls got there – what would usually happen to their parents for them to end up training as a Templar. I don't think he wanted that fate for himself, but ignorance is bliss I guess.

I finally ran away when I was fifteen and I got tired of following him from town to town, always looking over our shoulders, never able to scrape anything but a meager existence from his pickpocketing. I got into a tavern brawl and impressed a caravan guard captain by knocking out two of his teeth – next thing I knew he was offering me work in his band. I never said my goodbyes to pa – I knew it would devastate him and he'd be pathetic begging me to stay. Oh, and I hated his guts and never wanted to see him again.

I had mixed thoughts about caravan guarding. It was easy enough on the first two trips what with the lack of any attacks to defend from. Still got paid – more decent coin than I ever saw from pa! The third trip went much worse. My career as a caravan guard came to an abrupt stop after our very first attack – well planned, well executed – the brigands, hiding in trees, brought a good half of us down with crossbow bolts before closing in to finish the job. I killed one in melee, but the heavy-set woman, their leader, took me down with a shield bash. Guess she liked my spirit because they decided not to slit my throat and offered to be one of them instead. Highway robbery beat being dead, so I agreed.

There was a strange freedom to the highway life. Hide in forests, send one of ours into town to get word of a good target for a hit, prepare, kill a bunch of guards, sell the spoils – drink it all away in the next town. Town watch and the caravan warriors are no Greycard and we only got in real trouble with them rarely. Lost some people, found some new ones. All of them were one like another – rotten teeth, drunk half of the time, eager for the next bloodletting. And I was one of them.

The brigand leader took me under her wing, thought of me as a daughter. Got respect as people feared both myself and my new adopted ma – ain't no one stupid enough to try something funny. The food was decent, we fought more than we ran and, outside of regular attacks from wild animals, the woods were pleasant enough. Life was good.

Then that one attack came – one that changed everything. Rich-looking wagon – purple velvet, gilded decorations. Knew it was a good haul from the looks of it. The guards were better than you'd expect too as we lost four men in the fight. Even the bastard in the carriage decided to put up a fight – usually it's only the guards who do. He could swing his sword too, despite his rich clothes and all. Bled out two more of ours before Ma put a crossbow bolt in his gut.

She was mad as all hells then – we lost half of the band on that raid. She made him watch as she dragged out his wife and daughter from the wagon – whimpering, pathetic, helpless. Ordered me to end them, so that the poor sod could suffer before he croaked. His eyes, I'll never forget them. He looked sad, blood running down his chin, whispering for quick death. I couldn't do it. Ma was not pleased, but others were more than happy to oblige.

That day I found out that no matter how much of a shithole the Dark can be – there are things I won't stoop to. And staying with those who would make me sick to my stomach. And so, I left the band to strike out on my own. Staggered around for a bit, never really finding a place – never more than a year, until I found this little place on the edge of the Scarred Lands. The abandoned mine that the elders were trying to get up and running were teeming with kobolds and they needed disposable swords to clear the critters out. Great fit for me.

I spent my earnings drinking and dining as I liked, getting into tavern fights when I was feeling bored. It was a low life, but it was honest, and I felt content – for the first time in what seemed like ever. Until one night I was asked if I was brave enough to venture deeper into the mines to face something more than just kobolds for a chance at some serious coin.

As the bruised boys of my childhood could attest to – I never turned down a challenge. I had a good feeling about this.

CHARACTER STORY: BRAWLER

I hurt people. Always have. It's the only damn thing I'm good at. Wouldn't want to do anything else for coin.



Far as I can recall I've been always hanging around the tavern anyways. Ever since I was a young idiot – all bulk and not a thought in my head – I'd work there hauling bags of horse feed or water buckets, chopping firewood – you name it. Easy jobs for someone with muscle. People around the tavern liked me – I mostly kept my temper in check, which was all that was needed to guarantee frequent hay romps with servant girls.

Was sure I'd get picked for the Greyguard – had everything going for me – big, strong, not squeamish about following orders. Got rejected. Think it's that sergeant prick, had it in for me after I roughed up that buddy of his over a lost bet he refused to pay up. How the hell was I to know the bastard had important friends?

I don't give it a second thought. The morons can spin tales about how brave they are trudging through swamps to chop up a gnoll or two – all they are really good for is passing out from drink or picking fights with the locals. How did their motto go? "We keep the darkness at bay, so the light shines pure". Maybe an eternity ago. What a load of crap. I mean, I did get a little upset – had a couple of rough nights where I had a bit too much swill, started a fight or two to get the tension out. Inn furniture is cheap crap anyways – not that hard to get a couple of new tables.

That's when the tavern keeper was smart enough to hire me as the man who throws out others who'd want to break tables. Great move now that I think about it. Keeps me sober, lets me break some teeth now and again and lets others drink in peace. Just what our world needs – peace and drink. And an occasional teeth-smashing of course.

Guess my reputation got around because one night this thin berk comes in, all wrapped up in a cloak and hood. Stayed at the inn looking for me, "mighty warrior of this fine village". Wants to venture into some sort of a dungeon from what I get of his ramblings. Needs someone strong in case things get dicey. Of course, I told him to get bent – no need to ruin the good arrangement I got here. He doesn't need to know that I'm not that good with a sword – more of a fist to the nose kind of a "warrior". Oh, and I prefer drunkards to actual monsters if we're picking who it is that we're hurting.

Now the next night an old friend comes by the inn. Haven't seen the bastard in years. Guess I'm taking a night off. Drinks pour one after another and I lose track of his stories – no longer sure whether he's fighting the bandits on the roads or he's the one doing the banditry. There is definitely robbery happening in the stories somewhere. We smash the mugs and keep at it – it's good to see him again.

We stagger out into the night barely standing, screaming the foulest drinking songs we manage to half-remember. The jumbled talk turns to the ladies as we spot his old flame out on the street. He never got over this one he tells me, but she'd probably never speak to him again. And it's not just that – it looks like she's with someone new! The nerve, passing up on a perfectly suitable gentleman like my friend here just because he vanished for a few years! Our eyes narrow and fists clench. We follow them. The stars spin, and the memories get hazy.

I wake up in a pigsty, my head feels wooden and my fists are covered in dried blood. No sign of my friend as I sit up, the world slowly drifting into focus. A fat hog is chewing at my boot. I spit in disgust, looking around for a stick to throw at the pig. An arm sticking out of a hay bale catches my attention. There's my buddy! How much DID we drink last night? I pull to get him out and fall on my ass as the dim morning light reveals a corpse of a man with his face smashed in.

The new suitor of my friend's lady. I look again at my bloodied fists, my thoughts racing like blind, confused mice in the fog filling my mind. Did anyone see us follow him? Is anyone going to miss him? Then I remember where I know him from. I thought he seemed familiar. It's the sergeant's buddy, the one with lots of friends in the Greyguard...

I stumble away from the pigsty wiping away mud from my face and blood from my fists, legs still unsteady. I need to get out of town before someone finds out and decides to return the favour for this one. I need to go find that hooded berk, the one who wanted the muscle for his plan and to do it quickly.

It seemed whether I wanted it or not, I was going for an adventure.



CHARACTER STORY: HUNTER

This world has always taken from us more than it gave in return. "The Dark" they call it – ever since the horrors of the Cataclysm plunged our lands in eternal gloom, filling hearts with eternal despair.

A fitting name for a world abandoned by light. You can sense it in the ash-filled air, in the malice of the corrupted forests, in the eyes of the people – terrified and desperate, ready to inflict any ill on others to survive another day.

My sweet little star, you are the purest and kindest soul among this shadow, an echo of a love that ended much too soon. You have my eyes but his smile. It is that smile that I miss most during my long hunting journeys into the wilderness while the elders of the village looked after you in exchange for some of the meat I'd bring back. As I waded through pools of foul stagnant water, ripping my cloak on the crooked branches of the gnarled trees I thought of your sweet little laughter and it kept me warm as I got drenched by the freezing rain. As I held my breath, concealing myself from the marauding greenskins, I thought of how you played with my fingers and it brought a smile to my face. You are the most precious gift this cruel world has ever offered.

And now it wants to rip you from my grasp.

You were such a strong baby – it caught everyone off guard when the sickness came after your sixth name day. Pale and feverish, you wouldn't stop coughing for days. My poor little girl, shivering, delirious, your light almost extinguished. I tried whatever I could. None of the poultices and cures that I could procure in our backwater hamlet did a damn thing. You were fading. The wise woman who would watch you sometimes mentioned that there was a place far to the south – away from the corruption of the Scarred Lands, where the learned sages could help stave off even the cruelest of maladies. The Blackmoor Circle. I could not lose you and I embarked on a journey the next time I could join a caravan heading south.

It seemed you got better on the road – maybe it was the change in your surroundings, or just wishful thinking. People of the caravan treated us well – out of pity or gratitude for the meat I brought back from my hunting forays.

We finally made it to the Circle. A mysterious set of buildings on the edge of a huge marshland – all made of dark stone overgrown with vines – ancient-looking but far from decrepit ruins. The wise men and women who greeted us there exuded an air of knowledge and quiet confidence. I knew they could help you. They could cure all ills it was said, and people from far and wide came seeking their aid.

It turned out we were lacking the one thing that made all the healing possible. Coin. Lots of it. The meager contents of my purse – whatever remained after paying for the road, was not enough to cover even a portion of the cost. They turned from me, these sages in their flowing robes, holding hostage the very life of my daughter and they left. I begged, I cried, I threatened, I promised the world but with no payment for their services – no salvation was to be delivered in the Blackmoor Circle. I collapsed on my knees next to the bed where they looked at her. She held my hand asking if we were going home soon in her weak raspy voice. My little star. I kissed her fingers, containing the tears as much as I could. If no aid was possible here – I would find another way.

It felt like a defeat coming back to our home in the village. She started feeling much worse on the road back and it didn't get better when we finally arrived. I went hunting as much as I could, hauling heavy deer carcasses back from the twisted woods to sell for extra coin, almost being spotted by the monstrous inhabitants of the Scarred Lands a few times because of my carelessness.

The disease progressed faster than I could earn enough to pay the healers. Despair descended on me, with only the light of my child's eyes to guide me out of it. And even then – exhausted beyond description from overexerting myself – I felt like I was letting her down, not doing enough.

That's when the offer came. One of the elders who used to watch my child when she was little, came to see me. An expedition, he said, one in need of a tracker. An expedition to a place where great treasure may be found, though the journey was sure to be fraught with peril. It was the chance I could not pass on – any risk was worth it if it meant I could bring my daughter back from the brink of death.

I sheathed the hunting knife and tightened the straps on my leather armor, giving my girl a long kiss before leaving her with a young woman who agreed to look after her while I was gone.

I swear, my little star, soon you will shine brighter than ever. I will not let The Dark consume you.



CHARACTER STORY: HUNTER

The world plunged into darkness. Beasts and monsters swarming just beyond the tenuous light of our settlements. What a time to be alive.

Most choose to recoil from the dark, huddling to the warmth of their fires and the illusion of protection the crumbling walls provide. Others struggle against the darkness – pushing it back, forming a barrier to stop it from encroaching further. Me? I embrace it. Darkness brings monsters and killing monsters is what I am known for.

It started innocently enough when I was a simple hunter in my village in the south. A particularly bulky boar here, a scar from taking down a bear there – you stay alive long enough with these stories and people start to recognize you. Then a winged deformity started frequenting the village snagging children – putting a spear through that brought me real fame. I liked it.

Tasting the glory and profit that came from feats such as that I knew I would not stop. Following the Calamity there was no shortage of twisted beasts prowling the wilderness and I pledged to put them down. Long weeks were spent knee-deep in stinking mud, cutting myself on bladegrass in search of filthy monsters dwelling in the marshes. Stalking the treacherous mountain slopes to seek out and take down a griffin. I have done these things and have the trophies to prove it, yet I found the appreciation of such kills never went as far as I'd like. Nothing like that time I killed a monster that was threatening a village. I was good at this but being good wasn't enough. I wanted people to know it, to value it, to be awed by my prowess.

So, I decided to make things a little more interesting. Luring a couple of harpies out of their cliff nests to the vicinity of a trading post was not particularly hard. Soon, caravans started to suffer from the attacks as people plunged to their deaths, captivated by the bewitching songs. I remember the despair that hung around the trading post when I arrived – their livelihood was at stake. People grabbed my sleeves, begging to make it go away. A tip of the hat from me – that's what I'm here for. Some poisoned bolts, some wax for the ears – not a difficult job. Back to the post with some feather trophies to the grateful crowd. Let the gossip and whispers of my deeds spread, the slayer of monsters is there to save those in need.

Who's to judge if sometimes the need is a little contrived? Morsels of food here, shiny trinkets there – each beast is drawn to their own prize. And with them they bring devastation and death. Good thing someone is there to put a stop to such horrors.

And now this mining hamlet. Seems desperate enough as it is, but the legend must grow. I hear a cavern complex nearby is home to terrible beast of all manner. I'll be the judge of that. Perhaps going alone is not wise – even with my skills I don't wish to be overly heroic. The hooded stranger in the tavern is seeking companions for an expedition – that will provide a suitable reason to venture down and scout out what kind of beasts dwell in these depths.

Before this village can be saved – I need to stir up something to save it from.

CHARACTER STORY:

SAGE

I am getting too old for all this nonsense.



Even getting up to get the firewood the kind villagers supply me with is a struggle in the colder months as my joints creak, reminding of age and the strain they already had to endure. The pain is especially bad when it rains but what am I going to do, not enjoy rain? Not going to happen. Always liked the distant patter of it, ever since I was a young enthusiastic fool, my nose buried in a book, seeking long-forgotten secrets in the libraries of Aulstrad.

People were different then. Less resigned, still thinking we could rebuild after the Cataclysm. I remember many aspiring crusaders coming to me, willing to pay for locations of strongholds lost to the disaster, now occupied by greenskins or worse. They went, and they tried to reclaim these, to claw back what was taken from us. Hardly anyone came back. Hardly anyone would bother to even try now. How long ago was that, forty, fifty years? That's now how long it takes for hope to die, I suppose.

I was happy spending my days with musty tomes, eager to share my knowledge for coin. I ate like a Lord back then – say what you will of the morals of Aulstrad but they feed you well if you can afford it. These memories bring a smile to my face as I ladle the gruel from the simmering pot in my hut.

I took what I could from these libraries and have broadened my search, ever hungry to expand my knowledge. I took trips to far cities of the Dark that still stood to learn from the sages there, glean the knowledge held by the elders. The roads were not safe even then, but I could afford protection. Some of my travels took me to less traveled places, but it is those that often hold the most intriguing knowledge. My curiosity started to attract attention. The unwelcome kind. The first conversation I had with a Templar should have told me everything I needed to know. The furious seekers of corruption are indiscriminate in their zeal to purge it from our lands and I fear little weight was given to my objections and assurances of innocence. Suspicious activity, wrong kind of research, dangerous implications. I felt the dial of fate turning against me, but my preparations to leave Aulstrad were not expedient enough. Within four days of that conversation I was taken to the Purgatory.

Seven years. That is how long I spent in that place devoid of hope, devoid of light, devoid of knowledge. A place where the corrupting taint of magic and forbidden lore is burnt out of those who have come into contact with it – willingly or by chance, proven or by suspicion. The food in that place made my gruel here feel like a feast. I remember clinging to my sanity as if it was a ledge on which I had only the most precarious footing. Many who went in there were not so fortunate. I had a little help. I could hear the rain in my cell and that sound helped my thoughts drift away from the terrors I had to endure. After seven years of inquest, no convincing evidence of my involvement with the forbidden knowledge was found and I had my freedom again, damaged as I was.

I left Aulstrad soon after being released. The burden of what I had to endure was too much to bear and the open road beckoned. With no coin to my name this journey was quite different. Travelling without guards and having nothing worth stealing I spoke to brigands, stopping in settlements of ill repute that were still dotting the countryside of the Dark. I visited sages in rickety huts and half-mad prophets spouting things that were either great truths or inane ramblings. I consulted tomes in forsaken ruins and pursued rumours. I offered what knowledge I could to help the folks along the way and their kindness in response made sure my needs were looked after. It felt good to learn again, to breathe free. But all journeys must end and mine led me here to this hamlet at the edge of nowhere where I sit stirring the gruel over a dying fire. It is a simple life but one that I have enjoyed as it left me to my research, untroubled by the attention of the Templar who have much more obvious targets for their righteousness this close to the border of the Scarred Lands.

I have grown old and content here, my research nearing completion, when one night an unexpected opportunity came knocking. A desperate-looking fellow in a dark hood – nimble and shifty-eyed – asking for my knowledge to aid him and his companions in a dangerous expedition. There are risks, he warned, but the rewards would exceed my wildest dreams. Better yet, he seemed to know better than most what would be of most value to me – not shiny trinkets and baubles, but knowledge, knowledge of a very particular kind.

According to him, a cavern complex not far off contained forsaken ruins of an ancient empire – the vague descriptions he provided matched what I already knew through years of research. The ruins would hold the answers I needed, perhaps even the appropriate materials to enact the formula.

After all it was immortality I was after, something I dedicated most of my life to study, regardless of how corrupt shortsighted fanatics would deem it. And such knowledge justified many risks.

I was old, yes, but alive and keen to continue living – and I intended to stay that way for a long, long time to come.

CHARACTER STORY: SAGE

Knowledge is like a plant. Given fertile soil and nourishment it blossoms and expands, nurturing and supporting everything around. It is truly a beautiful thing. And much like a plant – it is not meant to be contained.



The ancient buildings of the Blackmoor Circle were covered in creeping vines – I remember feeling a serene, tranquil air whenever I would pass my hand over the dark stones and the leaves enveloping them. I have spent a long time there with others who dedicated their lives to pursuit of knowledge. It felt like an island of sanity, civility and peace amidst the swirling sea of violence and chaos that has consumed our lands ever since the Calamity struck.

Located on the very edge of a vast marshland teeming with all manner of wildlife, it provided a fertile source of curious specimens and rare ingredients to examine, study and combine as my colleagues and I sought to salvage and expand the knowledge that our civilization once possessed. I remember these early days – the long nights poring over ancient texts, the insightful conversations with the wise elders, eye-opening expeditions into the swamp. My mind was swelling with knowledge and my heart was soaring with the hope that this knowledge could help so many people – more full bellies, more cured diseases, less suffering and death.

I soon found out the reason why the Blackmoor Circle could stay as serene and unharmed as it did. The knowledge we produced was a valuable commodity and those who could pay for it were the ones who benefitted from it most. The guards to keep the monsters at bay, the lavish meals, the flowing robes, the incense, the antique quills – all that came at a cost and the elders were prudent in exacting a price to keep our sanctuary as safe and comfortable as they could. Except it meant that those who could not pay could not benefit from our wisdom. And almost nobody could pay. I remember sitting in my room dumbfounded by my realization that all that we produce – the wisdom filling our books in exquisite calligraphy, the poultices able to cure many ailments – none of that was helping the common people. I decided to change that.

My forays out from the Circle started with visits to the neighboring villages. I went, I helped those who suffered, I swore them to secrecy and I would come back. A cured sickness in one hamlet, a fertile seed to plant in another – I tried to spread the wealth of our knowledge as far as I could reach without raising suspicion. The elders were starting to get concerned that my expeditions did not produce the results they once did – I came back empty handed blaming poor luck and focused on library research instead, planning my next journey.

I tried to be generous with what I could offer, and I went too far. One of the village elders begged for a book that he thought would be in our library's archives. A simple family tree, wanted to know who his forefathers were. I snuck it out from the Circle and I brought it to him. The book itself, while full of names, seemed to possess some additional glyphs and diagrams that I could not quite place, but in my desire to help, I did not ask for an explanation.

We received news later that the village was under attack by a corrupt monster emerging seemingly out of nowhere. Many lives were lost. The book was found in the splintered ruins of the elder's house – occult writing having awakened the dark energies within. It all came back to me. For much like a plant that has been twisted into a misshapen wretched thing by the corrupted soil it grows from – knowledge can be deadly in the wrong hands.

I confessed, for I could not bear to keep such a secret.

My exile from the Circle was swift. I was not to return under the penalty of death.

My travels were hard – my robe covered in mud, my legs aching, my vision swimming from hunger and weariness. Spending most of my life in the sheltered confines of the Blackmoor Circle, I was ill prepared for the perils and tribulations of the outside world. Yet if there was one thing I knew how to do – it was how to learn. So, I learned. I went from village to village begging in one place, doing dirty manual labour in another, helping cure an illness in third. The healing was hard with no access to the Circle's herbs – I knew what would help and had no way of obtaining the needed ingredient. I had to say that I could not help often – the people's gazes immediately drowned in desperation.

Yet I helped as much as I could, and sometimes people helped me in return. Drenched, dirty and hungry, for the first time in a long time – I no longer felt ashamed of what I was doing.

The life of wandering led me to a hamlet on the very edge of the Scarred Wastelands – the region most affected by the Calamity. I lived there for many years, trying to leave my past behind, helping deliver babies and staving off diseases that often threatened the hamlet's inhabitants. I looked after children and I knew and cared for the people who eked out an existence on the verge of monster-infested wastes. I always wished there would be a way to obtain a good supply of ingredients for my healing and an opportunity finally presented itself in the strangest manner.

A hooded young man spoke of mysterious ruins of a long-forgotten civilization, rich in knowledge and advanced in the ways of alchemy and medicine. The journey to the ruins would be fraught with peril, he warned, but the rewards we could find would be worth the risk. He needed someone familiar with the ancient lore to help with the expedition and sought me out, for my knowledge resulted in somewhat of a reputation.

My eyes gleamed at the thought of having so much to aid me in helping the people. With such tools at my disposal, I could make a real difference, to put my knowledge to work doing good for all – not just those living a life of luxury. For too long my knowledge felt impotent and useless. I had to agree.



CHARACTER STORY: SNEAK

I hear smuggling used to be easy living. I'll be damned if it stayed that way.

If you believe the stories, in the old days – before it all went to hells with the Cataclysm, you could make a good living bringing in some innocent-looking load under the guards' nose. Spices, furs – that sort of thing. Sneak it into the city so that you don't pay the taxes and there you have it – saved some money to the merchant who buys them off you, and you are heading to the taverns, friend! Sure, time to time you would deal with something you're not supposed to bring in at all like a poison vial or two, but that was rare.

Now of course no one bothers with the taxes anymore. If a lord wants some money from you he'll just send his helmet-heads straight to your shop to knock on your door and get what he wants. No taxes, no easy smuggling money. There are still some wares the powers that be don't want within city walls though. We live in a scary time, friend, and you need something to take the edge off. And I don't mean the cheap tavern swill. Those who are looking for a real special experience – they want the good stuff, the Night's Kiss, the Coppers, White Lily extract if they can afford it. Sure, sometimes it takes you too far and they find you breathless and bloated in a gutter, but with death around every corner in the Scarred Lands – you may as well go feeling real good.

So that's the kind of packages I deliver. Sometimes it's something unique like an obsidian-reinforced blade or a pair of these rooster monsters that turn you to stone if you look at them too long. I don't ask questions. I bring the goods in and I get paid. And most importantly – I never get spotted.

Because many eyes are on the lookout for the wares I courier. Corruption – the verdict has been rendered in advance and anyone caught with these items is sure to hang for their involvement. Guess the Cataclysm has everyone a bit on edge with that, so the watchful Templar pay special attention that the wrong kind of trinkets don't get into the wrong hands. They say the Templar can feel it on you no matter how you conceal it – anything with slightest traces of the stuff they deem evil. That's what makes them so good at what they do. Well, I'm still here, aren't I? I guess that means they met their match in me.

Normally I only do the delivery for someone else, but I think all that is about to change. This one stupid bastard kept showing me a map he stumbled upon – blabbing on about how just beyond a mine by a tiny village lies a source of unimaginable riches. He talked too much – a knife in a dark alley made sure that didn't last enough to get annoying. But the map looked real. Bloodied and torn, it seemed to point to a passage from the mining tunnels into ancient ruins in a cavern complex under the Scarred Lands. The symbols that decorated the map were familiar to me – I've seen them on some of the more dangerous items I had to smuggle in. If I could get my hands on a load of these and find a buyer – I'd be set for life. I stood in that alley, under drizzling rain, barely able to contain my excitement.

The plan is simple. Travel to the little village, get a sense of things. Find some muscle, someone who knows about these caves and maybe a tracker to not get lost down there. Small team – down we go. Follow the map, get what we came for, make it out alive. Guess we'll see how many of us survive. I am certain I won't be in a sharing mood.



CHARACTER STORY: SNEAK

I keep hearing people complain that life is difficult. Am I wrong to want to experience this hardship? Sheltered away, far from the struggles and dangers, I am not certain if I ever truly lived.

A daughter of a mighty lord, protector of the realm, or whatever was left of it after the terrible events of a century ago. Yet as the tutors told me – in that time of despair our keep stood strong, a bulwark of protection against the relentless onslaught of the monstrosities that would claim our land as their own.

It was my great-grandfather who held the evils at bay and his daughter who built up what is now the northernmost civilized land still holding against the evils of the Scarred Wastes and the unbridled corruption beyond. Ever since I was a child I found strange comfort looking out from the walls of our keep, seeing the gnarled forms of the twisted trees stretch into the horizon.

The people of this land flock to my family for the protection it offers. My father is surrounded by warriors loyal to him those who can protect our people and assert his will over those who would challenge his authority. He has created a semblance of safety for the land and allowed me to grow up within the walls of the castle, enjoying every comfort and luxury that most people can only dream of. And I hate it.

Those who stop at the castle tell stories of danger, daring, adventure, adversity. They all look downtrodden, their clothes ripped and mud-stained, but what a thrill it must be to oppose the creatures of darkness, to travel through the corrupted forests, to fend off bandits, to seek ancient mysteries amidst crumbling ruins! The tales I heard and the books I read describe a world full of opportunity for those who can seize it. Yet here the only opportunity that awaits me is an advantageous marriage proposal. How dull. I am no fool and I understand that life beyond the keep is full of peril, but I think I would rather face that than wither away next to an ungrateful oaf of a husband.

I have decided long ago that I would not submit to this existence. Getting around the castle, into places where I'm not supposed to be I was always agile and nimble. I know these corridors well and I am light on my feet, able to stay out of sight. With enough curiosity and attention, one can find many secrets in our keep and a hidden tunnel leading beyond the walls was a welcome discovery. I had my plan and means of escape. Not for a second did I doubt that this is what I want for myself. A few weeks were spent putting together a travel pack. Some food, enough coin to get by, a slender blade, an outfit that wouldn't make me stand out too much. Sneaking around the castle, these things were not difficult to get a hold of.

My most prized possession came to me when I was rummaging through the scrolls in the map room to ensure I would not get lost on the countryside roads. An ancient-looking map, torn and scorched around the edges, it seemed to hint at a source of great treasure in a ruined city below a small mining settlement to the north, on the very edge of Scarred Wastes. What a thrilling adventure to start my new life! I rolled it up and snuck out, keeping it close to my chest. My preparations were coming to an end.

A caravan to the north was not hard to find once I made my way out of the castle on a rainy night. The caravan captain looked me over with a smirk but took my coin as I got a place in the stagecoach. My travel companions smelled and coughed. The raindrops seeped through the cracks in the damaged roof. I looked out of the window, saying silent goodbyes to the lights of the castle windows that were drifting away, blurred by the rain's veil. I pulled up my hood and put up my feet on the opposite seat. Once I get to my destination I would pursue the secret of the map. My adventure was about to start!