

Gerond's Maze

"Why are we going to this place instead of Yul Funus?" Katha asked again as the group of would-be heroes walked across the dry, thankfully deserted landscape.

"Because there are creatures within the maze you need to see," Callidus replied evenly. "And because there is supposed to be an item locked away there you might find useful."

"You've mentioned these things before," Naeline said. "Just what is it we might find?"

"There are supposed to be wraiths and other restless dead guarding a great treasure," the wizard replied. "The treasure in question being a stone. Possibly even a pair of stones."

"Stones?" Katha asked quickly. "As in gemstones?"

"No. As in the tears of an angel solidified into stone. It is said that when the angel Eliziel fell from grace, the archangel Raphael shed two tears. Those tears turned to stone as her sadness changed into resolve. The tears of an angel are a bane to evil. The tears of an archangel like Raphael are a most powerful bane. One or both of them were said to have been acquired by the former owner of this place. That is the prize I hope to find for you in the maze."

"Tell us again about the maze," Denny said with a frown as they continued walking under clear, very sunny skies, across the barren, rocky landscape.

"A wizard by the name of Gerond built it centuries ago. Like me, he tired of having too many visitors and too many people calling upon him. His response was to turn the cavern complex under Brice Hill into a great maze. Gerond's living quarters and work shop were safely hidden in the center of the maze."

"And then what?" Katha asked.

"Gerond wasn't a particularly nice man," the wizard explained with a shrug. "He built traps both magical and mundane to keep people away from his private quarters. The traps were lethal. People died. The first deaths weren't noticed but eventually the authorities came for him. And they too died. Specialists were hired to bring him out. They were never heard from again. A bounty was placed on the foolish wizard's head. Every so often individuals or groups would go into the maze trying to earn the reward. Again, none returned."

"Decades passed. A young man came bearing forbidden magics. He too entered the maze but with a different intent. He wanted to take the place over. This man was called Aristarin."

"That name sounds familiar," Naeline said, looking as though she was still trying to remember. "Father Garnell? Are you alright? You look pale."

"I... I'm alright," he reassured her before turning an angry look upon Callidus. "Tell me he's no longer there! Tell me Aristarin has moved on."

"Oh, indeed he has," the wizard agreed easily. "Gerond's Maze is where he got his start though. In a very real sense this is where it all began for him. However, when he departed, he left some of his lackeys behind. They're the ones I'm wanting your group to see... and learn to defeat."

"Who is this Aristarin person?" Katha demanded, throwing frustrated looks around the party.

"He is a necromancer," Father Garnell answered quietly. "His powers of death and undeath grew too great for his earthly body. The evil consumed him and he became one of the undead. Though his body has died, still it walks the land. His powers are greater than ever now. Aristarin was a most potent spell caster. And now he's an unliving embodiment of the powers of undeath."

"It's almost a shame that you channel the powers of Raphael," the wizard told the priest with

a quirky smile. “If you channeled Azrael, the archangel of death, you’d have a good chance of standing up to Aristarin. The angels of death hunt and destroy the undead with a perseverance and a ferocity that is chilling to behold. Still, there is a lot to be said for healing. Isn’t there Naeline?”

“I’ll say,” she agreed with a smile. “I’m very happy to have Father Garnell just as he is,” she said, patting the older man’s arm.

“Which is tired and sweating in this infernal armor,” he complained grumpily.

“Get used to it father,” the young noblewoman told him. “I assure you this chain mail is no lighter than the scale mail you wear. Still, we are in the lands of the enemy. We cannot afford to relax our vigilance for even a second. Speaking of which, who were these lackeys you mentioned who remained behind. And how likely are we to run into them?”

“The lackeys are the various peoples who died in the maze. Aristarin brought many of them back into a semblance of life.”

“A mockery of life is more like it!” the priest declared hotly, rubbing sweat off his forehead.

“I certainly won’t argue that,” the wizard replied with a nod of the head. “There may be a few of those spirits whose bodies remain, but I doubt it. Most of them will probably be bodiless. Wraiths. Spirits imbued with the cold of the grave and an eternal void created by Aristarin’s necromancy. The cold is unpleasant and harmful. The void that powers the wraiths... that can easily be fatal. Using this necromantic void, wraiths can suck the life right out of you. It provides them with a fleeting warmth that reminds them of what it was like to live. And wraiths are not the only undead creatures with a necromantic void within them. Other things have them as well. Things such as you will find in Yul Funus.”

“How do you kill something that doesn’t have a body?” Katha asked worriedly.

“With enchanted steel,” Denny stated.

“Denny’s right. Most enchanted steel and healing magics harm the bodiless. The power of healing fills the void and with the void gone, the spirit is released.”

“What are *you* going to do then?” Naeline asked with a frown. “I notice you don’t carry a sword and I’ve never heard of wizards healing anyone.”

“I’ll either use some chunk of enchanted metal or perhaps a spell or two specifically designed for dealing with bodiless undead.”

“Ah, the means of dealing with wraiths grows by one,” she remarked with a grin.

“It does seem that way,” Callidus agreed with another nod.

“What does the writing say?” Katha asked as they stood looking upon the entrance to the maze.

“The larger writing in the stone names this as home to the wizard Gerond. The part right below it says and I quote, ‘If you’ve not the wisdom to depart now, put your soul at ease and prepare for the long night.’ ‘Long night’ is one of the old human expressions for death that’s not much used anymore. The smaller writing to the left of the door is a warning that death awaits any who enter the cursed maze. Probably written by someone fruitlessly waiting for his companions to return from within. Opposite it is written a brief message by Aristarin.”

“What does that say?” Naeline asked.

“Now hiring,” the wizard replied with a wry grin. “Now, why don’t we step inside. It will be cooler and we can start planning on how to proceed. Assuming of course that we’re not all killed

by any traps or wraiths in the entryway.”

“That wasn’t funny,” Katha stated. Poking Father Garnell in the shoulder, she said, “Tell him that wasn’t funny.”

“Tell him yourself girl,” the priest gasped, still breathing heavily from their long walk. “I... don’t have the wind.”

“That wasn’t funny.”

“We heard you the first time,” Lady Naeline stated tiredly. “And I would imagine that we all agreed with you.”

“Oh, not me,” Denny contradicted with a dark grin. “I appreciate morbid humor.”

“Okay, I think we should go back to the entry way again,” Katha told the others frowning. “There’s yet another demon-loving trap here.”

“What does it do?” Denny asked, his eyes never seeming to stay in one place as he kept watch with axe in hand.

“I’m not sure. There’s a pressure plate here,” she indicated, pointing towards one of the hundreds of two foot wide tiles that made up the hallway floor. “Look at all the carvings in the walls in this section of hallway. They could hide anything. I can’t be sure about this one. I think we should back up and trigger it from a known safe place.”

“No sense hiring an expert and then ignoring her advice,” Naeline stated. “Alright. Back to the entryway everyone.”

“How do you plan on triggering it?” Callidus asked.

“Either by landing a loose stone on the square or getting you to magically push on it,” Katha replied.

“I think I can manage that,” the wizard replied with a faint smile.

“Alright,” the young woman told him once everyone was back in the entryway. “Press the stone.”

The wizard waved his hand and suddenly the distant hall filled with a moving blackness accompanied by a peculiar, rushing noise, both of which appeared and were then gone so quickly it was impossible to tell just what had happened.

“What in the name of all the horny demons of hell was that?” Katha demanded.

Rather than reply, the wizard pulled off his backpack and began rummaging around inside it.

“What was that and what are you doing?”

“I’m looking for a crystal,” he replied after a moment. “And I’ve found one. Now, I’m going to trigger the trap again so you can all see what you missed.” Holding the crystal towards the hallway, he again waved his hand. Once more the moving darkness momentarily filled the hallway as did the odd noise before disappearing as though they had never happened.

“Well?” Denny asked.

“Give me a moment,” the leather-clad man replied. He then muttered a peculiar sounding incantation and tapped the top of the crystal. From within it a light sprang into being. The light grew and expanded into an illusion of the hallway that filled half the entryway.

“Now that’s neat,” Naeline whispered.

“Alright,” Callidus told the band. “I’m slowing it down to be clearer. There, you see that’s the tile. Weight is being applied.....”

“Are those darts?”

“Thousands of them, probably more like tens of thousands of them,” the wizard replied.

“For that many darts, to fire so incredibly quickly, it has to be magical in nature or augmented by magic,” Katha stated.

“Then we are in agreement. Now we need to find where the enchantment is focused. Once we know that, I can disenchant it.” He began walking back towards the corridor.

“The trigger stone?” Katha asked, following at his heels.

“Sounds like a good place to start looking.”

A few minutes later the wizard announced, “Yes, this is it. Should only take a few minutes to disenchant.”

“The trap looked complicated. How long did it take to make?” Naeline asked.

“Years probably,” Callidus replied a bit absently.

“And you’re going to disenchant it in few minutes,” she said wonderingly.

“It’s always been easier to destroy than to create,” he muttered, not looking up from the thin streams of light that were even now emanating from the stone. Slowly the lines elongated and dispersed. As the last of the light faded away, he turned back to the group, “Shall we?” Without waiting for a reply, he started down the corridor. When he was ten paces away from them, Katha trotted up in front of him.

“Stay behind me,” she told him. “I’m better at finding traps than you.”

“As the expert wishes.”

“This is taking too long,” Denny stated grimly.

“Great prizes are worth great effort,” Callidus replied absently as he finished disenchanting yet another magical trap.

“Yes they are but that’s five magical traps and four mechanical ones. We’ve been in here all day. Literally. Before too much longer we’re going to start feeling fatigued. Not a good idea when there are enemy forces around and they have the advantage of numbers.”

“I believe he has a point,” Garnell stated. “We’ve seen half a dozen of the restless dead briefly as they’ve slid through walls in our vicinity. Thankfully, none of them have taken notice of us yet, but luck is not something we can continue to count on. Especially not when we’re resting. Will the walls of this place hold them inside? Will we be safe even camping outside this place?”

“If we take the proper precautions, we should be safe enough,” Callidus replied, standing again. “This one’s finished.”

“What precautions might those be?” Naeline asked with a thoughtful frown.

“Wardings. Both my own and Garnell’s. Together, we should be safe anywhere we decide to rest. Inside or out.”

“Alright,” Denny said. “I’ve got another concern now that we’re working our way away from the entrance.”

“What’s that?” the wizard asked, preparing to set off through the area the trap had covered.

“Isn’t all this moving around going to attract the undead who live here?”

“Eventually, but someone dying nearby will draw them to us much more quickly.”

“Okay,” Naeline began in a serious whisper, “You hear that everyone? No dying. That’s an order.”

“I hope the rest of you slept better than I did,” Katha muttered as their camp slowly began stirring to life.

“Not really, no,” Naeline yawned. “Is there any chance of taking these wardings with us? I mean, if they protected our camp, why not just take them along?”

Father Garnell shook his head, “Sorry. It just doesn’t work like that. The warding directs everything approaching around the boundaries set by the spell. However, it is anchored to a specific place. Not tying it into a location would cause the magic to spin off in all directions and dissipate. Also, without the area being specifically delimited, the edges would move around a lot. That would make it very likely that someone would get caught on the outside before the magic had a chance to spin off and dissipate.”

“Stuck alone, outside with the bodiless dead? I think we’ll have to pass on that,” Naeline replied, grabbing a piece of breakfast cake as the camp began slowly returning to the backpacks from whence it had emerged.

“Well, it is called a ‘maze’ isn’t it?” Katha asked. “Our first three way split. Left, right, or straight ahead?” she asked Callidus.

“I don’t have the faintest clue,” Callidus replied as he continued to scan the area.

“What do you mean you don’t have a clue?” she demanded. “You’re the one who led us here!”

“It’s a maze that was built by a wizard who didn’t want visitors,” the leather-clad man replied with heavy sarcasm. “Don’t you think the fellow might have put up protections to prevent other wizards from scrying on him? Well, he did. Finding the center of this maze is going to require good old fashioned work. No cheating on this one using magic.”

“Which brings us back to the original question,” Father Garnell pointed out gently. “Does anyone have strong feelings in any particular direction?”

“Let’s just try the right one,” Naeline said, her tone not quite a command but not far from it either.

“Just as good as any other,” Katha agreed, slowly walking over to inspect the open doorway. “Long hall stretching out. Checking this one for traps is going to take a while.”

“Now that we’ve decided which way to go, we’ll wait patiently,” Naeline replied, sitting down with her back against a wall. “Everyone else might as well have a seat. Keep sharp and be ready though. We’re fairly far in and we know what’s all around us.”

As soon as the words had left her lips, bodiless undead came soundlessly pouring out of the walls. Some turned and began moving straight down the corridor at the group. Others, already in the nearby walls, simply leapt from one side of the corridor, across the intervening space (possibly passing harmfully through the person located there), and into the next wall. Fortunately, none of the alert group were caught by surprise.

“Dammit, I really hate the spectral dead!” Denny declared, utilizing his big axe more skillfully and usefully than one would expect in the confines presented by a corridor only five feet across. The big man had one hand near the butt of the handle and the other just under the axe head. This allowed him great control but little power. However, as these undead had no bodies, excess power was more

detriment than benefit and the warrior obviously knew this. Though many of the attacking undead wounded him, none seemed to be able to pull away any significant portion of his life energy. On the other hand, his enchanted weapon was sending many of the attackers on into the afterlife that should have been theirs when first they died. The big man's frenetic efforts kept more of the undead from attacking the rest of the party. And this was something they desperately needed.

Naeline used her sword two-handed and fought desperately to keep herself and her companions safe. One of the undead reached up through the floor and grabbed her leg, eliciting a surprised and then pain-filled scream from the noble woman. With a quick dive roll, Katha sprang across the suddenly freezing corridor and severed the spectral arm, which faded to nothing as it fell away. Naeline in turn lunged past Katha to kill another of the silent monsters that seemed intent upon the other woman's back.

Father Garnell, who'd been quietly praying even as he defended himself with his enchanted blade, finally came to the end his prayer. In a strong, carrying voice, he proclaimed, "Unto all who stand within sound of my voice, in Rafael's name, I invoke the blessings of peace and healing upon you all!" A powerful wave of white light erupted from his hand spreading out in all directions as it completely engulfed the corridors in light. In the wake of this powerful invocation, no undead were left to be found. Naeline rubbed her leg absently and Denny, covered in sweat, sat down with a sigh.

"Well done, father," Callidus told him, sitting beside the heavily breathing priest. "Very well done."

"High order magic takes a lot out of a you," the priest panted.

"Oh, it certainly does," the other man agreed with a hint of a smile. "But there's nothing else like it. The rush of power. The finely honed control over every last scintillion of energy. Nothing compares."

"Speaking of comparing," Katha asked. "Just what did you do during the fight? I lost track of where you were."

"Oh, I wasn't here."

Naeline turned to look at him so fast her hair flew out in an almost horizontal line. "You weren't here?!"

"No. I was following back the voice that commanded those creatures to attack," he replied easily.

"I didn't hear anything. And you couldn't have done that after helping us overcome the attack?!" Denny demanded angrily.

The wizard blinked at him a couple of times before answering, "No. Obviously I couldn't because once the attack was over, there would be no need of a voice urging them on to victory."

Clearly not pleased by this answer, the big man settled into a sullen silence.

"I didn't hear anything either. What did you find?" Naeline asked after a moment.

"I suppose the voice might have been conveyed by some sort of magical energy. Doesn't really matter. What does is that we're actually quite close to the heart of the maze. There's the remains of someone there. Dunno who. Physically, he's nothing but bones now. However, those bones remain animated. Powerfully so. Who, or whatever it is, they still walk... and command the other undead here. There is a strong aura of magic about this thing. Both innate and based in items of magic it bears. I was able to sense it through solid walls so understand that it is quite strong."

"What items?" Katha asked quickly.

"A crown, a silver scepter, and an amulet. There may be more but that's all I had time to see via some very short-range scrying before I came back. Got here just in time to see the good father

finish his invocation. Quite impressive it was, too.”

“Guys,” Katha began excitedly, “If you can keep him... it... distracted, I might be able to sneak around and get the amulet and crown off him. I have a very light touch when need be.”

“That’s going to be very dangerous indeed,” the wizard told her. “He and I will almost certainly become engaged in a magical battle as soon as we see each other. The areas around both of us will be covered with reflected and deflected spells and powers... not to mention the ones that actually strike their target and take effect.”

“What kind of powers?” Naeline asked.

“No telling on his part. It depends on what he learned in life and managed to carry over into his unlife. Anything you might have seen thrown during a magic duel is certainly a possibility. Elemental powers, curses, targeted spells, anything from dozens of families of magic...and a lot more on top of that.”

“What if you didn’t engage him until after I’d snuck into the room?” Katha asked, “I’m sure I can get them, just give me a chance to prove it.”

“I might be able to give you something that will help,” Father Garnell told her with a thoughtful frown.

“What is it?” the lithe young woman asked.

“It’s a blessing that specifically protects against the undead. In this case, it hides your life aura. Means they can’t see you.”

“That would have been helpful for us all earlier,” Naeline declared with no small amount of exasperation in her voice.

“Yes,” he admitted a bit sheepishly. “But it’s not a blessing I know well. I only used it once as a boy and that was just in preparation for a test that I did not actually need it for. It’s not used often. It will take me some time to fully work out how this benediction functions again.”

Katha turned to Naeline. “Please give us the time for him to learn this. I don’t know what this magical crown or amulet do, but I’m sure we don’t want the fellow using them against us. I can get them from him. I know I can!” The noblewoman studied her for a long moment.

“Very well,” she finally said. “Father, do what you need to do. In the meantime, we rest and watch. Anyone still wounded?”

“Nah,” Denny replied with an absent wave of his hand. “Father G’s spell took care of all my little problems. I’m good to go whenever.”

“Everyone else good?” she pressed. When no one answered, she nodded. “Alright, get what rest you can while remaining watchful. Personally, angelic healing always makes me hungry so I’m going to hit my rations again.” The others moved to follow suit.

While digging around in his backpack, the priest told them, “The blessing from my earlier spell should remain on our immediate area for hours if not days. We shouldn’t have to worry about further attack for quite some time. With a little luck, before that time is over I’ll have figured out the correct means of calling forth the proper prayer.”

“And without luck?” Denny asked as he began pulling dried food out of his backpack.

“Without luck we find out the hard way what the magical amulet and crown do,” he replied with a sigh.

Several hours later, the priest stood up from where he'd been quietly praying, stretched, and rubbed his back.

"Well?" Katha asked, making the one word hold much more hope than it was meant to. The others turned their attention to the balding priest as well.

"I believe I have it," he replied with a tired, yet satisfied smile.

"What do you mean you *believe* you have it?" Denny demanded with a frown.

"It means I believe. However, there is no way to test this particular blessing. Not without actually facing one of the undead."

"That's a dangerous way of testing something," the big man stated firmly. It was clear that he was not happy with how this was turning out.

"This entire endeavor is filled with danger," Callidus said quietly. "This is no more dangerous than what lay ahead on our greater path. Learn to adapt and be flexible. Learn to trust in one another."

Denny's eyes flashed with anger and his mouth began moving but before words emerged, Naeline said, "Please Father. Give Katha this benediction. It is time we purged this place of evil and found if the angel tears we seek are truly here. As Callidus says, our greater path awaits."

Katha almost danced over to the priest in her eagerness.

He spoke a quiet invocation and the hand he held over her head glowed with a golden light that was quickly gone.

"That's it?" Naeline asked with a frown.

"That's it," Garnell confirmed with a sigh. "It's quick to cast but it takes a lot out of me. This is more the sort of thing Gabriel's or perhaps Azrael's followers do. My abilities and talents are more suited to the direct healing of the injured."

The noblewoman turned towards Callidus. "Alright. You're the one who saw the undead leader. How do we proceed?"

"This way," he replied, stepping into the middle corridor. Katha immediately ran to the fore to keep her sharp, trained eyes open for traps. However, unlike the other passages they'd been down, they proceeded all the way to the end of this hallway without running into any such devices. The lanky woman turned and looked a question at the wizard as they entered a small room at the end of the corridor with four passageways leading out of it. "Right," he said with a nod towards the path in question.

Katha started down the hallway and stopped after walking only a short distance. "Trigger stone," she said, point to spot right in front of her foot. "What really gets me," she said, backing her way out of the corridor, "is that I haven't been able to find a single deactivation switch for any of these traps. Not one."

Callidus nodded absently as he used a simple telekinesis spell to press the stone. The entire ceiling within the hallway crashed down in a single block, completely filling the corridor. A moment later it began sinking into the floor even as a new stone slid down to replace the one from the ceiling, until with a loud clack, it stopped moving and the corridor looked just like it had when Katha had first started down it.

"That would have been bad," she stated in a bare whisper.

"Quite unpleasant," the wizard agreed. Walking to the edge of the corridor, he muttered a long incantation before pressing his hands to the floor. A layer of white stone began growing over the floor of the hallway. Slowly at first, it gathered speed until a few minutes later the entire corridor floor was covered in a five centimeter thick later of smooth, pale rock. Wiping his hands together,

he started down the hallway and the others quickly followed. By the time he'd reached the far end, Katha walked beside him.

Both stopped before stepping out beyond the corridor.

"Wait a minute," Katha said with a frown. "If you came this way looking for the sound of the voice, how did you get past this trap?"

"Quite easily actually," Callidus replied, looking ahead. "I flew."

"Oh," she replied, looking surprised. "I suppose that answers that. Where do we go now?" she asked.

"Ten paces here," he said, pointing to the left.

"And then?"

"We turn right."

"But there's no door!" she quietly declared with a thoughtful frown as she eyed the wall in question critically.

"No," the wizard agreed with a small, tight smile. "But there's about to be."

"Let me check the corridor first," she said, stepping ahead of him.

"By all means," he agreed. "Ladies first."

A couple of minutes later she told the assembled group, "There's a beam of light crossing the hallway about twenty paces down. I'm not sure what it does."

"It's not a concern," Callidus stated, walking the ten paces to the place on the wall he'd indicated earlier. "We won't be going down that particular hallway." Placing his hands upon the wall, he began speaking quietly. A moment later the stone under his hand began morphing into a pudding-like consistency. The effect began spreading out, away from his hands. The stone, now quite malleable, moved away from the wall, slid to the floor, and equally slowly reformed itself into a new wall. Resolidifying, it completely blocking the area Katha had said held yet another trap.

"I became quite good at this sort of elemental work when I decided to build my first tower," the wizard explained, dusting his hands off.

Revealed by Callidus' efforts was an open area. A room some twenty by thirty paces filled with all manner of dusty, long unused lab gear. After a quick peek through the opening, Naeline silently signaled for the others to be quiet and to move in a similar fashion. She then led the way into the old laboratory.

Despite the obvious age of the place, very little of the equipment seemed to be broken. However, it was all pretty much uniformly covered in a layer of thick dust. Across from them stood a closed door, apparently made of metal.

After oiling the hinges and the other moving pieces of the door, Katha silently opened it and slipped soundlessly past it into the hallway beyond. With a scowl on his face, Denny took a step towards the door with a hand raised as though to stop her. He almost immediately returned the hand to the haft of his axe. However, the scowl remained in place.

"It's close," Father Garnell warned in a bare whisper. "I can feel the creature's foul, cold presence."

"We should do something to attract its attention," Naeline suggested, looking a little unsure of herself.

"No need," the wizard replied with a frown. "While it has a body, it still feeds on life energy...all thanks to a necromantic void within it. If the good father can sense it, then I should imagine it can effectively see us as well. Walls and stone are not impediments to this kind of 'sight'. I rather strongly suspect that it knows we're here. And that it's already coming for us."

“Damn if you aren’t just one happy little ray of sunshine,” Denny declared with a frown and a scowl.

“Move these tables,” Naeline ordered. “Clear the center of the room. Let’s give ourselves some room to fight.”

“Hurry,” Father Garnell rasped through a throat gone suddenly dry. “It’s coming!” Moving with alacrity, he began shoving over tables in an effort to clear some space. Across the room, glassware and other tabletop items crashed to the floor as everyone hurried to clear enough space for them to maneuver in. Across the room, one wall suddenly exploded, sending shards of stone blasting throughout the entire room.

Sporting numerous small wounds, everyone turned to find the undead leader striding through the settling dust towards them, a wall of icy air preceding the red-eyed, skeletal abomination as it advanced through the gaping hole in the wall leaving frost growing in its wake. There was just enough time for the quick of eye to see that it wore the diadem, the necklace and carried the scepter the group had been warned about. Suddenly, from out of the dust Katha ran past it from behind. While the quick fingered woman was unable to get the scepter, she did manage to steal the diadem and the amulet from the undead monstrosity.

With an ugly roar, a beam of brilliant red light erupted from the scepter. Chasing around the room, it destroyed everything it touched including walls, floor and ceiling, as the undead tried to find and kill the one who’d stolen its treasures. Callidus chose this moment to release a torrent of spells at the monster while Denny threw his great axe at it. With a flick of the skeletal wrist the huge axe was narrowly deflected away. Some of the wizard’s spells seemed to have no effect while others were visibly fended off via some arcane power. No one wanted to close to melee combat with the monster despite their protective gear. Using the wand she’d been given, Naeline began throwing damaging little balls of red light at the creature but it ignored the small damage they did.

Focusing its attention on the offensive members of the group, the skeletal undead raked the deadly beam from the scepter across the room, leaving a wake of destruction and injury in its wake. However, each member of the group had accumulated magical protections through their varied travels. And while none of these protections were proof against the deadly beam, they were stout enough to keep anyone from being killed outright. From the creature’s other hand, it began throwing spells almost as rapidly as Callidus. The combination of spells and the destructive beam began quickly devastating the opposite side of the room despite the mage’s efforts to counter these powerful magics.

Seeing that Father Garnell was walking up to monstrosity from the opposite side, Katha made a quick decision and decided to try to distract the creature. And so, still invisible to the undead, she ran up to it and with a two-handed swing of her sword, removed the lower half of the arm holding the scepter. The destructive beam cut off instantly. Almost too fast to see, the undead creature brought its other hand around and a killing blast of frigid air spread out in a fan. Katha was struck full on and thrown against the far wall by the icy fury of the spell. A bolt of brilliant blue light from the wizard struck the undead monstrosity, distracting it away from the girl it could now evidently see.

But Katha’s plan had succeeded. Father Garnell took the last, measured step up to the undead creature at the same time it realized he was there... and more importantly, at the same time he finished with his prayer.

“Be healed!” the priest shouted as the surge of angelic power left him in a rush and smashed into what had once been a man. For several moments white light covered the undead creature. It faded suddenly and with it went the animating red lights from the creature’s eye sockets. The bones

dropped into an untidy pile at the good father's feet.

"Katha!" Denny cried, sprinting across the room to the pile of debris where she lay unconscious. Father Garnell arrived at her side with him. Denny held the unconscious woman while the priest determined the extent of her injuries.

Across the room, Callidus stood looking down at the scepter the undead monstrosity had dropped. "One of the ten scepters of Acrimos. Created by dark enchantments so very long ago. I'm not sure if this is the one dedicated to light or to fire. Hard to tell by just the red beam."

"How is she Father?" Naeline asked from across the room, brushing dust and debris from her clothing and armor. Her armor had become discolored where the red beam raked across it and from her ginger movements, it was easy to tell she was feeling more than a little discomfort.

"She'll live," the priest called, relief clear in his voice. "She's got a bad case of frostbite but I can take care of that easily enough. I'm going to have to rest a few minutes before I heal her though. Healing that undead monstrosity took a great deal out of me."

"That was impressive," Callidus said, looking up from the scepter at his feet. "It takes a powerful man, channeling powerful spells to do what you did. Well done Garnell. Well done."

"Yes, well..." the suddenly flustered priest turned his attention back to his patient. Smiling quietly, the wizard returned his gaze to the scepter at his feet.

"Am I ever glad to have that terrible place behind us," Katha declared with a sigh as they walked away from the entrance of the maze and back into the badlands.

"Indeed," Garnell agreed fervently. "A more foul place I've not seen in a long time."

"So," Naeline began with a smile, "Changing the topic, we now have two tears of the archangel Rafael. What do we do with them?"

"There's a number of things I can think of right off the top of my head," Callidus replied as they continued walking towards what lay ahead. "We can powder one and use the powder for re-forging one of the magical weapons. That would probably turn the item itself into a bane against evil. Another thing we could do is simply make a setting for it and someone could wear them as the centerpiece of a pendant. I'm not clear on exactly what effect that would likely have but it would certainly be beneficial. We could also get a divine chalice and place the stone at the bottom. Healing potions poured into the chalice would have their effects bolstered. The stones could be integrated into other jewelry but I don't think they have as strong an effect if they're not directly touching skin. Same effectively goes for weapons, shields, or armor. The stones could be set into them but I don't think it would be as effective as if the stone was ground up and used in re-forging the item."

Frowning in thought, Naeline asked, "Is there a reason why we couldn't have two necklaces made, and occasionally place them in a divine chalice to get the beneficial effect on our healing potions?"

"None that I can think of," Callidus replied with a smile.

"Then it is my suggestion we have two settings made for pendants. We give one to Father Garnell in the hopes that this will allow his patron angel to further aid him and through him ourselves." The priest smiled his appreciation for this idea. "And that we give the other amulet to the woman who's bravery helped us gain the tears in the first place: Katha." Obviously pleased by the idea, the lanky woman danced over and gave their noble leader a quick hug before moving ahead of the group.

“No objections from me,” Denny stated. “In fact, I don’t think I could agree more.”

Naeline turned her gaze to the wizard. “What do you think Callidus?”

“Hmm? Oh, whatever you think. They’re for you to do with as you wish.”

“Very well then, that’s what we’ll do. What’s our next stop?”

“The elves maintain an outpost in the hills of Dain Brannagh. Supposing it still stands, we’ll find safe rest there. If we’re lucky, we might even find a silver smith to make the necklaces for your tears.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve spoken with elves,” Father Garnell declared with a smile.

“Yes,” Callidus replied almost silently, a haunted look in his eyes. “Me too.”