

ARTISAN

Lofniatho thumped the back of the chimney with the butt of his lump hammer and smiled knowingly. He'd been working on the clan's buildings all his working life, but it was only recently he'd discovered that some in the Empty Quarter contained little, undiscovered hidey-holes. When the Huaos-Dzaa invaded he knew that the ancestors had painstakingly hidden their valuables within secret chambers although he had thought that these had all been recovered. However, so far, he'd reaped a tidy sum in hidden treasures, but it was from hunting out the hideaways that he gained more satisfaction than from the items he retrieved.

His experienced eye had noted something odd about the inside of this chimney and his lump hammer had confirmed his suspicions. A few minutes work with chisel and hammer and he was able to prise one of the bricks loose. It was too dark inside to discern what was behind and he wasn't about to blindly stick a hand in to find out. Many traps had been built to guard the valuables and although he hadn't encountered one yet, he wasn't taking any chances, his hands were his livelihood after all.

After retrieving his lantern Lofniatho held it up to the hole. He could see a rag wrapped around something slightly bigger than his hand; another secreted treasure. He inspected the chamber and was satisfied there weren't any traps so reached in, took hold of the find and lifted it out. There followed a crumbling noise from behind him so Lofniatho ducked smartly out of the chimney, holding the lantern high to flood the room with light. He could see nothing. No cracks in the walls, the ceiling was intact and the room was completely empty save for his tools lying in a canvas bag. He wondered if the sound had come from outside so made his way over to the shuttered window. The noise came again from behind him and definitely from within the room. He spun around. Nothing.

Lofniatho was getting nervous now. He strode over to his tools and picked them up - he was getting out of here. Just as he was shoving the tools into the bag he heard a new sound; a low sustained grating. From beneath the floor. A constant grating. He took a tentative step toward the noise, his mouth dry and his palms sweating, combat training forgotten. Then, one of the flagstones flipped up in the air in front of him, spun once and then crashed to the floor. Lofniatho leaped back, eyes fixed on the hole.

A dirty, gloved hand emerged. Lofniatho couldn't move, he was rooted to the spot, fur bristling. A second hand emerged, but its glove was in tatters and Lofniatho could see decayed flesh and yellowed bone. He was frozen with horror as the remains of a Huaos-Dzaa soldier pulled itself from the ground. A foul rotting stench filled the room. Dry earth fell from its dulled helmet and armour to sprinkle on the floor as it stood

up. Lofniatho gagged on the overpowering stench that assailed his senses. Grey, dry skin was visible through holes in the crumbling material covering its arms and legs. Lofniatho watched in disbelief as it slowly reached across its body and drew its short sword. The ancient grip fell apart in its hand and long strips of the sheath dropped to the floor.

The dead soldier lunged forward with surprising speed. Lofniatho reacted instinctively and pulled his bag of tools and lantern in front of him. The sword smashed the lantern and struck the bag with such force that Lofniatho was knocked back against the wall. The lantern shattered as it hit the stone floor and the spilled oil burst into flames. The abomination came at Lofniatho again and again. It slashed and stabbed in an unrelenting attack, but then Lofniatho's training took over and through instinct alone he managed to block the strikes with his tools. The canvas bag was taking such a beating that a crowbar fell through a rent in its side and clattered to the floor. It brought Lofniatho out of his daze as he realised his makeshift shield was deteriorating fast and wouldn't be able to take much more punishment. Once it was in tatters he'd be dead.

Lofniatho weighed up his predicament. The soulless soldier was between him and the door and to his left the pool of oil was burning itself out. He had to get to the door as the shutters on the windows would take too long to open. The walking cadaver came at him again and slashed at his head but this time he was thinking and alert. He ducked and moved round the room away from the flames and closer to his exit. The cadaver surged forward and lunged, but Lofniatho rushed in to meet it, trapped its sword between its body and his tool bag and continued to push. It was caught off balance. Lofniatho drove it back and then caught it behind its heel with his foot. It crashed into the corner and Lofniatho threw the threadbare bag and contents at its head. He raced to the door, threw it open and slammed it shut behind him as he darted out into the night.

From a safe vantage point Lofniatho looked back at the door. It didn't open. He realised he was panting and sweating profusely. The cold night air chilled his skin beneath his fur and he couldn't stop shivering. The door stayed firmly closed and he almost cried with relief. Every house in the clan had wards carved into the doors, window shutters, walls and roof to keep evil out and the occupants safe inside. He realised the opposite was occurring here. The power of the wards was confining the dead soldier to the house and keeping Lofniatho safe outside. He laughed nervously at the irony before retreating up the cobbled lane and then running through the night as fast as he could to the safety of his own home.