

A Man's Home is his Castle

Part 1

by Lois Spangler

If this matter were not of such great import, if I were not performing a duty to someone of immeasurable influence and power, I would have fled at the merest whiff of the wall. By all that's sacred, if this is what Atlantean "civilization" is about, I would far rather live in some squalid pig-farming village than spend my working days in any vicinity of that wall.

"Ey, Patchwork, you been starin' at that wall there for a real long time now," said Parth.

"Boss. You will address me as Boss. Far be it for me to request you call me something more appropriate, like Sir."

"Kay, Boss. You gonna quit starin' soon?"

My back was turned to these half-trolls behind me, as was usual in our leader-follower relationship, but I knew it was Parth who spoke because he had the gall to walk as closely to my person as no one else in the formation did. He was most offensive; as the sergeant of his troops, he insisted on wearing a headdress—I use the term loosely—dyed with blood as an indicator of leadership.

"I stare at the wall, Parth," I began, trying so very hard to keep that note of weary patience out of my voice, "I stare at this raucous pile of stone and stench to determine the best route of entry."

There was a pause.

"Whut?" Parth grunted.

"I'm trying to find a way in, you mindless brick."

Parth's brows knit together the way they always did when he was thinking very hard. "All the fighting's on that other side," he protested, pointing up and over the city.

And he was right. But I felt, in only the tiniest glimmer of my own great wisdom, that it would be nothing short of suicide to try to sneak into the city in the midst of those so desperately defending it. But these subtleties were forever lost on Parth and his kin.

"We do not want to be seen entering the city," I explained slowly and carefully, the way I imagine I might do so to a child.

"Oh," Parth said, and leaned on his battle-ax. "Let us know when you're finished, yeah?"

I suspected that his statement might have been an attempt at sarcasm, but I was hesitant to give him that much credit.

I looked up and down the wall. I had been informed, by the one who had sent me on this endeavor, that there would be an entrance here, a gap in the wall--admittedly difficult to see, as it was a secret passage—that would grant entry into the city for me and my seven

half-trolls. There was treasure to acquire in the depths of the city; but getting there had so far proven to be the real challenge.

"You say there be a door here?" Parth asked, leaning over and—of all things—touching the wall. Little, sticky, snot-like strings came off with his hand, and he looked quizzically at the substance clinging to his palm.

"Many birds roost?" Kresh, Parth's best friend and maybe his brother, if I'd heard a couple of conversations right, theorized.

"Dunno," Parth answered.

Of course it wasn't. It was some addle-brained Atlantean scheme for fireproofing the walls, presumably under the idea that flame bearers would be overcome by the fumes before ever coming close enough to ignite anything. The fumes themselves smelled rather flammable, in my opinion.

I stepped up to the wall. If there were cracks in it, I'd have to check closely, and indeed I'd have to touch it, too. Under most circumstances I would have ordered Parth do it, but there was no way I could trust him with something as subtle as finding a hidden door. Sighing heavily, I pulled my red suede gloves from my belt and put them on. It broke my heart; I would sadly have to write them off as a loss.

Suddenly to my right there was a sharp crack and a heavy groan. The half-trolls let up a yell and gathered up close behind me—there is something to be said for relentless training—and waited for my command.

Enormous flakes of the putrid fireproofing broke and fell, showering the earth, just as a large slab of stone ground open, swinging outward toward us. There was a clattering of hooves and weapons, and a short burst of well-dressed Atlantean nobles, presumably escaping impending doom, flew out of the wall like pheasants from brush.

"Get the door!" I cried, waving forward for my men to take hold of the door, preventing its closure. But my worry was in vain.

The nobles must have been the ones who had opened it, and since all had fled for safer places, there had been no one left to close it.

"This it, Boss?" Parth asked.

"Indeed," I replied, gratefully removing my gloves, spared the indignity of the wall. "Inside. All of you."

We entered the city, the smell of death and fire hanging low like a haze over the cobbled ground.

"Close it," I commanded, and while they were busy sealing the door I was busy examining my map of Alrisar.

A tangle of streets, thrown at angles reminiscent of a spider's web, made up most of the city. Simple alleys, lined with houses and bakeries and tailors, led to larger avenues, lined

with stately manors and homes of the affluent and influential. The door was shut and I beckoned my men onward.

Ah, the homes. As we traveled I examined the real estate with great interest. Nearer the wall the houses were paltry things, mere stucco upon wooden girders. Hardly a residence at all. But as we pressed towards the interior of the city, we came upon mansions and manors that nearly matched the glories residing in my mind. Many of the homes were too close to the street; what foul influences, so close to one's heart! And humans call us filthy.

Others were too large, too pretentious, for their own good. Why have a second carriage house when a single one will do, and instead use the space for, oh, say, parlors—or, dare I say it, kitchens! Or, if one wishes to bring natural light into one's house, a garden has many uses, and if cultivated properly, can provide sun-ripened treats for one's visitors, in addition to the riots of color flowerbeds bring.

Sadly, my goal was not one of those fine homes—homes that, if all goes well, will pale in comparison to the rewards a successful mission will bring—but a small thing, tucked away in the most ancient part of the city, a place where the founders of Alrisar had once lain their dead to rest.

One final turn brought us to our destination. Surrounded by a fence made of high, narrow, metal bars loomed a temple that nearly defeated even my ability to describe it. Built in heavy stone, so that it looked like it broke the back of the earth upon which it sat, the temple was narrow and tight, almost like a tower made with unnatural angles, spires reaching upward like broken teeth, gnashing the light of the sun into dim shreds. Vines and moss had grown over the front façade, but hung in scraggly blackened strands, diseased mockeries of what they once might have been.

An immense maw of a portico stood, sealed shut by thick doors of ancient wood bearing no signs of weakness or deterioration. In the frieze carved above the door were scenes of burial, and perhaps, though the light was dim and the stonework difficult to discern, scenes of actual death—hangings, executions, duels.

"So's this it, Boss?" Parth said, leaning against the fence, axe over his shoulder.

These fools had absolutely no sense of drama.

"Yes. This is it."

"Bit spooky, if you ask me."

"I didn't. And I find it amusing that you should be intimidated by a bit of cut stone."

The half-troll propped a fist on his hip. "Never said I was scared," he said, sizing up the temple. "I think it's kinda dumb. We goin' in the front way?"

"By all means," I said, and gestured towards the locked and barred gate in the iron fence.

Ever so delicately, as is their habit, my men made short work of the gate, peeling and tearing it off its hinges.

Parth had enough wits about him to hold the men back, allowing me to enter first. A stench of death—not fresh, but old and moldy and decayed—assailed me as I set foot upon the cracked slate walkway that led to the temple. Battlefields were one thing, a stage for glory and victory. Bloodshed was entirely natural. This, however, was a completely different matter, the death of things that could not, or should not, die.

“Light your torches. Once we’re inside, look for a passage that will lead us underground. It can be a door, a stairway, a hole in the floor. I don’t care. Just tell me when you find it,” I said, and approached the heavy doors.

I heard the half-trolls snickering behind me. Perhaps they thought I was going to try to break the doors down. Well, there are many more ways in the world to achieve what one wants than the mere use of force.

There was a thick cord of silk, once red but faded a dull yellow, hanging to my right. I took it and pulled, and far inside the temple bells rang, deep and loud. Though I expected the footsteps of an acolyte or the measured march of a temple guard to approach as the notes died away, nothing happened. And nothing happened for quite a while.

“So much for being polite,” Parth laughed.

This certainly hadn’t been a part of my plan. Leaving a temple unguarded was unheard of. Perhaps the acolytes and priests were simply hiding, hoping to wait out the war. I rang again.

“Aw, Boss, just let us break on in, would ya?”

I sighed angrily. If the sound of the torn gate hadn’t alarmed the people inside, then the idiocy behind me very well might.

“You couldn’t break through these things if you tried,” I replied, putting my ear to the doors, hoping to hear some sound, some snatch of a rustle of fabric, the slip of a foot on stone.

And then I slowly felt myself fall forward. The doors were unbarred, and they were soundlessly slipping on their hinges, swinging inward.

“There’d better be some good loot for this waste of time,” I heard Parth grumble. The other half-trolls muttered assent.

I pushed hard on the doors, hearing my men come up behind me. A cloud of dank, grimy air billowed over me and those behind me, carrying the faint scent of decay. I was certain I’d never get that smell out of my red jerkin. And it was my favorite one, too.

“Nobody’s been here for years,” Parth scoffed, looking around in the dim light reaching into the main hall of the temple.

“You’re wrong,” I said. There was no dust on the floor, and the altar, rimed with gold and silver threads woven together like the threads of the lives of mortal men, was clean and intact. Figures carved from jade and marble and alabaster stood undisturbed.

"I ain't hammering no gold out of no stone," Kersh complained loudly.

"You said there'd be really good stuff," Parth added.

"I promised you loot, you'll get loot. Are you saying I'm not an orc of my word?" I demanded angrily.

"Oh, well, no, we weren't saying that," Parth replied.

"It certainly sounds like you are," I snapped. "There's enough here for all of you to retire twenty times over."

"I don't wanna retire, I like fighting," one of the half-trolls whined, but Parth wisely elbowed him in the gut.

"Just a little more patience on your part, and we'll be well on our way to treasure and —"

But I couldn't finish what I was saying. From outside, perhaps from graves whose stones had long since worn away, came shuffling figures armed with swords and axes

... They were the dead from the war outside! I recognized the standards on tunics stained only with blood and not with earth or age. Men of all kinds, and elves and orcs, had arisen from battle to defend the temple.

I had no need to issue a command. I left the half-trolls to what they did best, smashing and bashing and hacking to pieces the corpses of the dead, just recently slain.

I kept back and fired with my crossbow—a mostly futile act, though it gave me a chance to search quickly for a way into the catacombs.

There was nothing immediately obvious; no opening in the floor, no doorway into a wall whose destination I couldn't surmise for myself. I looked for patterns carved into the stone at my feet, a path or a trail, or even a marker. But some places were covered with thick and ornate rugs, and moving all of them in my search was simply not an option.

An empty brazier, a shallow cup at the top of a long metal shaft, stood to my right. I took it and began tapping furiously at the floor, listening for a sign of something hollow underneath. This was a nearly impossible task with the sound of battle going on around me.

Kersh rushed to my side and started attacking the ground with his axe.

"What are you doing?!" I cried.

"Attacking the floor, Boss!"

"Go attack the things coming through the doors!"

"But, you're hitting the floor, and Parth said I should protect you no matter what —"

"Wait!"

"Okay, Boss," Kersh answered, looking a little confused, which was generally his normal state of being.

"Hit that again."

"Not the stuff coming in the doors?" he asked.

"No, hit that place you hit just a second ago."

He did, tentatively.

"Harder!"

He threw his weight into the blow. I heard stone crack.

"Quick! Grab this rug and pull it away!"

He scratched his head, but to his credit, he did as I told him to. And there at our feet, fissured and damaged, was a hinged door in the floor, centered perfectly in the invisible triangle formed by three hanging braziers whose flames had died long before we'd arrived.

"Boys!" I called. "Retreat to the passage!"

I waved Kersh to remove the door, and he did, piece by piece. Slabs of wood formed the backing of the door, and he tore those out as well. Beyond that was perfect darkness.

I pushed Kersh in before me, handing him my torch. He yelped a bit, very un-troll-like, but I heard his feet hit ground. And then I heard his head hit the ceiling. Stupid human architects think only humans will be wandering their halls. I'd be willing to wager my prized hat that dwarves are exactly the same way.

"This feels like a bad idea," Parth said, waving the half-trolls in.

"It's not," I snapped, watching the dead lumber over the dismembered pieces of their comrades, slowly coming toward us and the hole in the floor. "We're forcing them to come to us one at a time this way."

"Yeah, but we also gotta fight one at a time."

"And those guys fit in a place like this, and we don't," Kersh called faintly from underground.

"Cover me," I said to Parth, and leapt down into the hole. This was a mistake, as there was a perfectly good set of stairs, steep though they may have been. I'm fairly certain I gave myself a shin splint. I am completely certain, however, that this was where I scuffed my left boot. Completely irreparable. Absolute nonsense using unfinished stone for any kind of structure. Very rude and inconsiderate.

"At least these ones ain't movin'," Kersh joked roughly, jabbing at the charnel heaps that surrounded us on either side. "We go this way, Boss?"

"Yes, go!" I said, trying to find the right map in the flickering half-darkness.

He started moving, as did his companions, and slowly we moved away from the hole in the floor of the main hall. Shelves of bones, rattling weakly but harmlessly, still closed in on us from either side.

And then, a sound I dreaded. Some of my cohorts were clever enough to dread it, too: the squeak of an old pressure plate. I waited for what would inevitably come next—it could have been any number of things, actually, the sound of bolts fired from tiny stone holes, a gout of flame, the dull thud of stone dropping on flesh.

Instead, there was the most alarming gnashing of metal.

Kersh yelped. His brethren roared, and there was the most amazing sound of fists and axes clashing on metal.

Though I am ashamed to admit it, I was thunderstruck. From the ground reached two elaborately wrought, spiked, enormous mechanical arms—nay, jaws—and Kersh was gripped in the maw of one, while the other snapped blindly, searching for a victim. The arms thrashed violently, smashing Kersh into the wall, and his other three cohorts into the ceiling. A wicked spinning blade centered between the two arms made restraining the contraption difficult, if not fatal. Parth roared furiously, as if this would accomplish something.

"Parth! You two! With me!" I called. The sounds of undead echoed dully in the hallway behind me. I so hate being pressured.

Parth didn't come; he was too busy trying to free Kersh. The other two reluctantly followed me, back towards the shelves of bones.

"Take as many as you can, the biggest and longest ones, and stick them in the trap!" I called. Undead shambled towards us, and the half-trolls left to guard our rear began tearing them apart.

Once the two half-trolls had their arms full of bones, I waved them back to the metal jaws. It looked like a farcical fencing match, the half-trolls stabbing femurs into the gears and elbows of the machine. With a snap and crunch of old bone, the machine hissed and howled and eventually ground to a halt, allowing Parth to finally free his brother.

"Boss!" Kersh called, still bleeding, his arm around Parth's shoulders. "I wuz gonna say, I got a gate here. What you want me to do with it?"

How astounding that the same mental deficiencies that allowed Kersh to walk straight into a trap also insisted that he perform his duty, despite grievous wounds.

"Open it, you twit!" I answered.

"It's already open," he answered.

"Then why are you telling me this?"

"Cause we can go three ways down here, Boss, and I need you to tell me which way I gotta go. I can't just smell treasure, you know."

Of course. Not duty, treasure. "Let everyone get into the chamber, Kersh, and I'll tell you from there," I said, exasperated.

I still hadn't been able to sort out my maps. We moved into the chamber, the half-trolls milling about uncomfortably, watching the undead shamble forward and clumsily climb around the still-moving jaws of death. I took in my surroundings: three doors before us, two of them directly on either side. Each one was marked with a different sigil.

Fortunately, and unlike many so-called "civilized" humans, I am not only functionally fluent and literate in the common tongues, but I am student of the more esoteric languages. And though I'd never seen these particular pictograms before, they contained elements with whose meanings I was familiar.

Turning around to check on the progress of the dead army, I realized the entrance through which we had just passed could be sealed, closed by a portcullis whose mechanism I hoped was still in working order.

"Drop the gate!" I called to Kersh, indicating the crank which raised or lowered the portcullis.

It took considerable force to make the crank turn, so much so that I feared the mechanism might break entirely. But apparently the ancient Alrisans knew their business when it came to construction and engineering, and the crank held together.

Only a few of the undead managed to come under the closing gate, and those were quickly dispatched by my waiting men.

"Okay, Boss, so what now?" Parth asked, brushing bits of rotting flesh off himself.

"I am determining our best course," I said, finally finding the map I was looking for. "The door before us bears a symbol whose meaning relates to the idea of 'interior.' It means that something continues through there, or that something is inside."

"Treasure?" Kersh hazarded.

"Correct," I nodded. "But these two doors," I said, indicating to my right and left, "they hold the keys to opening this door before me."

"So we gotta sit around again?"

"Very possibly," I answered, and rolled up my sleeves.

To my left was a door marked, more or less, fire. To my right, water. Which to open first? And how would I ever come to any conclusion with all the infernal racket the undead were making in their attempts to reach us through the portcullis?

"Water first," I said, and faced right. "Kersh. Try the door."

"Aw, Boss, why's it always me?" he groaned, wiggling a finger in a particularly nasty wound.

"Don't question me. Now open the door."

Kersh banged on the door a couple of times—a typical half-troll method of discovery. There was, of course, no response.

"Ya want me to just open it?"

"Yes, Kersh."

"Can I break it down?"

"No, Kersh."

"Bugger all."

He tried the latch, but it was fastened shut by some mechanism on the other side of the door. He pushed on it, once, twice, trying so very hard not to smash the wood.

"No break, no open," Kersh shrugged, then stepped back.

I glared at him, then approached the door myself. There was no trap set to immediately assault anyone near the door, or even touching it. And the latch apparently carried no unsavory device, as evidenced by Kersh.

"Thinking no good. Let's just break it down," Kersh said hopefully.

"The treasure's destroyed if you break down the doors," I replied.

Kersh scowled. "That's just mean. I don't like the Atlunteeuns."

Ignoring further distraction, I reached up to the sigil, began to trace it —

—And my hand went right through, like the door was made of water.

The door rippled gently around my arm. I reached further in, and down towards the latch, which I planned to undo from the far side of the door. A sharp shock, like a tiny bolt of lightning, struck my hand. I bit my tongue not to cry out, and I pulled open the latch despite the devious trap laid for me.

The door swung open slowly, and my arm slipped out of the watery glyph. Inside was a tiny chamber with a single tome, thick and old, sitting on a pedestal.

"Kersh. Inside," I said, thumbing the charred skin on my hand.

"Something bit ya, Boss?" Parth asked.

"No. I'm fine."

But I put on my gloves nevertheless. Never let it be said that Patchwork does not learn from his mistakes.

"S'all clear, Boss," Kersh said, loping back out of the chamber.

"Good. Bring the book to me."

"Aw, why didn't you say so when I was over there?" Kersh whined, but did as I'd asked.

"This the map to the really good loot?" Parth asked.

I sighed, opening the book to the page marked by the crumbling silk ribbon sewn into its spine. I had no patience to restrain my true feelings much longer. "Yes. If all goes well, this is the map to the really good loot."

A Man's Home is his Castle

Part 2

by Lois Spangler

I could not have asked Fate for better fortune—the page marked in the ancient tome was precisely the one that described the door of flame opposite the chamber where the book had been sitting, just moments ago.

“So’s what’s it say, Boss?” Parth asked.

I tried not to roll my eyes. “Go check on the undead, will you?”

Parth grunted, ambling towards the portcullis in a manner not unlike those I had asked him to watch, and left me in a blissful, though somewhat limited, solitude.

I began to read, tracing the words with my finger. The style was archaic, which was to be expected from prose as old as it had to be, locked in the catacombs for so many years. Along the side, glosses of students and holy men coiled in tight little lines, saving as much space as possible. One such note caught my eye: *The essence of the barrier that protected this tome is what will render its opposite useless*, it read, more or less. The gloss was old, but not as old as the text it described.

I pondered this new wisdom. The essence of water, presumably, would render the door with the fire sigil useless. But what was the essence of water? What was the poetic heart of water-ness? How could that quality then be used to open a door? A key made of ice, perhaps? There was no time to make one, and no resources with which to achieve such a task.

Curse these priests and their drivel-filled heads! What could be so amiss with having one straightforward word in their books and notes?

Again I thought and pondered, and nothing came to mind. Perhaps it was the groans of the dead still reaching out to slay us through the gate. Perhaps it was the Gorger and Kersh loudly blowing raspberries at each other to pass the time. The one certainty in my life at that very moment was that I was empty of my usual genius; no glimmer of resourcefulness, no spark of an idea presented itself to me regarding the essence of water and how it could be used to open a door guarded by fire.

Honestly, I blame the raspberries.

But what was truly intolerable was that I now found myself in the most unfortunate situation of having to elicit suggestions from my company of fools. Time was of the essence, and there was no room for the sparing of wounded pride.

“Everyone,” I called, shouting over a particularly resonant raspberry, “what, in your opinion, is the essence of water?”

“Um...” one said. Predictable.

“Er...” said another. No surprise there, either.

"Cold?" Kersh hazarded.

I turned briefly to face him. That reply, much to my chagrin, made some sense. Enough to be seriously considered, at least.

"That'd be ice," Parth replied, as he prodded the undead which slavered in that slow way of theirs, desperately trying to throttle the half-troll through the bars of the portcullis.

"So what would it be?" Kersh asked.

"Easy. It's wet."

I toyed with the shaft of the foremost plume of my most elegantly wide-brimmed hat, sighing heavily. From the mouths of fools can sometimes come the greatest wisdom.

I composed myself, as this mission was most definitively getting the better of me, despite all my efforts. "Kersh. Get your waterskin and pour it on the door to my left."

"Your left?"

"That one!" I said, pointing it out to him. "And you! Stop poking the dead!" I cried to Parth.

The half-troll giggled, a sound entirely unbecoming for anyone of his race. He was clearly more satisfied with himself than he had any right to be.

Suddenly there was the most alarming hiss of steam. "Okay, I done it," Kersh said.

I could hardly see the half-troll. "Now open the door," I said.

Kersh shrugged, wrapped his thumb and finger around the latch—as that was all that would fit on the tiny human-built handle—and pulled. There was a much harsher sound this time, reminiscent of fat sizzling over an open flame. It took Kersh a moment to realize that the sudden searing sound in the chamber was from his own hand.

He flew back, howling. I can't say I blame the poor beast.

"Tend to him," I said, waving one of Kersh's comrades in his direction. There was no way I could have one of my top combatants down.

I approached the door. It positively sizzled as I came nearer, the sigil glowing a livid red, and calmed itself as I drew away. For a brief moment I considered that the true essence of the chamber marked by the water sigil was the book which was now in my possession; however, wisdom overtook me before the ancient tome became ancient ash.

I withdrew my own waterskin, which was actually filled with water, and not wine, due to the severe nature of travel through the Blasted Lands. Spilling enough of the liquid to just barely saturate my glove, which was covering my lightning wound—which, by the way, stung like the bite of a desert viper, not that any soul would hear me complain about it—I put my hand to the latch and attempted to open it.

Despite the water, which escaped in gouts of terrified steam, the heat was so unbearable I could not dare to work the latch, much less open the door. I withdrew my hand and shook the pain from it.

"Still stuck, ey?" Parth chuckled.

I looked at my glove. The fire sigil, which I had not seen on the latch before, and could not see now, had been branded into the suede.

"Take my waterskin and your waterskin. On my mark you begin pouring them out onto the latch. Do you understand me?"

No door would defeat me, magical or otherwise. Brute force had always worked, and it would work here. Or I'd lose my hand trying.

"You're the boss, Boss," Parth shrugged, taking my waterskin.

"Go."

He began pouring, and again great gouts of steam billowed from the door. Steeling myself, I grasped the latch and clenched it tightly in my hand—the heat must have made the metal expand, making it that much more difficult to open. But my own brute force, strong though I am, was not going to suffice.

"Hit my hand!" I ordered the half-troll.

"Whut?" Parth said, cocking his head, perhaps to hear me better, or perhaps to clear the steam from his eyes.

"*Strike my hand!* —The one on the door," I corrected, before my free hand suffered any unnecessary damage.

Parth did as he was told, and nearly removed my arm with that mighty blow. But by his work the latch was undone, and I pushed the door open with my foot, peeling my hand from the burning metal.

There was little left of the palm of my glove, save for a thin sheet of char and ash. And this had been my favorite pair. The blisters on my hand were a trivial matter in comparison.

"You can stop pouring now," I said, before Parth emptied both our waterskins.

He sheepishly stopped, tucking them into his belt. I grimaced in plain disgust. My waterskin, alas, was now forever his.

The steam slowly began to clear, allowing us a better view of the interior of this new chamber.

"Ooh! Sword!" Kersh cried, apparently completely healed of any anguish the latch may have caused his hand, and rushed towards the open chamber, only to be stopped by my own hand. The heat still rising from the door also served as a deterrent.

"*Not yet,*" I spat, in what I felt was a most intimidating tone. Perhaps half-trolls are too dull to properly comprehend intimidation.

"Aw, but you said—"

"I said *wait.*"

This chamber was very similar in arrangement to its counterpart, if not identical. It was small, high, and had at its center a pedestal upon which a sword rested. I pushed Kersh from me, allowing me a better view inside.

The sword was a long, bright, narrow blade, a bit dainty, in my opinion, but in the dim light I could tell it was well-worked, engraved with fine lines and sigils of the same style as what had decorated the doors. Its hilt was ivory, or possibly horn, with tongues of flame carved into it and darkened, in scrimshaw style.

The sword was, in all likelihood, a ceremonial piece, though why one would waste a weapon on purely ceremonial use, and not put it into battle, where it should be, was completely beyond me. I stepped into the room to retrieve it, wary of any other surprises that might await me.

I took hold of the weapon and emerged again, unscathed.

"Aaah, it ain't even got any jewels," Kersh said as I brought it into the main chamber.

Now was the time to think. There was nowhere to sit, so instead I crouched on the ground—what, you think I'd ruin my fine buckskin trousers on the clotted mess on the floor?—and rested the sword over my knees. I rested the book on the sword, checking briefly for any smell of char in case the two did not behave civilly when in close proximity to one another, and thumbed through its pages. After searching long enough to make my men restless again, I found a passage that promised to provide me with some intimation of the solution to the remaining locked door.

A grave and ancient Artifact lies in the stony depths of Al-Risar, the tome read, in an archaic version of the tongue spoken commonly in the region today. Well, that certainly wasn't anything new to me, but I knew thoroughness now would prevent wasted time later. I continued reading. The Artifact remains safe there, and will forever remain safe in the care of the Dead, and also in the care of the Living; Human creatures who cannot touch this Thing upon pain of death, but who will unknowingly defend it with those very lives they might lose should wisdom not prevail in their own hearts.

Ah. Well. that was all fine and beautiful and wonderful and lovely, but none of this was getting me closer to opening that accursed door and taking the item within. And there was nothing else on the page that held any promise of opening the door.

"...I think it's gowld," Kersh said loudly, still rubbing the pain out of his hand.

"It better be food. A feast," the Gorgor growled.

I'd never bothered to learn its name. I say *it*, since it might very well have been a she. I certainly wasn't going to ask.

I thumbed a few pages ahead, and found mention of a sword. Well, it was possible that this passage might hold some hints of its own. Set apart, in large and illuminated letters, was the following:

The door is sealed by the Sword. Hilt to Point, and the door shall open. Point to Hilt, and all will be in vain.

I swear I hate riddles. They make me very angry. It's impossible to be charming when angry.

Point to Hilt. Point to Hilt.

"Can we break down the door?" Kersh asked.

"No," I answered, rather tersely. I *said* riddles made me disagreeable.

Oh, but wait, Point to Hilt was bad. It was Hilt to Point that was useful. I closed the tome and drew the sword from underneath it. Again, there was nothing remarkable about it, except for what I'd noted earlier. It wobbled a bit if I shook it hard enough; it made a rather pleasant sort of a noise.

Which meant it was soft! The metal was pliable, and I could bend it, turn it into a circle! Hilt to Point! Of course!

Yet again, my own wisdom spoke to me and stayed my hand. Mere humans wouldn't be able to bend a blade with their bare hands. —Ah, but mages would, what with all that magic and other mystical things. Which brought me to the horrible conclusion that perhaps only mages could open the door. Or priests.

My heart sank. We'd gotten so far already, just to think that none of us were capable of retrieving the artifact. But that, of course, made no sense. Why send someone to retrieve something, if one knows that this person isn't capable of retrieving it? Or maybe this was as much a surprise to those who sent me as it was to myself?

I sorely wished I had some wine. It would help to calm me down, still my thoughts. Stupid riddle. The answer would be in front of my face, all along, and I'd be feeling as imbecilic as my companions once I'd discovered the correct response.

"Hey, Boss?" Parth asked.

I ignored him. I was clearly busy, pondering.

"Uh ... Boss? Boss?"

"Can you not see that I am in the process of thinking? Is this not clear to you? Tell me!"

"I, uh, sorry to disturb ya, Boss, but I think this gate's crackin'."

I looked to the gate and the dead pressed against it. Though I saw no cracks, the gate itself was clearly bowing under the great pressure of the corpses collected behind it. I could only imagine the horde of dead the temple had collected to defend itself.

"What do we do, Boss?"

I stood up, catching the book and the sword. "I don't know," I said, hating every moment of admitting I was at a loss.

"Can't ya get that door open?"

"I still think we should break it down," Kersh sulked.

"If you break it down we will all surely die!" I yelled, hoping the panic I was feeling was not making itself overly evident. The riddle had already broken my composure, but the gathering undead were the very last straw.

"Then there better be good loot in there," Kersh muttered.

Every nerve in me demanded that I slay him then and there, for his insolence, for his glibness. But there was an air of mutiny about my men, a willingness to turn on me that had it appeared at any other time would not have worried me much at all, but under these circumstances was as fatal as the bodies piling behind me.

Collecting myself, I turned to face them. "Are not the most precious things guarded most closely?" I asked, looking every one of them in the eye. "You, Gorger, when you crave honey, must you not first brave the bees?"

"Not if I take it from somebody else."

"But, from whomever you take your food, those people fight you, as much as they're able!"

"Well," the Gorger pondered. "I guess that's true."

"This is no different!" I said. "There is treasure here, but it is guarded with many clever things, and those things must be defeated before we can take what we've rightfully earned. You and you — mind the dead! Some of you press back against the gate, relieve the pressure. Don't let the corpses take hold of your necks. It shouldn't be but a little while longer before I unravel the meaning of these words."

There was more muttering behind me, but they did as I ordered and eventually fell silent. This approximation of peace allowed me to go back to pondering the riddle in the book.

Hilt to Point. A sword Hilt to a sword Point. It made no sense at all. I'd have to dismantle the thing right here, take it apart, and that was only if the services of a weaponsmith weren't necessary to the disassembly of such an ornate piece. And what was the use of putting the hilt of the sword to its own point?

My head began to throb mercilessly, in time to the pain in my twice-burned hand. Lost in thought, I drew a sword in the dust at my feet, then drew a blade with the hilt at the point. It looked like a long and distorted letter "T." My eyes went towards the door, searching for a

similar shape, but there was nothing. Absolutely nothing, except for the ornate sigil that roughly meant interior.

Just one silly little word.

And that's when the chill came over me, the chill I knew so well, the one that came over me when I knew I was most definitely onto something. I reveled in the knowledge that I might just have caught a glimpse of that thing that hides before me, in broad daylight. Or, in this case, catacomb light.

Hilt ... to ... Point. *Sword*. Take the initial "S" and move it to the end. *Words*. The key to the door wasn't the sword itself—it was what was written upon its blade!

I dropped the tome, snatched a torch from the nearest half-troll, and held the light close to the blade. Here were all my answers.

On both sides of the blade were words, of the same kind as the ones in the ancient book. Though I may not have been completely clear on the meanings of all of them, I knew how to pronounce them, speak them aloud. The words on either side of the blade were identical, but one line began at the hilt and ran to the point, and the other line began at the point and ended at the hilt. There was no indication as to which was the proper place to start.

Again, the answer was there before me. Hilt to Point. Just like the book said.

"Here," I said, handing the book to whomever was closest.

Slowly I read aloud the words on the blade, written in the ancient tongue of those long-dead Khosian Warrior-Priests, from hilt to point and back again. The sigil on the remaining door began to glow a pale white. I was almost at the point when the ground began to shake, stone grinding hard against stone, making the catacombs rumble. Even the dead became still, and my men relaxed.

By the time I arrived at the point, the sigil on the door was glowing impossibly bright, rivaling the rays of the sun. I continued, and the ground continued to tremble, and the sound of stone moving against stone became louder.

Halfway back to the hilt, the grinding ceased. It was followed by the thundering sound of stone falling from a great height, which rattled me, and in reply my soldiers drew their weapons. The dead, though still pressing against the portcullis, were limp and once again lifeless.

Moments before I finished, the sigil was so bright it could not be safely seen, lest it burn spots in the eyes. And when I intoned the final syllable, the sigil erupted into searing flame and consumed the door, blasting us all with unimaginable heat.

The half-trolls cried out in terror and rushed at the door, now gone—not even ash remained—swinging wildly with their axes, expecting some great foe to challenge them. But there was nothing. After a brief interlude of wild and blind blows, with surprisingly minimal damage to one another, my troops stopped and collected themselves.

Though this room was a little larger, perhaps to allow for all the moving stonework that surrounded it, like a huge lock in which it played the role of the tumbler, it was arranged very much as the ones before. And on the pedestal, as promised, was a broken piece of jewelry.

This took a moment to sink into the rather thick heads of my men.

"Bugger all!" Parth roared, spinning round, looking for gold, silver, jewels, anything.

"Whut's this, then?" Kersh yelped, anger constricting his throat.

Despite my better judgment, I stepped into the chamber. There was a definite feel of magic, a rising of the hairs on the back of my neck, as I passed the threshold.

"There ain't nothing!" the Gorger boomed. "Not one scrap, nothing!"

"You said there'd be treasure," Parth growled.

Ah. That feeling of mutiny, it was very much returned. With a vengeance. The half-trolls all looked at each other, then looked straight at me.

"We've had just about enough of you," Parth said.

And then he howled. And then they all charged.

After which they all were reduced to little clouds of ash and smoke.

"Thank heavens," I said, taking the amulet shard from the pedestal.

It flashed briefly, felt warm to the touch. It was rather pretty, though in a very gaudy sort of way.

"Patchwork."

Oh, I knew that voice well, low and deep and cold, resounding like it was very barely chasing a younger version itself.

"Aye, Lord," I replied, turning around to face Heddravalis, Solonavi Striker. He was beautiful in the same way that deadly things are beautiful—awe-inspiring, menacing, unnervingly competent. There had never been any doubt in my mind that he was not of this world. He glowed, as if he were built of light, of magic more pure than anything the Land has ever known. I didn't see him so much as feel his presence, the overwhelming sense of power.

Lord Heddravalis was accompanied by a single Drone, but he himself was enough to chill my spirit. I noted with no small turn of my stomach that the piles of walking dead were completely gone—no trace left.

I grasped the amulet shard in my hands and dropped to one knee, foul floor be damned. Head bowed, I raised my hands and opened them, letting the amulet sit on my flat palms.

"You have done well," Heddravalis said, removing the amulet shard from my possession.

"Thank you, Lord."

"I trust the loss of your half-trolls has not inconvenienced you."

"Nay, Lord. Not at all."

"Good. You may rise."

"Yes, Lord."

I stood before the Solonavi, controlling my nerves as best I could. He lifted his hand and swept it through the air, producing a letter from nothing at all.

"This writ," he said, extending it to me, "is the deed to Halfspire. It is a castle in the Principalities, long abandoned, but now restored to its proper appearance and function, for your benefit and use. This document grants you power over that edifice, and the lands within one mile of its walls. You will find that Halfspire is already populated with those servants needed to keep such a household in running order. Use it well. I trust you will find it to your satisfaction."

"There is no doubt in my mind, Lord," I said, taking the writ from him with a shaking hand, "that all is as you say, and more."

"Good. You are dismissed."

And with that, I bowed and blinked in the wisps of light that the Solonavi left in the wake of his departure.

I shrugged, then began making my way back up and out of the now-barren catacombs. I thought of the fighting above, the soldiers, the men and orcs, wasting themselves, spilling their blood on the ground.

"Some people. They just can't be helped," I sighed, smiling at the smoky light of my first afternoon as Lord Patchwork, Master of Castle Halfspire.

Lois Spangler has been making stuff up for over a quarter century now. She very much enjoys writing for MageKnight, and has recently contributed to Eastern Seaboard, the newest supplement for Clockworks Games' Asylum RPG. Additionally, she wrote "It's he Little Things," a shortstory that appeared in the second volume of the MageKnight Collector's Guide. She's also had four plays produced in New York.