

Safe Passage

by Scott Hungerford



From the moment the tavern doors banged open, letting in an angry wail of desert wind, the patrons of the Dust Hawk knew that the hero was not someone to trifle with. As he staggered from table to table, exhausted from his long trip through the wastes of the Blasted Lands, the drinkers quickly got out of his way--and out of the reach of the wicked-looking sword he gripped in his right hand. The blade was three feet of ancient runed steel with a ruby-set hilt forged in the fashion of a roaring dragon's mouth.

Sand and dust shook from his clothes as he stepped up onto the low stage as he stepped up onto the low stage by the bar, his cloak tattered and torn from the relentless abuse of the desert winds. When he stopped and gazed down at the awestruck minstrel, her lute nearly forgotten in her trembling hands, the young woman scampered from her stool atop the stage, quickly getting out the way.

"Good people," the hero rasped, "I've something to say."

"Then say it," demanded the

Xandressan bartender, Fathom, coming around the edge of the counter. Ever since his family-ship sank some twenty years ago during a storm on the Inland Sea, he'd run the Dust Hawk like a well-kept river-vessel. "Say your piece, then leave us in peace."

"The Pyramid is open," the hero stated with apprehension. "The gates of the Black Temple yawn wide, and the interior is filled with gold and treasure--and *these*." He held up his sword, and the blade erupted with a violet, flickering flame. Half the patrons of the bar scampered back a step or three; the rest watched with interest--and greed.

"The Black Pyramid is filled with weapons that can kill even the mightiest Mage Spawn. Within the deep levels, down the shadowy staircases into the interior of the maze, there are treasures that even the vaunted High Elves never dreamed of."

The man reached within his cloak, and removed a tattered scroll of parchment with his free hand. Snapping open the scroll, he sent a shower of dust and sand onto the stage floor. With a trembling arm, the hero raised the crude map before him like the most irrefutable of evidence.

"This haunted place lies between the parched streams that feed the northern river. Only the mightiest of heroes can penetrate this ancient place and survive, as it is jealously protected by guardians and spirits. Within the first antechamber lies a shimmering pool of water and light, and chests of gold lay secreted in its salty depths. Traps abound, deadly Spawn lay in wait, and the corpses of dead Draconum prowl the halls seeking tear out the hearts of heroes and cowards alike."

"Just beyond the pool, just within reach of its deadly waters, a portal opened to . . . somewhere else . . . a gate into a tomb filled with treasures of old. Stepping through the magical doorway, I found myself transported to a chamber filled with treasure, and guarded by a snake-headed beast armed with deadly

blades. I managed to cut down the Spawn and retrieve this enchanted blade from the treasure within. I stole it from the arms of a corpse that hasn't seen daylight in a thousand years. I managed to make my way back through the labyrinth to where my companions waited, but found that I'd been gone far too long. . . ."

The warrior paused, and wiped at his brow with the back of a sunburned hand. "When I finally made my way back to the exit, I found that some of my friends had been savaged, torn apart, and partially devoured by the inhabitants of the Pyramid. My priest was crushed under a massive weight; my thief apparently drowned himself within the treasure pool. My mage was chased into a corridor laced with deadly traps and slain like a frightened child. A Catwoman was waiting for me by the desert door, ready with a gleaming blade and a promise of death."

"What happened?" asked the minstrel, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice.

"She let me pass," the hero said with a shake of his head, "and I don't know why."

The patrons watched silently as he pondered his fate. For on the stage before them now stood not a man, but a ruined corpse, blasted by sun and wind after weeks of wandering the arid desert. His eyes had long been chewed out by insects, and his skin danced with fleas and ticks that gorged themselves upon the feast of his rotting flesh.

"I don't know why this happened," the dead hero lamented, the violet flames from his blade casting an eerie light on his ruined face and the tatters of flesh hanging loosely from his hands. "I don't know why she let me free. . . ."

"Neither do we, son," said the barkeep, lifting his wood-axe from behind the counter. "Neither do we."