

## The Black Hand, vol 2

The fire crackled out over the silence of the night. Orange capped flames jumped and cast moving shadows upon all those sitting around the fire and sent a slow grey trickle of smoke to mingle with the pale wispy clouds in the night sky above. A group of eight sat round the campfire, staring in. Some had blankets wrapped around their shoulders, even though it wasn't that cold, but they seemed to feel the need anyway. There was evidence of a good-sized meal having just been eaten, by looking at the pans in a pile next to the fire, and they were holding mugs - some of a steaming brew, others of wine or mead.

"...And so," said the old grey beard huddled beneath a thick blanket of furs, "after he caught the arrow in his eye, he dropped to the floor, and he lay there, dead as the rat what the cat caught."

There was some light applause and general mutterings of approval around the campfire, and the old man nodded sagely.

"I believe that it's one of your group next," he motioned across the fire at a group of four, "Who shall it be?"

They conferred amongst themselves for a short while, until the tall silent one, black robed, dark eyes and hair, with pale skin, nodded. Silent, gaunt, and strong looking, he slid his stool forward, closer into the circle of the campsite.

"I am Millar, sometimes called the Black Hand, and sometimes called other things - some good, some bad, depending on who is telling the tale, and these are my companions, Alissa," the Red-haired woman raised her hand, "Meliboeus..." the legionnaire nodded his head.

“Ave!”...

He went on, “and Horace.” The scarred, grizzled face campaigner nodded.

“We have been on many an adventure together, but I think there is one in particular, that you will enjoy hearing of. It has great deeds done and deeds mis-adventured, calamity and intrigue, and mighty contests of will and strength and magic. It has exotic locations and gold by the bucket full... rivers of gold - enough for any bold adventurer to claim their fill! Come let us settle in, put another log on the fire, and I will tell you of the kingdom under Gannamin peak...

It was summer and the kings under the mountain had declared the festival of K'sham, the twenty-one days where the Dwarven tribes from under the Gulgath mountains come out from their stony homes and meet in the shadows of Gannamin peak. Every Dwarf tribe along the entire mountain range is represented there, from the grim Svarterin, to the gaily bedecked Sjerein, makers of the finest jewellery in the world. Here, daughters and sons of the different tribes meet and join, and it is here where old political alliances are strengthened and where new ones are forged. Seeing as how the K'sham happens only once every 25 years, most people don't get to go and the lucky few who do go, most don't get to go more than once.

For adventurers like Meliboeus, Alissa and I, it was an opportunity we could not turn away from – and so with a month before the beginning of the world renowned and world famous K'sham, we headed off to the rocky feet of Gannamin peak, where all the Dwarf tribes of the Gulgath mountains would meet, where adventures beyond our ken, waited in store.

The K'sham was indeed a world of wonders packed within a city of wood and tent. The plain alongside Gannamin was covered in tents of every colour and wooden buildings of every shape, size, and description.

People had come from every land to trade with the mineral rich dwarven nations, barter with their smiths, and sell their womenfolk exotic wares and their cooks spices from the furthest lands.

Wide-eyed and like young boys on their first travels, we walked along muddied paths through tents bedecked with items of every colour, amidst peoples of every nation. As we passed a drinking hall, a fight was in progress, and a scuffle of three men broke through the entrance and fell in a fist flying, grabbing, and head-butting clump to the floor. After a few more seconds of the dull crack of fists flying and landing, one of the men, muddied and bloodied head to foot, and very clearly drunk, stood up. His dirty face cracked into a grin, and he flung his filthy arms wide open at us – it was Horace of Mount Spell doom, our old friend of many campaigns! He drunkenly lurched over, fell in my arms, and we went into the tent, to entreat him to more ale whilst he caught us up on the latest happenings at the K'sham.

“That's it!” he nodded to himself in a self-satisfied fashion, “We're a foursome!”

“What does that mean?” Alissa asked.

“It means”, he proffered up his beer mug as though to deliver some great profound fact, “that we can enter the Svarterin tourney,” he paused, to take a slug from his mug, “and that is a wonderful thing! We cannot lose, not with us four, Ha ha!” and he took yet another drink, and then fell over backward onto the floor, quite solidly unconscious.

The next morning, over a breakfast of some exotic meats that burnt the tongue with spices orange and red, that were made, it seems, to be accompanied with Dwarven beer as cold as a glaciers kiss, we spoke with Horace about this Svarterin tourney.

Through a nursed head, more beer, and small bites of spicy meat, he told us of the contest.

“Well,” he began, using a piece of chilli’d meat in a flat piece of bread as a pointer,” there was a time, far in the darkness of a long-time past, that beneath Gannamin mountain, the largest of all Dwarven cities existed. It was a city of beauty, and wonder, with craftsmen that could create marvels for others to behold. This city was unique in that it had gates that opened – and stayed open to the outside world, and it was a place where men and women of all races were welcome for trade and knowledge. It truly was a city that reminded one of man’s divine origins, and it was a place blessed by the gods.

The city’s name was Gjeradin – which in the old tongue means golden halls, and it was the foremost city in all the world. It was a centre of learning and sharing, and the most powerful mages, richest merchants and wisest kings lived there. If those times were a golden age, then Gjeradin was the shining peak in that golden crown.” he paused for a long draught of beer, “And, as we know, golden times in old stories, always turn to shite! It is the manner of things, that Summer turns to Autumn that turns to Winter, and Spring. Except, the spring, for Gjeradin at least, has never come. And it never will.

Now a dragon is a fearsome beast, for sure. And a Dragon could easily terrorise a town, or maybe a small city that was unprepared for it and didn’t get itself some armoured men and a mage or two with haste. But a city like Gjeradin had more Archmages than any other city on the planet, and more war hardened heroes, more Dwarven hammer wielders and axe throwers than they had a right to call for, so any dragon that even chanced its scaly

hide within a hundred miles of the city would be hunted down and turned into a nobleman's wall mounting.

But what if something from beneath the earth, some evil that was buried by some force that was powerful enough to partake in the creation of our world – what if that evil poked its head through its infernal prison bars, and called in a song of death, despair, and misery, to all creatures of evil and night that hid in the shadows and sharp dark places of the world?

What if, an ancient Evil called a beacon to all creatures of wicked and bent design? And what if they heard, and what if they came? Well, some Evil did perk its head up from beneath some infernal, eternal cage, and it did call. No one knows how, or why. Many claim to know how the evil arose and called out to all things born of the night, but in truth, none do.

Nevertheless, it called, and all things evil responded. It started as a trickle at first. Too many bats and more roaches this summer. Snakes in the fields, rats in the barns. Then goblin raiders in the outlying lands. An orc patrol. Highwaymen plaguing the king's roads. Crops went bad, and a malady fell on the people. The king went insane, claiming that voices in his head whispered madness. Beliefs and the worship of old evils arose. Creatures, sharp-toothed and vile swept through the streets at night. People went missing, and curfews were raised. In the space of ten years, the Dwarven kingdom that was the jewel of nations, became tarnished. And then came the hordes.

Sweeping down from mountain holds too numerous to mention, a horde of fell folk – goblins, orcs, ogres, trolls, bad mountain men, tribes wicked in their ways and creatures too foul and numerous to mention, swept down and sacked the city Gjeradin, plundering the jewel from the crown of nations.

But weakened, sickened and diseased as it was, the mage council of the city, the heroes and kings who resided within its hallowed halls, they had the strength for one final act of defiance. Though a small secret passageway, out the back of the mountain, they led many of the citizens of the city, then they threw open the gates and let the horde rush in, chasing plunder and blood. And when the horde were in the city chasing their path to the evil that called them, crazed in lust for blood and soft pink flesh, the dwarven princes and kings, mages, and heroes – pulled the mountain down upon the city.

It was one mighty magic act of sacrifice and courage, and soul damning proportions. But through skill, technique, great courage and ability, the spell was wrought, claiming the lives of hundreds of casters in the process. But in turn, claiming tens of thousands of the enemy.”

Horace paused for effect, then ordered another beer.

When his refill arrived, he continued with renewed vigour.

“The cataclysm was felt around the world.

All of dwarven kind woke in their sleep, and all of mankind felt a shudder in their collective souls. It was magic with a power the likes have never been seen since, and that’s coming from me – Horace of mount Spelldoom. And I’ve seen some magic in my day. Over thousands of years, the mountain settled over the ruins and its horror was forgotten –except by those who somehow found their way beneath the mountain – to that which lay buried beneath.

Now, many thousands of years later, a way has been carved into the mountain. Mounted with runes, guarded with spells and wards and a battalion of the stoutest and finest

of dwarven warriors, and sealed by a door of steel as thick as a wagon, the path into the mountain is guarded for one purpose: The tourney!

There were many rules, and many legends around the Dwarven Svarterin tourney, but most of them were nonsense. In its essence, the tourney was very simple. A team of four could enter. No tribe, city, clan, or troop could enter more than one team. There could be no more than ten teams in any one tourney. If there were, the first ten teams entered had to have a head-on ring fight with a challenging team. No team could face more than one challenge. Previous successful teams got preference.

All teams were to be followed by a magical floating orb that captured their actions and displayed it to the vast crystal screens in the plains outside the gates. Here, the teams could be viewed as they progressed beneath the mountain. Every creature within the mountain carried a bounty. For examples, a dead goblin carried a bounty of one gold piece. A Hobgoblin, ten, and a troll, twenty-five, and so on. After three nights in the mountain, a horn sounded, and all had to be back. Any kills after the horn did not count. But teams could come out sooner if they felt they had sufficient loot and bounty. The team with the highest combined tally of treasure carried out, and bounties added up, won. Winners got to keep their treasure, bounty, and that of the second team. The second team got to keep the third teams' treasure and bounty.

Often, teams did not make it out. Actually, more teams didn't make it out, generally, than those who did, and most of the teams that did make it out, didn't come out whole. In a good year, 7 or 8 teams would make it out. On a bad year, only 2 or 3. It was carnage, and horror, ghosts, goblins, ghouls, and treasure, and it was viewed by thousands of cheering fans across massive screens of crystal and mist.

If the Dark Svarterin dwarves who ran the tourney made money from the treasure haul, they made ten times as much in the gambling tables just outside. Who would kill the first goblin, the first team to die, the first team to make a hundred pieces of gold, the first team to reach the old city gates...and so on and so forth. Because if there's one thing that a dwarven heart loved as much as gold, it was gambling, and it was a good fight. The tourney drew them like bees to the freshest spring pollen, or a lovelorn sailor to ladies with low standards, depending on your inclination, I suppose, but the tourney is loved by the dwarven kind nonetheless, with a macabre and addictive fascination."

We had sat still up until this point, enraptured by the tale of ancient horrors and modern greed. Truth be told, I was not inclined to take part in this looting contest. There was, for me, no cause.

Of course, Meliboeus was the first to give his assent, and Horace and him had already ordered another beer, and were beginning to discuss best tactics, but I did not want to do it. There was no great need, no people to be saved no great justice to set aright. This was pure slaughter and greed, and I would have no part of it.

Alissa agreed to abide by my judgement, and so Meliboeus and Horace set out to convince me to take part, although I would not be swayed. It was adventure and it was glory, but it was not my sort of adventure or glory, and my mind would not alter its course, until...until Kalsath the black, walked into the bar.

I noticed a tall, pale man dressed in black leathers, wide shouldered with a high ponytail, with a long dagger at his hip. He walked up to the bar with a swagger and signalled to the barkeep for an ale and took it without paying. He took a large swig of the ale, turned around and leant his back against the bar, ale in hand, and surveyed the room.



He saw us at the table and instantly, walked over towards us. Or rather, he walked over towards Alissa. Now she is a tall, beautiful woman as all can attest. She is no fainting violet and she is quick with her sword and quicker with her tongue, but there is no firmer ally and more ardent and unwavering love a man could ever want, than Alissa Nordgren.

We had been together on every single adventure since we met. For years, we had shared our bed and also our hearts. I was - and still am - the only love for her, and she was, and only ever has been and only ever will be, the love for me.

This man, clearly a warrior of some skill and repute, walked up to our table and ignoring the rest of us, he leant on the table opposite Alissa.

“Hey Angel, are these gruff types bothering you?”

“No.” she said frigidly, “These are my people, and you are not welcome here. I suggest you go worry some other woman, or a young boy, if that’s your sort.”

Meliboeus burst out laughing and spat his ale across the table.

We all thought her retort was amusing, except the man whom it was directed at. If he hadn’t been so arrogant, so cocksure and haughty in manner, I am sure he would have got a different response - but it was what it was, and so it became, what it became.

In the manner of arrogant, overbearing men who believe they are better than those around them, he responded badly, instantly reaching out for Alissa, suddenly and angrily. That, as it turned out, was a remarkably poor life choice, for as he grabbed her, she caught his hand and bent his fingers backwards. As she did this, Meliboeus launched off his chair

and swung a powerful fist at the man's head, he fell into Horace, who gripped his windpipe with a savage tight fingered grip.

The pale warrior was indeed a warrior trained, and he reached for the long dagger at his side, only to come to a sudden stop, as Meliboeus impaled him to the table with his short sword, a dark gout of blood shooting out of his mouth onto Alissa and me.

Meliboeus burst out laughing at Alissa covered in blood, his laughter on the edge of that pitch maniacal edge I knew it went to when he turned into a nigh unstoppable killing machine. For the sake of all of us, I had to de-escalate the situation quickly. As it was, a murder in a bar fight could get us in some trouble and the last thing I wanted was to be fighting off a Dwarven clan of rock biters, who were very tough customers indeed.

I stood up and put both hands in the air placatingly.

"Everyone calm down - he put his hands on the woman, he reached for his weapon - there was only one way it was going to end. No one else need get involved in something that could turn an unfortunate incident, into a very unfortunate incident."

"Unfortunate for who?"

I looked over to the doorway, which was filled by the widest man I had ever seen. He was short, approximately five foot tall, but seemed at least as wide. He had black hair, flecked with grey, and wore black furs and steel scale. At his hip, was a small war hammer, designed for one handed use. Small, but very brutal and very deadly.

"I said," he repeated, "unfortunate for who?"

Before I could speak, Horace, who was a little tipsy, I must admit, chimed in with his throaty rasp. “Don’t you mean, ‘unfortunate for whom’” with massive emphasis on the ‘m’ at the end of ‘whom’.

With my hands upraised, I stepped in-between them. I gave Horace and Meliboeus a look, motioning them both to sit down. Then I turned and regarded the Man - Dwarf - who had come through the doorway. We hadn’t seen many Dwarves yet, and this was the closest I had to seeing one first hand. If this man was a typical one, they were very intimidating physical specimens, lack of height not coming into it.

“Good sir. My name is Millar from the city of Diomedes, and I mean no insult or harm, but that man went to draw his weapon and laid his hands - unasked for - on that woman. He received what he would in any place of valour or virtue in this world. We seek no other troubles, but to go on with our business...”

“Which is?”

“To enter the tourney!” Piped up Horace.

The dwarf, scowling and as mean lipped as ever, regarded me. “Is this true? Are you here to enter the tourney?”

What else could I say?

“Yes!”

The dwarf nodded. “My name is Vinskar Dei Svarterin. My people run the tourney. If your story tests true, then I will take you to the entrance tent myself. If not, we hang murderers, even at the K’sham.”

He looked at the ceiling of the bar, and raised a heavily ringed right hand, snapped his fingers, and then turned his hand palm up. A small white globe, looking very much like a glass ball almost the size of a man's head filled with white smoke, floated down from the ceiling, and settled in his hand.

He pulled a crystal out from a pocket in the coat, and the globe became full of images, and when we looked closer, we could see, it was images of the bar, captured in the globe.

"Now we will see." he said, and suddenly, the crystal in his hand glowed and threw images of us, and the surrounding bar into the air, pale and see-through, but clearly, it was the scene in the bar, a few moments earlier.

"Behold, "Proclaimed Vinskar, "Let us see if these words uttered ring true."

He held the crystal up, above head height, so others could see what had transpired. It showed the tall pale warrior approach our table as he had done and we heard, somehow, via the crystal, the exchange between him and Alissa, and we witnessed the sudden and instant deterioration of the situation. From beginning to end it had been no more than a handful of seconds.

Vinskar nodded.

"It is as Millar says. There will be no repercussion - he laid hands on the woman without her asking, and he went for his weapon when others had not. He is the victim of his own poor choices. That is the Dwarven way."

He motioned to us. "Come with me, let us enter you into the tourney."

And so, we were entered into the Svarterin tourney under the great mountain of Gannamin.