want them for the Emperor, and I intend to explore it in the morning. Skelnik, stand guard here. See to it that no one enters."

The strangers who waited below— for human souls . . .

But as Sturlinies approached, squat, shadowy forms shambled out in front of him, obstructing whatever it was that shed the pale radiance. He stopped short in his tracks, readying for combat, when he was suddenly set upon from behind. A number of seemingly short yet strong forms tackled him and began dragging him down as more and more joined in to pile on top of him. The chamber became filled with strange clicking and hissing noises that seemed to be made by his bizarre attackers.

He managed to hack at a few that came around in front of him—vague, dark shapes that gave voice to deafening shrieks when struck—but the things clambering upon him grabbed at his arms and face, twisting and scratching, and even with all his strength it was a struggle just to keep from being brought full to the ground. As he grappled thus, he caught sight of a figure away ahead, taller than the rest, silhouetted against the sphere of luminescence, standing with its arms stretched up towards the light as if in some reverence.

But of his foes he could make out little more than stunted shapes through the haze of the contrasting light and darkness, compounded by the throes of combat. They moved to and fro about him, trying to keep out of his blade's reach while at the same time striking out with their deformed hands; others had wrapped themselves around his legs, impeding his movement, or hung on his arms, pulling and tugging.

The battle beneath the stones, where life or death would be decided . . .

A raging wrath that must normally lay locked brooding somewhere within him seemed to be suddenly unleashed, and in a moment his sword was slicing back and forth through the enemies' numbers and his strong arms tossed opponents aside or battered those that came too close. Despite their astonishing strength, the beings were no less vulnerable to steel than their human combatants, and within moments the ground underfoot was copiously splotched and spotted with blood—both red, and the muddy yellow grume that ran from the creatures' wounds.

It was then that he caught sight of Kahf-rel. The first-swordsman had been

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