

# **Friday Night's Alright for Hack and Slash**

## **Dungeons And Dragons**

**By Brian Caball**

# Introduction

The Pcs are either members of, or friends of a successful trading family, the Vardens, that has been running caravans throughout northern Cormyr for decades. Now that the brothers have flown the nest to become adventurers, and his wife Martha has died, the patriarch of the family, Alister Varden, just keeps the business ticking over, a way for him to travel and see the sights in a comfortable retirement.

The Varden brothers have been trying to persuade their father to retire properly to Suzail or Marsember on his savings, warning him of the increase in Goblin activity. For years he has resisted their suggestions, but even his wanderlust is beginning to fade now, and the thought of settling down to some nice southern beachfront property is starting to get appealing.

Therefore, Alister has decided to retire, but not 'till he's done one more trip, from his center of operations in Arabel to Highmoon, "Which is always nice this time of year". As a way of a family reunion and making sure nothing happens to the old man on his last trip, the Brothers and their friends have decided to accompany him, using the pretext of the midsummer festival in highmoon as an excuse to save his pride.

However, this will be a more eventful trip than the Pcs have bargained for. In the eastern eves of the Hullak forest lies the village of Dernham, a sleepy and friendly village, containing the last inn this side of the Thunder peaks.

Long ago, Dernham was home to The Blackhands, a knightly order of Paladins who had dedicated themselves to fighting the evil lord of Hullack forest, the Demigod Thrieldon. Thrieldon was a demigod of plants, who vowed to keep all creatures who would harm his forests from

invading... but also delighted in slaughtering the innocent to feed the hungry trees of his woods. Thrieldon himself was a gigantic oak tree, twisted and ancient, capable of walking on his roots and battering his foes with his great boughs.

After decades of struggle, the knights, with the aid of druid and ranger allies who would see this perversion of nature overthrown, finally defeated Thrieldon, but he was not destroyed. With his last strength, he dropped the one withered acorn that clung defiantly to his withered branches, and even as the horrified knights watched it germinated in the blood soaked battleground and began to grow.

The archdruid who had aided the knights in their struggle managed to place a curse on the bloodthirsty shoot, stalling its growth long enough for it to be uprooted and placed in a specially prepared circle of power, to prevent it from quickening anew, and to stop those of evil heart from coming to claim it.

This circle was in the hidden secret temple of the Blackhand order, buried deep under their stronghold near Dernham.

Years passed, and farmers and settlers moved into the once dead Hullack forest, which became a green place of birds and butterflies, and the people forgot the horror of the place, and eventually the clean rain washed the blood and the terror from the soil.

But some of the Druids of the forest were sorry to see Thrieldon go. He acted as a balancing force, a foil against the order and form of civilisation that now came to tame the wild woods. The more fundamental of them realised that nature had two sides: On one was the beauty, the peace, the gentleness of the rainbow, the waterfall, the forest glade. But the other face, the face of the terror of horn and ivory, of teeth and claws anointed with the blood of the weak

and the slow, was an aspect equally important.

And so a small cult grew up, worshipping the new felled Thrieldon, awaiting the day when the order of the Blackhand grew weary and tired in a world that no longer needed their services.

It is now centuries later, and the great cathedral of the Blackhand order lies in picturesque ruin on the edge of the forest, a home now for rabbits and foxes. The cult too has dwindled to but one old and bent druidess, Eleanor, who lives nearby, still trying to regain the withered shoot of her ancient god.

Eleanor's problem is that it is impossible to enter the deep chamber of the Blackhand order except on Midsummer's eve, the anniversary of the great battle that felled Thrieldon. However, on this night the dead warriors of the Blackhand order rise from their graves to defend against the cult who would steal back their dark lord and begin anew the terror of the Dark woods. If only she could find some warriors, dauntless enough to defeat the now much weakened undead knights, and yet pure of heart enough to break the circle and free the dark god of the woods.

## Act One

### Scene One: A walk in the woods

*Alister Varden, his youngest Daughter Stephanie Varden, and the PCs are travelling east along the road between Arabel and Highmoon, along with a caravan of fine Ales, bolts of rich cloth, and other trinkets for the annual midsummer's festival in Highmoon.*

*It is late evening on a balmy summer's day, the setting sun behind them painting the peaks before them a rich gold, and kindling the industrious insects of the dusk into a cloud of busy moths. The woods are alive*

*with the evening echoes of birds, and rabbits scamper from the broad grassy path before them as they approach. The heros have been walking in the woods for two days now, and as much as they enjoy camping out on warm summer nights, they are also eagerly awaiting the fine brews and lively music of the Dernham inn.*

*However, this idyllic scene is torn assunder as arrows thud into the side of the caravan and warshouts erupt from the woods on either side!*

### Scene Two: Ambush!

A vicious bandit gang has lain in ambush. These are not here by any idle chance, but have in fact been hired by the druidess Eleanor to attack the PCs. She has seen the approach of the PCs in her crystal ball, and sees the chance to gain a band of willing warriors to assault the underground temple.

She has given them poison with which to coat their arrows, with the explicit instructions to fire the poison arrows only at the old man and the human female. The rest of the party is to be roughed up somewhat, but the Bandits are to feign a retreat, and allow themselves to be beaten back by the PCs

There are "Enough" of the bandits. About 6 will shoot arrows from the shelter of the trees, while about 10 rush forward to press the attack in melee.

The Bandits are led by one Bruce one-eye, a known ne'er-do-well, and should be known to the PCs by his wanted posters (Reward: 400 gold pieces for Bruce, plus 20 gold per gang member, dead or alive). Bruce normally hangs around the southern eaves of the woods, and is rarely seen this far north.

#### Bruce One Eye

**HP:** 24  
**Init:** +1

**Speed:** 20ft  
**AC:** 18  
**Attacks:** +6 longsword melee  
**Damage:** longsword 1D8+2  
**Saves:** F: 5 R: 2 W: 1

#### **Gang Member ruffian**

**HP:** 1D10+1  
**Init:** +1  
**Speed:** 30ft  
**AC:** 15  
**Attacks:** +3 assorted weapons  
**Damage:** Assorted weapons 1D8  
**Saves:** F: 3 R: 1 W: 0

#### **Gang Member Archer**

**HP:** 1D10+1  
**Init:** +1  
**Speed:** 30ft  
**AC:** 14  
**Attacks:** +3 longbow missile  
**Damage:** longbow 1D8  
**Saves:** F: 3 R: 1 W: 0

Bruce and his gang will attack the players for maybe a couple of rounds before they realise what they've gotten themselves into, at which point they will leg it off into the woods. They all have hide and move silently to some degree, though the party will be able to follow them if they want to. Bruce and his gang will flee mainly south, or failing that will try to circle south.

If captured, they will claim at first to just be looking for some richer pickings along the east way... they had a friend in the Cormyr army who let them in on the patrol schedule for the next week, and they thought they'd be fairly safe attacking the PCs. They hadn't reckoned on encountering such stalwart foes guarding a small caravan. If asked what kind of poison they used on Alister and Stephanie, they will claim not to know, that was Burt's department, and Burt's dead now.

If they put the prisoners to "The question", the bandits will sing like songbirds, telling the PCs all they want to know about the

strange and sinister figure who hired them to ambush the PCs. However, Eleanor was magically disguised as a tall and strong middle aged wizard when hiring the Bandits. They can tell the PCs that the wizard who hired them described the PCs and their caravan, and how they were to target the old man and the girl.

The effects of the poison:

Alister was only slightly wounded by the arrow ("He's as tough as old boots") but Stephanie was wounded sorely in the shoulder. Still, her brother can heal them both, but even after healing they still feel pain, and after a couple of minutes break out into a fever. Brother Augustinius will recognise it as a poison, and a quick look will reveal the sticky green substance on the arrows pulled out of his family and the sides of the caravan.

Anything he does can at best slow the process of the poison. However, Alister, having come through this way several times before, finds the breath to tell his sons of the medicine woman who lives outside the village of Dernham, which lies only an hour or so ahead.

### **Scene Three: Dernham Village**

*Dernham is a small and sleepy village of perhaps 100 inhabitants, its main industry being farming and the Dernham inn, last inn west of the Thunder peaks.*

*Dernham is winding down for the day, and already the sky is turning a deep navy overhead and the first stars have pierced the veil of day. Children are running around, enjoying the salad days of youth, and already the windows of the inn throw a bright and cheery yellow light across the square. Laughter and cheer can be heard from within, as well as the beginnings of a lively ballad being struck up by Alfried, the resident musician.*

The PCs will no doubt hurry towards the

inn, where all conversation and music will cease as they bring their gravely wounded inside. The barkeep Freida, a tall, sprightly, but greying woman, will quickly clear some tables and send her son Micheal running for Eleanor, the local wise woman, gifted in the arts of healing herbs.

The locals will be shocked at the news of bandits so close to the village, and several will talk of forming up partys to stand watch for the night in case more come this way.

Eventually, Micheal returns with Eleanor, who has with her a healer's bag stuffed full of poultices and herbs.

She will examine the wounded characters carefully, her worried frown deepening in concern as she does so, and occasionally letting out sighs of sorrow. At length, she tells the PCs that her worst fears have been realised. The characters have been poisoned with Mansbane, a vile and evil poison that visits it's victims with a slow and torturous death. With the herbs she has with her, the best she can do is to slow the poison, but she fears that unless the antidote is found, they will be dead by sunrise.

The only antidote is a rare herb called Thrieldon's root, which grows underground in old graveyards. Ask brother Augustinius to make a roll (on Knowledge: Religion). If he succeeds, tell him he has heard the name before, something about an old, evil god that was worshipped in these parts once. If he brings it up, Eleanor will agree. Yes, the herb is called after the old god, because it feeds not on light like most plants but on the decay of flesh, even as Thrieldon fertilised the forest with blood. But not to worry... it's restorative powers are great, even if it's lifestyle is unsavoury.

At this stage, Frieda, who is listening in, will gasp in horror. "But how can we get that herb? Isn't tonight... That night?".

Eleanor will sigh sorrowfully, and explain to the PCs that a nearby ruin does have an underground crypt that has been known to harbour the herb, but they are most misfortunate in the hour of their need. For tonight, the vile denizens of the graveyard rise from their graves to haunt the ruins, and will surely kill any who dare venture there!

## Act Two

### Scene One: The Ruins

*Perched on a low hill lies the ruins of the cathedral of the order of the black hand. The ruined splinters of the flying buttresses reach upwards to shine in the moonlight like the bleached ribs of some long dead beast. At the centre of the cathedral, four blackened and broken towers point towards the sky like a withered claw. Despite the warm summer's night, a deathly chill flows from the ruins, painting the ground with frost stealing the life's warmth from the blood.*

#### 1. The gate

*The gate is guarded by two squat towers, between which the rusted and aged portcullis lies strewn like a broken toy. Braken and grasses grow up now between it's bars, some of which are missing, allowing easy entry to the once impregnable fortress.*

#### 2. The grounds

*The broad ground between the cathedral ruin and the walls is smooth as a bowling green, peppered with tombstones and gravemarkers curiously devoid of overgrowth or vadalism. Though the stones are weathered with age, their ownly adornment is the crystals of frost that flash in the silver moonlight. Before each stone is a patch of loose earth, and even before your very eyes, hands begin*

*to reach through it as the grisly caretakers emerge to tend their own graves.*

The Zombies that are emerging were in life the most junior of the Order of the black hand. There are hordes of them... the PCs can stay and fight them for as long as they like, until they are killed, or until they get bored and wander off. The zombies aren't particularly fast, and distant ones might not even be aware of the PCs until they are attacked.

#### **The Zombie Menace:**

**HP:** 16

**Init:** -1

**Speed:** 10ft

**AC:** 11

**Attacks:** Slam +2 Melee

**Damage:** Slam 1D6+1

**Saves:** F: 0 R: -1 W: 3

### **3. The Knave**

*The broad flagstones of the knave are now cracked and pitted with age, greenery struggling to claim this unwelcome artefact of man. The glorious stained glass windows have long been ground to sand by the relentless elements, the elegant lace of stone that held them now lying in twisted and broken heaps. Along the walls are statues of warriors who's last battle has long been fought, some lying in ruined pieces where they fell in final defeat against the hordes of time.*

### **4. The Alter**

*At the base of the four skeletal towers that form the centre of the cathedral, the alter lies deep in shadow. From it's depths a murmured voice is heard, echoing throughout the cathedral in a sermon preaching despair and madness. Over the alter with arms flung wide in supplication, a ghostly image is seen in the mist that pools at the alter's base, it's face twisting as the mist rolls and writhes as if to escape. Terror grips your heart with a hand of ice as the fiery eyes of the dread pastor fix upon yours, and the spirit drifts forward to bear witness to it's gospel of death.*

The ghost of the pastor is treated as an

Allip (Monster Manual page 16).

#### **Dread Pastor**

**HP:** 26

**Init:** +5

**Speed:** 30ft

**AC:** 15

**Attacks:** Touch +3 melee

**Damage:** 1D4 wisdom

**Saves:** F: 1 R: 2 W: 4

**Notes:** Voice causes madness (will save DC 16 or as hypnosis for 2D4 rounds), requires +1 or better weapons to hit, ½ damage from corporeal weapons.

### **5. The Towers**

The towers each contain a door, long rotted and broken. The left, hindmost tower contains a stairway that descends to the Dungeon level 1.

## **Scene Two: Dungeon Level 1**

### **6. Hallowed Halls**

The spiral stair case descends from the base of the tower above, after about 100 feet of winding downwards, leads to a large semicircular space, some 50 feet across and 30 feet high. The stairs once continued down to the floor, but the stairs has fallen, leaving a 30 foot drop to the floor below. If the players are not careful, they could stand on some unsupported stone stairs and fall. If the Dwarf is not up at the front, have the character there make a wisdom or intelligence check... if it fails, the character continues too close to the end of the stairs and must make a dex check to grab onto a solid ledge as the stones fall away with a clatter. The rim of the chamber is lined with recesses, which contain the skeletons of long dead warriors. These skeletons are wearing rusted full plate and wield rusted weapons.

#### **Skeleton Warriors**

**HP:** 12

**Init:** +4

**Speed:** 20ft

**AC:** 18

**Attacks:** Rusty swords +0 melee

**Damage:** Rusty sword 1D6

**Saves:** F: 0 R: 1 W: 2

Of the three exits from this room, the one leading south has an inscription reading "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" in an ancient script.

## 7. The Armoury

*Desicated and crumbling racks hold row after row of auburn streaked weapons, piles of rust accumulated below them, obscuring the flagstone floor. Larger piles of brown flakes show where armour once stood.*

## 8. The hall

*Soft footfalls echo in this cavernous hall, which must once have been the heart of this stronghold. The floor is littered with the mouldering remains of tables and chairs long consumed by decay, and the shattered remnants of a once glorious chandelier. On the walls hang tapestries, some now slumped to the ground.*

Close examination of the tapestries will reveal that some can still be read. Some bear pictures of knights in heroic poses or performing noble deeds, the inscriptions signifying the themes of Bravery, Loyalty, Honour, Valour, Virtue. The Remains of the Chandalier will yield 1D20 gems worth about 50 gold each. There is a secret compartment (Spot check DC 20, Search check DC 15) behind the top table which contains the good silver and fine china, still in very serviceable condition. They are worth about 1,000 gold.

## 9. The Kitchen

The kitchen contains a large fireplace, with a chimney which reaches the outside about 10 feet outside the fortress, cleverly disguised as a rocky outcropping. Along with rusty pots, pans, chipped delf and utensils, it contains The Mad Chef, a poltergeist.

**The Mad Chef**

**HP:** 30

**Init:** +8

**Speed:** 40ft

**AC:** 15

**Attacks:** Thrown delf + 5 missile, 3 times a round.

**Damage:** Thrown delf 1D4

**Saves:** F: 0 R: 4 W: 6

**Notes:** The Mad Chef is incorporeal, and can only be damaged by +1 magic weapons or higher. He takes ½ damage from corporeal weapons. If the mad chef becomes enraged (10 hp or less), he will abandon delf and switch to large rusty cleavers (1D6 damage).

## 10. The wine cellar

This contains vaults which once held barrels of wine... this have long since broke open, spilling their contents to be spoiled on the cellar floor. However, a careful search of the vaults will reveal a rack of ancient spirits (the alcoholic kind), and while many of the bottles have been broken, 1D10 of them are intact. These are worth about 200 gold each to the right buyer, or taste damn if the PCs would prefer to keep them for themselves.

## 11. The Dungeon

The door to area 6 is large, steel, and while rusty is still quite intact. It is also locked. It is a difficult skill check (DC 20) to open the locked door, but failing that the rusty lock mechanism can be forced by main strength (strength check at ¼).

*The door opens with a mournful groan that owes nothing to rusty hinges. A palpitable aura of Evil flows out to wash over you like freezing water and the stench of freshly spilled blood, urine, and feces close your throat and sting your eyes. No prisoner could be held in the 8 cells who's bars sag and flow like rusted wax, but a pale ghostly figure strains against etherial manacles in each cell, their cries for release rising to an ear splitting crescendo.*

The cells contain Allips, (see the Mad Pastor) but fortunately for the PCs, they cannot get free of their bonds. Also, only one save versus hypnosis is needed. Unfortunately, the Allips are requesting that the PCs free them! Any that become

hypnotised by the Allip's cries will attempt to free the nearest one, bringing him close enough for the Allip to attack.

### 12. The Inquisition Chamber

If the PCs came in here to escape the cries of the Allips in the dungeon, they're going to be sorely disappointed. There is another one in here, this time tied to a spectral rack in the centre of the room. The remains of the original can be seen, rotting beneath its spirit self. This Allip will require a new saving throw against hypnotism, and again the Allip will try to get hypnotised PCs to free it.

### 13. Guardroom

This was a guardroom. Rotten tables, a weapon rack.

### 14. Obliette

This is a chute leading to an oubliette, a cave far below the stronghold where truly unco-operative prisoners could be relegated.

## Scene Three: Dungeon Level 2

### 15. The Inner Sanctum

The stairs leading to area 15 is trapped. If a certain stone is not pressed before venturing down or up it, the stairs will become a chute, a pit trap will open up at the foot of the stairs, and a door will open in the corridor wall opposite the top of the stairs releasing a cistern of water. Any characters in the path of the water must make a reflex save to avoid being washed into the trap (DC 10 if in the corridor, DC 15 if on the stairs). The pit is 20 foot deep and has rusty spikes at the bottom (2D6 damage). The trap is fairly well hidden (DC 15 to spot). In the centre of the hall is a raised dais, on which there is a large stone altar. On the altar is etched a magical circle, in the centre of which is a withered plant, a seedling frozen in time, having just burst from its seed.

The seed is guarded by the Ghost of the Grand Master of the order.

#### The Grand Master

**Hp:** 40

**Init:** +5

**Speed:** 30

**AC:** 12/21

**Attacks:** +9 longsword +2 melee

**Damage:** 1D8 + 4

**Saves:** F: 4 R: 2 W: 2

**Notes:** Incorporeal, +4 turn resistance. Frightful moan: As a standard action, all within a 30ft spread must make a will save (DC 13) or be panicked for 2D4 rounds. Horrific appearance: all viewing within 60 feet must make a fort save (DC 13) or suffer 1D4 points permanent loss of str, dex, and con.

Once the grand master is defeated, the shoot can be removed by breaking the circle. Otherwise, it will not pass it, no matter how hard the PCs try to pull it.

## Act Three

Unless the PCs are totally thick, they should be suspecting at this stage that not all is as Eleanor told them. How this act plays out will be largely based on how far Eleanor can string them along. They may choose to demand an explanation straight away, or even attack her, or they may just go along with whatever she says. Although, this act is a lot better if they actually retrieve the shoot.

### Scene One: Confrontations

Hopefully the PCs will be back in town, a little (or a lot!) beat up, with shoot in tow and plenty of questions. Eleanor will explain how the Black Hand was an evil order of blackguards, whom the druids of the forest had fought for many generations before finally bringing down. The townsfolk will corroborate this tale... after all, the cult of Thrieldon has spent many years colouring the local legends about the Blackhand to suit themselves.

With the fears of the PCs hopefully quelled, Eleanor will explain that to cure their friends, they must be laid out in a garden, and the shoot planted between



them in order for it to work on them. Preferably the won't even ask, and she'll just do this.

If this comes to pass, she will cut her finger, feeding the shoot some of her blood to start the whole process off. The shoot will then start to grow, and will plant roots in the friends of the PCs. The shoot will feed on them during the night, growing larger and stronger, until by morning it is a young oak sapling some 6 feet tall, with a beautiful spread of fresh green leaves... and when the sun breaks over the eastern horizon the next morning...

## Scene two: A dark and hungry god arises

Thrieldon has now been reborn, but he is weak as yet, and vulnerable to mortal hands. The PCs have mere minutes to act if they are to stave off another reign of terror by the dark god of the woods.

An ear piercing scream will wake the PCs and alert them that something is happening. The cleric and the sorcerer should be fully fueled and rearing to go, and hopefully everyone else will have recuperated somewhat.

### Thrieldon

**HP:** 20 to start, gains 1D10 every 2 rounds

**Init:** +6

**Speed:** 30

**AC:** 15, gains 1 every 2 rounds

**Attacks:** Slam +2 melee (gains +1 every 2 rounds)

**Damage:** Slam 1D4 (goes up 1 die type every 2 rounds)

**Saves:** F: 2 R: 2 W: 2 (each gains 1 every 2 rounds)

**Notes:** Thrieldon can cast entangle as a free action every round. He gains 1 foot in height every round.

Note that Eleanor will aid Thrieldon in his fight with the PCs. Hopefully they will kill him before he becomes too big for them to

handle. If he's kicking their ass, tone him down a bit... if they're kicking his ass, give him a bit of a boost.

## Scene Three: And i'd have gotten away with it too, if it wern't for you pesky kids

If Thrieldon is defeated, and she is still alive and in custody, Eleanor will come clean with the whole story.

## NPCs

**Eleanor** 5<sup>th</sup> level druid

**HP:** 22

**Init:** +1

**Speed:** 30

**AC:** 11

**Attacks:** Club +3

**Damage:** Club 1D6

**Saves:** F: 4 R: 1 W: 4

**Notes:** Eleanor has as an animal companion an ill tempered raven. She has memorised: Entangle, Fearie fire, Shillelagh, Barkskin, summon nature's ally II, summon nature's ally III.

# Player's Introduction

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Therefore, Alister has decided to retire, but not 'till he's done one more trip, from his center of operations in Arabel to Highmoon, "Which is always nice this time of year". As a way of a family reunion and making sure nothing happens to the old man on his last trip, the Brothers and their friends have decided to accompany him, using the pretext of the midsummer festival in highmoon as an excuse to salve his pride.

## **Dramatis Personae:**

### **PCs:**

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| Ardel Varden        | Human sorcerer, son of Alister.           |
| Kerel Varden        | Human fighter, son of Alister.            |
| Brother Augustinius | Human cleric, son of Alister              |
| Bjarne Stonson      | Dwarven barbarian, friend of the Vardens. |
| Aldaria             | Elven ranger, friend of the Vardens.      |
| Victoria Tasseldale | Halfling rogue, friend of th Vardens.     |

### **NPCs:**

|                  |                                      |
|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Alister Varden   | Human trader                         |
| Stephanie Varden | Human teenager, daughter of Alister. |