

**Robert E. Howard's**



**THE BLACK TEMPLE**

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## ADVENTURE



# THE BLACK TEMPLE



*"Conan had been told dark tales of hidden temples where intense smoke drifted up incessantly from black altars."*

— "The Hour of the Dragon"

## A LAST STAND?

The sound of metal against metal, again, as if pulled from the forges where they were made, purposed now toward killing instead of creation, but the din the same. The fray, a whirling melee of gore and mud and the last glinting of sharp edges—a small band, surrounded now by the Ophirean army, dog-brothers heaped around them like human anthills. The dead are thick, and one could walk one from one end of the grim field to the other using only islands of corpses without stepping in the pink-stained snow.

The scarlet-streamered sky heralds dusk. Soon, the field cloaked in dark, all one will hear is the slitting of throats and the jangling of looted coin. The situation seems hopeless. Your foemen press all around. The last men in your company fight for every last breath but the House of Shades is all-too visible in their eyes.

Knuckles turn white as fists tighten one last time about swords. If only you could mount a horse and cut a swath through the enemy's thin line behind you. But no, you'd be trapped in the valley still.

Yet, yes! There was a temple behind you, but a half-league. There, you might make a stand worthy of a soldier's end. Your gods must smile upon the idea, for an Ophirean cavalryman loses his saddle in the slippery slush and topples

*"Their shields were gone, their corselets battered and dented. Blood dried on their mail; their swords were stained red. Their horned helmets showed the marks of fierce strokes."*

— "The Frost-Giant's Daughter"

to the ground. A mount! Now you need but rally a few desperate men and cleave your way toward one last chance at life or die in the trying!

## A SUMMARY OF POSSIBLE EVENTS

The Black Temple models itself on the survival horror genre. In a familiar Howardian opening, the player characters find themselves the last dogged remnants of a mercenary company caught in a nameless pass between Ophir and Koth. Having fought against the Ophirean army proper for an upstart prince, the mercenary company found defeat when their supposedly stealthy approach via said path was betrayed by one of their own. The Ophireans were ready for the mercenaries, and the tide of battle soon turned a crimson, bloody red against them.

An army surrounds them but, to the south, deeper into the pass, the line of their foemen is thinner. Carving their way out seems the only option, though a thin opportunity at best. By mounting horses whose riders lay in the pink snow, they may yet escape. The player characters must, in this case, marshal what few forces they can and drive through the enemy lines.

Among their followers is an Ophirean mercenary who believes the Ophirean army, being followers of Mitra, are unlikely to attack the temple they passed not long before. At the very least, the temple could provide a more defensible position should they gain entry.

Assuming a victory against the Ophireans standing between them and life, the player characters race to the temple. They find it strangely quiet, and the doors unlatched. An air of ill-omen pervades the area but, even as they feel the hackles rise on their necks like soldiers





coming to attention, the Ophireans arrive. At first, they are few, but too many to fight in open combat. The mercenaries have no choice but to enter the temple, bar the door, and hope the sacred ground—and the monks within—prove a sufficient deterrent to open assault.

The temple is not solely devoted to the light of Mitra, at least not of late. While conducting repairs, the monks came upon fragments of the Pnakotic Manuscripts, a dreaded collection of writings about horrors from the Outer Dark. The resulting corruption divided the faithful and brought forth beings from planets that wind round other unknown stars. Something stalks the temple and the monks and soon, the mercenaries seeking shelter there.

What's more, the dog-brother who betrayed the company's route to the Ophireans found the Ophirean general had no love for traitors and, before the general could slay him, he fled to the temple. Revenge may yet be possible.

That, however, must wait. The Ophireans quickly find reinforcements and gather at the temple gates. The temple itself used to be a castle, and the fortifications are strong enough that the mercenaries may cause enough casualties to make their foes rethink this relentless pursuit. That which stalks the temple soon seems to infect the ranks of the Ophireans. Alien corruption spreads and neither sell-sword nor soldier of the king may survive the night.

## APPROACHING THE ADVENTURE AS GAMEMASTER

Some adventures are linear form, with one event proceeding inexorably to another. Others are open, allowing players nearly limitless choices. The former are sometimes known as "railroad adventures," while the latter are called "sandboxes." Both have their merits, but this is no place to get into a treatise on adventure design here. Instead, this small section exists to prepare the gamemaster to run *The Black Temple*, a hybrid scenario combining both elements.

The adventure begins with limited options where the adventurers have only the temple in which to shelter. Once inside, the scenario is much more like a sandbox — non-player characters have motives rather than specific events, though scenes are suggested. Myriad things can happen in the temple. The adventure concludes with a final mass combat. One way or another, this is an adventure for mercenaries, and it is only fitting to end in the heat of a sizable fray. How that plays out, and who comprises the sides fighting are a direct result of the middle portion of the tale.

The story opens in media res with only one clear path to survival. After that, the adventure opens up and allows both the gamemaster and players to guide the story in a variety of thrilling, and horrifying, directions.



## TWO BACKSTORIES

Two paths converge at the Black Temple. One is the course of the mercenary company fighting for a rebellious Ophirean prince, while the other is that of the monks of the temple. As these two threads twine together, our story unfolds.

### THE OPHIREAN REBELLION

The prince of a city-state in southern Ophir had had enough of the king and decided to topple what he perceived as a weak throne. To do so, he hired mercenaries and used the element of surprise to supplement his own troops. To this end, the company of mercenaries (or a portion thereof) in which the player characters currently serve, was hired to attack the king's marshaled forces from a little-known pass through the mountains dividing Koth and Ophir. Koth itself was not involved in the current dispute, having enough internecine conflicts of its own.

Had things gone to plan, the mercenaries would have emerged from the pass on the flank of the Ophirean army and, with the prince's troops already engaged, have surprised and slaughtered the king's army. Such was not to be. A Zamorian sell-sword named Zalosia cut a deal with the king (who had a price on his head) and sold the mercenaries out. He then fled camp the night before and joined the Ophireans waiting in ambush. They, however, have no love for traitors and less love for Zalosia whose exploits are well known in Ophir. He escaped before they could exact revenge.

Unfortunately, the damage was done and, just before the mercenaries reached the end of the mountain pass, they found Ophireans waiting at its mouth to charge them. Wheeling about, they saw more Ophireans coming down the cliffs and feathering them with arrows from behind. There was no escape. The battle raged from afternoon till dusk, leaving few dog-brothers standing as the adventure opens. The player characters are among these few.

### THE BLACK TEMPLE

The Black Temple was once a fortress designed to guard this pass when it saw trade. In time, other natural passages through the mountains became favored, and the royal line of Ophir saw little profit in maintaining a keep here. The fortification was turned over to priests of Mitra over three centuries ago as part of an overall conversion to Mitra in southern Ophir.

In that time, the monks of the temple have maintained it as well as they can, and though the battlements are not what they once were—for why would Mitran monks need such defenses?—the temple is overall still defensible. The only threat to the temple would have come from the local

hill people, but they have avoided the temple for entire tenure of the monks' residence, with good reason.

Three weeks ago, while conducting repairs in the subterranean portions of the main complex, the monks came upon historical artifacts. At first, they believed their find to be the will of Mitra. That conclusion proved wrong and foolhardy.

What they found were portions of the Pnakotic Manuscripts, which corrupted those able to decipher them. The scriptorium produced a ready supply of eager eyes and, within two weeks, nearly half the population of the temple were converts to the religion spoken of in the texts.

That "religion" is in no way a part of human theology. Instead, the texts describe a planet far from Earth called Polaris. Within the weird glyphs etched into the unknown metal pages were words which called forth creatures of Polaris from the planet itself.

These beings crossed the void of space, distorting time so that they arrived in mere days instead of the millennia which separated the two planets. Though the monks have no way of knowing, they summoned a weapon, the first wave of soldiers from Polaris. Now, some of these soldiers stalk the temple and the surrounding area. If unstoppable, they will prove but a vanguard for an invading host of madness and horror the likes of which Earth has not seen since the Great Race of Yith warred with these folk and sealed their access to Earth for what the Yithians hoped was eternity.



## A FIELD HEAPED IN GORE

The opening text of this adventure gives flavor for the field of battle in which the player characters find themselves. There is no time to prepare, to equip themselves, or to plan. The adventure opens in media res and the gamemaster should reveal the backstory of the rebellion in pieces, perhaps waiting until the adventurers reach the brief calm of the temple.

Instead of any preamble, the player characters must immediately face combat. Each has 2 Fatigue from the day's melee and, should the gamemaster desire, 1 or 2 actual Wounds. The key here is to put them in a desperate situation and move them toward the adventure proper. Also, opening in the middle of combat provides an exciting beginning to the adventure, offering action and peril from the first moment.



The player characters begin face-to-face with ten Ophirean soldiers (see page 16). The gamemaster wants to show force here, but go easy. The goal is not to kill the adventurers before the adventure truly begins. They are already fatigued, possibly wounded, and the encounter is designed to thrill with a modicum of challenge. Once this initial challenge is dispatched, the player characters can focus on making either a last stand or an escape.

Roughly half the adventurers still have mounts. Any player character seeking a mount may make a Difficult (D2) Observation test each turn to spy a suitable mount not surrounded by the enemy. Mounting and establishing control over the found steed requires a Difficult (D2) Animal Handling test. If that test results in 1 or more Consequences, the mount is injured by the surrounding battle. If the test succeeded, it receives 1 Wound. If it failed, the mount is killed and falls to the ground in front of the unlucky adventurer, who must make an Average (D1) Athletics test immediately or become trapped beneath the dead animal. As this is Ophir, the mounts in question might be horses, camels, donkeys, or even water buffalo.

Any attempt at getting a sense for the course of the battle reveals that the Ophirean line to the south is thinner and slower to reinforce. The player characters cannot hope to cut through it alone, but they could marshal their remaining comrades for a direct charge through that wall of men. Now is an appropriate time to mention the temple the mercenary army passed but an hour before the ambush turned all their plans to dust. Set into the mountains, it appeared defensible. If the players themselves do not think of it, an Average (D1) Lore test informs them that the temple was devoted to Mitra and Ophir are a people of Mitra worshippers. Alternatively, an Ophirean mercenary survivor among them points out that the Ophirean army would give some pause before attacking a holy place of their favored god.

The onus should fall on the player characters to organize an assault on the Ophirean line and effect escape. If the group dallies, the gamemaster should throw another 5 Ophirean soldiers at them, and continue to do so, until it is apparent they need men and a rough plan to escape. To rally fellow dog-brothers—each of whom now fights for life—any

player character may roll an Average (D1) Command or Difficult (D2) Warfare test. Basic success draws five men to the cause with an additional two sell-swords rallying for each Momentum earned. There is no army left to summon, but the characters can draw a sizable unit to their ragged banner with good rolls or wise expenditures of Fortune.

So mustered, the adventurers and their followers must now carve their way through the enemy toward yet another chance at turning certain death into a fighting chance at life!



## BREAKOUT

As soon as the player characters have become oriented and gathered a paltry collection of survivors, their next task is to escape the surrounding enemy and make a break for freedom. The nearest Ophireans number four squads of ten men each: two cavalry and two infantry. Each is led by a Sergeant. Use the statistics for Guards and Guard Sergeants on page 317 of the **Conan** corebook.

On the first turn, the player character most clearly in command must attempt a Difficult (D2) Command test. If they fail, the Ophirean Sergeants form up ranks before mercenaries can break through. If they succeed, their retreat breaks through without a direct clash and the chase is on!

The gamemaster should remember the goal of mass combat in this adventure is not to track the blow-by-blow,

*"In a hurricane of thundering steel, the lines twisted and swayed. It was war-bred noble against professional soldier. Shields crashed against shields, and between them spears drove in and blood spurted."*

— "Black Colossus"



maneuver by maneuver nature of a miniatures game, but to abstract a larger battle into a narratively exciting scene.

While in the midst of combat, perhaps halfway through the melee as a whole, the player characters note an Ophireans' Captain: Tassala the Grim — the one who led the slaughter of their brothers as it happens—ordering his men to kill, "Kill the curs at all costs!" The adventurers cannot reach the captain through the whirling combat, and he is out of range for missile weapons. This brief scene is only present to give more weight to the captain's later arrival at the temple. He is one of several enemies encountered in this adventure.

## FLIGHT TO THE BLACK TEMPLE

Once the player characters and their troops break free of the Ophireans, they must race to the Temple. As the adventurers flee through the battlefield, each makes several tests to represent the headlong flight, with each cycle of tests representing about ten minutes of elapsed time. Most player characters attempt an Average (D1) Animal Handling or Warfare, or a Difficult (D2) Athletics or Melee test as they cut and ride their way toward freedom.


Failure on these tests means one of the pursuing guards gets close enough to attempt a Melee attack against that player character. Any time a player character rolls a Consequence, on a test, one of the allies they rallied to the retreat falls, slain by the pursuing armies. Once their last ally is slain, any additional Consequences add to the gamemaster's Doom pool as normal.


Any Momentum rolled may immediately be spent to grant an ally 1 bonus d20 on their next test, or added to the group Momentum pool. When the pool reaches a total of three times the number of player characters, they have outpaced the larger force, and can reach the Temple without further combat.

Do not track attacks by the player characters against individual foes. Assume that any successful test they make includes cleaving the arm off, or the horse from beneath, an overly courageous enemy. They are too numerous to fight off, though. They must be outrun.

Keeping in mind that the purpose of this scene is not to kill the adventurers outright, but to maintain tension during a thrilling chase, the gamemaster can use Doom to keep the pressure on.

- **2 Doom:** An aspect of terrain or enemy action makes one player character's next test 2 steps of difficulty harder, for example, changing an Average (D1) test to a Challenging (D3) test.
- **2 Doom:** An enemy targets one player character, attacking with a sword, spear, or bow. The target

must make a Challenging (D3) Acrobatics, Animal Handling, or Parry test or take 5  damage with the Piercing quality.

- **4 Doom:** A player character's horse falls, pierced by an enemy spear. They must immediately make a Challenging (D3) Athletics test to avoid suffering 4  damage with the Stun quality from the fall, after which they may make no further tests toward escaping to the Temple until they have unhorsed an enemy and stolen their mount.



## THE TEMPLE ITSELF

Upon arriving, the characters find the familiar site they passed this morning. However, the temple's appearance is new to the players.

Set among the craggy hills of the low mountains, the temple boasts a sheer cliff at its eastern end, providing a natural defense. It is little wonder the old kings of Ophir built a fortification here. The battlements crumble in places like a beggar's rotten teeth, but the crenellations yet stand against the final light of day.

The defensive towers are poorly kept, but the walls themselves retain full integrity. Anyone making an Average (D1) Warfare test concludes the site is more than fit for defense.

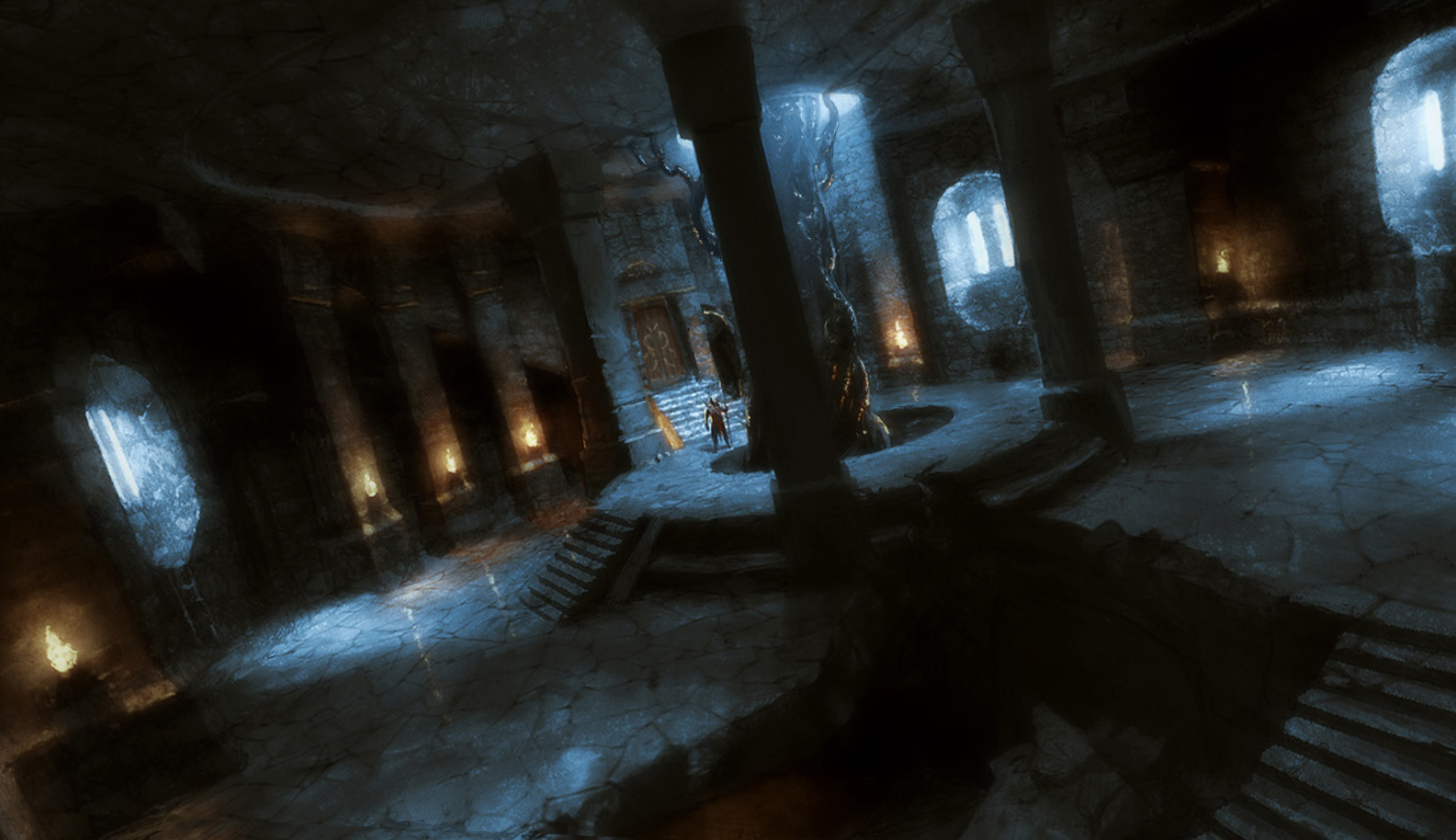
The main complex is largely hidden by the walls, but the temple's central structure is a four-turreted tower which rises above the walls. The main gate is slightly ajar. It stands twelve feet high. While there is no continual threat to the temple, it is unusual for a gate anywhere in Hyboria to be left ajar.

One of the monks fled during the night, escaping via the gate and slipping into the mountains. He did not make it far, but there is no evidence of his passage for characters to follow.

No one guards the gate but, being as this is a holy site, this is not unusual. Usually, though, someone would be present to open the gate were it not already ajar.

Darkness falls as the adventurers enter.





## MYSTERIES OF THE BLACK TEMPLE

This section provides the necessary detail to run the rest of the adventure inside the temple. As mentioned, this section of The Black Temple is something of a sandbox. We begin by drilling down further into the events which split the monks and drew forth the creatures from Polaris. From there, we explore the present schism.

Next, the various non-player characters at work inside the temple are given persona and purpose. Much of what transpires comes from the interactions between them and the player characters. However, had the adventurers never arrived at the temple, its denizens would have the same situation to deal with: an alien threat killing monks and to whom some of the monks are ostensibly allied.

### MAKING REPAIRS

As many terrible things it started simply enough—with repairs. The temple, and the castle before it, is well over 500 years old. However, eons before any structure made by men rose here, an ancient fortification stood in this place. In the many, many cataclysms between the days when humans did not yet walk the Earth and the destruction of Atlantis, other races held dominion over this planet—while other races still desired to remove them.

The Great Race of Yith once battled a race known only as The Star People of Polaris. The Yithians battled the Star People of Polaris to a stalemate during which time the Yith were able to seal the means by which the Star People of Polaris travelled across the vast gulfs of inky space from their world to Earth. There are perhaps a handful of beings upon the Earth who know anything of this conflict. The rest of it lies hidden in manuscripts, strange stones, and places where mortal men find only madness.

Some say the mighty wizards of Acheron had knowledge of some of these mysteries. This adventure supposes that their ancient bloodline, carried in some of the people of Ophir grants special affinity with the Pnakotic Manuscripts as translated in a form of crazed Acheronian.

Three weeks prior to the battle of the pass, the monks at the temple conducted routine repairs. While doing so, one of the monks stepped on a weak spot of ancient masonry beneath the main tower. He fell and hurt his leg. His fellows went to fetch rope, and the monk lit a torch which had fallen with him. He found himself in a vast, domed chamber buttressed with crystals that looked like the bones of some vast, alien species. On the floor of the dome, stretching the entire circumference, lay a seal made of something neither rock, nor any metal alloy known to men.

Limping about the chamber, curiosity roused, the monk found a large golden disk on which cryptic markings spiraled in a single sentence from the outer rim of the disk to its very center. The monk could not read the language by sight and yet, all the same, he mouthed the words.







In the days that followed, the monk took ill and became fevered. All the while he spoke, his gibbering tongue forming something not-quite-words from the disc. Meanwhile, other monks explored the chamber their brother had discovered. Believing they had stumbled upon something left by ancient worshippers of Mitra, a faction began to excavate under passages around the seal. The temple's Prior ordered them to stop, citing knowledge he would only admit came from the temple's library. By then, the more curious monks fell under the eldritch, alien influence of the chambers and what they found in the tunnels they made. Within a week, the sick monk died, and something, possible many somethings, began to stalk the temple and kill the brothers.

These creatures, who the monks termed Polaran Stalkers, were creations of the Star People of Polaris, alchemical aberrations designed for war. One or more now skulked about the temple at night doing what it was designed to do—killing anyone not an ally. For a time, those monks who dove into the fragments of the Pnakotic Manuscripts translatable from the mad version of Acheronian left behind were allies. In the last few days they, too, became prey.

Two days after the monk, Garrus, died, he rose again. His body now contorted, bones poking out in ways that surely broke them, Garrus shambled to the great chamber below the temple. In the non-language of Polaris he called to those other monks whose minds had turned. As they arrived, Garrus stretched out his form, becoming malleable in a way that broke all illusion of his remaining remotely human. The monks who arrived joined him—literally. A moldering, leprous sore of amalgamated flesh grew in the

chamber. The great crystal bones glowed, the flesh-thing bloated, swollen with star stuff to give birth to the gateway by which the full host of Polaris might arrive.

The thing below is horrific. Merely seeing it drove two other monks irrevocably insane. Those monks not loyal to this monstrosity help the Polaris creatures find the others and bring them here. When enough life force and flesh are amassed, the globular profanity turns into a giant, pustulent portal through which untold madness ultimately pours.

As evening falls and the players arrive, the flesh-thing below is a mere night away from reaping the grim rewards of its labor. Sergeant. Use the statistics for Guards and Guard Sergeants on page 317 of the **Conan** corebook.

## AND THEN WHAT HAPPENS?

As noted in the introduction, this adventure is designed to offer the player characters complete freedom of choice. While the opening of the adventure presupposes a few elements of the player character's past – that they are mercenaries who have signed up to prosecute a war and that the only point of safety available to the player characters after the catastrophic losses they had endured in the recent battle is the Black Temple – from here on in, everything is up to them. The gamemaster might like to issue a little guidance, if they choose to do so, but this is far from necessary and many players might actively cavil against being given a clear hint as to the path they should follow.



Whatever the player characters choose to do, things are likely to end in a series of increasingly bloody and frenetic battles, with the shrieks of the dying mingling with the unholy calls of the dark, twisted creature metastasizing in the Temple's catacombs. Below, are some possible paths the adventure might take. Again, these should not be seen as prescriptive, but, at most, guidelines for ways the adventure might develop, to be mixed, matched, or provide inspiration.

*"Conan recognized the grim finality of his position. He sensed an inexorable driving fate behind all this."*

— "The Hour of the Dragon"

## THE DARKEST TIMELINE

The player characters are in an unenviable position. Caught between a victorious enemy army seeking to complete the slaughter they have already begun on one side, and an eldritch creature born from the stuff of dark sorcery on the other, the easiest and bleakest route for the adventure to take is to have these twin perils gradually crush the player characters between them. If this game is the climax of a campaign, a heroic last stand might be a suitably glorious and savage way to conclude it. If this is the opening adventure of a game which is to continue for some time to come, then there are a number of potential ways out of this. Howard himself was not averse to last minute heroics turning the tide of a battle, and there are few better ways to bond a party of adventurers together than to thrust them into a situation from which they only just escape.

The adventure here would see the Ophireans begin their assault almost immediately, harrying the player characters almost from as soon as they enter the Temple. While a few of the player characters might be able to explore further than the courtyard and temple walls, most of the focus of the adventure is on the characters encountering different exploratory raids by the Ophireans as the ominous rumblings below become more persistent and troubling. Finally, the creature bursts from below and the player characters are caught in a crossfire. The adventurers may be able to lure the Ophireans into a trap, using the eldritch abomination in the Temple as their own means of negotiating an escape.

## THE LOVECRAFTIAN APPROACH

The player characters make it to the Temple, after the brutal conflict outside its walls and, as soon as they close the heavy doors to the place behind them, the Ophireans instantly flee. How much the Ophireans know about the goings on in the Temple is up to the gamemaster. It could be that the Temple has long been rumored to have fallen into decadence and the pursuits of hideous, arcane knowledge – quite an authentic Howardian approach – or it could be that, as the player characters shut and barred the gate behind them, some omen of evil was seen above the Temple. To truly push the grotesquerie, perhaps some spore of the creature in the catacombs is discerned – tentacles, eyes, the stones of the walls becoming flesh...all good reasons for an army to run off, if they know what is good for them.

The surviving mercenaries who accompanied the player characters begin to explore their surroundings. A few don't return. Soon, the corridors of the Temple are choked with gloom and death. Have the very dimensions of the Temple begun to shift and change, so that the gates the player characters entered by are no longer the gates that allow them out? Has the place assumed the impossible geometries of an Escher painting as the creature in the catacombs drags itself towards them, seeking more and greater sustenance? Resolving an adventure that takes this path can be as simple or as complex as required – perhaps killing the creature restores normality. Perhaps, however, killing the creature unleashes something worse.

Whether that 'something worse' manifests itself in the Ophirean capital, in the plains just beyond the Temple or in the frozen wastes of Vanaheim, the player characters are linked to it now. Whether they seek it out, from a sense of heroic obligation or are desperate for safer locales to better enjoy wine and companions of loose morals, whatever they unleashed is going to find them in due time.

## BALANCE IS KEY

The adventure could take a more complex path, one with more twists and turns than a game of cards in a Zamoran tavern. In this possible adventure path, allegiances are formed of necessity and broken moments later, as it becomes more expedient to stab your erstwhile comrade in the back than cover him with your shield arm. After all, you don't necessarily need to outrun the eldritch creature at your back, just the Ophirean next to you.

In this adventure path, the player characters fortify the Temple and prepare to fight off the Ophirean foe, trying to survive the onslaught and make the going for the enemies bloody enough that they decide finishing off the remnants of the mercenaries is no longer worth the cost. However,



as the fight against the Ophireans becomes desperate and the defenses begin to give way, the relationship between attacker and defender is suddenly, irrevocably changed. The thing lurking beneath the Temple breaks loose and begins to seek flesh. As the madness and corruption which the creature brings with it begin to seep into the fabric of the stone, and the Ophireans and the player characters realize the predicament they are in, enmity may soon become a temporary friendship. The now united forces need to plunge into the fetid, inky darkness of the catacombs to cleanse the Temple of the forces which now infest it, if they hope to escape with their lives or their sanity, intact.



## BLOOD AND IRON



Just as the adventure began at the end of a vast battle, which had rendered the ground red and left hundreds sprawled and eternally still in the valleys nearby, so too can it end in the massed ranks of troops converging upon one another, the cacophony of horse's hooves and the bellowed orders of desperate sergeants, trying to marshal their soldiers.

In this version of the adventure, the player characters know reinforcements are on the way, but they must hold out for one or two days. Their delaying action has some chance of succeeding, but is complicated by the presence of a malevolent, grasping force from the Outer Dark lingering in the cellars where once the monks kept wine and beer. If the player characters can survive long enough, then their comrades-in-arms arrive and the besieging Ophireans have to abandon the attack. The player characters can escape from the Temple at this point, perhaps joining the relief forces in time to warn them of the eldritch horror which is about to break free from the Temple and intrude upon the field of battle. What this means for the engagement is entirely up to the player characters. They may choose to parley with the Ophireans, convincing them that slaying the creature within the Temple is far more important than the petty demands of princes and territory. They might attempt to use the eldritch creature to their advantage, luring the horror from the Temple and using it to deliver a devastating attack to the flanks of the foe, sowing terror and destruction throughout the enemy lines and ensuring victory for their own side. How the player characters' brethren respond to the creature is to be decided. If given sufficient warning, they may be able to overcome their horror long enough to drive home the advantage. If not, both armies may be

## TICKING CLOCKS

The player characters begin their time at the Temple aware of only one impending catastrophe upon them and their sword-sisters and dog brothers. With each passing hour, the host of Ophirean soldiers amassing outside increases and their Captain draws nearer. They will attack, the only question is when? Simultaneously, Garrus's transformation into a gate to Polaris and all of its horrors progresses in the forgotten downstairs chamber.

When each of these happens varies according to the tone and play desired, but gamemasters should stretch the tension of these tight timelines as tautly as possible with hints, signs of deteriorating margins of safety, and similar happenings in their games. Doom spends are a great tool for this, using the following as examples and inspiration.

- **1 Doom:** A fanfare and war cry from the troops massed outside shake the foundations of the Temple and the souls of the player characters. Three must make an Average (D1) Discipline test or suffer 3  mental damage with the Vicious 1 quality.
- **2 Doom:** Two allies from the mercenaries rallied during the battle desert in secret, leaving the player characters to discover whether they left, were captured by the enemy, or met a less seemly end.
- **2 Doom:** A Polaran Stalker ambushes one or more player characters while they are separated from their allies. It attacks for one round before slipping into the shadows.
- **4 Doom:** Nightmares of squamous things from impossibly distant stars haunt the player characters overnight. All suffer 1 Fatigue from the sleepless night, and two must make a Difficult (D2) Discipline test or suffer 5  mental damage from the maddening visions.

stricken with panic upon seeing the nightmarish thing emerge from the saturnine confines of the Temple. What happens then is likely to be a dreadful, swirling maelstrom of slaughter and terror. No one emerges victorious from such a situation.





## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The player characters have stumbled into a situation beyond their immediate ken. Inside the walls of the temple, such horrors as most men cannot imagine occur. Outside, the horsemen who followed the fleeing mercenaries await reinforcements.

Were that not enough, the very traitor whose actions led to the death of so many of the adventurers' comrades also holes up in the temple. Ironically, he may now make a better ally anyone else.

The gamemaster should use these non-player characters they see fit. The adventure does not hinge on any of them. Rather, it is best to bring to the fore whichever most captures the attention and imagination of the players, or whoever is at the center of where the plot unfolds.

## RESIDENTS OF THE TEMPLE

There are perhaps two dozen remaining monks, though no accurate count is possible. Some are allied with Polaris, some with Avanasso the Elder. Most are Ophirean, though the Mitran religion accepts any faithful. Some few monks had lives before which saw war. Most have not. A few monks have given up on anything other than hiding, praying to Mitra, and trying to avoid the horror from space. Use statistics for Cultists on page 313 of the **Conan** corebook for monks other than Avanasso and Burgos. Also, at the Temple when the player characters arrive is the treasonous Zalosia of Zamora.

*"A god must have his sacrifices. When I was a child in Stygia the people lived under the shadow of a priest. None ever knew when he or she would be seized and dragged to the altar."*

— Thalís, "Xuthal of the Dusk"

### Avanasso of Ophir, Elder of The Black Temple

Avanasso joined the Mitran faith under duress. The third son of an earl in Ophir, he had no direct line to his father's title and, as many such noble boys find out, the alternative is a monastic life. It is a respectable life for those born to better blood.

As a boy, his father sent him to Mitra's embrace where he trained in the clergy. That was some fifty years ago and, while Avanasso is far from venerable, he has reached an



age most peasants would never see. His hair is gray but close-cropped, appearing just a bit more than stubble.

While the boy did not wish to follow Mitra and a life of chastity, the man does. Avanasso's singular purpose in life is furthering the will of Mitra on the Earth. This, he believes, is best done through contemplation, asceticism, and reading. It was his furor for the latter which gave some hint as to what Garrus, the monk who fell into the chamber below, found.

Avanasso read some of the Acheronian translations of the Pnakotic Manuscripts the temple has held since prior to its inception. He never spoke of it to anyone, but was well aware the librarian, Burgos, had likewise read them. This did not lead to a wedge between the two, for said wedge formed upon their meeting. The two men have never liked each other.



Avanasso's faith is total. He is not fully cognizant of how the beings of Polaris operate, nor of the Yith who sealed their passage, but he will do anything to stop the corrupted monks. He views this as the will of Mitra.

Many years removed from typical civilization, coupled with his stature at the temple, have made Avanasso an arrogant man. He is not arrogant in a prideful way, but instead believes Mitra's will the only truth. Anyone who



does not thoroughly understand the nuances of Mitran theology is therefore a lesser person.

**Guiding Motivation:** Avanasso seeks to end the horror unleashed in The Black Temple. He believes, mistakenly, that killing Burgos is the means to do so. Protecting the temple is his second goal, and saving what monks he can the third.

ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
9	9	7	11
Agility		Brawn	Coordination
6		5	6
FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	—	Movement	—
Fortitude	—	Senses	1
Knowledge	2	Social	—
STRESS & SOAK			
Vigor	8	Armor	—
Resolve	11	Courage	4 (Faith)
ATTACKS			
<div>■ Fists (M): Reach 1, 2 , Improvised, Stun</div> <div>■ Judgmental Mein (T): Range C, 3 , mental, Stun</div>			
SPECIAL ABILITIES			
<div>■ <b>Inspiring Leader:</b> As the Talent, applies only to other monks.</div>			
DOOM SPENDS			
<div>■ <b>Holy Will:</b> For 2 Doom (or two Momentum taken by the group's pool with or without their permission) Avanasso channels Mitra's will so forcefully that even the Polaran Stalkers recoil. Why this is so, none can say. For every two Doom or Momentum so spent, a Stalker may not advance toward Avanasso, or anyone behind him, for one turn.</div>			



*"We are wise in our civilized knowledge, but our knowledge extends just so far — to the western bank of that ancient river! Who knows what shapes earthly and unearthly may lurk beyond the dim circle of light our knowledge has cast?"*

— Valannus, "Beyond the Black River"

### Burgos, Librarian of the Black Temple

Younger than Avanasso by at least a decade, Burgos is the more ambitious of the two men. Perhaps, that lead to their initial enmity. Certainly, Burgos believes less in Mitra than he does in knowledge. While he is no heretic—until very recently that is—Burgos always prized wisdom of lost ages over mere dogmatic adherence to Mitran texts. It is therefore no surprise that the Pnakotic Manuscripts fascinated him.

Unlike Avanasso, Burgos was not born into nobility but to the life of a peasant. His farm was razed to ground by Nemedians during a border dispute with Ophir. Ironically, it was the Nemedians who took the boy in, giving him over to Mitran clergy to raise in one of their orphanages. Some years passed before he was assigned to his native land.


Prior to anything that led to the current situation, a darkness welled up in Burgos' heart. He desired what the ascetic life forbade. He coveted where chastity demanded a blind eye to supple flesh. Still, for all the worldly pleasure he wanted—and occasionally partook in—Burgos wanted to understand the world beyond the mere speculations of men. Over the years, he became not a sorcerer as such, but a dabbler enough that, when he found scraps of further translations of the Pnakotic text in some unrelated book, he understood what truly lay beneath the temple.

It was no accident that "renovations" needed doing there. Burgos saw to the assignment. He hoped prying up the ancient flagstones below would reveal the secret he sought. When Garrus fell though into the chamber, Burgos counted himself lucky.

Burgos' thin face and lean frame come both from bloodline and a propensity toward modest diet. Food, it seems, is not one of the worldly things he covets.

**Guiding Motivation:** Burgos wants to understand the alien minds his meddling unleashed. He believes the Star-People of Polaris possess more knowledge than the whole of the human race combined. He believes, foolishly, he can broker a deal with them if he assists in gaining them passage to Earth. Failing that, his secondary motive would be survival, but his lust for knowledge and power blinds him to this.



ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
9	11	10	9
Agility		Brawn	Coordination
6		6	6
FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	—	Movement	1
Fortitude	1	Senses	1
Knowledge	4	Social	1
STRESS & SOAK			
Vigor	6	Armor	—
Resolve	7	Courage	1
ATTACK			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Dagger (M):</b> Reach 1, 3 , 1H, Hidden 1, Thrown, Unforgiving 1</li> </ul>			
SPECIAL ABILITIES			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>Benevolent Manipulator:</b> Burgos gains 1 bonus d20 on any Persuade test made to convince somebody to do something he believes is in their best interest.</li> <li>■ <b>Eldritch Perspective:</b> Burgos has 2 extra Soak against mental damage resulting from contact with creatures from the Outer Dark.</li> </ul>			
DOOM SPENDS			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ <b>The Limits of a Merely Human Mind:</b> the gamemaster may spend 6 Doom at any time to make Burgos's mind snap. At this point, he becomes wholly a slave to the Star-People of Polaris, no longer acting in the misguided best interest of his brethren, but as a willing co-conspirator of these alien invaders.</li> </ul>			

### Zalosia of Zamora (Toughened)

A mercenary known to the player characters, but only superficially, Zalosia's only loyalty is to his purse. When the opportunity to fill it came in the form of a request from an Ophirean spy, he took it without a second thought. However, his betrayal spawned betrayal in turn. Although Tassala the Grim uses enemy spies and double agents, he loathes disloyalty and punishes it wherever he finds it. He ordered Zalosia's death, but the mercenary is nothing if not a survivor.

Zalosia overcame his executioners, stole weaponry and armor, and slipped into the chaos of the battle. He fled through the valley and reached the Black Temple exhausted, where he claimed sanctuary before keeling over from his

ordeal. He returns to consciousness as the player characters arrive.




**Guiding Motivation:** The Zamoran wants only to survive. He will lie and kill to maintain the lie as necessary. If his treachery is discovered, he first bargains for his life, then attempts to flee. There is no depth to which he will not sink to live another minute.



ATTRIBUTES			
Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
8	7	8	8
Agility		Brawn	Coordination
9		10	10
FIELDS OF EXPERTISE			
Combat	2	Movement	—
Fortitude	1	Senses	1
Knowledge	—	Social	2
STRESS & SOAK			
Vigor	11	Armor	3 (Mail)
Resolve	8	Courage	1



### ATTACKS

- **Sword (M):** Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Parrying
- **Throwing Knife (R):** Range C, 3 , 1H, Piercing
- **Hateful Gaze (T):** Range C, 3 , mental, Vicious

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Ambush:** If Zalosia rolls 1 or more Successes on any attack made against a helpless, surprised, or unaware target, he gains 2 bonus Successes.
- **Gifted Liar:** Zalosia rolls 1 bonus d20 on any Persuade test when he is deceiving somebody.

### DOOM SPENDS

- **No Dog Brother's Keeper:** If an ally is within close range of Zalosia when he is successfully attacked, he may spend 2 Doom to make that attack strike his ally instead.
- **Survivor:** The first time Zalosia receives a Wound, he may spend 3 Doom to ignore its effects for 24 hours.

## THOSE FROM OUTSIDE

The connection with Polaris is not yet complete, but at least two beings either of or corrupted by that distant star now inhabit the Temple: Garrus the Shepherd, once a loyal monk of Mitra, and a hideous Polaran Stalker.

### Garrus the Shepherd (Nemesis, Horror)

Garrus was a dutiful monk, possessed of the humility and contemplative nature evidenced in the best of his kind. Unlike Burgos, his mind was not predisposed to corruption. Yet the sorcery and technology of other planets can corrupt the calmest of minds. Thus did Garrus turn after falling into the chamber while helping direct renovations.

In the days he took to fever, Garrus changed from man to host of an alien mind. While the intelligence possessing him cannot physically come to Earth, it can occupy Garrus, and pervert his mortal form. Garrus currently resides in the alien chamber below the temple, a vehicle for the transportation of more Stalkers and whatever else the race on Polaris sends through. The intellect inside is purposed only toward that singular mission and cannot help but serve as a conduit for its superiors beyond. Such is the nature of the amalgamated horror that Garrus has become.

The Stalkers which have come through rely on the Garrus-thing to relay messages between themselves and Polaris. Cutting that line of communication—slaying the monstrosity—greatly reduces the Stalker's ability to coordinate. It also prevents other Star-People of Polaris from coming to Earth, at least for now.

The stats below reflect what Garrus has become, not the human form of the man now long gone.

The horror looks like the forced union of more than a dozen monks. Faces appear on a bloated belly, eyes at the ends of what might once have been human arms. The creature shambles slowly, a fury of fat seeming to inch it from side to side. Bones and sinews comprise appendages that can reach nearly all parts of the chamber. Anyone entering is subject to attack.

**Guiding Motivation:** The creature Garrus became is more one of instinct than intellect. It does not have motive so much as atavistic programming to become. The becoming is all. By flesh and sorcery a portal between Polaris and Earth is made.

### ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
10	4	4	12
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
12	14	12	



### FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	2	Movement	—
Fortitude	3	Senses	—
Knowledge	1	Social	—

### STRESS & SOAK

Vigor	10	Armor	4
Resolve	12	Courage	12

### ATTACKS


- **Appendage Strike (M):** Reach 1, 4 , Grappling, Fearsome 2
- **Insane Ramblings (T):** Range C, 6 , mental, Area, Vicious 1

### SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Absorb Person:** The Garrus-Horror incorporates human, or any sentient being, into itself on a successful grapple attack. It takes three turns to absorb the person in question. Each round, a Challenging (D3) Brawn test can resist absorption for that turn. After that, the poor character becomes part of the perverse thing it sought to combat.
- **Utterly Mad:** Garrus' mind is completely gone and as such it is all but immune to fear or intimidation. Its Courage Soak is 12, reflected in the statistics listed above.



## DOOM SPENDS

- **Birth Stalker:** One round after absorbing a person, or any time thereafter, the Garrus-Horror may spend 2 Doom to vomit forth a Polaran Stalker, which may take its turn immediately. If the absorbed person had the Ancient Bloodline talent, two Polaran Stalkers are brought into being.
- **Toxic Vomit:** For 3 Doom, the Garrus-Horror vomits forth an acidic, flesh-eating bile. Said mixture comes from the bits of the monks it cannot otherwise use. Broken teeth, loops of intestine and worse spit forth from an aperture near the top of the entity. An entire Zone becomes subject to a 4  attack with the Stun quality (with a Stunned character losing their action due to uncontrolled vomiting), requiring a Challenging (D3) Athletics or Acrobatics test to avoid.



## Polaran Stalker (Toughened, Horror)

Although described by the few scholars who know of them as soldiers and assassins, these beings are more an extension of will from a central mad intelligence inhabiting its namesake star system. They have no fear, no desires, and no individuality despite their alien cunning.

A Polaran stalker exists to corrupt, to bring the foulness of its home to wherever it reaches. Their primary attack exchanges the material, spiritual, and intellectual essence of the victim with the stuff of Polaris itself, simultaneously causing the pain of having those parts ripped away and the horror of experiencing Polaris. Only the strongest can withstand such horrors and emerge even marginally whole.

**Guiding Motivation:** Though they have no instinct or desire for self-preservation, a Polaran stalker understands it cannot fulfill its purpose if killed. It uses stealth, surprise, and its memory-altering powers to remain undiscovered for as long as possible, potentially corrupting dozens of victims and protectors before entering into any kind of combat.

## ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
11	11	5	8
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
12	10	10	

## FIELDS OF EXPERTISE



Combat	1	Movement	—
Fortitude	1	Senses	2
Knowledge	—	Social	—

## STRESS &amp; SOAK

Vigor	11	Armor	3*
Resolve	8	Courage	2

\* Partial Corporeality


## ATTACKS

- **Chill Touch of the Void (M):** Reach 2, 5 , Fearsome, Persistent 1
- **Impossible Appearance (T):** Range C, 6  mental

## SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Partial Corporeality:** A Polaran stalker is not entirely of this world, making it more difficult to harm with physical attacks. Further, it may use one entire turn to pass through a solid wall as though entirely incorporeal. It receives 2 bonus d20s on any test made to escape being grappled or any similar attempt.
- **The Cold Between the Stars:** Interstellar cold radiates into any creature who strikes a Polaran stalker with a melee attack, subjecting them immediately to one level of Fatigue if they fail an Average (D1) Resistance test. If they roll a Consequence on this test, they drop their weapon from the shocking chill.

## DOOM SPENDS

- **Ignore Geometry:** The Polaran Stalker can spend 1 Doom to vanish from its location and appear up to 2 Zones away.
- **Utter Nothingness:** Upon its death, a Polaran stalker can spend 2 Doom to vanish from reality and take some of reality with it. All beings within Close range suffer 3  damage with the Fearsome 1 quality. All beings within 2 Zones are sucked 1 Zone closer, and must make a Challenging (D3) Athletics or Acrobatics test to avoid being knocked prone.





THE OPHIREAN ARMY

The Ophirean host gathering outside the Black Temple consists of regular army soldiers. As with the opening battle, use the statistics for Guards and Guard Sergeants found on page 317 of the *Conan* corebook for all but their commander: Captain Tassala the Grim.

Tassala the Grim (Toughened)

Tassala is the best kind of commander and the worst kind of enemy. He rose to his command from a lowly infantryman on the strength of his personality and accomplishments alone. He had no patrons, no wealth, no influence outside those whose lives he saved through his own heroic competence. Decades of this life have left him as a feared commander, a beloved leader, and an unwavering zealot for the glory of Ophir. He kills without hesitation, be it an enemy in single combat or the entire population of a rebelling village. He is seldom wrong and never uncertain.

Tassala’s priorities are simple: the glory and welfare of Ophir, the completion of his mission, the well-being of the soldiers under his command, and his own life. Nothing else matters to this grizzled veteran.

ATTRIBUTES

Awareness	Intelligence	Personality	Willpower
8	11	13	9
Agility	Brawn	Coordination	
9	10	8	


FIELDS OF EXPERTISE

Combat	2	Movement	1
Fortitude	3	Senses	1
Knowledge	1	Social	2

STRESS & SOAK

Vigor	13	Armor	4 (plate)
Resolve	9	Courage	4

ATTACKS

- **Spear (M):** Reach 3, 4 , Unbalanced, Piercing 1
- **Sword (M):** Reach 2, 4 , 1H, Parrying
- **Grim Demeanor (T):** Range C, 6 , mental, Stun

SPECIAL ABILITIES

- **Dual Wield:** Tassala attacks with both spear and sword on a single turn, or attacks with one weapon and may Parry one extra time in that round.
- **Terrifying Leader:** If Tassala uses his Grim Demeanor threat attack while within 1 Zone of at least 20 Ophirean soldiers, he rolls 2 bonus d20s on the attack.

DOOM SPENDS

- **Might of Legions:** Tassala may spend 2 Doom to give his Grim Demeanor threat attack the Area and Vicious 1 qualities.
- **Master Tactician:** Tassala may spend 2 Doom to inflict 3  casualties on enemy minions through brilliant application of his own forces.

