

looked to be roughly oval in shape yet with squared-off corners, topped by a hemispherical dome. The very existence of such a thing in that expanse was a riddle, for all places of habitation bordering that wasteland shunned the plains of Reluorn and its mountains, local traditions and superstitions purporting them to be abodes of flesh-hungry spirits called *sulpas*, who stalked invisibly among men and sucked the vitality from their victims before devouring the shriveled corpses. Had the ruins stood amidst the skeleton of an ancient city or village, I'd have thought little of it, being merely the vestige of some nameless people now long lost to memory. But no, it stood out alone in the middle of emptiness, and my spine felt a cold tingle at the thought of it.

We ventured into the ruins, but not without some caution, I must say. I felt there was something, Handor alone perhaps knew what, that awaited us within those decaying walls. We set foot upon the dusty stone steps with swords drawn, our senses striving to detect the slightest indication of danger. Slowly we passed under the lintel of the entrance which stood beyond the tumbled-down colonnade, and entered the ancient edifice.

It was into a vast, empty chamber that we stepped, like a great amphitheater or auditorium, with rows of stone benches surrounding a central dais upon which stood a tall statue. All within seemed perhaps even more eroded and withered than without, and shafts of sunlight fell in columns from prodigious holes in the domed ceiling high above. The hand of decay hung everywhere, from the crumbling stonework that covered the floor with dust and debris to the grass and plants that were growing up through large cracks in the floor tiling.

The outside walls had once been whitewashed with plaster, scarce remnants of which could still be seen in flaking patches here and there, and there were signs that the inside walls had born colorful paintings and murals, now mostly worn away. In the walls to the left, right, and ahead of us, circling around the rows of benches, were doorways leading, I assumed, to antechambers. Our breathing and footsteps echoed noisily in the spacious place, and I was suddenly seized with an impression of what it must have sounded like when this ancient theater had been filled with whatever patrons it once served.