

SHADOWSFALL LEGENDS



THE GEM THAT CAUGHT FIRE

KURDAG'S TALE

by Ed Greenwood

Shadowsfall Legends: The Gem That Caught Fire

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This story takes place in Shadowsfall, a setting for the Pathfinder Role Playing Game. To find out more about Shadowsfall, goto JonBrazer.com.

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The Gem That Caught Fire

By Ed Greenwood

“No, no, I don’t mean I’m being hunted for it,” an unfamiliar voice rasped, on the far side of the wall. “I mean it caught fire—all by itself—and started to burn! Smoke, flames; on fire, get me? Ruined a perfectly good shoulder-sack—see?—and was well on the way to doing the same to my shoulder, too!”

Kurdag cocked his head, and leaned toward the panel. Hoy, now. This sounded more interesting than the usual sort of client. Most of them wanted love potions or swiftsleep quaffs to send a drinker straight to snoring.

He carefully set the clay bomb-molds he’d been filling far apart from each other on his workbench, so there was no chance of even a pinch of rustreen—carefully packed into the inner mold—touching even a grain of the heheldur in the outer mold. Large or small, his shatterclay bombs worked all too well.

And The Exploding Herb was far from the grandest shop in this most crowded, dirtiest end of Fireside, but it was all his, and he liked the life he’d built. Not many umbral kobold alchemists owned their own businesses, in Blackbat or anywhere else, let alone one that did well enough—just well enough—that they didn’t have to spend their every waking moment hard at work, measuring and packing and buying and selling just to be able to eat.

In fact, Kurdag wouldn’t have been here right now at all, if he hadn’t run out of bombs.

Umbral kobolds were more tolerated than well liked in Blackbat, and Kurdag knew he was held to be more annoying than most. Thanks to his manner, and the bombs and what they did.

Yet if it wasn’t for the bombs, he’d almost certainly have been casually slaughtered long ago. So let them consider him annoying—so long as they remembered the bombs, and did no more than mutter and turn away.

“Them” being the oldest and most powerful of Blackbat; the

citizens who lived in the largest old homes in Darktown, and sneered at daywalkers. Oldblood or rich or both, they turned away at the sight of him. If they needed philters and physics and poisons, they sent cowed and sly-murmuring servants or hired agents rather than setting foot in Fireside themselves.

Not that Kurdag did anything but shrug at such treatment. He cared nothing for the oldest and most powerful of Blackbat beyond making sure to get more than even when they crossed him— and making sure word of his doing so got around Darktown. He was more interested in visitors, the adventurers and others who strode or sidled into The Exploding Herb and brought their coins, their tales, and a little interest into Kurdag's days.

Like the owner of the rasping voice on the other side of the wall. The one Gilhart was trying to placate right now.

"I've never heard of any sort of gemstone that combusts spontaneously," Kurdag's sole employee was saying earnestly, "so the fire must have been magical . . . or alchemical."

"And that," the rasping voice said a little smugly, "would be why I'm here, right now."

"And, ah, you've nothing to show us, apart from a hole burned in a shoulder-sack?"

Kurdag rolled his eyes. Sometimes Gilhart could be a little too yielding to customers.

"Came to buy advice, didn't I?" the rasping voice replied. "From an expert on alchemy, to tell me what I want to know!"

"And what would you, ah, want to know?"

"I'll be telling the expert that, if there is one. Not you. You don't even know enough to act as if you believed me!"

The umbral kobold slipped out of his workshop, locked its door, whisked himself along the passage, slid into the shop's backroom, and arranged himself lounging against the wall there, flashgoggles on and a reassuring smile on his face, all before a nervous and sweating Gilhart stepped through its curtains to reach timidly for the bell.

Giving his employee a firm 'stay here, and keep still' gesture, Kurdag stepped past Gilhart and through the curtains,

out into the shop.

As he strode to confront the owner of that rasping voice, he held one of his bombs ready behind his back. There were two more and a smokeflash bomb in his belt pouches. Not that he thought they'd be necessary.

A massively muscled, none too clean man was standing by the counter, gap-toothed jaw twisted in a sneer and head thrust forward to confront the world with relentless war-prow aggression. He wore filthy, well-worn leather battle harness that was bristling with scabbarded blades of all sorts, most of them probably battle-spoils. Trophies of his prowess. Hunh. One of those.

"Hunh," he said, lifting bristling eyebrows in 'what next?' exasperation. "A kobold."

"Hunh," Kurdag replied, in perfect mimicry. "A rude, aggressive human."

"This your shop?"

Kurdag nodded. "And I know a few things about alchemy." He delivered that sentence with enough quiet pride that even a dull-witted human should catch that it was meant as modest understatement. You've found all the expert you're going to find, in Blackbat and for a long journey in any direction from here, too.

The human merely nodded. "Ever heard of a burning gem?"

Kurdag nodded. "Some gemstones can be heated in fires to change their hue, and can scorch what they touch when taken out of the flames. Some are enspelled to burst into flames. And some are treated with . . . certain alchemical tinctures, that cause them to catch fire on their own after a time. Are you interested in purchasing such tinctures?"

"You make them?"

"I know how to."

"Sold any lately?"

Kurdag shook his head. "Not for many years. None of them can last more than a few days at most, before causing their conflagrations. Most not nearly so long."

“Not for years . . . so who else in this town could treat a ruby big enough to fill my fist, so it caught fire?”

Kurdag shrugged. “I know five or six who could, and there could be many more I’m unfamiliar with—but I know of no one in Blackbat likely to use such tinctures for such a purpose.”

“Well, someone did. So who’s the most likely, of these five or six unlikelies?”

Kurdag shrugged again. “Whichever one hates you the most.”

The human warrior was fast. Suddenly he loomed above Kurdag, hands spread like claws. Claws the size of sidetables. Waiting to grab, and crush, and shake. His snarl was cold and menacing. “I want answers, kobold, not insolence.”

“And I want customers still alive enough to pay me,” the owner of The Exploding Herb replied calmly, “so we’re even: we both don’t want to hurt each other. Enough to end this pleasant conversation just yet, at least.”

The human’s eyes blazed with mounting fury. “You’d not last long in my profession, kobold, with that smart mouth!”

Kurdag bowed. “I trust in your expertise. Trust this much in mine: lay hands on me, and you’ll not last long in your profession. Warriors struggle to make war once they’re missing both hands.”

The warrior sneered openly. “You? Just how would you hurt me?”

Kurdag brought the hand that had been behind his back around in front, tossing the bomb gently into the air and catching it, repeatedly and nonchalantly. “If this hits the floor, or gets caught and squeezed just a little too hard . . .”

The human took a step back. “Hunh. Wouldn’t you get blown to the skies, too, if that happens?”

Kurdag smiled and shook his head. “I’ve swallowed the antidote.”

The human took another step back, then stiffened. “A bomb antidote? Bah! Don’t take me for a fool!”

The umbral kobold shrugged. “Whether I take you or not doesn’t stop you being one. You who know so much about

alchemy, to deny the existence of something so basic as a bomb antidote.”

“But—but I’ve never heard of such a thing! Seen no proof!”

“Oh, yes, you have. You’re seeing proof right now.”

“Oh?”

Kurtag smiled, and spread his hands in the manner of a grand wizard. Above one of them, the juggled bomb rose and fell, rose and fell, the human’s eyes following its journey involuntarily. “If there are still umbral kobolds in the world, that’s proof bomb antidotes exist. Enough of us wield bombs—and we fall down just as often as, say, humans do.”

The big lie worked like a charm; the human backed hastily around a tall rack of bottled herbs. “Don’t fall down now—and don’t drop that thing!”

“You’re departing?”

“I am.”

“Good.” Kurtag strolled after the human. “Because it’s such a strain not hurling this thing, and watching something get blown to the skies.”

“What? You’re mad!”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. After all, throwing things at larger creatures is what kobolds do.”

Except for the utter foolishness about bomb antidotes, Kurtag had been telling utter truth. It was a strain negotiating and being polite. What he loved above all else was throwing bombs and watching the blasts and hurled mayhem. He took pride in running a successful shop, but he didn’t enjoy negotiating and counting coins and being nice to customers. He loved bombs and what they did.

He itched to step outside right now and hurl the bomb he was juggling at the back of the loud, rude human’s head. After all, Blackbat liked to host such fatal accidents from time to time—it kept daywalkers afraid of the town, and more apt to behave while visiting it. Kurtag had already contributed a few headless unfortunates to the tales told—

One of the louvered shutters at the front of the shop shattered with a loud crack, glass tinkled in the wake of that

crash—which meant a rock or something like it had smashed the shutter and continued deep enough into The Exploding Herb to break some herb-vials—and then the shop was full of racing, hissing destruction.

Crossbow bolts, hurtling through the gap where that shutter had been in several directions—which meant there wasn't just one bowman—to topple racks of bottled herbs. More vials smashed, a small explosion spat sparks and streamers of flame in all directions, and some of the hanging bundles of drying herbs blazed up.

“Try to kill us, would you, kobold? Well, you'll soon be as dead as your crony Kortimmon! The Hookblades take no prisoners!”

That jeering shout came from the raspy-voiced human. Who sounded close, but not close enough to harm with a blindly thrown bomb. And more bolts were whizzing and hissing through the quickening flames and rolling smoke.

“Coming out, little runt? Or are you too afraid to stand and fight like a man?”

“Too stupid to fight like a man, to be sure,” Kurdag muttered, racing back through the curtains to pull the cords that would bring down his safety crocks. The mistquench gushing out of their shattered remains should keep the entire building from going up in flames.

He kept right on running, plucking at his employee's elbow and dragging the cowering, whimpering Gilhart down the steps into the cellar. The Hookblades must have the building surrounded, waiting for him to flee the flames . . . waiting to turn him into an umbral pincushion. Raspy Voice had just been their scout, to make sure the kobold alchemist was at home before they sprang their trap.

The news had been all over Fireside a few days back. The Hookblades, a more brutal and reckless band of adventurers than most, had murdered Kortimmon the True Trader, looted the old swindler's shop—and paid dearly for their ruthlessness. The rarest and most valuable of Kortimmon's possessions had been trapped. Alchemical traps that seared flesh or poisoned,

not nasty spells. Obviously, the survivors blamed Kurdag for concocting those traps—which was a sick joke in itself; he and Kortimmon had hated each other, and the long feud between them had been heating up, not mellowing with the years. They'd not have willingly worked together if all Blackbat begged them to.

Not that the Hookblades would believe Kurdag's innocence if he got a dozen Firesiders to earnestly swear it. They wanted him dead and gone, and were willing to start fires in Blackbat to do it.

Luckily, that would swiftly make them far more unpopular around town than a dozen annoying umbral kobold alchemists.

"Stay here," Kurdag snapped at Gilhart, slamming him onto the cellar bed kept for guests who needed to be hidden, "and you'll be safe. Try to run anywhere or follow me, and you'll be doomed. Yes, it's that simple."

Without waiting for his frightened employee to stammer any sort of reply, Kurdag hurried into the little storage chamber in the corner, and firmly closed the door so Gilhart wouldn't see what he was doing. It was the work of a moment to find the hidden catches that released the ventilation shaft grating, step into the shaft, softly close and latch the grating again, leap high to catch the rope, and clamber up it onto the ladder set into the shaft wall.

A few panting moments later, he was through a secret panel in the wall of the shaft, just under the roof, and into a narrow passage in the attic of the shop next door. He slowed down to move as quietly as possible along that passage, because the owner of that shop would have been astonished—and angry—to learn that his kobold neighbor could visit his attic at will. The passage ended at another panel that let Kurdag into the attic Smalthur's Specularium, which sported several trapdoors onto its roof. He used one of them.

Smalthur was a glassblower and mirror-maker, and his tiled roof was a maze of leaning chimneys held up with props and collars, and steep slopes with dormer windows jutting out of them. Kurdag chose a chimney to hide behind, and an area

of roof that would overlook the street in front of his shop—and then used them, in reverse order.

He looked long enough to determine that the Hookblades, who were keeping a hard-eyed, eager watch over the smoke-billowing front of The Exploding Herb, numbered seven in all. Only four of them had bows, and they were all now busily cranking and reloading.

Kurdag smiled gleefully, and tossed a bomb with casual ease and perfect accuracy ere seeking the lee of the chimney.

His second bomb, lobbed with a higher arc, was still in the air when the first one exploded with a mighty, shop-shaking roar.

If the Hookblades sought the nearest cover, back behind Maliber's parked wagon, that second bomb might actually hit one of them before it slammed into the ground.

Or not. Kurdag didn't much care. So long as it now rained arms and legs—of motley human adventurer—extensively enough to leave no Hookblade standing.

He wanted all seven accounted for. Feuds were luxuries a lone kobold couldn't afford. He needed his own battle-companions—his own fellow adventurers—or he needed to end this particular problem here and now.

He had, after all, a reputation to maintain.

The second bomb went off with a deafening blam, and it started raining pieces of adventurer.

Kurdag smiled, got out another bomb, and headed for a distant section of roof, to get a better view. With luck, no more bombs would be needed . . . but more likely, there'd be a fleeing survivor or two he'd have to chase and blast.

His neighbors were starting to shout in anger, now, and spill out into the street. They had no love for Kurdag or his bombs.

Yet it wasn't his fault that a large, dangerous band of veteran adventurers had made a mistake in apportioning blame, and come hunting him.

Nor was it thanks to Kurdag that they'd brought crossbows, and set his shop afire.

It was thanks to Kurdag that most of the street was still here, right now. It would have been stupid to fill his shop with plentiful bombs that could easily go off if idiots with crossbows attacked the place with utter recklessness and bad or blind aim, and fires sprang up while shop fixtures fell down—but stupid umbral kobold alchemists don't live long.

Besides, a shop full of bombs would be a target for every thief in Blackbat, and he might run out of explosive ingredients before the town ran out of people who wanted to snatch bombs

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Reaching his chosen vantage point, Kurdag took a good long look down at the gore-spattered street below before ducking behind a handy chimney.

Where he chuckled with glee as he hefted his bomb.

Ah, but he loved bombs, and what they did! Not a man down there moving or intact. It was a pity about Maliber's wagon, but its cushions looked better in blood-crimson than that sickly not-quite-emerald green, and the staring, jaws-open severed human heads would make great ornaments, impaled on the spikes of the wagon's rarely-lit nightlamps. It might take some swift talking and more than a few coins to make Maliber see it that way, but—

"Kobold! Get down off my roof, right now!"

A dormer well above Kurdag, thrusting forth from the highest and steepest part of the roof, had swung open noiselessly, and Eregus Smalthur was leaning out. The glassblower looked furious, and the contraption in his hands looked like several crossbows locked in indelicate congress with a lot of wire and more than a few of the new spyglasses Smalthur had recently begun crafting. Yet it was undoubtedly a weapon, and just as undoubtedly pointed Kurdag's way.

"Drop or throw that thing, and you'll be dead before it goes off!" Smalthur added with a snarl, glaring meaningfully at the bomb in Kurdag's hand. "Just—just get you gone, right now, and . . ."

His voice trailed away as he started to gape, angry eyes turning frightened and astonished and looking up and past

Kurdag.

Who knew better than to turn around—and instead raced back across the roof, dodging from chimney to chimney.

With a wordless shout of terror and fury, Smalthur triggered his multiple crossbow. Not at Kurdag, but at whatever was now looming up in front of their shops.

The alchemist skidded to a stop beside another dormer, and risked a glance at Smalthur's target.

Oh, stink and fizzle! One of the Hookblades had escaped his blasts.

And wouldn't you know it'd be a mage, now?

A wizard who now stood as tall as a castle tower thanks to some enlarging spell or other. He loomed over the roof as he lurched forward, a reeling giant, scorched and furious. He was clutching a dagger in one sticky-with-blood hand, and looked tremblingly eager to use it.

That dagger was now the size of a small cart. Its wielder was hissing in pain and plucking at Smalthur's bolts as if they were insect stings.

The glassblower gaped at it, lowering his contraption. He'd fired all of its bolts, and it took even a strong, veteran bowman some panting and clattering time with a windlass to get a crossbow ready to fire again.

Time Smalthur did not have. That dagger was already rising into the air for a mighty stab that would probably destroy not just the glassblower, but the entire dormer around him.

"Neighbor!" Kurdag called eagerly. "Change your mind about my bombs yet? Can I throw one now? At yon oversized mage?"

The glassblower stared back at him, pale with fright, seemingly frozen.

"Can I?" Kurdag yelled, dancing with eagerness. "Can I blow him up now?"

Smalthur gulped, watched the dagger start to descend—it was so large, and so gleamingly sharp—

"How about now? Now?"

"Y-y-yes!" Smalthur screamed.

Kurdag smiled and tossed the bomb in his hand almost gently, with the perfect aim of long practice.

“You’ve got to get a head in this world,” he observed, watching the wizard lose his. Then the blast broke every window in all of Smalthur’s dormers, and flung the glassblower back out of sight.

Safe in the lee of his chosen chimney, Kurdag watched the headless giant waver, then topple backwards.

It was shrinking fast, the enlarging spell broken by the death of its caster, but—

The awful, splintering crash made Kurdag wince.

Yes, it was a pity about Maliber’s wagon . . .

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The Plane of Shadows. The Death Land. The Forgotten. The Shadow Realm. It goes by many names but it all refers to one place, Shadowsfall. This place is the dark flip side to most fantasy realms. While most traditional fantasy settings roughly resemble medieval Earth, Shadowsfall can be described as its dark opposite. While many places seem familiar here, they are far deadlier. Undead roam the vast wastelands searching for living flesh to consume. The dim sun provides little in the way of true sunlight and no help in discerning objects at great distances. The city stronghold of Blackbat is home to many humans, orcs, fetchlings, umbral kobolds, and others reside in relative safety despite being located next to a zombie-filled forest. Other city strongholds such as Blackbat exist throughout Shadowsfall as the best protections lost living creatures have against the undead hordes and other threats of the plane. These cities have a standard guard for smaller threats but even these cities rely on their adventurers and heroes to survive larger threats. Kurdag, one of a variant kobold race known as umbral kobolds, is one such hero. He is considered eccentric, even by Shadowsfall standards. He relies heavily on his alchemy and his bombs instead of magic to solve his problems. Umbral kobolds typically live in

caves deep underground. A few prefer to live among the taller creatures while others find they have no option, being the sole survivor of an undead attack.

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About the Author: Ed Greenwood is the creator of the Forgotten Realms fantasy world setting and the author of more than 170 books that have sold millions of copies worldwide in over two dozen languages. In real life, he's a Canadian librarian who lives in the Ontario countryside with his wife, a cat, and far too many books.