

DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

CHAPTER 1: UNRAVELING

What is this place?

The thoughts came from a young man barely able to keep his wits or stay conscious. He wore a layered blue-grey robe and its trim was a dull blue. Soft shoes adorned his feet and a rope belt held his robe closed over his tunic and breeches. His hair was blond and fell around his face, his eyes were a light blue and his features were rugged and square, while his build was slight and his flesh was pale, more so at this time for the loss of blood.

Ulrik carried a dagger and a spell book in a satchel with him, but they had been of no use in this accursed place. He held his belly where a bloody patch had formed from the wound he had received only moments ago.

His footfalls hit something as hard as the earth but appeared as a foggy white substance. He had fallen several times thinking the ground was solid, but finding a steep slope instead. Nothing was ever visible for long and he had stopped caring a while ago.

As he staggered forward the clouds dispersed around him and he found himself looking at a wood and stone inn. The inn had cobbled stone paths and a few fire lamps visible in the distance hanging from hooks like fireflies in a dream. The inn was small maybe a few windows on the main floor and a small upstairs, but it looked both sturdy and welcoming. Around the inn there was nothing more than the smoky air that plagued this place. In the smoke dark shapes still slinked about. There was not much time and there was nothing else in sight.

Ulrik felt his head swirl as he tried to fight through the pain.

An inn! Here? Could this be a trap?

Ulrik staggered holding his wounded belly. A shape with claws and scales moved very closely behind him, feeling its presence he chanced a quick look back behind him only to catch a glimpse of a slender black spade tipped tail vanishing in to the clouds.

His feet never quite seem to reach the cobblestones, but he finds himself close enough now to make out a hanging wooden sign with the picture of a man with a stick slung over his shoulder a sack tied to it walking casually while smoking a pipe.

Don't know if I'll even find out...

Reaching the first lamp post he looks back in horror as a fanged and horned face that was just peering at him with glowing white eyes vanishes in to the clouds around it. Ulrik, his heart racing again, picks up the pace.

Almost to the door his vision blurs slightly as he staggers some more. He can hear the creatures moving in the fog behind him, their nails scratching the cobblestone, their footpads thumping against the ground, their cackles echoing in the distance. He stumbles as he reaches the stoop, and he tries to tuck his dagger in to his belt, but instead it clatters to the stone path. He reaches for the door and falls against it; pressing the latch, the door creaks open.

Ulrik finds himself lying across the threshold of a wood floor, the door open. Unable to find the strength to lift his head he collapses. Everything fades to black.

“Wh... where Am I?”

A swarthy male voice replies, “You're at the Traveler's Inn son.”

Ulrik's vision clears up slightly to see a slender man with a long pointed goatee and chiseled features. “Who are you?” he asks groggily.

The man picks up the pipe he was packing to nestle the mouth piece between his perfect teeth, “I'm the Traveler, this'd be my Inn.”

Ulrik lying in a bed notices the man is dressed in fine articulate clothing, vest, leather boots, belt buckles. The linen on the bed he is resting in is soft and detailed. He notices that his stomach is bandaged only slightly from his ghastly wounds.

The Traveler, picking up a candle lights his pipe and smokes it beside him. “You took a pretty nasty clawin I gather, then came staggerin through my door. Can't have ya bleedin all over my floor now can I? No, can't be havin that. Now what you be doin here?” He gave Ulrik a raised eyebrow.

Ulrik couldn't imagine his good fortune, “You've been very kind sir, I appreciate your generosity. I was separated from my companions, could they have arrived here as well?”

“Dunno, lots o people come round, they usually end up here. Maybe u'r boys be down stairs. You rest up, and go be checkin for em when u'r ready.”

Ulrik peers out the window by the bed only to see swirling smoke, “Not much to look at out there.”

The Traveler nodded with a chuckle, “No sir, not much. Don't worry though, I think you brought all your parts in with ya.” He gave Ulrik an assuring wink. “We don't get too many healers passing through these parts, but there were other accommodations we could make to fix ya up.”

Ulrik looked a little concerned, wondering what had been done.

“Oh, no need to be worryin' son, few wizards pitched in to get ya back together.” The Traveler paused with a look of concern, “This is your first time here isn't it son?”

Ulrik glanced down, “I don't know where here is.” He muttered.

The Traveler leaned back with a look of understanding, “Ah, I see.” He took a long breath on the pipe he held and exhaled a large ring which faded in to the room. “Well son, you're in the aether. The realm between worlds. Mightcha remember how you got here?”

Ulrik remembered it clearly, “I remember following my companions, we stepped through a stone archway. As I stumbled in to what I thought was a smoky room, my companions had vanished and so did the entrance. The next thing I knew some creatures were circling me and one of them ran straight at me. I think I cut it, but not before it left its mark on me.”

“Sounds like you found a gateway. Were you exploring some old ruins perchance?”

“Yes, an ancient temple believed to be ruled once by Mystic Elves...”

The Traveler furrowed a brow, “Mystic Elves would make some sense. So, which world are you from son?”

“World?” he let that notion sink in a moment, “Ara... there are other worlds?”

“Oh there be plenty! But, Ara, she’s one of my favourites. Tell me of how things are there.”

“I don’t know much sir, I grew up in Keldorn. I was poor and my parents wanted better for me, so they offered my services to an old wizard named Kelargor. Poor fellow is pretty senile, so most of what I learned, I learned on my own. The rest of the time I spent taking care of him – but, he did teach me to read and write. Keerus takes care of him now, she’s a wonderful cook.” Ulrik realized he was rambling. “But, I don’t know much about the world outside our humble lands I must admit, or this place either.”

The Traveler looked slightly disappointed, “Very few people do young man. Ah well, come downstairs when you’re feeling better. You’re things are at the foot of your bed.” He got to his feet and walked to the door.

“Sir.”

The gentleman paused, “Yes, son?”

“Thank you kindly for your hospitality.”

The Traveler turned and bowed placing a hand over his heart with a big smile, “With pleasure young man, it’s all too rare we get a visitor with a humble heart.” With that he opened the door and walked out of the room. The room seemed very quiet and vacant as the man left.

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A few hours later Ulrik felt strong enough to venture from his room. Wearing his own robes again, which had been mysteriously stitched back together, he stepped out in to a hallway; four other doors filled it, one to his left that capped the hallway, one across and two mirroring each other towards the stairs which led down. A song filled the air tonight, he hadn’t noticed any singing or noise inside the room and assumed there hadn’t been much traffic, but the crowd singing sounded like a whole village had turned up to join in.

He just caught the end of the song as he stepped on to the landing and peered in to a great hall "...there be no better getawaaaay than the traveler's inn!" As the song ended the crowd returned to their general conversation and the musician playing a strange instrument held between his chin and shoulder and held in one hand started another song without words as he strummed a stick across the larger piece.

Ulrik crept up to the end of the hallway, where bright lamplight flooded the room and he was amazed.

The hall was enormous with iron chandeliers decorated with antlers and candles the size of tables and kegs the size of wagons, he could barely believe his eyes. There were two levels and a vaulted ceiling, with enormous wooden beams crossing over making their way to the top. People mingled amongst tables that could seat eight or more, barmaids weaved in and out of traffic carrying trays of a wide variety of drinks and glasses Ulrik had never seen before. A few men and women danced, many were species or cultures he’d only ever heard of in legend. The strange clothing and scents they wore mingled through the air around him.

Was this the same small tavern he had seen from the road?

A bawdy barmaid came by the alcove Ulrik was emerging from and stopped with a chipper “Well now... what can we getcha laddie?” Her outfit suggested no shame.

Ulrik wasn’t sure how to react so he tried his luck with humour, “You could get me a new head, cause I think I cracked mine.”

A familiar voice surprised him, the Traveler apparently descended the stair behind him and approached unnoticed. "Glad to see you're up. Come have a seat at the bar."

The barmaid curtsied and moved on with a wink as the gentlemen passed by, only a few strides later the Traveler was standing behind the bar and Ulrik was moved in front of it, "What'll you have?" came the gentleman's inquiry.

Ulrik gulped already anticipating a tall drink, "I'd love an ale sir."

"As you wish," the bartender bowed and turned to fill a mug from a tapped casket.

Ulrik looked around in awe, "This inn... this... is a dimensional pocket - is it not?"

The Traveler turned and set Ulrik's drink on the counter, Ulrik began to reach for his satchel and the Traveler stopped him by raising his hand. "Save your coins lad. You're a good kid...", he then leant in closer and lowered his voice, Ulrik leaned in attentively. "Be careful around these folks, not all of them are right in the head, and most all of them could best ye in a heartbeat. Keep in mind they're here cause most of em chose t'be."

As the Traveler finished his warning, took a drink of something that was a reddish-golden colour behind the counter from a small glass and put it down. Someone needed his attention in the kitchen, with a nod to Ulrik he excused himself and turned to deal with them.

Ulrik raised his glass to the bartender and took a long drink, then he realized that someone was watching him.

Looking out of the corner of his eyes he spotted a girl in a hooded cloak. She was slight of build and her clothing was strange to him, it was dark in colour and wrapped around her in bands. She leaned on a staff that had a strange metal end, but most notably was the mask that covered all of her face, excluding her eyes and mouth. She peered at him, her head slightly bowed, with one red iris and one purple iris she peered at him. White strands of hair framed her face beneath her hood. A drink similar to the Traveler's sat in front of her on the bar, but she was not looking at it, she was looking in his direction without moving or blinking.

Not knowing what else to do Ulrik turned his head, gave her a smiling nod and slight wave. She did not seem to react, as though she were in a trance, and looking beyond him, so he turned back to his drink and took a few more gulps.

Clearly, he heard her say, "Tell me a story." Her voice was a raspy whisper, like she was almost otherworldly.

Uncertain, he looked around to be sure she was talking to him. He pointed to himself and mouthed "me" making an inquisitive face.

She nodded slowly.

He turned his head so she could not see his face and muttered beneath his breath, "Okay creepy girl... must think of story... or wind up dead in the aether... no pressure." Clearing his throat he took another drink, and turning back around began to tell her a story he had heard at childhood.

He retold the tale of three ogres that had stolen sheep from a farmer and a brave knight traveled in to their forest to end their tyranny. She seemed to smile at the story and crossed her legs on her barstool and listen intently. At first he wondered if she were mocking him, or if she was even listening, but she seemed to be genuinely listening. The brave knight faced several perils as he traveled to the den of the trio of terror, before the ogres captured him and made him suffer. It was the knight's noble heart that saved him, for in his travels he had

spared a fairy from the very ogres that imprisoned him now in exchange for his own freedom. The fairy later returned to free him from the villainous crew whom he then slayed in a great battle.

By the end of the tale, the girl was laughing as he embellished on the slaying of the ogres, he had begun to enjoy telling the story he had heard so often and the girl had a certain charm about her. The ale must have helped.

“Why are you here?” she asked in a cheery voice, as she took a drink, “In this place?”

“Adventure really. Well, mostly. To the inn? My guess is chance. I did not expect to find this place at all.”

“Seems most people find their way here, unexpectedly.”

Ulrik, looked around at the crowd, “I hope so, I lost some friends out there. I rather hope that they’re able to make it here. It’s been a long time and I am worried that something has gone terribly wrong.”

She tilted her head and blinked, “How long have you been here?”

“I awoke just a few hours ago, but I am not certain how long it has been. Then again, with what I met out there, a few moments could be too long.” He seemed rather frustrated by this. “But, they are stronger and more cunning than I am, perhaps they faired better and were able to stick together.”

“So, why don’t you go look for them?”

He seemed saddened, “I would, but I... am loath to admit, that I am a coward. This place is beyond me.”

She smiled, “How long will you wait then coward?”

The words hit him with burden, “I... I do not know. Perhaps, until I can find a caravan to travel with.”

“Caravan?” she exclaimed. “Where do you think you are Ulrik? Look.” She stood up, she was around five feet tall, “When you want to find your friends, come and find me, if I’m still here. My name is Hela. I’ll help you find your courage.” With that she migrated in to the crowd with a new drink, her expression, from what he could see, was saddened.

He didn’t remember giving her his name, she must have overheard it while he was talking with the barkeep. As she left, an older gentleman took her place at the bar, he had a wild grey and white beard, eyebrows and hair that looked as if it had been blasted away from his face. It stuck out and gave him a look of surprise. He wore a robe of simple weave, while waiting for another barkeep, he turned to Ulrik and boldly extended a hand, “Candle. Candle’s the name.”

Ulrik shook his hand and gave his name.

“You seem lost my boy, and you don't want to be lost in a place like this!” He seemed cheery and blinked boldly while he spoke.

“No sir,” was all Ulrik could think to say.

Candle took the open seat beside Ulrik. “Couldn't help but overhear some of your story. Sounds like you could use a hand.”

Ulrik cocked an eyebrow.

“Where you headed?”

“Back home to Keldorna I suppose, doesn't seem like my companions made it here.”

Candle smiled a cheery smile at Ulrik, “Well, that's easy enough I suppose. If you want to wait around for your friends that's fine too my boy. I'll be around a little while yet, let me know if you want to go.”

Ulrik asked, “How will I know where to find you?”

Dropping some coins to the barkeep he gets his drink and puts on a pointy wizard's hat where the end tips forward, a fiery wick resting at the end. “Oh, that shouldn't be too hard.” He pats Ulrik on the shoulder and hobbles off in to the crowd.

Ulrik looks surprised and with wonder, “That's an amazing hat...”

A few rounds of ale later, the Traveler had still not returned, so he decided to take his leave and head back to his room.

Closing the door, he moved over to the smoky window and stared out in to the ether, small glowing lights fluttered around. In his state, the ether looked beautiful from here. Then a thought occurred to him. He reached in to his satchel and drew out a thick book and began checking his notes. While he was here, he should make good use of it.

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The Traveler stood alone in the smoke leaning against a lamp post he lit his pipe. “Who've you come fer?” He didn't stop what he was doing or even look in the direction of the shadowy figure.

A woman's voice answered, “Oh, it's not me old man... I just happen to be wandering by.” Her shape was of a voluptuous and fit scantily clad woman. Ringlets of gold and silver adorned her shape holding what little clothing she wore in place. A black slender tail vanished behind her, its spaded tip the last to vanish. She did wear a strange leathery cap over her shoulders.

The Traveler looked down at the ground as some movement caught his eye, “Well, now what have we 'ere.”

A tiny glowing mouse like creature hopped over to him. Two tiny bumps sat upon its forehead and a slender spade tipped tail curled around its body. Overall it looked like an oval egg with little stumps for legs, large pointed ears, big pearly eyes and whiskers.

“Has someone called for you little one? Oh, I'll bet I be knowin who ye be here for,” he bent down and picked up the creature.

The woman was mostly just a silhouette as smoke washed over her, “A gift”.

“Maybe at dis size it's a gift, but at your size, tis nothing but trouble.” He smiled at the small critter and placed it on the ground, “Run along, find your new master then.”

The woman laughed, and her voice was ominous, her form began to change, “You old fool, you'd love to be able to handle my kind of trouble again someday.” Her cape lifted and unfurled in to bat like wings, revealing the slender tail again, curved knotted horns sprouted from her forehead and her ears became pointed. Her form faded deeper in to the mist.

“I doubt it Cyla,” the man answered without looking, but he could not hide a sneer that made its way on his face.

As he ignored her and watched the tiny rodent like creature float away towards the inn, his sneer at the woman’s chide faded as the small entity floated up to the window of the tiny inn and he seems almost at peace.