

DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

CHAPTER 2: WEAVING

“Well, I’m as ready as I’m ever going to be, my many thanks for your hospitality,” Ulrik said his farewells to the inn keeper.

The older man smiled and shook hands with the youth. Then looked to his slight and odd companion, the strange girl Hela, and putting an arm across his shoulder he moved him towards the door and kept his voice low enough for her not to hear him, “You be certain about your travelin companion son?”

Ulrik smiled and nodded, “I trust her well enough, and she did offer to help me find my friends. I wouldn’t feel right abandoning them here. Are you certain I couldn’t offer you something in return for you generosity?”

“No lad, you just be keeping yourself safe out there and keep u’r witts.”

“Will do sir, will do.” He handed some dry corn to a small blue and white bird with a crest and black markings that perched upon his shoulder, it nestled in to a fold in a collar of his robe.

“Where did that little fella come from,” smiled the Traveler knowingly.

Ulrik wasn’t sure how to answer at first, he felt a little guilty and a little shy at the same time. “In the collection of books that my master owned, he had a few rituals on summoning. I recalled that I had one of those scripts on me, and decided to attempt my hand at it, not too bad I’d say. I never thought I’d have the opportunity to call forth a blue jay, fortune has been very kind to me.”

The Traveler smiled warmly, “Fortune has been kind, the familiar will be one of the most loyal creatures you’ll ever encounter in all the realms. What did you name it?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Ulrik answered a little surprised he hadn’t thought of that.

“Give it some thought. Well, it looks like someone is waiting for you, you best be goin.”

Hela was already outside and had moved along the path, she seemed to be waiting while distracted in her own thoughts. Ulrik waved goodbyes and jogged to catch up to her, “So, where do we start?”

She turned to face him. “We’ll start with you,” she said, her voice and mood had shifted to a dark tone. He stopped a step away from her and looked back at the inn, it was gone. “We need to start with you Ulrik, only you can fail us.” She seemed to grow with those words and become ghostlike and a feeling like being in the eye of a dark storm surrounded him.

“What? What’s going on?”

Suddenly, the girl was normal sized again and the mist seems bright and friendly, “I said, we need to work on you!” She said with a chirp.

He stood there stunned, looked around with only his eyes before he answered, “What?”

She seemed to float up from the ground, “Where are you going Ulrik?”

“What do you mean, you’re the one that’s flying!”

“No silly,” she leaned in towards him, “It’s you that are the one that is falling...” she smiled as she shrank away. His hair and clothing seemed to flap in her direction, then he realized he was not walking on any ground and she was vanishing rapidly above him. He looked down to see nothing but clouds as they rushed up to meet him and pass him.

The blue jay leapt in to the air and soared around him.

From beside him Hela crept in to view, she was reclined as though lying on her side and leaning her head on one arm, “Where you goin in such a rush?”

She reached over with a finger and balanced him on it, she moved him with ease above her and smiled through her mask, “You see?”

He looked around in awe, “You... you are powerful! What do you... what do you want with me?”

She cocked an eyebrow under her mask, “You’re not listening.” She said flatly. She placed him on his feet below him still with one finger, and hopped down from her invisible perch. “You’re not paying attention Ulrik,” she hit him in the leg with her staff. “Look around you, what do you see?”

Ulrik looked around in every direction was nothingness, white rolling mists of nothingness, “Nothing Hela, why what’s supposed to be out there?”

She seemed to be staring directly in front of her, almost in a trance, she spoke quietly, calmly and slowly, “What... do... you... see?”

He looked and waited for something to change, he took a breath about to speak, but then something caught his eye. From the mist a tiny ball of glowing fluff seemed to emerge in front of Hela, between them, floating like a dandelion seed, “I see.”

“You see.”

“I see,” more spheres of light floated around them, larger and larger.

“You see the worlds.”

As she said that, he saw the spheres reveal blue bodies of water and green and brown landmasses. He nodded.

“You see the stars.” A black area seemed to grow and with it some of the glowing spheres shone brighter.

“You see the heavens.” She smiled. Clouds filled in the darkness and swirled around the worlds like trails left by birds made of volcanic ash. The pair seemed like gods standing there amongst the cosmos as it floated by.

“We are in the ether Ulrik, it is everywhere and nowhere, the vale between worlds and planes. Our will is our power and here it is both wondrous and terrifying.”

Some noises of horseman broke their concentration, the hoof beats became deafening, Ulrik looked around and didn't see any riders. Hela was crumpled in to a ball holding her head, she appeared to be screaming, but he couldn't hear her over the thunderous hoof beats. He reached down for her and she shot away from him like a coiled snake, she was over 20 strides from where she had been and she looked feral.

“Hela, what's wrong?” he called out to her. The hoof beats finally subsiding.

She didn't seem to notice him, she struggled for a few moments, he decided to approach her. Halfway there he watched her rise with her head down. “Are you okay?” he continued his approach and reached a hand out to her shoulder.

Her voice seemed calm, angelic and came as a crystalline choir, “Hi.” Was all she said.

He looked around them and tried to look at her face, it was hidden mostly by the mask, “Tell me, what do we need to do?”

Her voice stayed the same, but she looked up, “You are pinioned to reason, so, we will walk.” She sighed.

He nodded. “Ok.”

She turned and began to walk, “Come with us. I will take you to him.”

He followed, had it not been for the “us” and “him” part he would not have been too concerned. He also began to wonder whom she was referring to. They walked for what seemed like hours before they reached some black muddy water, and the mist gave way to twisted swampy trees draped in hanging moss. “You chose this?” Her charmed voice vanished and a scared little girl voice appeared, “I hope there are no rats in here.” She gave her staff a twist and a slender blade flicked out of the metal tip. She began to look around the mire as though frightened.

They moved through the swamp for quite some time, ahead of them they saw flames on torches writhe in front of a stone ruin. The sky was pitch black.

An old enormous stone throne was all that stood in the middle of the ruins, which was otherwise empty. The ruins consisted of broken pillars, a few walls that barely qualified and broken stone basins. They stepped up out of the black water and on to the stones.

Then a shadow moved behind the throne, turning to face them was a devil which must have stood twenty feet to the top of its head. Curved and knotted horns sprouted from its dark red scaly forehead, its eyes were a pearly white, a spade tail wrapped around its robed legs and enormous bat like wings spread out across the ruins.

Hela bowed slightly, “Asmo... uh, well, here’s someone, just as we promised.” The creature seemed perturbed at her, it moved with powerful muscles and flashed pearly white dagger like teeth in response.

Ulrik stood very still not sure if he’d been betrayed to a creature to be made in to a quick meal, “Who, what, is this?”

Hela presented an arm palm up in the direction of the creature now seated in the throne, “This is your answers, now ask your questions.”

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Before Ulrik could respond the creature growled out, its lips never moving it spoke, “I will give you answers for that which you seek for a price.” It extended an enormous clawed hand briefly in gesture.

Ulrik was afraid to ask, “What is your price mighty one.”

The deep growl seemed to be amused by the compliment, “The price is dependant on the answers needed, what is it that you seek?”

“I seek my friends, three of them, I wish to know their locations.”

The creature seemed to deliberate on this for a moment that seemed like an eternity, “The three you seek that came in to our realm with you I can give. In exchange, you will need to bring three willing mortals to me to bargain with within the next full moon, or serve me.”

“I lack the power to carry out this bargain on my own, how will I bring them to you?”

The creature’s breathing seemed to surround them, “I will give you the means to fulfill your end of the bargain, do we have an accord?”

Ulrik looked to Hela, whom shrugged and rolled her eyes and cocked her head with a smile.

“Aye, we have a bargain.”

The creature reached out with a powerful arm something small and shiny peered out from its long blackened claws, a golden ring. It was a simple band with another slender band wrapped around it, three fine circles joined the two parts. "Use the ring to bring the willing mortals to me."

"Will I return with them?" Ulrik opened his hand

"No, it was not bargained for." The ring dropped and a sizzle escaped Ulrik's hand as it enclosed the ring.

He screamed out, "What!?" Where he expected to see burned and blistered flesh, instead a ring of blood appeared where the metal had touched him.

"You are marked Ulrik of Keldorn, you will not break your word to me. Two of your allies lie in Pandemonium; one in the fiery clutches of Hask'mordikarrd, the other in the icy wastes of Uhldradar's lair at its center. The last of that which you seek lies in the Netherworld in the clutches of Ombrah'dhul in Hades." The shadowy creature then vanished in a cloud of black wisps and they trailed off in to various directions of the swamp.

"Ooo, that last one's gonna be tough," Hela nudged Ulrik with a friendly elbow to the arm. "Sure you can do that in three days?"

Ulrik looked at her in surprise and very confused, "Three days?"

"Aye, full moon should be in three days to my recollection."

He was flabbergasted, "When I left it was weeks off, how..."

"Time doesn't move the same here, besides you didn't even ask which full moon..."

"Which full moon!?"

Hela nodded as she walked down the stony path beyond the ruins, "Aye, coulda been Roon's full moon, course it has two - so not likely. Lucky for you Asmodai deal in a specific lunar currency of time, and I'm savvy to it. You should be more careful when you're cutting deals with them."

There was little that made sense to Ulrik anymore, he once again was stricken silent as he followed her down the path.

It took a little while before he asked, "So, how do we get to Pandemonium?"

"Pandemonium, oh that's easy! Here take my hand." She extended her gloved hand to him as he walked she had stopped and whirled around, they made a slight impact with one another, but fell off the path and when they landed it was on orange dirt.

They both stood up and brushed themselves off. Hela picked up her staff, “Welcome to Pandemonium.”

A wave of hot dry air washed over Ulrik, as he took in his surroundings. They stood on a strange reddish dirt in a chasm, a floating upside down mountain hung in the sky, water cascading off of it from a jungle canopy. In the distance he could see a trench of lava running alongside a wall of ice which covered what seemed to be half of the desert he stood in. Balls of flame streaked across the sky, which were filled with spiraling clouds, spheres of water and stone all collapsing towards what he could only imagine was the sun or heaven itself. “Incredible.”