

DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

CHAPTER 5: HASK'MORDIKARRD

The gnomes had played melodies on some stringed instruments which lulled Ulrik to sleep. Hela was being treated by the gnomes, but had passed out almost immediately possibly from exhaustion.

They had drifted through the makeshift stars during the night and when he awoke it was much warmer, yet still dark.

Gouts of fiery lava, which Ulrik had never seen before, streamed down a molten formation not far away oozing its way downward in to the great beyond. Steam and smoke rose around them as the crewman navigated the sky. It was much hotter here, akin to standing near a campfire while sitting in a steaming bath.

Before long Hela was awake again and in much better shape.

Grimble reeked of booze and wavered slightly, Ulrik was uncertain if he had slept at all, but he seemed content. Evidently celebrating his new lease on life.

It was still night as they approached their destination, the gnomish captain explained to the trio the best he could what lay ahead of them. He spoke eerily for such a high pitched voice, "The lair of Hask'mordikarrd is a fortress surrounded by worse heat than you see here. We're going to descend not far, where there is a land bridge you can take. This is usually a trade rout for those that dare trade with the Salamanders, usually food, weapons and slaves. You should be able to make it pretty far in to their territory with a patrol. I would advise against engaging them, Salamanders are dangerous folk, they absorb and expel fire. When we land tell the soldiers that you wish to make a trade or something, they will escort you back to their market. The walk is long, it will take you about twenty minutes along an open bridge, but you'll come up to their black gates unharmed. Here comes the tricky part, do you have anything worth trading?"

He looked at the group, they shook their heads. "We have some barrels of whiskey, but you'll not be able to trade that for a slave."

"What about a slave for a slave and some whiskey?" piped up Ulrik.

"That might be doable. But, you'd have to have good reasoning. What did you have in mind?"

"I'm not sure, but maybe we can figure out something that might appeal to them as a slave?"

"They do like hard workers, military craftsmanship, they loath the undine and enjoy tormenting them as slaves, mortals make good servants or fodder for their arenas, but generally anyone will do."

“What about a dwarf slave?”

“Hmm, that would be an excellent choice, but I’m not sure they would believe gnomes would capture and sell a dwarven slave... however... I do have another idea!”

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Ulrik watched the gnomish ship rise in the sky, it was what passed as morning in pandemonium. He now stood on the deck of a smaller skiff with his two companions and a small crew of humans under the command of a Captain Ailanna Volund.

Svirnyl had let it slip that she was a pirate, smuggler and generally all around unpleasant scoundrel of the skies, but he had paid her handsomely for two things; drop off the trio and then bring the foursome to the dark gate beyond. Neither of those prospects seemed rather appealing.

Captain Volund was small, but her constant snarl and brazen behaviour kept everyone rigidly under command. She barked the orders and the ship started moving. This detour would cost them a few hours, but it was necessary to keep up the ruse if Grimble was going to pass as a prisoner. The gnomes had returned home and wished them all well, assuring them that Ailanna would keep her word and no harm would come to them.

Ulrik quietly took Svirnyl aside and asked if he would mind checking on Ila on the way back, he honestly could not thank the gnome enough for his hospitality in this entire endeavor. Svirnyl shared a secret with him about how a mortal had done something similar for him a long time ago, and that mortal bore the name on the same spell book he studied from; the name and sigil of his aged master. The gnome did not hesitate to accept Ulrik’s request to check on Ila, as he boarded his ship, he promised he would look for Ila on the return and see to her safety if they could. There were ways to tell if an undine had passed on in the universe, something about a shoal.

They wished each other good health and said farewell, they then turned their attention to the new crew at their disposal, a ragtag lot belonging to the *Witchbroom* which was far more grim and scandalous in appearance.

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“Listen up you material world know-nothings, you’re going to get one shot at this and I’m not going down with you – you got that?” Captain Volund snarled through perfect teeth, the painted short hair on her head and piercings on her nose and lip giving her a more menacing appearance than her stature commanded. “We go in, you give up the dwarf to the slaver and ask to see their elf stock in trade. Don’t let the sketchy one do any talking, you’ll be better off for it. Once you’ve located the elf, if he’s in their lot at all, make the trade. If for some reason he’s not there, there’s a good chance he’s been killed, or they already traded him off.”

“What if he’s just injured?” interjected Ulrik.

“They don’t keep the injured, the injured get made in to food. Now the tricky part, getting everyone out alive. They will be expecting you to try something during the trade, but not after, so there will be heavy guards present when you do make the trade. After the trade, you will need to find a way to backtrack and follow the slavers to the slave pits.

The dwarf will be dispelled and searched immediately before the trade is made, then he will be brought to the slave pits below the fortress. So you may as well stick him in a loin cloth now. You’ll have to go below and get him. The Salamanders can see heat and lack thereof, so invisibility won’t work, you’ll be better off moving quickly and striking hard. Free as many prisoners as you can, but beware, they’ll likely draw attention to you as their rescuers and beg for you to bring them with. I doubt you could move that many people if given the chance, but for each one you bring with you, we’ll be charging you extra for the trip. So, this is likely where your invisibility spells will come in handy.”

“To hide from the people that need our help.”

“You got it. Like I said, you get one shot at this, we’ll be waiting here.” She pointed at her crude charcoal drawing, there’s a ledge that the fire lizards used to use for their own docking, but it’s crumbling now, occasionally they check it, but it was flooded with lava to seal it off long ago. Use a rope, teleport, whatever it takes to get down there exactly two hours after we drop you off or we leave without you.”

Ulrik believed her. She wasn’t looking to get cooked for someone else’s problems. The only question he had was why she would be willing to do this at all, her name would be mud with the Salamanders once she did this. Seemed like an awfully large risk. Maybe she intended to trade the trio to the Salamanders instead of helping them. Svirnyl seemed to have faith in her. Ulrik also knew he was running out of time, if she abandoned them utterly it could cost him dearly even if they escaped the fiery lord and his ilk.

“Two hours, got it.”

“If we know where the slave pits are, why not bust in to the slave pits right off? All of us armed and ready, I don’t like the idea of being disarmed,” added Grimble.

“After the trade, they’ll drop their guard and accept you as a trader, before that you’re just a stranger to them and they’ll be on full guard. You’ll be given accommodations to watch the “games”, we should be arriving during the matches, my advice is to strike then as they’ll be rushed to return to watch them.”

“Games?” inquired Ulrik.

“Gladiatorial matches, basically what they’ll use the dwarf for if he’s not a good craftsman.”

They nodded.

The captain continued, “That doesn’t leave you a lot of time champ, you’ll walk for about twenty minutes minimum, speak with the guards and then the slavers. Maybe an hour

there, they tend to be very efficient, then you have to get down to the slave pits and out of the fortress, so that last bit had better happen fast.”

Hela spoke up, “He can fly!” she smiled happily.

“You might be better off leaving her here.”

Ulrik smiled wryly, “No, that’s alright, I don’t want her giving away your position by setting the ship on fire or something. She’ll be okay with me.”

“Better you than me wizard. Let’s get ready then we’ll be landing in about an hour.”

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The vision ahead was so strange to Ulrik, a skinny narrow stone bridge extended from a mountainous chunk of rock where he could only partially make out the shape of the dark fortress imbedded in its mass. The bridge was suspended by rocky formations that seemed to drip down like icicles in to the mist below. At the end of the bridge was a platform which stood like a rocky cone with the point also descending in to clouds. The platform itself was very large over one hundred strides itself and barren except for some spires around its parameter which seemed to be garnished with torches and runes.

As they approached the reddish brown rock platform there were several ships already present, it appeared that other traders were also arriving and leaving. The *Witchbroom* looked tiny and long compared to the tall hulking ships that also docked there. Captain Volund waited her turn and was eventually flagged to land after an extremely bulbous ship finished dropping off her entourage.

Some ships then departed, but most landed and then floated nearby. Ulrik counted seven in all, a much more impressive number than he had imagined would come to such a villainous place.

As the ship descended a plank was extended by rope and crank to allow the trio to disembark on to a rocky ledge. Their assembly looked pathetic in comparison to the wagon driven caravans that lead the way. They fell inline.

Grimble seemed uncomfortable with his task of pulling a wheel barrow laden with whiskey casks, in nearly nothing but boots and essentially a toga. He was more uncomfortable with the lack of weapons and armour than the physical labour, he had lugged much more substantial weight in his long life.

Hela seemed preoccupied by the strangers more than anything as they shuffled towards the black iron gate between two very large stone monoliths carved with runes and adorned with torches which lead to the bridge ahead.

Then Ulrik saw one of their hosts. The creatures looked like a fat snake made from a combination of rock and lava, an armed humanoid torso sprouted at one end with a lizard like head which held large fiery eyes. Tiny volcanic ulcers appeared to run the length of

its back from head to tail like red open wounds. A blackened metal pole axe was held tightly in its two hands. It was not as tall as the humans, about eye to eye with the dwarf at four and half feet tall, but it was much longer, likely twice the length of a human lying down. As Ulrik passed by the guards he felt a heat radiating from them, but as he brushed one it was rather cold to the touch.

The creature stood guard and waited as the line moved by, more guards waited along the way, several waited by the spires. Then like clockwork they turned and began moving with the traders, an escort of sorts.

The group moved in silence, pretty much taking in the sights and the wonderous items that the other travelers carried. Some brought weapons and armour, while others brought supplies. Illogically there seemed to be a few merchants that brought cloth and leather, which Ulrik assumed these creatures might incinerate them on contact, or at least the environment would.

It was dusty, very hot and dry. As he stepped out on to the bridge he looked out at the expanse around him and felt as though he might fall forever, it was both breathtaking and overwhelming. He wavered slightly and then Hela grabbed his arm, which pulled him away from the ledge he teetered on, "I like those boots". She was indicating a pair of blue-grey soft boots strapped to a wagon ahead of them. Her eyes lit up and a smile shone across her face. Sometimes he forgot she was still a woman behind that mask and hood.

Then a moment of panic hit Ulrik, what if the trade took too long to perform because there were so many traders present? Ulrik, had to get the trade done quickly, it couldn't wait, just how efficient were these Salamanders, would they get to him in time? Ulrik started to compile a variety of ideas to get him to the front of the line.

The sky bridge finally ended and the path wound around the rocky landmass towards the fortress.

Hela leaned in towards Ulrik as they walked and whispered, "We're being followed." Ulrik waited a few moments before looking backwards. They were at the tail end of the pack and Ulrik could only see the two Salamander escorts. His eyelids dropped in annoyance and as he started to speak he did notice something out of place, a humanoid figure moving along the bottom of the sky bridge. It was man-sized, he didn't want to draw attention to himself so he quickly turned back around and hushedly spoke to Hela, "Just ignore it, don't bring it up."

She shrugged.

Another ten minutes and they made it to the black gatehouse of the fortress. It took only a brief moment to enter and they walked in to the vast courtyard beyond. The line slowed and Ulrik noticed a Salamander asking questions and filing the travelers towards a right hand corridor, where a very loud audience cheered and booed at various intervals. It was hard to hear what was transpiring ahead of him over the commotion. Only six other

people, comprising of two groups stood off to the left of the line, everyone else including the people directly in front of him proceeded down the right hand corridor.

Ulrik's turn, he stepped up to the Salamander whom hissed at him, "Hass you been here beffore?"

"No sir," He answered courteously.

"You here ffffor tradesss or gamesssz?" it inquired. A orange glow came from its throat and its black spotted tongue looked like rocks floating on a toad made of magma.

"Trade."

"Ssstand here," it indicated along side the other six individuals, mostly humans of cultures he did not recognize. Hela decided to sit on the wheel barrel that Grimble let rest. It slithered to the other groups and seemed to write something on a stone tablet in a chalk like substance.

"What is your interestsss?"

"Pardon?"

"What isss it you wissssh to trade ffffor?"

"Ah, sorry, a slave – an elf if at all possible."

"That is all?"

"Yes, we'd like to see your stock mind you, not just any elf."

"Very well." It shuffled the tablets and wrote something.

The cheering in the distance was starting to make sense, the games were already on, and with only three of the traders actually being there for trade, this could very well go as quickly as planned.

The Salamander slithered over to three other Salamanders which it gave the tablets to and they in turn slithered off down various corridors.

Time seemed to bleed away as they waited. Hela's incoherent mumbling was beginning to annoy, when one of the other merchants a very round man made his way over to Ulrik, "You know if you don't find something you like, you can trade with us later on. Are you selling both the girl and the dwarf?"

Ulrik was taken offguard, "Just the dwarf today."

"Very sturdy specimen..." the fat man cut his sentence short as the Salamander in charge whipped its head around, fire erupted from its back and its tail slapped the ground.

“No dealsss! Until our tradesss are done here, human. You are new, sssso one warning.”

The fat man stammered as he tried to defuse the creature’s rage, “I was just talk... apologies, my error.” Hela said something under her breath that Ulrik didn’t catch. He saved his breath and trailed off.

The Salamander visibly cooled and grew darker, there was now an awkward silence in the courtyard.

Finally the tension broke as a line of slaves and material goods were brought in to view.

Ulrik’s heart jumped in to his belly when he saw Soola, he had made eye contact and Soola nearly jumped in his chains. Ulrik tried to shake his head as subtly as possible, Soola seemed to get it and averted his eyes. There were lots of slaves, a long line of elves, Ulrik’s heart sank at the thought of so many unfortunate souls being imprisoned here.

The Salamander approached asking for those trading to move forward and inspect the goods. Ulrik moved down the line of elves, looking upon saddened faces, some were not in very good health, possibly beaten, but not injured. He asked a few questions as he walked down the line, then he came down to Soola, “What is your name?”

“They call me Soola,” he responded.

“How many languages do you speak?”

“Uh, five, well six, uh really the sixth one is made up, so five, why?”

“Which five languages do you speak?”

“Trade, obviously,” he said it more to himself than to Ulrik, “Azrahdiyy, Keldornan, Sylvan and Undertrade.”

“Good, how fluent are you? Say something in Azrahdiyy.”

Ulrik wasn’t sure what Soola said, but he did sound convincing, he responded in Keldornan, “Excellent.” He then leaned in and lowered his voice, “I will try to bargain for you.” With that he moved down the line asking similar questions to the others. He was lucky, none of the other elves present spoke Azrahdiyy, he had his reasoning. There must have been fourteen elves in all and more than twenty humans, men and women. Ulrik felt like a traitor to his own kind as he walked back to his companions.

Hela leaned over and whispered, “Is that him? He’s cute.” She giggled, smiled and waved openly.

Once all of the traders were back with their groups, the chief Salamander moved down the line of materials he stopped and indicated something, it became evident very quickly that the items in question were more of an auction with a minimum bid. The traders

made their bids and the auctioneer moved down the line, bids that were too low were disregarded. The end of the line was coming up and the traders all seemed to be very happy with their bids, and now it was Soola's turn.

"Do I hear an offer?" called out the Salamander.

Ulrik raised his hand, "I have a fine dwarf craftsman and warrior in exchange." Ulrik heard Hela say something behind him, but couldn't make it out. He gave her a stern look.

The chief auctioneer seemed very pleased with the offer for the scrawny sea elf and seemed to be moving forward to take the offer, when the fat man spoke up, "A minotaur for the elf."

The Salamander stopped, "You have no minotaur here human, we do not trade in the marketplace."

The heavy trader responded, "He came with us in the wagon, he's on his way to the arena right now."

The auctioneer paused, "He's no good damaged."

Grimble spoke up with a huff, "And no minotaur is equal to *this* dwarf." Soola and Ulrik both looked at him surprised.

"We could settle this in the arena if you like master dwarf," chided the merchant.

The Salamander, furrowed what passed as its brow, "Wait here, I will check this minotaur of yours." The chief slithered off towards the arena.

Ulrik, cursed under his breath and wondered how long this would take. He also recalled Volund's words that *if* you made a trade they would drop their guard, he wondered if the failed attempt would still count or if he'd be escorted straight out.

He decided to reach out to his familiar and check on their status. His attempt seemed to be blocked, possibly the defenses of structure as well. He would have to hope that his familiar was safe, and that the Captain was keeping her word.

It wasn't long before the chief returned, "Your minotaur offer is in good standing human. Do I hear a counter offer?" he peered at the others and waited.

"I also have four casks of gnomish whiskey. They kept the dwarf docile enough for him not to kill us with his bare hands at a moment's notice."

The Salamander seemed enticed by this description, "Good bid human, but the minotaur is a much more impressive display in the arena than the small dwarf. Perhaps there is another elf you would be interested in?"

Ulrik paused only briefly, “I had specific needs for an elf with specific traits, I will look elsewhere. Thank you for your time.”

The heavy man and Salamander both moved forward as Ulrik indicated for his trio to pick up and go, the Salamander was the first to speak up though, “No need to be hassty, perhapssss we can make other arrangementsss? Please, sssstay here, it would be a sssshame for you to hasss made ssssuch a long journey and leavesss empty handed.”

Ulrik bowed deeply, “Yes, I suppose it would be a shame. I accept.” Hela retorted a whisper behind him, but then bowed as well.

“Bring our guestsss to their roomsss,” he spoke to some of the smaller Salamanders nearby which ushered Ulrik and his companions down an arched corridor towards some heavily pillowed rooms. This is what they traded the flammable material goods for, for guests.

Ulrik cursed, even Grimble looked sullen to not be traded off. They were in the middle of formulating another plan, when they heard a knock at the door.

It was the fat merchant, Soola and his entourage stood behind him, “Greetings, I am Kaliff Abal or should I say it in Azrahdi?” he smiled broadly.

Ulrik scrutinized the rotund man and his thick beard, but said nothing.

“I saw that the elf recognized you when he was brought up from the pens, and I’ve gambled that he’s worth quite a bit to you. Perhaps he has some secret information that you’re trying to gather – it matters not to me! I am looking towards trading him to you...” he trailed off and waited.

Ulrik squinted in confusion, “For the dwarf?”

“No good sir! For you’re other servant, the young lady!” he chuckled.

Ulrik stood stunned, “She’s... not...”

The fat man interrupted, “I realize you said she wasn’t for trade today, but I was hoping to perhaps change your mind with something that you really wanted. Hmm?”

Hela interjected, “Master, if you wish it, I can be of no further use to you in your current state of affairs – perhaps it would be a wise bargain. This new merchant might require the services of a sorceress to protect him from the dark arts.”

She bowed low to Ulrik, whom was doing some catching up, “Ah, I see, yes. That sounds like a decent offer sir, but she’s simply not for sale at this time.”

“Perhaps if I sweetened the deal then? I noticed you are a spell caster of sorts, a wizard perhaps, I could give you a trinket I’ve come across which although powerful is less useful to me or even a sorceress,” he gave a wink to Hela whom teasingly giggled. He

clapped his hands and a man stepped forward with something long and wrapped in cloth, “but perhaps to a wizard... this would change your mind then?” He unwrapped the cloth and inside was a beautiful ebon wood staff with four gems at its decorative head. Each gem was small and slender, but sparkled clearly; emerald, sapphire, diamond and ruby. Along the shaft were engravings of flames, clouds, mountains and lightning. A piece of parchment was wrapped around the handle and tied there by what appeared to be a lock of braided blonde hair and leather.

Ulrik’s eyes widened, “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes my boy a staff of the elements themselves. Forged here by a powerful spell caster, long ago, not a toy to be trifled with by far! The script is wrapped around the haft.”

Ulrik actually felt his hand tremble as he reached for it, but instead he turned to Hela, “Are you certain Hela? This is what you want?”

“It is a wise bargain master, I am ready to move on to a greater challenge with your leave.”

Ulrik turned to Kaliff, “You will treat her with the utmost respect, I have your word?”

“Absolutely my boy, I will treat her like a treasured daughter!”

“Then Hela you have my leave.” She jumped up and down and rushed out the door to stand behind the fat man happily. Ulrik could not figure out what she was doing.

Soola cautiously stepped up to the fat man, who then unmanacled him and moved to manacle Hela, but she spoke up, “Those won’t be necessary.” The man didn’t say another word he simply put the locks on the pile of items his assistant was carrying held out his arm for Hela, she locked arms and they said farewell.

Ulrik, closed the door as they disappeared down the path, “That was perhaps the strangest thing I’ve ever seen...”

Soola’s voice brought him back to the present, “I don’t know how you did it, but thank the light!” He jumped up and hugged Ulrik and then moved in tauntingly to Grimble, whom grumbled, but still let him embrace him. Soola could not stop laughing, he was too happy.

“Okay, we need to get out of here, quickly. We’re running out of time.” Ulrik spurred them out the door, “We have to get out of here.”

They were walking through the courtyard, when they heard a commotion rise up behind them. The trio picked up their pace, but the commotion seemed to be getting closer, Ulrik snuck a peek behind them, sure enough he saw Hela running through the corridors with a few of Kaliff’s men chasing behind her.

The guards at the gatehouse dropped the portcullis and gathered in front of it defensively, still not sure what was going on. Then a huge wave of people flooded out of the arena stadium for an intermission.

The trio pushed through the crowd and took cover behind a building, “Now what?” asked Soola.

“We find a way out,” replied Ulrik.

“Was she some kind of distraction or something?”

“No, but we should get out of here before they find you,” it was Hela’s voice. She was huddled with them by the proximity of her voice, but she was unseen. They all kind of jumped back except Grimble whom just shot a glance in her general direction.

Salamanders seemed to be pouring out of the towers and guard houses and making their way ever downwards. Exactly where Ulrik was instructed to go.

Ulrik looked around, “There are stairs going up, perhaps we can get to a tower or something and get out of the fortresses defenses?”

Some alarm bells started to sound. “Boy are they overreacting,” came Hela’s voice up ahead as they climbed the stairs.

As some Salamander soldiers came in to view and passed right by them, they all stood there frozen.

When they remained unmolested, they started moving again Ulrik accused, “Hela what did you do?”

“Just a small charm, stupid thing wore off kind of early though, boo. I think he might’ve given you his daughter’s dowry or something.”

Ulrik looked at the staff in his hand and cursed himself.

Soola moved along the wall very stealthily and fast, he beckoned them all forward. They made their way to the top of eight flights of stairs before they found themselves on the roof of the fortress.

The wind was hot and very strong up here, it threatened to knock them around.

A hiss greeted them and a dozen Salamanders moved towards them, whether or not they were the ones being looked for was irrelevant it seemed, they shouldn’t be up here.

“Hela do you think we’re outside of the lock?”

“I don’t know. Try to teleport!”

“If I try to teleport and it fails we’ll lose the spell!”

The Salamanders moved in slowly their pole arms pointed at their query, “You ssshould not be up here mortalsss, you do not have clearancsse?”

The foursome moved away, the Salamanders were undeterred by the invisibility of Hela and penned her in as well.

“Just one moment, I have written permission right here!” Ulrik unfurled the parchment from around the staff he carried, “One moment please.” He looked over the inscriptions and read something arcane aloud, nothing happened.

He cursed.

The Salamanders didn’t seem to like that and took a swing at him, he held the staff in front of him and incanted something else, a blast of cold erupted squarely in the center of the guards and a sizzling crackling hiss sounded as a large portion of the group ground to a halt.

Grimble leapt forward and grabbed one of the pole arms from one of the frozen creatures, who’s arms snapped off, which he promptly swung in to the oncoming other guards. One was hit solidly and its wounds erupted in to a fiery burst. Five remained a few of which spewed forth flames, Soola evaded them and kept his distance. Hela lanced another with pure focused force.

The group decided to run across the rooftop towards the mountain where they found a path, the Salamander’s harried them the entire way, Grimble holding them off with his much higher prowess in battle, they easily matched his speed. Hela picked off another as Grimble dropped one, the last two retreated back to the fortress.

“I hope you have a plan Ulrik!” called Soola.

“We have one, maybe two shots left at this,” he looked at Hela. “We need to get down to a landing site below the fortress, that’s where our ride is meeting us.”

“Can’t you just teleport us to anywhere else in this miserable place?”

“They have a locked area, no teleporting in or out, and no scrying from the looks of it. And, there’s no time, we need to get to the ship so we can find Kazgen.” The wind cracked around him, as he looked at the skyline. He saw six ships floating off in the distance by the platform where the bridge snaked out toward it. No *Witchbroom*, so it must be in position already under the fortress.

They continued to move along the path they had found all the while Ulrik was trying to figure out how to get down, when something small and dark caught his attention. The sky had been filled primarily with clouds, but a small black shape rose up opposite the fortress and was moving away, a long slender ship which looked extremely familiar, and it was moving away.

“Whatever you’re going to do, you need to do it fast!” called Grumble. An army of Salamanders were swarming up from the fortress and making their way up the path towards them.

“We must be far away enough by now!” Ulrik closed his eyes and reached out. His sight warbled a little before it adjusted to his familiar’s location, it was perched on the sails of the *Witchbroom* watching the rock that the Salamanders called home, shrank away in the distance.

Ulrik opened his eyes and incanted the words, a rush of wind popped his ears and the rock beneath his feet was replaced with the wood of the *Witchbroom*’s deck.

When he arrived, he looked around to see captain Volund’s crew, and captain Volund at the wheel. Behind her was the Salamander fortress sinking away in the distance, “Ah good, you made it.”

* * *

Ulrik found his companion and himself imprisoned in the cargo hold, and tied up. He was told not to cause trouble and no harm would come to him. He scoffed at his current condition, “Ha, no harm”. Captain Volund had removed their possessions and tied them up as she didn’t want to take the chance that they would take offense to their almost being abandoned at the fortress. It seemed Captain Volund had sent her own crew member to the fortress on a mission of her own. She would not say for what, but said it was profitable enough that she would never be able to return there.

He could keep an eye on things up above with his familiar, which they had not found, or not bothered to capture, he wasn’t sure which it was.

When the ship started to move in to a storm cloud, his familiar flew through the ropes in to the deck and hid in his collar.

The storm seemed to be rocking the small craft pretty badly. It felt like hours before they were untied and they were brought up top, they found it was a terrible storm. The ship floated off of what seemed to be a swirling vortex of grey cloud and rain. Its center was black and rimmed with what appeared to be giant grey stones inscribed with runes of glowing orange.

“Your gateway awaits!” She indicated the vortex.

“Here?” Ulrik disbelieved. “You’re not serious.”

“You wanted the netherworld, this is the closest portent.” A huge bundle rested under the arm of one of the more muscular pirates, she nodded to him, and he tipped it over the edge in to the darkness below. It vanished almost immediately.

“What was that?”

“It was your gear,” she looked stern. “No sense letting it go to waste, best go after it. Remember, this is what you had asked for.”

“How do we know we can survive the fall on the other side?”

“People have gone in to here and returned, not necessarily the same, but they’ve returned alive none-the-less. The entrance is safe enough. But, I wouldn’t take my word for it, I’m a scoundrel,” she laughed, the crew joined in.

“If you’d like I’ll extend the plank, and we can do this traditionally.”

Ulrik looked over the edge at the darkness below. The ship was very close to it.

“Captain!” shouted a man from the crows nest, “Captain! Giants!” he was looking through a spyglass and pointing towards the peaceful clouds behind them, he had panic in voice.

Volund moved quickly to the stern castle, there was nothing to see in the sky and pulled out her own spyglass. Sure enough the spyglass showed her four giants flying through the clouds. “Storm Giants, invisible and they’re coming in fast!” She handed the spyglass to her second mate and cursed, “They caught up to us pretty fast, must’ve talked to the Salamanders. Hoist the anchor!” she bellowed.

The crew responded immediately.

The second mate was shocked, “Captain we can’t outrun them, they’re too close!” As he spoke one of the giants, a blue skinned humanoid that stood nearly fifteen feet tall, materialized and lightning from its hand hammered the hull of the ship, a few crewman were singed and screamed in pain from the burns they received. The ship was pushed from the force of the blast and the unanchored ship lulled in to the darkness slowly fading away. Several crossbow bolts were fired at the assailant’s appearance, most of which he deftly outmaneuvered.

Ulrik felt the cold wash over him as he passed in to darkness near the front of the ship. The thunderous roar from the vortex drowned out like he had suddenly submerged his head beneath water. He did, however, here Captain Volund say, “We’re not going to outrun them, we’re going through the portent.”