

## **DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY**

### **CHAPTER 6: NETHERWORLD**

The ship crashed hard against the ground, the ship shuddered at the impact and the crew was tossed across the deck. A few unlucky crewmen fell over the edge, the sound of their screams muffled by the thrashing of leaves and eventual heavy thuds.

Ulrik looked over the edge to see a rocky outcropping of stone and just below that, the leafy canopy of a jungle.

The first mate bellowed an order to ready arms, most of the crewmen that regained their feet stood at the ready looking towards the sky ready to do battle.

Their only response was an empty and still sky.

Soola decided to ask in a hushed voice the question on everyone's mind, "Why didn't they follow us?"

The Captain responded, "They were bounty hunters, they weren't willing to go this far to get their reward."

Grimble spoke up, "Bit of a gamble wasn't it? Now look where you are."

Indeed, where were they. The stars sparkled above although it appeared like an overcast day, there was no sun, just ambient light. The air hung chill and stagnantly, the sky and world below them did not stir at all. It was eerily still.

Voices of the fallen crewmen called up to the ship for aid. The Captain not being able to see them through the canopy told them to hold their ground or climb the rock to get back up to the ship. A few minutes later some appeared on the rocky outcropping.

While they were off the ship, she asked them to assess the damage, they reported that the hull had been breached. She had someone confirm it from below deck. The rock had spilled some of their supplies. Men were set to work to retrieve those supplies and move the rest away from the breach.

The first mate was surveying the area with a telescope, it looked like there was a small settlement close by, he could make out a windmill in the distance. There were strange formations on the ground in the distance, not so much structures, perhaps ruins and in the air there were strange creatures and large floating rocks.

"Mr Eldor, what do you make of the area?" asked Volund.

The gruff older first mate answered, "There's a settlement with a windmill about four hours walk from here. Can't tell how many live there, but from the number of structures I can see, maybe there's a couple hundred people."

Captain Volund decided to avoid the floating rocks and creatures, but the ship needed repairs. She looked over her crew and decided that they would scare the locals, and not knowing anything about this world, she didn't want stir up a hornets nest. She set anchor, assembled a small team and prepared to disembark.

Ulrik and his companions were welcome to go with them, seeing as their equipment was still somewhere on the ground, they decided to go as well.

Hela opted to stay with the ship.

Rope ladders were lowered and they made their way down, half a dozen crewmen, Captain Volund, Ulrik, Soola and Grimble. Ulrik had never been on a jungle floor before, but he assessed it to be very alien to him. It squished with moss and foliage, mist hung over the ground and things squirmed below. "This jungle is strange."

"It's not like any jungle I've ever known," answered the crewman Ulrik knew as Edge.

"Everyone stay close, and don't touch anything," Volund ordered. There were already men down below gathering the dumped supplies.

Soola was wandering around the jungle floor already looking, "Okay, let's move in a circular formation spanning outwards and find our equipment boys. You can go ahead lady, we'll catch up."

"Don't take too long, you're likely to be left behind," Volund chided.

Her team disappeared before too long, but Soola wasn't waiting for her to get out of ear shot or anything, the three of them began the search, leaving a marking on a tree they began their circular search pattern, always certain to keep in sight of each other and a good idea where the ship was.

Strange noises came from the jungle on occasion, but nothing too alarming presented itself. It took a few hours to find their gear, it was spotted in a mossy opening by Grimble, but Soola stopped him and refused to move towards it, something didn't feel right.

"What do you mean?" pondered Grimble.

"Don't know, look at it, looks like it's been dragged there."

"How far do you think we are from the ship?" asked Ulrik.

"Half mile, why?"

"Maybe something is leading us away from the ship." He shrugged. "Just a thought."

Soola rolled his eyes, "Great. Okay, look." He picked up a stick and threw it at the equipment, it landed a few feet away from the bag. "Nothing." He picked up a long stick

and moving towards the bag he slowly made a path. Something moved in the underbrush, Soola froze.

Ulrik started casting and put a protective spell on Soola.

Nothing more stirred.

Soola took another silent step and as his foot settled the underbrush rustled again, this time they saw it, there were feathery topped plants almost like dried dandelions bending away from him. Soola thought it kind of looked like they might be trying to shy away from him.

He shrugged and decided to move forward however as he raised his foot to take a step it knocked over what he thought was a moss covered stone, but instead it was a goat like skull, slender yellow-gray barbs embedded in it's bones.

He looked back at his companions, "Take cover!"

They shuffled back behind tree trunks and Soola dove forward. If it weren't for the protection spell and the large bag of equipment he jumped behind, he might've been skewered as well.

The large plants snapped forward as he landed and yellowy barbs flew freely from its feathery top. The barbs hit the surrounding trees like darts or throwing knives.

Soola hefted the bag and began his retreat across the moss kicking up dirt, moss and remains.

Ulrik was already casting again from his hiding place, this time to give Soola more speed.

Another volley of barbs flew through the area, Soola dropped down and let the bag take the brunt of it. When he stood up again he was moving much faster and before the next volley let fly, he was already back amongst the tree line and beyond his companions. Still barbs came very close to finding their mark on him.

Ulrik and Grimble caught up to him, the plants slowing down their thrashing.

"Looks like some of the barbs hit ye laddie," commented Grimble.

"Yeh, don't feel too good either, kind of burns." There were some cuts across Soola's left leg and arm, the side that the bag didn't cover during the retreat.

"Let's get the bag open, I'm sure I have something in there to help you out," Grimble untied the bag and their gear fell out as promised.

Soola was quickly becoming uncomfortable with the swelling wounds and he began rocking back and forth with the pain.

Ulrik searched for his pack and pulled out a potion bottle, the tiny vial was red in colour, “Now this will burn a bit –” They looked at each other, “- right then.”

Soola snapped up the vial and drank its contents down quickly. He dropped the vial and his face began to contort, then he yelped a little. His back arched and he shook while a glow grew inside of him, before long his veins and insides lit up. The glow faded as quickly as it had arrived, his shaking stopped and he settled down.

“Not the best medicine I’ve ever had.” He groaned. “But, I do feel better. How’d you know?”

“It’s a cure all, basically burns all impurities out of you.”

“Excellent,” he let out a huff, “Okay, where are headed?”

The three of them distributed their gear and stood, “Well, the ship is that way, but if I’m not mistaken we’re actually already headed in the right direction of the settlement. We heading to the settlement?”

“Don’t see why not, best place to start looking for Kazgen.”

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It didn’t take very long before they found a path of sorts, probably a hunting path, it was narrow and windy, but traveled in the right direction. Without a sun in the sky to guide them, they had to stop every quarter hour to make sure they had their bearings.

There were a few signs that the crewmen had passed this way, perhaps Volund was making sure they followed.

The trio decided to quicken pace to try and gain ground.

With Soola in the lead they were making good time. On one of their regimented stops, they could hear some distant clanging and some shouting. It was Volund.

They broke out in to a full out run, as they made their way through the twisting foliage, they saw something spherical rising from the ground, human legs kicking from what could only be its toothy maw.

It looked like an inflated toad covered in spikes with a wide flat tadpole like tail rising in to the sky and swimming away.

That gave them pause.

Steeling themselves they continued their charge. The first thing they could see was Volund fighting a trio of large toad like creatures. They had sharp talons and wide toothy maws, they were tossing her crew around like rag dolls. Another crewman was being

stuffed in to the craw of another creature, its body was beginning to inflate, swelling much like that of a pig bladder ball.

Volund's sword struck out sticking her slender blade between the creature's eyes, through its gullet and just between her crewman's legs! She gave her blade a twist and the creature croaked in protest, it slumped to the ground and the crewman began to wiggle free.

What was strangest was one of the other creatures burst in to a gooey mess and fell to the ground. Perhaps they were linked in some way.

There were three crewmen and Volund remaining.

Ulrik let a bolt of lightning fly striking two of the creatures. They swelled a little, but other than smoldering a little, it seemed to do nothing to them.

Soola and Grimble jumped in to the fray cutting in to a creature together, most of the crewmen were on the ground another was being devoured while Edge recovered from his near death experience.

Volund turned to face the remaining creature crouched behind her. Its long tongue already lashing out towards her, she cut deeply across it, but the force of the tongue grabbing her and the spin that followed sent her sword flying in to the trunk of a tree like an arrow.

It all happened so fast that Ulrik was stunned. It just starred at him with those orange eyes that burned like fire. Ulrik felt the primordial nature of the creature before him, its predatory nature, its ancient simplicity mixed with something much more disturbing.

Volund's arm and leg, the only things seen jutting from its mouth disappeared inside with another swallow from the creature which was already inflating.

Ulrik snapped in to action, stepped forward casting and hit the creature in the belly with a stream of fire. Edge was charging forward axe in hand, but was batted aside by the creature's large clawed hand. It then leapt in to the air and hung there for a moment, the flames still licking at its belly, it began to wiggle its tail and propelled itself in to the canopy above out of range of Ulrik's spell.

A sudden crunch and rending made him turn around, Grimble's axe was embedded in the skull of the creature behind him. Soola's blade was firmly placed between what might be its ribs. The monster fell to the ground as the first one had.

Ulrik looked to the sky, "Maybe." He moved to get a look at the retreating creature carrying Volund, but it continued its path without change. There was no chance at a final shot.

They took a head count, three crewmen remained; Edge, Greybeard and Skydog.

That's when they heard a coughing that did not belong to any of them, they traced the sound to the corpse of the creature that had exploded. There was something... human... trying to fight it's way out of the mess.

Ulrik pointed, "Edge, help them out of there."

Edge hesitatingly stepped forward and started pulling away the guts and the mucus covered fleshy sack that entombed the chap.

There was gasping of exertion from the fellow within. He was young and gaunt, Ulrik didn't recognize him, "Edge, this one of your men?"

He shook his head, "Actually Greybeard's next in command, but no, don't recognize him."

The youth stammered, "Th-thank you, thank yo-ou! A th-thousand times I thank you! Y-you don't understand... how long, I-I've been trapped... as... as... oh my, n-no idea." He staggered out of the remains, took a few steps, fell to his knees and then heaved heavy in the branches.

When he was done, he seemed to be crying for joy and then rolled over on to his back laughing. His laughter turned to tears of sadness, he then turned over to his side and curled his limbs inwards.

"Edge, keep an eye on this lad," ordered Greybeard. "Skydog, let's get the supplies and get moving again." He turned to Soola, "My thanks for arriving when you did, that battle was far from victorious, but it would have been worse had you not arrived. Our weapons didn't seem to do much at all to them, Volund had some luck though with this." The older gentlemanly type moved over to Volund's sword and wriggled it free from its wooden tomb.

"My magic didn't seem to do much either," admitted Ulrik, "Not a good sign."

"Perhaps we should get going, before they come back?" suggested Skydog.

Greybeard nodded, "A sound idea. Let's get to that village, must only be an hour away now." He looked over at Edge, "That lad, can he get on his feet yet?"

Edge looked down at the youth, "Well, lad?"

The young man sat up, "Yes." He wiped away the tears, "I can make it."

"Wait now," spoke up Skydog, "How do we know he's even human?"

They all looked at Skydog, then back to the boy, Edge added, "Yeh boy, how do we know what y'ar?"

The boy looked up at him, and stood, “My name is Jollunn, Jollunn Skyhawk. I am human, but not from here. I don’t even recognize this place. My family is from a town named Haythorne Meadows. I was traveling abroad when we were attacked by a Sorcerer, the creature he summoned devoured me. From what I could tell we were just in the way, he didn’t want us.” He realized he was getting off track, “I’m not sure what happened afterwards, but I’m reasonably certain that I’ve done some terrible things against my will. I tried to fight it, but I think I devoured others and made more of these things.” He looked to the others for moral support. “I swear it was against my will.”

“You speak Lumii very clearly, but I do not recognize your accent. We’ve all had to do things we weren’t happy with lad. We’re pirates,” smiled Edge.

The boy recoiled visibly.

“No worries lad, we’re not the really bad ones,” added Greybeard. “You can come with us, you can make your way with these three if they’ll have you, or you can take your chances at the next village. It’s up to you, we’re not drafting you. But, we’re moving on now.”

The boy nodded and stepped forward again, “Sorry for my behaviour Mr Greybeard, you have already proven your good natures. I will be glad to accompany you to this village.”

Edge led the pirates along the path followed by Jollunn, Soola, Ulrik and Grimble.

The path split, one path arced closer towards a rocky escarpment and the other made its way down towards a river. “Any thoughts?” asked Edge.

Greybeard stepped up, “We don’t know if the water is safe to drink, and either path can be riddled with critters we won’t like, but odds are that critters will be drawn towards the water. We’re close to the village, there’ll be drinking water there. Let’s take the high road.”

Skydog thought about it and smiled, “Sounds pretty good to me. Greybeard, you’re good at this leadership thing.”

“Outta be, been around far too long to not have learnt anything,” he winked back.

They made their way up the path and sure enough they reached a stony path that sloped up towards the cliff wall.

Edge stopped as they made their way up and cleared the jungle canopy.

“What’s the matter?” asked Greybeard.

“There’s something on the wall of the cliff,” he answered thinking.

“Looks like a flower or something.”

Ulrik and Soola perked up, "That could be bad."

Soola continued, "We were cut up pretty bad by a plant when we tried to get our gear. I would recommend caution."

Greybeard looked at the growth closely. It looked similar to just the head of a flower attached to the cliff wall. "Okay, let's test it, everybody stay back." Greybeard unslung his crossbow, loaded it, took aim and fired it in at the rim of the "plant".

The bolt struck it and clattered on to the stony path. "Well, that was effective."

Soola stepped forward, "Let me try this." Still carrying his long stick he moved towards the lumpy formation several yards up the path. He cautiously waved the stick in front of it.

No reaction.

He then moved the stick towards the surface and with a sudden snap, the "plant" clamped forward like an enveloping toothy synch. The teeth had been resting against the stone wall, and it appeared the other side of the creature was still holding on with similar claw like barbs. This was no plant.

Soola had reflexively jumped back and was now starring at the "middle" of the creature, which blinked at him with several black eyes. He smiled and backed away slowly.

The mouth spat out the stick and grasped at the air a few more times. It looked like a toothy worm twice the height of a man emerging from the stony wall.

Soola was several feet away from it now almost back with the group, he refused to turn his back on it.

The mouth retracted and seemed to rest a toothy rim on the path, then the other mouth released its grip first from the bottom, bringing it to rest on the path and then the top, now free-standing, it warbled a little on the path.

"Uh oh," said Soola, whom then turned and fled down the path.

"I think he's right boys!" said Greybeard, and the entire party followed Soola's hasty retreat, and none too soon. The creature started to roll forwards like an enormous spiked wheel.

With the slope heading down towards the jungle the group had an easy decent, but the creature was accelerating and sticking to the ledge.

Skydog and Greybeard jumped off of the path down to the top of the trees.

The others were further ahead and could no longer land on the canopy.



Edge pulled out his grapple hook and rope and dropped down on the ledge to dangle below the path. The creature continued forward.

Grimble was already next in line despite starting at the back of the line, decided to take his chances and ducked behind a large rock along the path using his shield to cover his exposed side. Which was a good choice as the teeth scraped and dented his shield as they passed over.

The boy, Ulrik and Soola were last. There was not enough time for Ulrik to stop and cast a spell, but he finally came to his senses and could activate his staff. With a quick word he vanished in a flash and reappeared behind the rolling creature, he immediately began casting.

As a result Soola and Jollunn both hopped off of the ground, Jollunn didn't know what to do, but Soola did, he doubled back and grabbing Jollunn's collar he yanked him out of the creature's path just in the nick of time.

The creature continued on its path in to the jungle. It crashing through the underbrush and seemed to twist and turn as it softened its toothy edge to correct its trajectory.

There were squeals and shrieks from the jungle. The group was unsure if it was the creature itself or something else until a cloud of feathers erupted from the greenery.

They cautiously made their way away from the escarpment making the best use of the flight spell that was cast on Jollunn and Soola.

"We're really close, I can see the windmill," called out Soola.

The group all prepared to move, when a strange repetitive noise made them all look back at the escarpment. There, the creature that had just rolled down the path was now making its way back up the path, like a short tube it would curl end over end holding the ground with its maw with each "step".

They watched in disbelief until it disappeared well above the foliage.

"Let's get down to that river path, and watch our step," grumbled Greybeard.

It was a quick downward slope to the river, they eventually found a shallow crossing with stones. It was wider across, but dry.

One by one they moved across.

Soola, whom was second across, scouted ahead and came back to report, "There's a clearing ahead, like a field, beyond that there are some structures and people moving around. They look like farmers."

"Do we look presentable?" asked Greybeard.

Soola looked them all over.

Of the group Greybeard looked the most presentable in his long tail coat, respectable clothing and well groomed beard. He looked almost noble, and his weathered appearance made him look far more frail than he proved himself to be.

Edge was young and looked like a pretty boy. His hair was matted to his head from the saliva of the creature that previously tried to swallow him. He had a certain honest charm about him that might get you to let him in the front door.

Skydog was short, slender and non-threatening, his darker complexion meant he was from scorched land, but his eyes were blue and made him a fascinating specimen.

He knew from this trek that their temperament was pretty even, so he could see why Volund had selected this harmless looking group of men for the journey.

Grimble looked like a battered warrior, he had a dour look to him. Not something you would want to present to villagers unless you were looking to threaten them.

Ulrik was covered in small burs and wore tattered blue robes that although simple were well made. He carried only a staff which currently had his jay perched on it at this time. Certainly a pass.

Soola looked at his own hands, they were a pale blue in comparison to the humans he traveled with. His hands were cut and calloused from years of service, his clothing was very much like that of a simple enough villager. He tucked his long pointed ears under his hair. More than once did being an elf prove to be a detriment in a human village, and he knew better than to hope for better here.

His gaze finally fell to Jollunn. Jollunn was covered in dried brown and green crusted gunk. He was a curly dark haired lad that looked entirely harmless, "You're going to have to wash up junior."

"What? Oh!" he turned back to the river and keeping to the shallows began scrubbing his clothes.

"Grimble you and I may have to stay behind while the others check out this village," Soola told his companion.

"Aye, we'll keep an eye on them from here," he agreed.

They all took a queue from Jollunn and washed up a little. When they were done they straightened their attire and made their way in to the field.

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The town was simple. Many of the buildings were gray stone and wood. There was a chapel, the windmill, silos, barns, stables, a smithy and various homes. All of the comforts of a village that you would expect, with its people tending to their work.

A man, possibly a farmer, with a dog acknowledged them first. “Well met friends! Where’re you from?” He had to raise his voice to be heard over the distance. The dog padded forward.

“Greetings my good man,” called back Greybeard. “We come from far away. We’re looking for a way – out I suppose.”

The man looked knowingly, “Fell through a portal then?”

The dog approached the men and sniffed each of them wagging its tail, Skydog avoided it and it padded back to its master.

“Aye, came crashing in to some rock over that way.”

“Hmm, then the portal is moving this way again. Not the best news I fear, there’s likely to be some others coming through over the next few days then.

Well, if you’re looking for a way out, you’ll be wanting to get to the Bazaar.

I’m the Mayor, Bothorn, and this here is Hollowbrook. Oh, and of course, the hound is Hunter.” He extended a hand, “We won’t be expecting any trouble, now will we?”

“No sir. We’re just looking for information, and maybe some water if you can spare some,” answered Greybeard with a smile as he shook his hand.

“Certainly, we have a well, we can fetch some water for you. Tell me about yourselves.” Mayor Bothorn turned and walked with them towards the village interior.

Ulrik noticed a man in robes standing near the chapel they had spotted earlier, it was set on an outgoing road on the outskirts of the village, “Mind if I say a prayer at the chapel?”

Greybeard deferred to the Mayor, the Mayor looked in the direction of the watching man and sighed, “Be my guest friend. We can use all the prayers we can get in these lands.”

Ulrik bowed and made his way over to the chapel. The man continued to watch his approaching visitor. Ulrik approached him and with a low bow introduced himself, “I am Ulrik Koaren, may I pray at your chapel?”

The man bowed in return, “Of course, you are welcome my son. I am Priest of Light Chaplain Terrek. Please make yourself at home.” Ulrik entered the brightly white painted chapel, it was small structure with only a few pews and a few stained glass windows, but it was welcoming. Candles were lit on the simple marble altar and book placed in the center. The carving of a sun was in the center of the altar’s face.

“This chapel feels so different from the rest of village, it really stands out,” commented Ulrik.

“Yes, said the chaplain, you have an honest eye. I came to this village long after its origins and built this chapel as a beacon of hope in such a bleak world.”

“How old is the village?”

“I do not know, but I know the Mayor is well over 60 years now.”

Ulrik paused, the man he met couldn't have been over forty, “That seems rather strange, the Mayor must have elven blood. You, yourself, must be around thirty. Lest of course, I'm a terrible judge of age.”

“Please,” the chaplain indicated a pew for Ulrik to sit on, “Let me explain.”

Ulrik obliged.

“Now then. In this world, as with others, things are not always what they seem. I would tell you much more history, but we are sorely lacking in time as the sun will be setting soon.”

“How can you tell? I did not see a sun all day,” asked Ulrik.

“When you have been here long enough, you get a feeling for it, I assure you. The Mayor...” began Terrek.

“Is he a Vampire!” interrupted Ulrik suspiciously.

“No! Not exactly, but you're on the right track though I fear. He's something as... complex, a Shade.”

“A Shade?”

“Yes, my son.”

“And you?”

“I-I fell a long time ago as well, I've been trapped here ever since.

When twilight comes, the Shades rise. Loathsome haunts, icy cold to the touch and filled with hunger. They feel no remorse, no fear and have no memory of what they've done. They feed on the warmth of the living and will stop at nothing to get it. Their realm growing with each new victim.

Locked doors can not stop them for long, they will win any fight in time.

The thing is, that, they do not know what they are. They live their lives normally during the day, and at twilight they change.”

“So, what can I do?” asked Ulrik.

“There are a few options. One is to get your people out of the village, they will not leave their borders in either form, it is their portent. Another is to come here, the chapel is protected from the Twilight Realm. Fight and you will become one of them.”

“Why have you not left?”

“I am a Shade as well. I am unchanging as they are and can not will myself to leave. I am lucky though, through the days something made me build this chapel. It protects me, and although I can see what happens I can do nothing other than warn other mortals that might wander in to this nest of shadows. I fear for my immortal soul Ulrik.”

“There must be a way. If they are simply men during the day, what about slaying them then?”

“I tried.” He was distantly haunted over this thought, “Even gave them last rites. They simply return the next day, vaguely aware of what happened the day before.

If there is a way to end this nightmare, I pray you find it and tell me, so that I might free these people. The voice of the Light is so quiet here, and I have been here so very long.”

“I will try Chaplain, you have my word,” Ulrik put his hand on the warm shoulder of the chaplain, there was nothing unsubstantial about him, he was very real and his concern was very genuine. “I will warn the others.”

“You can’t say it in front of the villagers, they will jail you for being a disruptor of the peace, and by night time you will simply swell their ranks. You must take care. You are already at risk since you have come here and we have spoken.”

“I understand.”

“Let us pray for guidance then.”

They prayed until Ulrik heard the others had come back from the well and decided to emerge from the chapel.

Skydog gave him a nod and Ulrik surveyed the village. There were all kinds of folks here, including a few dwarves and elves. Ulrik waited for a break in the conversation, “Hey, Greybeard, Mr Bothorne?”

They both acknowledged him.

“Mind if I go collect Soola and Grimble?”

Mr Bothorne looked uncertain.

Greybeard explained, “We weren’t certain if a dwarf or elf would be welcome here. We left them at the edge of the jungle as a precaution.”

“How many of you are there? Out there.”

“Around thirty souls to be honest, but just the two at the edge of the field. The others are waiting where we landed repairing our flying ship.”

“A flying ship! I don’t get to see too many of these, how long before they make their way here?”

“No need to, with directions we won’t disrupt the village and can be back to them in short order. Granted if you like, we could bring it by before we’re on our way.” Greybeard smiled.

“Mr Ulrik is it? Ah, yes. Go, get your friends, no sense in leaving them to stand out there on their own. Tell me about your ship Greybeard.”

Ulrik took his leave and made his way along the road back to the jungle. As Ulrik was not panicked or rushed, Soola and Grimble met him part of the way, but when he met up with them he stopped and leaned in to speak, “We’ve got a problem.”

“Is it the dog?” asked Soola.

“Wha?” Ulrik hadn’t noticed, but Hunter had followed him down the road, “No – shoo!” He waved the dog away.

The hound sulked away, but stayed nearby panting.

He gave it a scrutinizing look and whispered to the other two, “I met with the chaplain of the town, and this place is cursed. The villagers turn in to Shades at twilight, from the sounds of it some kind of nasty vampire like things. Only thing is they don’t know they do it, and from the sounds of it are un-killable.”

“So, let’s get out of here,” Soola suggested.

“First we have to get the others and get back to the ship. Oh, and it’s almost nighttime now.”

“I don’t want to be walking through this jungle at night, it’s bad enough during the day.”

“Agreed, I’m thinking we stay at the chapel over night,” suggested Ulrik.

The pair nodded in agreement.

It felt like a very long walk back, every single person that Ulrik looked at he felt a slight panic.

They finally arrived back to the center of town where Skydog was waiting for them, “Where are the others?” asked Soola.

“At the mayor’s house,” he tilted his head in the general direction of a larger home.

“Great.” Soola leaned in and covertly whispered to him, “There’s a problem with the village.”

Skydog scoffed knowingly, “Yeh, something feels off here.”

“You don’t know the half of it. We have to get everyone over to the chapel before nightfall.”

“I just noticed the sky is getting dimmer.”

Soola looked up, “Dang it. Okay, let’s go get them.”

They walked up to the house, knocked and were beckoned to come in. There were several men and women inside, even children. Mayor Bothorne, Greybeard, Jollunn and Edge were all inside talking over an old paper map. The Mayor indicated a spot on it, “Only takes six hours to get there on foot, it’s where we go when we need to get supplies. Take the main road leading from the chapel, take the right fork then the next left fork or you’ll be too far from anything at night.”

“Hey fellas, care for a drink?” a beautiful lady elegantly presented a silver tray with several glasses resting upon it, the scent of sugar and lemons was inescapable.

Ulrik felt his mouth fill with salivation and swallowed in anticipation, “I wouldn’t mind.” Taking a glass he raised it to the lady and drank deeply. The others waited for him to react, he nodded his approval. “My thanks,” he said to her and they then each accepted a glass and bowed.

Grimble abstained courteously. He would wait for sterner stuff.

The Mayor spoke again, “It’s quite late in the day, you’ll be moving through the jungle at night. As you know it’s dangerous enough during the day, and knowing the way. You are welcome to stay the night and return to your ship in the morning.”

Greybeard was about to accept, but the group in the know interrupted. Soola being the most coherent, “We really should be getting back, my humble thanks for your hospitality my fairest of lady’s and my most gentlemanly of fellows Mr Mayor.” He kissed the lady’s hand and bowed to the gentleman.

The troupe stepped out the front door, a few of them made it to the ground before Ulrik was on the top wooden step he looked to the horizon there was a bright glowing sliver white light hanging there and growing dimmer like a sunset, “Didn’t notice that before...” his voice faded out, everything seemed to slow down and smear, everything looked grey and blurred.

They took several steps across the road, Greybeard was still being ushered down the road by Skydog, Jollunn was still apologizing for the hasty departure, and a shadow slowly crept across the field towards the village. The field looked strange as though each blade of grass were being blackened and were left smoking with a radiated green aura.

Ulrik felt every second pass as though each were a strained moment in time, he had barely made it down to the ground off of the third step.

Soola was yelling something, and pointing towards the chapel.

The chapel looked so far away now. It stayed the same while the landscape changed to black with a seeping green aura around it.

The sliver in the sky changed to green and Ulrik realized he was in the shadows now, the people around him, that weren't part of his group, they all looked like blackened shapes. From what he could see; their outfits, faces and hair had changed drastically as though they were an alternate version of themselves. Their eyes were smoking green, their teeth were outlined in green, their innards were replaced with a swirling smoky green nexus, he could even see a black smooth ribcage on some of them.

Then the sliver in the sky vanished and all was dark.

Soola's clothes were grey like the others in the group, but his flesh was still blue in colour. He shouted at Ulrik, "Get to the chapel!" He had swords in his hands.

The villagers weren't paying any attention to them until the sliver vanished, now their black shapes all faced them. There weren't many of them, perhaps four in the streets, a few more looking through the windows, but there were six men and women in the shadows of the Mayor's home. It was not an organized ambush in the least. They were the closest and seeing the green lines of their shapes smiling or scowling wickedly.

Jollunn, whom was at the back of the group, jumped out of the house in to the street and scrambled to the center of the group.

The group inched their way towards to the chapel, it was illuminated like a beacon of light in the darkness. Its shape and colour were untouched, the chaplain waited next to the circle that surrounded the tiny structure, the door was open where they could see lit candles inside.

One of the villagers, having moved so quietly and quickly that no one realized she was that close, grabbed Edge's leg and tripped him to the ground. He screamed out in surprise and pain. Grimble spun around and brought his axe up in to the face of the woman. The arm that had grabbed Edge and part of her face appeared in grey tones, but now Edge's leg had gone numb and the fleshy colour of his foot was grey as well. Grimble's axe hit her squarely in the throat, what should have decapitated her instead sent her flying in to the second story of one of the nearby wooden structures.

Jollunn picked Edge up from the ground, whom said he felt cold.

Greybeard shouted, "Run!" and spurred them all in to action.

It also resulted in the three remaining villagers moving to block their path, they strode across the black ground as though taking great soundless strides.



Greybeard slashed at them knocking one aside with a heavy blow from Volund's sword, but a second villager, moving quickly struck him in the mid section. He let out a groan, his body greyed and the creature's hand and arm went from black to tones of grey.

Skydog, whom was closest swung his axe, which passed through it's body without contact, so he brought a knee up in to the chin of the shadowy man, which he instantly regretted. Both pirates were humbled and greyed from their contact with the second villager, and although it had been knocked back, the third was closing.

Soola, Grimble and Ulrik whom were charged with the rear guard saw the Mayor's house empty in quick order.

Ulrik cast a light spell, this illuminated a contorted Mayor's face in grey, he looked... like an evil butcher, shaved head, pierced flesh, chains dangling, straps of leather tied across him tightly with a leathery apron. Their shapes were tattered, strange and twisted versions of themselves. Clean cut when the original was a mess or vice versa, some were painted with phosphorescent symbols, others were pierced with shadowy spikes and bound in straps of shadow. In the light their skin was grey, but in the dark it was transparent, only the bones from their torsos were visible as shadows due to the glowing green within.

The creatures did not recoil from the light as he'd hoped, and he began casting another spell. One of the Mayor's men lunged for Ulrik, but Soola had him with two quick slashes he blocked the cleaver headed for Ulrik's skull and sent the creature sprawling to the blackened ground nearby with a jab to the ribs.

Grimble knocked aside another two, sending them flying in to the shadows, but the next two hit him really hard slamming him to the ground. Where they held him a soft white smoke seeped out of his body and both he and the Shades became grey.

Ulrik's spell finished and he sent a bolt of electricity through the two monsters on Grimble, which scattered them through the air.

Grimble stood up, "I feel terrible." Still he managed to bat aside another creature that lunged at him, Ulrik believed it was the Mayor's wife that time.

There was a scream, it was Greybeard. The third villager had him by the wrist and was dragging him off, he had dropped Volund's sword. Skydog picked it up from the ground and was about to give chase as he watch his companion and his captor turn grey, then Greybeard vanished behind a curtain of black as he was surrounded by Shades in the shadows. More and more villagers seeped through the walls of the houses. He broke in to a run for the chapel.

"Go!" ordered Soola.

Ulrik grabbed Edge's other arm and helped Jollunn rush him down the street. They were close to the chapel now.

Ulrik saw something moving fast through the darkness, it was low to the ground and before he could warn anyone the hound “Hunter” collided with them sending the three of them sprawling.

Ulrik hit the ground and skidded to a stop. From this close the seemingly black nothing that was the ground was actually made up of sand a pebbles of green with tiny green auras of their own.

Hunter didn’t stop. Its glow was weaker at the center, but was still similar to the Shades, his fur and skin were transparent, but his skeleton was black like the others. It grabbed Edge by the collar and spinning around dragged him in to the shadows by a house where the Shades converged, his screaming carried on as the others watched helplessly.

Soola pulled up Jollunn, “Get up, he’ll only buy us a moment.”

Grimble grabbed Ulrik and pulled him to his feet, the four of them ran.

The light ahead was the only thing in their minds. The man inside the circle had tears in his eyes, Skydog beckoned them inside the chapel. Everything would be okay, once they reached the circle.

\* \* \*

It was a long night. The Shades taunted them from outside of the circle. Greybeard and Edge also joined in. Mostly they tormented the Chaplain and Skydog, telling him about the people he had betrayed in their time as one of them. They even threw things which bounced away from the invisible area protected by the chapel, some even threw themselves at the chapel with the same effect. They could press against it, claw at it, it wouldn’t budge.

This raised several questions.

“What if one of them were pulled in to the circle?” It hadn’t been tried for fear of breaking the protective aura, also reaching through the barrier had different results. For those that were already Shades, they would get shunted out. For those that weren’t already Shades getting pulled outside was a very real risk.

“What about a lasso?” Soola suggested. It could certainly work, but what if it broke the protective barrier.

“What if one of them were inside the circle, when this twilight realm materialized?” It had been tried a few times, but it was difficult to convince someone the first time and keep them there, they always had the unconscious propensity to find a way to leave; excuses, drifting away, twisted logic. The first person that he was able to successfully get to stay inside, witnessed what happened outside of the barrier. He untied them and they tried reaching across the barrier to pull someone else in, instead they were instantly shunted outside, changed back to Shades and never returned in the evening back in the flesh, as though repelled.

Another instance resulted in a few nights of success, but the other person slowly went mad to the taunts, unable to sleep during the day or night and just one night didn't return to the sanctuary. The Chaplain had found out that they had killed themselves, because they don't forget until the twilight takes them, a few nights later they were back in the ranks of the Shades outside.

"Would they chase them out of the village?" Once the shadow fell, you weren't in the Netherworld anymore, you were in the Twilight Realm. The village was a gateway area, and once the lid shut, you were stuck inside. Some very fast beings had managed to make it out of the village and down the roads, but they were just captured in the jungle.

"What about the creatures in the jungles? Were they turned in to Shades as well? What about the dog?" None mortals wouldn't cross over, they were somehow unaffected and would just fade away from sight. The dog was Bothorne's pet, most animals avoid these areas, even insects, but the dog stayed with Bothorne to his end.

Chaplain Terrek prayed to the light in the chapel when he wasn't being asked questions.

He was thankful that most of them had been able to make it back to the circle, and warned them not to reach across the barrier.

Skydog took a couple of potshots in to the crowd with Greybeard's crossbow, it didn't seem to have any effect on them.

"How do you kill them?" Terrek didn't have an answer for that one, he'd seen some Shades destroyed by divine power, and even swords, but they always returned. The best effort he'd seen was by a Necromancer, he'd cast some spells that Terrek didn't recognize which tore the Shades apart and then jumped away through the shadows. Those Shades never returned.

Other Shades that were slain during the day, in their human form, simply returned as Shades that night.

In fact, the Shades outside had even said so, "Terrek, you thought you could kill us. You butchered your friends and piled our bodies in the basement, you even poisoned the well, but you can't stop us. We're always here." Their voices were calm and cold, telling whispered tales of madness, then they would suddenly shout in anger and vanish in to the darkness. It wasn't random, it was very tactical, belittling and calculated. They offered to end it. They offered their power. They offered to ease their minds.

"Why did you stay?"

"If I hadn't stayed, we would not be having this conversation my friends. I've managed to save a few poor mortals that have come through here."

A choir of voices outside interrupted, "Like you saved us!" They called out and laughed.

Terrek continued, "Like you will be able to do, they were able to leave in the morning. I believe it may be my calling, my penance.

I did try. I can't. I tried. I left here intent on getting help, I had to fight so hard to leave, I don't know how I got back here..."

There was a shout outside, "He lies!"

Chaplain Terrek's shoulders fell, and he humbly answered, "I don't know for certain."

Soola looked outside, it was the mayor's doppelganger standing alone at the barrier, "Ask him, how he got back here," it said.

Soola did not need to ask, Terrek answered, "I had gone for help, I was unlucky because the group I found tried to help me and I had escaped those that had tried to kill me when they heard my plight. Those Shades that leave here, or any shadow rift, and find Mortals, feed off of them, turn them in to more of these and send them to the Twilight. They must have figured out what I was doing when I thought I slept. I believe they managed to destroy my Shade because I awoke back here.

That is when I built the chapel. Something compelled me."

"We love you Terrek, you brought us so many new warm bodies," smirked Bothorne.

Soola closed the door. The sounds outside were distant and muffled to the point that the night seemed peaceful and calm.

Skydog pointed to a very long series of books on a shelf, "What are these chaplain?"

The chaplain smiled, "My notes. I log how many nights pass, unusual circumstances, the names of those that have fallen and those that make it out. I hope to write your names in there tomorrow morning."

Ulrik stood up and reached in to his satchel, "Here. I'd like you to have this. It looks like you are running low." He handed over a thick book.

"A spell book?" asked Terrek.

"Not as of yet. I have a spare that I was prepared to start filling when I found something, but I haven't come close yet. I also have a spare ink vial, quill and a few candles you can have. Anything to help." He smiled.

Terrek was sincerely thankful, "My thanks Ulrik, you are truly kind. One of the boys in the village brings me candles, I think he does it for reasons he doesn't understand. Either way, this will help, my thanks again."

The warm glow of the candles felt soothing. One by one they fell asleep, despite the horrors outside, they slept fairly well.

\* \* \*

The chaplain woke them, "I'm sorry I have no food to offer other than bread and water. But it would be best if you got on the road as soon as the sun rises. Oh, forgive the expression, when the sky is brighter."

They roused, gave thanks and took bread and water. Terrek had the door open already. The night was cool, there was still no breeze, there were stars though hanging there in a clear sky.

Only a few Shades remained, they were moving away. Greybeard and Edge stood nearby, they looked the most like they did in life. Perhaps the changes took place over time and stuck.

There was a green sliver of light on the horizon. They felt the eeriness fading, everything faded from black to grey, it streaked and smudged like it had before and the sliver turned to orange, the shadow crept back and colour returned to the world.

The figures changed from grey blurs to their normal human forms and resumed walking around, or appeared from their bedroom windows as though having had a good night's sleep.

"You need not fear them anymore, they will not harm you," encouraged Terrek. "But, you should go."

The village just went about their business, a few waved politely.

They cautiously stepped out of the circle, Greybeard and Edge greeted them. Skydog asked, "Well, what about you two?"

"The Mayor offered us a place to stay dog. We talked about it through the night, we'd like to stay and give up the life," said Greybeard.

Skydog wasn't expecting that kind of answer, but it made sense from what they learned through the night. He nodded.

"You can keep the sword," said Greybeard. "I realize it comes with the command, sorry about resigning on the spot, take care of the Skycutter, it's a good blade." He held out a hand to shake as farewell.

Skydog took it apprehensively.

Edge, who wasn't wearing a shirt before the change, was back to wearing it. "Hope this doesn't look like abandoning my post, but this place is just so peaceful." He smiled warmly and hugged Skydog.

The two of them turned and went to ask the mayor where they could fit in. The mayor greeted them at his door and waved good morning to the others.

Skydog leaned over to Jollunn, "That is some creepy creepy weirdness that is." He gave a shudder.

The entire group just nodded in agreement.

They took a few steps more and Jollunn turned around back to the chaplain, with sudden realization he asked, "Do you ever leave the chapel sir?"

Terrek sighed, "I dare not. If I do, I may not have the strength to come back."

The others had stopped not far away, "Is there anything I can get you then?"

He shook his head, "No worries, for some reason they bring me food and clean for me. They are my friends during the daylight, but what is said in front of them their other halves will know. Go with my blessing. If you discover some way to end this, send word, I pray thee."

Jollunn bowed and the others followed suit.

It wasn't long before they were running down the road and passed in to the jungle.

The path back was straight forward, and despite seeing some very strange things, they were troubled by nothing along the way.

They arrived back to the ship in short order and climbed up the rocky outcropping to where they could see the ship's deck.

There was a little bit of a surprise as they peered over the scene, the deck was burned in places, bodies were lined up across the deck with blankets covering them. Hela stood on the deck with two men, keeping guard.

She perked up and greeted them cheerily, she started pushing out the walk plank.

Ulrik asked, "What happened?"

One of the pirates answered instead, "We were attacked by a huge eyeball creature with tentacles! Craziest of things. Hela really saved our skins!"

Ulrik smiled, "Yeh, she has a habit of that." He gave her a wink.

The other pirate asked, "Where's the Captain and the others?"

The mood shifted visibly, "We'll need to talk to Mr Eldor, can someone go and get him?"

Hela answered, "Sure!" She whirled about and headed over to the aft castle and thumped on the door with her staff, "Mister Eldor!"

It wasn't a very long of a wait, he grumbled, but emerged with a few other men following behind, "What is it you infernal child? Ah! You're back... where's the captin' at?"

Skydog unwrapped the sword he was carrying and presented it, “She didn’t make it - Captain Eldor.” Skydog kept his voice low enough that it wouldn’t alert anyone beyond the deck.

The words hit the old man pretty hard, he didn’t seem happy about being promoted either. He looked at the other crewmen and reached forward for Volund’s cutlass.

“Give me a report of what happened. Leave out no detail.”

They retreated to the Captain’s quarters, leaving three of the crewmen on the deck and taking only Mr Hemm with them, the new first mate.

Eldor got the summary pretty quickly and turned the ship towards the direction of the Bazaar, he wanted out of here as quickly as possible.