

DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

CHAPTER 8: THE FORTRESS

They could see the fortress in the distance, it hadn't reached Hollowbrook yet. It was a twisted abomination floating through the sky, dark and constructed to look like body parts, enlarged, deformed, twisted and reshaped. It had a screaming skull nestled at the top, a spinal column that looked like steps winding to the top. All of it looked like blackened steel or iron.

There seemed to be no movement at all other than the swaying chains at the base of the structure. The rock formation that it rested on seemed to be the only natural thing about it.

Captain Volund shuddered, "Creepy thing isn't it?"

They returned to the captain's cabin to formulate plans, "Ok, these here look like panels, they might have something behind them."

"We believe those to be doors," spoke Rezzik, he and the seer were the only two in the room from their group. They were pretty large creatures and they would've crowded the room easily.

"Well, they're at the base, what are the odds the prisoners are held at the top of the structure? Pretty slim is my guess. If those are doors, you'll want to take those, prisoners will be kept at the bottom. Granted we don't know what the inside of this thing looks like."

"Well, we could start at the top and work our way down, or start at the bottom and work our way up."

"Advantage is always going down, tactically," injected Grimble.

"No, we must start at the bottom. The less conflict the better, if we don't have to fight the entire fortress, let's not do that," added Soola.

"Any chance of sneaking in?"

"We'll try, but it's not likely, you'll have to be prepared from the start to fight your way through."

"Any advice on the battle old man?"

The seer looked up, "None that would help now. Better to tell you once we're there."

"Any advice on the equipment?"

“Bring a variety, assume nothing of your enemies, the Neth are cruel creatures from Hades.”

“From Hades!?” Soola balked. “You’re joking.”

The seer’s face was solemn, “No.”

“Wonderful. That’s just great.”

“Nothing has changed my son.”

“Everything has changed! Aw, this... this is too much Ulrik.” Ulrik wasn’t taking the news much better, but he was being quiet about it.

Grimble spoke, “Lighten up Soola, it’s not like we’ll be in Hades.”

“Nice.”

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The ship sidled up to the boney back of the structure, there were crewmen everywhere holding their breath and keeping their eyes peeled for danger.

The stick they held out had a coin on the end, it shone brightly with a magical illumination. It was the longest stick they could find, a 20’ pole used for pushing off. Suddenly the light winked out and the crew stirred, Captain Volund gave the signal and the ship halted and slowly drifted back. They were now matching the slow lumbering speed of the fortress.

They worked their way around until one side of the boat had solid ground underneath it using their coin to gauge where the barrier was to maneuver painstakingly for the better part of an hour.

The structure was creepy. Its surface had a porous dry surface like cooked marrow, while also appearing like a slick wet steel surface shining in the ambient light. There were gargoyle like skulls attached sporadically along its outer wall near the crown. Flaps of “skin” lay draped over large areas like unpainted canvas.

The team that was being dropped in took up their ropes and repelled to the ground. It consisted of four Aresen and Krullig whom had a harness. They touched down on the ash like rocky surface and fanned out to keep guard, the next group that went down included Soola and Grimble. They dispersed on the ground finding rocky cover.

Lastly the Seer was lowered by crewmen, while Ulrik and Hela let their coiled rope ladders drop and climbed over the edge.

As Ulrik grabbed on to the rope ladder, he noticed how Skydog held on to the boat almost like a mayfly, he then had a realization, “You’re the one that followed us at Haskmordikards, aren’t you?”

Skydog nodded, “Yep, good luck with this one. Fire is one thing, but this, this place is sick.”

“Thanks,” answered Ulrik wryly.

Hela’s eyes fell to the face of one of the gargoyle like skulls fastened to the wall, it reminded her of a minotaur skull with sharpened teeth. As she peered at it, a soft orange pinpoint of light flickered in to existence in its empty eye sockets.

Suddenly, it screamed and flame erupted from its shape. Hela was startled back, and she retreated down her rope ladder as quickly as she could.

The scream was answered, and the sound of unlocking gates echoed through the air.

Ulrik, got to the surface and looking up he saw the skull leap from the wall and take to the air. The crewmen were fighting back, Volund was in command and was already pulling her ship out of there, the Seer was barely on the ground, his men cutting him free.

A pair of additional skulls joined the fray, fire leapt from their jaws and streaked towards the ship. Ulrik didn’t have time to watch, Soola was trying to get his attention, there were figures emerging from the fortress. Two full large figures in armour shambled forwards and three smaller things ran right at them like dogs, only they weren’t dogs at all.

As they got closer it became evident that they were just legs, with some kind of bladder and tubes resting on top of the hips. Ulrik thought they looked like innards.

The Aresen moved in with their spears striking one of the things to the ground, its wounds sprayed a yellow and brown foaming liquid in all directions, some of it hit the goat men. They screamed out as it sizzled against their flesh, blisters formed where the skin was exposed and raw muscle began to dissolve.

The twins, as Ulrik called them, elegantly dodged and weaved around their target, it sprayed the yellow liquid at them from a tube as a stream, and although it came close it missed all the same. Krullig charged in with his enormous hammer and with a mighty upper crosscut sent the creature flying over the edge of the cliff. A trail of yellow acidic liquid followed.

One of the creature’s intestine-like appendages slunk out and began to grapple with Grimly, swords struck out and the creature started to topple over twitching and bleeding.

When all was done Shallo, at least Ulrik believed it to be, lie in a heap on the ground mostly dissolved. Ardo and Kezek were very badly burned from the goo, Kezek couldn’t straighten his arm.

Ulrik looked at the coin in his hand, no light shone from it.

The two large figures were still several yards away, they were closing the gap slowly, their movements were jarring. They wore long layered skirts of skin and wide girdles high up to their ribcages with dangling hooked chains, their torsos and arms were heavily muscled and full great helms covered their entire heads. What was most disturbing were their arms and weapons. The blades of their swords were enormous, their hands were missing and their forearms were split in half, the swords were imbedded there and the wounds were tied shut holding the blades firmly in place with barbed coils of steel. These creatures served one purpose only, to destroy.

Krullig, Hydi and Eydi split the pair by charging one, Krullig was faster than the shifting creature and slammed his hammer in to its chest. The hammer struck it dead center and the creature stopped moving forward, but that was all.

Krullig looked dismayed. He was pretty much eye-to-eye with the ten foot tall creature. A dark and vacant helmet stared back, it was riveted in to the neck of the body with long spikes.

Its dual blades came up slashing Krullig across his belly and lower chest.

The twins were both knocked aside with little effort as they tried to deflect the slices away from Krullig. They rolled with the blow and came up standing.

The others watched in horror, the other creature still making its way towards them.

“They’re slow as mud, let’s move around them!” shouted out Soola.

The group fanned out and moved around the creature towards the front of the structure. Suddenly they stopped.

Another guardian stood on the stairwell leading upwards, it was slowly making its way down. There were three guardians now, but this one was not leaving the stairs.

“We have another one,” announced Soola as the group came to a stop.

Krullig had no such luck, he gave it a rib cracking swing to the side, but that only pushed it a little. It raised its sword arms, he gave it a crack under the chin with his hammer and with little regard it chopped downward. Krullig’s arm and hand hit the ground still holding the hammer. He roared in agony.

The twins hadn’t given up and were ducking and weaving to try to distract it, but the hooked chains were keeping them distanced.

Krullig still raging launched himself forward and headbutted the empty helmet – to his surprise, the helm dented. He reared up and kicked at the torso with his hooves. The creature stumbled backwards, but a sword arm came up and stabbed in to the bull portion

of Krullig's torso. Krullig couldn't take any more and collapse, the hooked chain snaked towards him and sunk in.

Eydi, having put his sword away, jumped up on to the creature's back and began hammering the helm with a bare hand, it stumbled ever so slightly. Grabbing a hold of the helm's decorative horns, he then grabbed at a spike protruding in to the neck and pulled. Surprisingly the spike came free and blood gushed everywhere.

The creature staggered, but did not stop.

From out of nowhere an enormous hook and chain which arched from the fortress underbelly crashed nearby missing the combatants. This was the first time the group had become aware that the giant hooks and chains were "watching".

Hydi called to the others for help. They stopped and tried doubling back, the other guardian was still an obstacle.

Krullig thrashed on the ground resisting the chains, the creature stepped forward and stabbed at his chest, Krullig shuddered and stopped moving.

It was too late, the chains now had a firm hold on Krullig and the guardian turned and began dragging Krullig towards the tower.

Eydi still rode on its back, grabbed at another spike and the sword arm came up smashing him across the face with such force he flew back off of the guardian and hit the ground. Hydi mimicked this, head snapping back and her body flew back rolling on the ground.

The guardian kept on moving as the others ran by, they took stabs at the creature, with no effect, the other creature moved forward to intercept them and they passed by each other as two ships would on the water.

Krullig was dragged to the front door, the doors swung open automatically, the creature walked through and the doors closed behind it.

Ulrik decided to try some magic and unleashed a stream of fire, this only served to get the guardians attention and it having stopped moving, decided to go after him.

It began to choral him to the edge of the rocky platform. The others were having no luck making a dent on him.

The doors swung open again, and the previous guardian returned to the battle.

Grimble just sighed.

As the guardian approached Ulrik, an ogre suddenly appeared between them. Hela smiled.

The Ogre was much larger than the guardian and its club came crashing down on its head. The club cracked and splintered, the ogre looked at it perplexed.

The sword arms came up in to the abdomen of the ogre skewering it. The Ogre bellowed in pain and rage bringing a meaty fist down on the head of the helm. It crumpled beneath the impact and stumbled backwards, the swords withdrew and the ogre fell to the ground dead then vanished in a cloud of smoke.

Grimble caught on, "It's not immune to our flesh!"

The guardian now turned to Hela and began its approach. Hela had no room to maneuver and she tried to cast something, but it fizzled. She was standing in the barrier.

The guardian raised its arms to strike, Hela turned to Ulrik, "I killed Ila." She said it in the most normal tone he's ever heard her speak in, and then she leapt back and plummeted off of the cliff passed the giant chain that lazily swung at her. The sword arms of the guardian barely missing her.

Ulrik ran to the ledge, threw himself down and futilely reached for his friend. He watched her tiny black form fall, her cape billowing out behind her. Ulrik shouted for her, tears filled his eyes.

Then there was a distortion around her and she vanished from the sky.

He grimaced and rolled away from the guardian, whom was getting ready to chop at him, when suddenly Grimble and a few of the Aresen hit it from behind sending it straight off of the edge. They watched it tumble downward and the chains from the floating rock reached out and hooked the guardian and started to raise it back up.

Grimble grumbled, "These things are hard to kill!"

"We must defeat them with our bare fists, only I imagine that very few survive very long enough to do so," spoke the elder Aresen.

"Hela's summon worked pretty good, but she's gone now, any other ideas?"

The remaining guardian had picked one of the Aresen as his new target, Grimly, if Ulrik wasn't mistaken. The Aresen moved around keeping his distance.

"I have one," spoke the old goat, "You have any wind spells?"

The enormous chains and hooks from the fortress kept them from staying still too long.

Ulrik thought about it and called forth a great funnel of air and slammed it straight in to the guardian. The guardian was flung far off the ledge.

"Well now, that's some results!" cheered Soola.

Ulrik then moved the funnel towards the guardian on the stairs, it must have seen it coming and dug its hooked chains in the surrounding walls and steps. Its body lifted off of the ground and clanked there in the wind.

The first guardian that was pushed off of the platform rose from below, the much larger chains of the fortress lowering it back in to the battlefield.

Ulrik shifted uncomfortably at its presence, and with a twist of his hands slammed the stairwell guardian against the fortress wall with his wind spell. One of the swords chipped on impact, the helm crunched and blood flowed from a wound in its arm.

This was promising!

An enormous hook and chain from the fortress underbelly slammed across the battlefield and then dragged itself away. It was somewhat close to the Seer this time.

The battlefield guardian moved towards Ulrik now, but the others having put away their weapons, were now brawling with it while trying to also simultaneously avoid its deadly blades.

Ulrik, continued to buffet the guardian against the structure until the chains and hooks released their hold and he was able to fling it out in to the open air.

The other guardian was close now, Ulrik shifted his position away and moved the funnel at it. It reacted similarly, grabbing at the strange rocky ground with its hooked chains.

There were no walls to slam it against and the force of the wind was not enough to dislodge it.

Grimble was speaking with a couple of the Aresen and they picked him up and boosted him on to the back of the creature as Eydi had been.

Ulrik tilted the wind tunnel forward to keep it off of Grimble as much as possible, while keeping the monster suspended in the air.

This time Grimble tucked his fingers under the helm, narrowly avoided being skewered by the creatures jabbing sword arm, and began to wrench the helm free.

With a sickening rip the spikes tore through the neck and the helm came loose, the body thrashed and threw Grimble clear with the helm.

Ulrik released the wind funnel and the guardian slammed to the ground its swords holding it up momentarily and blood squirting forward from a decapitated neck as though it were freshly beheaded.

As it collapse to the ground it was obvious it had nothing below the waist, no hips or legs.

Ulrik looked over at the bladder creatures they had faced earlier and posited that they might actually belong to each other. Then he snapped back to reality as another large chain slammed down.

The ship was far off in the distance, small blasts of flame could be seen as the crew scrambled around the bridge. Captain Volund was keeping the aerial forces at bay for now, possibly even winning from the looks of it.

Something caught his eye up high. Glancing over, he saw a pale white feminine figure standing in the maw of the skull, it was bound in a constricting leather gown of some kind and carried a very strange looking staff which had glowing orbs floating nearby it. The lady simply turned around and walked back inside.

“What do you make of her?” asked Soola whom had also spotted her.

“I think we should avoid her,” said the Seer.

Ulrik nodded, “I would agree. Besides only a few of us could fly up there, right?” He looked around for confirmation, they all nodded in agreement.

“How do you suppose we get inside the gates?” asked Balto.

Soola was checking them over, “Don’t see any locks or any way to get inside.”

Rezzik had revived the twins and brought them over to the Seer, they seemed to have had been lucky to survive the sword strike – perhaps it was something else other than luck. They both now had the same bruise across their face.

Grimble walked up, “Maybe we can knock?” As he approached the doors swung open.

“Woah.” Soola looked back at Grimble, Grimble just shrugged. Then Soola saw it, Grimble still had the empty helm in his hand. “Hmm, back up a bit there Grimble.”

Grimble obliged. The doors closed.

“Nice work! Watch your heads,” spoke Balto as another chain came crashing down.

There was a shift in the fortress, “We’re moving downwards.” Ardo was right. The fortress was slowly dipping down.

“Shall we take the stairs or the door?” asked Soola.

“There’s presumably an up and down in here, the stairs only seem to go up though,” added Ardo.

“I like options, let’s go inside,” concluded Grimble.

Everyone entered while Grimbale held the doors. Ulrik began to examine the doors, they seemed to be crafted by blackened porous bone and lackard with something that made parts of it look like metal.

“I think those guardians were hurt by the walls because these are made of bone,” Ulrik said quietly.

The Seer spoke, “Those guardians were Edroxin. And they are bone, as are the walls and parts of the floors. These are some of our people and others. Krullig’s brother is in here somewhere, as he is now. This is what the Neth do. They sculpt the flesh.”

“So this is made of dead people?” balked Soola.

The Seer sounded saddened, “Who said they were dead.”

Ulrik swallowed hard.

The chamber they entered was enormous, and an ominous orange light emanated from inside from a low hanging creepy twisted chandelier. The ceiling was high enough that it was out of sight and reached in to blackness. Below that was a pit in the floor. The blood trail led right up to the pit edge and then seemingly in to it.

The doors grated shut and only the blood coloured light remained. Grimbale was far enough inside that they felt the doors didn’t shut suspiciously of their own accord.

They moved up to the pit, “Well, what do you think?” Soola asked aloud.

“I dunno, this looks like someone’s ribcage,” spoke up Grimbale as he looked around at the walls. “Sort of.”

“Or a catacomb,” added Ulrik.

Soola clarified, “That’s not really what I meant. I meant up or down?”

The floor they stood on appeared like muscle tissue stretched towards the center, which then in turn was sphincter like.

“I’m not even going to say what this look like,” responded Soola.

Ardo asked, “Do you hear some creaking?”

Sure enough there was an eerie creaking coming from the ceiling. A few heartbeats passed and then a black figure dropped from the darkness. It was slender and twisted. It was bound in leather straps that had twisted the bones and muscles of its victim. If there were eye or mouth holes in its black leather mask, you would not know, for they were sown shut. It gave a hiss and lurched.

Each of the group jerked involuntarily in response.

“Laschzhul. Use fire Ulrik,” Kaarezek spoke with urgency.

Ulrik began to cast and a leather black strap snapped towards him like a whip, Grimble stepped forward to grab it, and it wrapped around his arm, the pair struggled for control.

Ulrik finished his spell and a stream of fire erupted from his hand, flowing through the room and touching the creature. It caught fire and let go of Grimble, whom didn't let go in return. As the room lit up, they saw something worse, bound to the ceiling like cocoons were scores more of the Laschzhul, and they did not like the fire!

They screeched and began dropping from the ceiling, their whip like straps lashing out and grabbing at the intruders.

The battle was complete chaos. The straps could be cut with some effort or a heavy blow, but were solid, a good chop revealed mangled bone and flesh, but it was like iron and would not succumb to their weapons.

Ulrik turned to fiery bolts which struck with great effect, the warriors finally pulled out torches and found ways to light them up, but not before Balto and Ardo were both flung in to the pit.

Balto could be heard calling up to the group a short time later.

Although the fire was effective, there were too many creatures, “We need to get out of here!” called out Soola.

“Where do you suggest?”

“Balto survived the fall, I say we go down as planned!” he grabbed a loose strap from a burning creature and jumped down, the creature slammed to the ground and slid along to the hole and then flipped over the edge.

The burning corpse and Soola's torch lit up the bottom of the pit, which looked like dried out organs, only Soola was visible. Soola stood in the middle looking a little panicked, “Guys! Hurry up!”

Grimble jumped down and the others followed suit, even Ulrik. The only one that did not jump down was the Seer. They called out to him, but there was no answer.

The torches lit up the chamber. It was not much better than their last chamber. Surrounding the room were small misshapened dwarf-like creatures, they bore no beards and their limbs were atrophied requiring them to wriggle across the veiny floor.

Grimble visibly shuddered, “What deviltry is this?”

Balto was being piled upon by the gruesome creatures and they were dragging him off through the wall which seemed to envelope the entire pile.

Ardo was unconscious on the ground, the creepers were still shuffling forward. Grumble took a swing and smashed the skull of one like a pumpkin, despite being smashed up the creature kept crawling towards Ardo's body and Grumble.

Grimble took another swing, while Rezzik pulled Ardo away. The creatures were everywhere, appearing from the folds in the walls and even ceiling. This chamber was an oubliette of doom.

They could see a corridor trailing off, "Let's go!" Soola led the charge, Grumble defended their escape. Rezzik was having trouble, it looked like Ardo had been latched on to by one of the creatures and he couldn't pull him free. Grumble stepped up and chopped off the already short limb, it whined like a giant baby. Grumble was startled, not by the scream, but by the limb that he had severed, it was absorbed in to Ardo's flesh as though they had grown together.

As he backed away something touched his shoulder, one of the creatures on the wall. He swung his axe hard, cleaving the creature, but the arm and head remained attached.

Rezzik grabbed at the creature, and instantly began to graft to it, he panicked ripping his own flesh away. Grumble toppled over, his head being absorbed and another creature grabbed at his legs, he was screaming in frustration. Rezzik's luck was no better as two more attached to him, and more and more kept coming forward. The pair were dragged in to the folds.

Only Azzothaffat saw what happened and he was horrified. He ran after the others.

When he caught up to them, they were at a junction a strange flap of skin was stretched across their path like a door.

Soola looked back, "Where are the others?"

Azzothaffat stammered, "Gone, they're gone."

"What do you mean their gone?" growled Soola, "What happened?" He was visibly angry, he grabbed the rather large creature by the collar. "What happened?"

The Aresen shook its large head, "Those creatures they absorbed them, they melted right in to them by touch!"

Grimly approached them, "Release my friend elf, it is not Azzothaffat's fault, whatever has happened to them."

There was shuffling coming from the corridor where they had made their escape, the creepers were making their way this way.

"We need to figure out this doorway," spoke up Ulrik, "We don't have the helm anymore though."

Soola let go of the Aresen, “Ok, it’s leathery, try blasting it.”

Ulrik unleashed a few bolts of fire at it, it did snap open, but hooked chains shot out in response! They jumped back as it grappled Ulrik, “Gah! I really hate this place!”

The skin contorted and now appeared like a face where the hole that the chains reached from would be considered the mouth.

Having dropped his staff, Ulrik drew his dagger just as the chains lifted him and dragged him inside the darkened maw. The others charged forth hacking and spearing the creature.

Azzothaffat even rammed it with his head, which appeared to be the only attack that left a large bruise and pulled that corner from the wall where it was latched on.

Eydi, “I think I’m getting the hang of this.” He put away his sword began tearing at it with fingers, which made it tear like thick skin. It shrieked for lack of a better word and expelled Ulrik. The others joined in quickly and before long it was in tatters on the floor.

Ulrik coughed and looked around. The group had been whipped by the chains and pierced by the hooks, but were hanging on. “Drink your potions, you look like hell,” he said.

Soola laughed, “You heard him gents.” They all took out potions and drank quickly. The creepers were still a little ways away, but they didn’t wait around. This was a t-junction, so they chose left and moved quickly.

A little ways down the corridor the floor suddenly opened up on Grimly, it was a toothy maw and it slammed shut on his chest. Grimly only struggled briefly before he slumped dead and then slowly sunk in to the floor. They all could only watch it happened so fast.

Then another maw opened behind Soola, “There! Watch for that!” He pointed towards a patch on the wall, the hall seemed to be booby-trapped. He reached over and punched it to prove the point, and the maw near him opened again. “Nobody touch the walls around here.”

It wasn’t long before they reached another “skin” door. They got to work as quickly as they could, hoping it led somewhere else. It did, there was a very dark room, with an occupied table and instruments. There was a cool dim white light provided by a small crystal in here that left the room almost black.

The occupant on the table was thick and burly, Soola, “Grimble?”

They all approached with caution. “I thought you said he was absorbed?”

Azzothaffat nodded, “He was.” He thought about it a moment. “This may not be him,” he concluded.

They all crept forward. It certainly looked like him. "He's still breathing," noted Soola.

Then they heard a deep chuckle come from the shadows of the room, they all went defensive.

"More mortals, my lucky day, and so lively," came the voice.

Ulrik cast a torch spell and against the wall they saw a maggot like creature with a human torso hanging high from the wall. Long silvery steel legs glimmered in the light, making the creature more like a spider in appearance. It shielded its black eyes from the light, "That's not polite at all." It groaned in a deep throaty voice.

"Forgive our manners, we've had a terrible day," responded Ulrik sarcastically.

Ulrik noted the hands of the creature ended not in finger nails, but instead in needles, the tips of the fingers looked like they held glass vials of coloured liquid.

"Oh, your group looks badly injured, perhaps they could use my services?" it offered, as it moved along the wall. It showed a needle like limb which seemed to be threaded, the spool being the "hair" on its head.

"No, thank you. I'm sure we'll be fine."

After all they had been through, they were reluctant to engage the creature. The tension was palpable.

Ulrik decided to ask something to stall, "Perhaps you could tell us where to find Kazgen?"

The creature stopped scuttling, "Depends. Was it mortal?"

"Yes."

It smiled a disturbingly wide grin, "Then you've gone the wrong way, the mistress never lets me see them intact. Now, where were we?" One of the creature's needle like legs shot out and pierced Hydi's leg, a long thick thread began to retract and pull her in towards the creature. Eydi also cried out in pain and grabbed his leg, blood already flowing from an invisible wound. There was no more stalling.

It was a long and hard battle, the creature constantly tried to sew them up in a bundle and with so many limbs of steel, it was a battle they would not soon forget.

In the end, they managed to dismember the creature satisfactorily. After some brief discussion they bandaged up their wounds even using some of the materials they found in the room.

Soola fashioned a cot and Azzothaffat dragged Grimble's non-responsive body behind him.

Kezek, Eydi, Hydi and Ulrik were left to lead the way. Ulrik was in the best shape, he concealed himself with magic vanished and checked ahead.

There were several empty chambers, most had tables and instruments similar to the implements they had seen in the surgeons room. There were also rooms with helmets and girdles like the ones worn by the guardians, and even a forge room. All rooms were devoid of activity though.

They did find a chamber with Krullig's hammer, but no sign of the bull man himself. Hydi picked up his hammer and brought it along. "He'll need this when we find him," she said solemnly.

Then the wriggling creepers began to appear through the folds in the walls, it was getting crowded. Could the only way back up be through the oubliette? Ulrik hoped not.

As they rushed down another similar corridor Soola stopped him and called him back in a whisper, "Back there, there's one of those skin things."

This one was concealed and did not respond when they had passed by, it was staying still. Ulrik had missed it, "Are you sure? I didn't see anything," he kept his voice low.

"Yes, it's right there, it's sort of a smooth patch."

The entire group was well passed it. They were now huddled.

"Wonder why it's different than the others?" he thought aloud.

Soola postulated, "I think this one is hiding something rather than guarding something, if you catch my drift."

The creepers kept inching forward.

"Ok, let's take it, everyone ready?" Ulrik raised a clenched fist, "Go!"

They charged the section of wall, it did not respond until Azzothaffat's horns rammed in to it at a full charge. It tore like a sheet from the wall, ichor spraying from its tattered form. It let out a scream and put up a fight, but was quickly subdued by the group.

The skin fell away from the walls and behind it was a bony stairwell, it spiraled up and even down. The group smiled.

Ulrik and Soola ran back to collect Grimble's body and dragged it over, Azzothaffat picked him up, "Go! Let's get out of here."

The stairs faded from orange to a cool darkness, more like bone than flesh, they were back in the tower.

They ran up through the strange structure until they came across an opening, they could see an orange chandelier and the hanging form of what could only be the Seer. Straps

held him suspended by his broken limbs. The ceiling which they stretched from was black with shadow.

“He’s alive, I can see him breathing,” Soola whispered.

“He’s being used as bait,” answered Kezek. “We will come back for him. If they haven’t killed him yet, they will likely wait a little longer.”

They silently continued up the stairs, each saying a prayer for their friend as they passed by.

Before long they were facing a great set of double doors, they looked like warped steel or bone, it was difficult to tell. Soola checked it over for locks or handles, something to open it.

“The crawling creatures are not following us,” spoke Hydi.

“No way to open it, maybe we should keep going upwards?” Soola suggested.

Hydi approached, “I have an idea.” Her voice echoed as she raised Krullig’s hammer with both hands, the words were arcane. The doors creaked open in to what looked somewhat like a strange laboratory.

* * *

Bubbling tubes lined the walls, cylinders of strange faint light beams in various directions. Chains and pistons filled the room in strange manners. There was only an ominous hum.

“This looks like Svirnyl’s workshop,” stated Ulrik. The others looked at him oddly, unsure whom he was talking about, but perhaps more so that he knew someone that had a workshop like this. “Well, ‘like’, not exact of course.”

A few small orbs of light hung suspended in the cylinders of scintillating rays.

Ulrik noticed a glow emanating from an odd shaped tube, and it was growing, he indicated for everyone to hide. They all took cover as the glow increased.

To their surprise one of the atrophied creepers squished out of the tube, it was the source of the glow and radiated as though filled with a flame that never flickered.

The creature wiggled over to a bowl shaped apparatus which had a ramp leading up to it. Markings surrounded it. The creature seemed to act blindly. It approached the bowl and then began to dry heave.

The process was strange to behold, but the light began to leave its body until a glowing orb left its mouth, it shunned the light and quickly wriggled away. It squeezed in to a

hole in the floor. The orb hung suspended in the air now surrounded by scintillating light as well.

“What... was that?” asked Soola out loud.

The group came out from their cover and entered the chamber. It was cool in here and dark, illuminated only by glowing liquids and the three strange orbs.

“Can anybody read these markings?” asked Ulrik.

They all looked, but only Eydi spoke up, “They are in infernal. I can’t read them, because they are gibberish, but I recognize the marks.”

“How do you mean gibberish?”

“Like ruins, or wizard script, the markings don’t make words, just sounds.”

“Well, probably best not to read those aloud then,” mentioned Soola.

“Agreed,” Eydi concluded.

“I can help,” answered a strange voice.

Ulrik answered, “Ok, wait, who?”

“Me, over here,” answered the voice. They all looked around the room, “Here I am, that’s right, right here.” Their eyes fixated on one of the orbs in the rays of light.

“Is that you then?” asked Ulrik.

“Indeed.”

“Who are you?”

“A tortured soul, my name is Angmar, but please listen, we may not have long.” The voice continued, “I am a powerful entity trapped here long ago by the mistress. What you are looking at is my soul.”

“Your soul?”

“Indeed. My body was taken and my soul placed here.”

“Where is your body?”

“That I do not know.”

“Are these souls as well?” Ulrik indicated the other two orbs.

“Yes.”

“Can they speak as well?”

“I do not know the new one, but the other is not powerful enough to speak. He is my back up should something happen to me. You would have to contact him directly to communicate with him. However, you are close enough that I can speak to you.”

Soola interjected, “You said he was back up? What does that mean?”

“Should I fail, he will be used to keep the fortress afloat.”

“You can drop the fortress from the sky?”

“I fear it’s not voluntary. My energy is keeping the fortress afloat, but it is being drawn from me. That’s what these creatures do, they draw energy from souls.”

The others nodded their understanding.

“Is there some way we could free you? And the others?” asked Ulrik.

“I would need to come in to contact with my body, or some greater force to break the magic that binds me,” it answered.

“I have an idea,” said Ulrik as he moved over to the second orb. He reached out a hand and touched it. He remained quiet for a few heartbeats and then opened his eyes, “She is willing to help us.”

“Huh, ‘she’, hadn’t known that,” answered the voice.

Ulrik moved over to the third and newest orb and touched it briefly, he recoiled in horror, then hurriedly spoke, “Bring Grimble’s body!”

The others were taken off guard by his sudden urgency, but scrambled together and brought over the body. Ulrik guided them, raising it up to the basin, the rays faded and the orb began to sink in to Grimble’s lifeless body. Suddenly he sucked in a great breath and his eyes snapped open!

“Grimble!” exclaimed Soola, he hugged the dwarf and pulled him off of the basin.

Grimble looked flustered, but came around quickly, “That was horrible.”

“Glad to have you back!” added Ulrik.

“I never want to see one of those things again!” growled Grimble.

Everyone welcomed him back with a sense of relief.

Ulrik turned to the first orb, “And where are your bodies?”

“I do not know. I have not seen it since I’ve come to this place, the last thing I recall is facing those Attroz hul, and then being placed in basin. I haven’t seen my body since.”

“I don’t suppose you know where we can find a kind soul named Kazgen?”

The orb was quiet, “No. I’m sorry, I don’t know a Kazgen, but the most recent soul before your friend there, was taken by the mistress herself. She was very happy with its power and claimed it for herself. Most are given in trade in the ‘cities’.” The voice paused briefly, and spoke with a saddened tone, “Please don’t leave me here. It’s been so terribly long. I’d rather die than stay here.”

“I have an idea, Angmar. You will need a little more patience, but I think I know how to free you, and Ms Everstone as well, even without your bodies.”

* * *

They left the cool dark room behind and made their way further up the winding stairwell. The halls and corridors here were wide and vaulted, there were even some kind of windows which allow soft blue light through. The floor became smooth, hard and white like polished bone.

There was some activity ahead. They slowed their approach and came to an opening which branched out in to the open sky. Down below, the Attroz hul, were crawling along a bridge like white maggots on blue flesh. Only instead of devouring flesh, it looked like they were regurgitating it. Their secretion was some kind of material akin to body parts, but the parts were stretched and deformed. This explained the morbid look of the place, as they appeared to be the engineers. They were bridging to another smaller incomplete tower.

The entire scene was enough to keep them hurrying along.

Eventually they arrived at an even larger set of doors, there were a pair of statues to either side, the doors were peaked and decorative. This almost appeared palace like, barely reminiscent of creepy; until they looked at the details.

The walls were etched with dioramas depicting acts of violence; dismemberment, tearing of flesh, families being drawn and quartered. The art was subtly placed, but not easy to ignore. Most of the concepts behind it were about transformation in to something twisted and powerful.

As they approached, the giant doors slowly swung open.

There was a long room stretched before them, across which was an open air enclosed balcony with a jagged banister; they knew they were in the skull of the fortress.

Between them and the open air was a tall single solitary figure. It was distinctly feminine and bald. She had bright pale skin which contrasted drastically with her dark blue slick gown. The gown exposed her white flesh along its length. She was beautiful in her own

way even at this distance. She carried only the strange staff with the ebbing sphere suspended in its clawed head.

“Welcome,” she called out. Her voice was strange, almost a symphony and yet deep and dark.

Near what appeared to be a bed stood a familiar figure, one of the sword arm guardians. The fortress must have been lowered to retrieve it, now they would face it again.

The group fanned out around the chamber.

Soola was the one to answer, his voice felt small and insignificant comparatively, “Lady, your hospitality leaves much to be desired.”

She was approaching, her strides were long although the gown resisted, he could see her more clearly now. Red lines ran along her flesh, splitting her face down the middle, like a strange tattoo. Her eyes were black, like a shark, yet a pin point of orange light could be seen within.

He knew fear, and it approached him gracefully.

She smiled with blood red lips, “My sincerest apologies, allow me to comfort you properly.”

The guardian followed, its chains dragging on the marble like floor.

“Remember, focus on her as much as you can,” Ulrik warned the others.

Grimble answered gruffly, indicating the guardian, “This one is going to be hard to ignore.”

She smiled, and licked her lips, something seemed to excite her as she drew near, “Yes.” It was almost a hiss.

Ulrik knew, she was no longer talking to him. He drew his staff and spoke an arcane command, lightning fired from his staff and struck through her and into the guardian.

Neither were affected, he looked exasperated.

She reveled in it, “Ah! Too soon my eager wizard. I would have enjoyed that a little later.”

From dark corners of the room scrambled several severed hands. They were large, and unattached to anything. The group didn’t like the extra distractions.

The guardian was getting too close to Kezek, so he broke formation and charged her axe in hand, she waved her staff picking him off the ground and throwing him hard across the room.

The others were upon her a heartbeat later. She was taller than anyone in the group, a full nine feet tall, and fast. Her slender build was deceiving, making her unimposing until she was upon them.

Although Eydi and Hydi were limping they went to work cleaving the hands that soared at them through the air, and to their personal glee, they were able to make contact and seemed to have effect on the mistress with their swords. The damage seemed to do less than anticipated, but it was still something.

Azzothaffat took a headlong charge at the guardian and knocked it down sending it skidding across the smooth floor. Although Azzothaffat took a couple of scraped from the hooks for his trouble, the hooks had nothing to grab to slow the body from its slide.

The mistress struck them each with fluid motions knocking them away, once they were in the clear Ulrik let go an icy blast. The one good thing about being a wizard and having all of your friends knocked around like ragdolls was you could get a clean shot at your target.

She didn't like that, she screamed in rage and retaliated with a blast of her own from her hand. A black bolt edged in green struck Ulrik and knocked him back. It felt like electricity, the throw back from the blast hurt enough, but the jolt made his arms tremble.

Azzothaffat was being scratched up by the disembodied claws as he hit the ground, Kezek helped him get rid of a few.

Grimble and Soola were back in action first, they tried a flanking attack and got a deep cut on her. She swung her staff around and connected with Grimble, his body collided with Soola's and they went flying.

Ulrik caught his breath, "I can get you out of here."

The mistress seemed perplexed, "You'd be better off getting yourself out of here wizard." She raised her hand again and hit him with some form of magic that had no visible effect. "But, now you'll be going nowhere."

His guess was that she was pinning him from teleporting, but this was not his plan. "No." He said as he stood, "You'll have to trust me, where I'm sending you will be better, it will give you a chance to get out of here."

She seemed annoyed as Kezek, Azzothaffat, Eydi and Hydi gathered around her for another bout. "Your distractions are worthless wizard."

Then with very little more than a shrug her skin tore open and slid out of the back of her open-backed gown, red liquid was flung everywhere hitting the foursome pretty solidly.

Eydi took a large enough dose of the liquid that he dropped to his knees and crumbled as his face and chest dissolved by its touch. Although it was Edyi that had taken the acid to

the face and chest and Hydi only took very little of the splash across one side of her leg and arm, she dropped simultaneously and just lie there not breathing eyes wide open.

Azzothaffat and Kezek both howled with pain as their flesh burned.

Grimble managed to get his shield up and protect himself and Soola, Ulrik was nowhere near the splash radius as he had been launched back so far.

What was left behind was a red muscled skeleton that looked like she had been flayed alive. Where her intestines were supposed to be instead writhed two long bloody tendrils. The skin that had withdrawn through her clothing now appeared like two tattered moth wings behind her. Strands of flesh from her face now hung like flowing wet red hair. It was beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

“I’m not going anywhere wizard,” she snarled with perfect white teeth and strode forward grabbing him up with the tendrils.

She presented her hand as a claw and reached back ready to gut him with her own hands.

“I wasn’t talking to you!” struggled Ulrik.

As she had pulled back her free hand to gut him, she had inadvertently brought the staff forward as a natural counter balance. Ulrik grabbed the shaft and put his hand in to the glowing orb, “I was speaking to Kazgen!”

In a heartbeat he knew all he needed to, the ring on his hand which had two small lights gained a third which filled in the circles, there was a windy flash as though the air around them imploded. The ring vanished and with it the glowing orb.

There was a rumble throughout the structure.

The mistress was distraught, she brought Ulrik forward as though to bite him, but the ground shifted beneath her feet and knocked her down.

Everyone fell and scattered across the floor. Somehow Ulrik found himself free of her tendrils.

“What?” she scowled and then she started to hover above the ground, “What have you done?”

Ulrik smiled, “I rescued some mortals from you.”

She then screamed out as Grimble had found his footing and slammed his axe in to the side of her head. She slammed against a sculpted pillar hard.

“We need to get out of here!” Ulrik pointed out. He raised a hand and cast a spell. Grimble, himself and the two Aresens lifted from the ground, “Don’t forget Soola and the others.”

They each swooped over and picked up a fallen comrade and they flew out of the skulls mouth, Ulrik had them turn right as they passed over the courtyard.

They didn't get far before they hit the barrier and the flying spell ended sending them sprawling to the ground.

They had to keep moving to avoid the collapsing formation, but at least they were out of the direction the building was crumbling towards.

The rock formation hit the ground and began to break apart, as it broke apart, the parts started to take on forms. The shapes were reforming in to various creatures, such as Aresen, Tauren and more. It was an avalanche of shifting bodies and rock.

Before long the crash site reflected a battlefield or mass grave. There were a few bodies mixed in that radiated light and energy, either vanishing in to ash or reappearing depending on the nature of their origins. For instance there were three minotaurs amongst the strewn bodies, they had appeared where the sword arm guardians had been. Then a few claws disappeared, and the hands of the minotaurs reformed. Where the heads, skin, legs, brains and eyes came from, Ulrik was uncertain, but he began to wonder what they had not encountered in the fortress.

From amongst the bodies, the mistress stood up, bloody and furious. She had been caught in the tumble and had violently removed the few bodies that had covered her.

The group readied themselves for a fight.

She snarled with rage, but delayed to look around and see the radiating bodies come back to consciousness, and rise to their feet.

Ulrik sent a cold blast in her direction, "Come on!" he called out.

She screeched in response, but as she tried to rise in to the air, her leg was grabbed by one of the minotaurs, and although it burned him, he pulled her down and the mob had at her. She was strong. Bodies flew in all directions, but there were so many, and they were so angry, they tore her apart in short order.

It was a gruesome demise because she was so resilient.

The other Neth, the ones with the straps, did not seem to survive the crash, they were not as resilient as their mistress.

The maggot creepers, however did begin to ooze out of the wreckage and before long the area was littered with them. One of the survivors an elf, asked for a torch, Soola obliged. Using the torch, set fire to the creeper and burst in to flame. It didn't take long to catch them and burn them as they tried to wriggle away.

As they burst from the flame, more bodies began to rise, these bodies were the bodies of the Aresen and even Krullig!

They could not explain how he survived, Ulrik hypothesized that perhaps the creepers had inadvertently healed him by absorbing him and reconstructing him.

They did find the Seer's body, broken. Overall, there were only a few casualties that were theirs, as though an evil curse had been lifted and an entire village now stood before them.

More than two hundred beings made their way through the jungle back to the bazaar, they were greeted by surprised family and friends. Many had been missing so long that they were now displaced and forgotten.

They buried Shallo, Eydi, Hydi and Kaarezek the Seer near the bazaar.

Grimly, Kezek, Azzothaffat, Rezzik, Ardo, Balto and Krullig were all able to mourn their passing.

* * *

A skull faced figure cloaked in ragged robes waited on the shore, a grim countenance on his face equal to nothing better than a placate skull covered in stretched brown skin. A rotting rope extended over one of its shoulders, moss dangling from it in wet strands. The boat it was tied to had a simple plank running up to its skeletal body. The frame of the boat looked broken, rotted and burned, some blackened wood seemed to make up the bottom of the deep boat.

The figure extended a boney clawed hand palm upwards as if expecting payment.

Ulrik reached in to his satchel and obliged, six silver coins clanked in to the boney hand and it closed around them before disappearing inside of the ragged cloak. The figure stepped aside allowing access to the plank across a green liquid which frothed and bubbled.

Ulrik moved to the boat first, as he crossed the plank he looked down and saw bodies floating in the greenish water, they looked tortured in death, and nearly all of them were facing upwards in the agony of what must have been their last dying moments. Soola and Grimble followed.

Once all of the passengers were aboard, the creature slid up the plank taking it aboard with the drop of a bony hand and grabbing the single large oar at the back of the boat which had a raised deck and pushed away from the shore. The trio felt obliged to move as far away from the ferryman as possible and took a seat at the front.

As they moved slowly down the river, the ferryman simply swayed his oar back and forth, his long gangly arms pumping the single oar at the back of the boat rhythmically. The sound of the liquid substance beneath seemed to fade, the gases from it seemed to rise and eventually enveloped the boat.

Ulrik whispered, "Where do you suppose he's taking us?"

“I don’t know Ulrik they said across the vale... that could mean anything,” Soola looked nervous. They tried to peer forward at the end of the boat and saw nothing but clouds and smoke ahead, then they realized that the sounds of the oar had stopped behind them and they turned to check on the oarsman. The ferryman was gone. All that was behind them was smoke, and the smoke was beginning to fade away, giving way to solid stone. They found themselves sitting on the floor of a cavern. No boat or oarsman in sight.

“I know this place,” spoke Grimble, “This is the cave with the portal.” Sure enough as the smoke faded away they saw a stone archway the ghostly glow from its ebbing runes held back the pitch black; it was the very same portal that had sent them to the ether.

There was a long silence before Ulrik spoke. “Soola, we should disassemble this,” Ulrik spoke uneasily. “We can take the keystones back to the town then split up and hide them from the world.”

Grimble agreed with a grunt and nod.

Soola hesitated, then remembering his last endeavor he slowly nodded in agreement “Yeh, we should hide them. After all, we don’t know what might come out of here. But, we still need to find Kezgan.” They nodded in agreement.

As they plucked the keystones from the archway the runes faded into darkness and they quietly made their way back towards civilization.

THE END