

DUNGEON CRAWLER - DRAGON SLAYER

CHAPTER TWO: THE DUNGEON

Sibra displayed an enormous and feral-looking dead rat by its tail, "I don't believe this, there's only giant rats and those accursed bats in here?" He flung the carcass behind him in to the rough-cut wall.

"Perhaps that is what it grazes upon normally?" asked Sabian.

Keron gave a sidelong stare at Sabian's choice of words. Sabian did not seem to notice.

Danei came up to the others in the main corridor where they had branched off, "We're wasting too many spells on these things, we have to find the lair."

Varei interjected, "We do not know where to begin Sharewood, none of us has been here before, and all of these caverns look alike." Varei was obviously uncomfortable in the enclosed space.

Grimtok answered, "These tunnels are well traveled, but I believe this is the right track, straight ahead." He indicated the corridor straight across from the entrance.

"Well we can't keep wandering around like this, she might catch us unprepared. We just need some kind of indication. Look for some markings or..." Lady Danei thought aloud.

Shade appeared from the darkness, "Then I think you're going to love this." They followed him down the main corridor until Shade raised his torch so that the others could see just beyond him. A few feet from where he stood the dirty jagged edges of the cave walls gave way to a very clean cut square corridor large enough for three men to stand across with enough room to swing a blade. It was the direction that Grimtok had suggested and he grinned knowingly.

Sibra gave a light whistle.

"May the light guide us," replied Karzden as he examined the scratches and scrapes along the floor and walls.

"Pays to have a scout doesn't it?" chided Shade with a grin. "I found this as well," Shade held up his fingers, in between his gloved fingers he held a red scale four times the size of a gold coin.

Sarandhu came from the dark corridor behind them, "It looks as though we do not need the light to guide us."

Behind Drogeda glowered at him, “The light always guides those who need it. Some day Sarandhu you may need it again. Do you suppose you will see it?”

Sarandhu felt uncomfortable, as well he should, that was the closest that Drogeda would ever come to a threat. “My apologies Priestess, I only meant to make levity of the situation, I meant no offence. Sincerely.”

Sibra walked by him following the others who had begun to move down the square corridor, “Too many eggs in these parts foreigner. Ooo, careful, you almost stepped on another!” He chuckled to himself, “Make ‘levity’ of the situation...”

Sarandhu furrowed a brow, “What eggs?”

Sibra wouldn’t tell him, and it would have to wait, Grimtok told them to be silent and the group moved down the corridor.

The long corridor stretched on, moving around corners and branching off in to smaller halls, they decide to keep to the largest. Assuming what they wanted would have to move through the larger corridor to get around.

Finally they came to what looked like a room. The corridor opened up suddenly, it was large with row after row of an unknown ancient language on the walls. They scoured the room looking for any traps or signs of trouble, there were only the two exits; the one they came from, and the one they planned to go through.

Keron whispered to Faeroes, who was the closest to him at the time, “What does all this writing say?”

“It’s in Elven, but I cannot read the dark scripts.”

“What are the dark scripts?”

She looked at him through the corner of her eye, “Dark Elves.”

“Dark Elves here?”

Karzden interrupted, “Aye. They probably owned this at one time. It’s not of Dwarven descent.”

Faeroes stopped briefly in the hall, as the others ahead did, “No. It was not made by them, or for them, but this writing is theirs.”

Sabian spoke up, “They were paid to protect this place, for whom and how and when, we shall find out in time.”

“Our brethren will have made this a rather challenging obstacle course I’m sure,” added Faeroes.

“Faeroes, they are no more your brethren than that Human or that Dwarf,” it was Varei. She had made her way up to them through the group and had overheard their whispers.

Something else they did not expect, Greyhome spoke, “They, are our brethren, Varei. Blood is bond.” He was even when he spoke and carried a coolness with it that reminded Varei of her heritage.

Varei acted indifferent to his declaration and continued to the front of the party, “Why have we stopped?”

“As you can see the corridor splits into two,” Answered Lady Danei as she looked down one corridor deep in thought.

“Well?” prodded Shade.

Danei asked, “Which way do you prefer?”

Grimtok added, “They are the same, no distinguishing marks between the two of them.”

“Do we flip a coin?” Shade interjected sarcastically.

There was long pause before Danei spoke again, “I think we should split up.”

Silence fell over the party at the suggestion.

“We can cover more ground that way.”

Varei nodded in agreement.

Shade stifled a laugh, “You’ve got to be joking! We’ll be spreading ourselves thin...” he seemed to trail off.

Grimtok furrowed a brow and then agreed, “What if we find what we’re looking for?”

“Then return here. If you find the lair or the beast, return here and we will go in together. Do not engage it if you find it. Play no heroics, just return here, to the room we just passed.”

Varei nodded again, “We can cover more ground if we divide.”

Shade smiled, “We can just meet here then? How long before we give up looking and come back? These corridors could go on for days!”

“Two hours, no more. If we find nothing in this manner, we shall have to try other methods. Something to draw her out perhaps.”

“Two hours?”

Danei nodded, “Two hours only!”

Shade finally nodded in agreement.

“Grimtok?” asked Danei.

Grimtok looked at the stone, wrapped in his thoughts, “I do not agree with this method. Dwarves are more patient I suppose, it is our way.”

“We must find her before we run out of supplies Grimtok, time is of the essence,” reasoned Danei.

Grimtok looked her in the eyes, “I fear you are correct Lady Danei, for if she finds us first, and we are unprepared, it will surely result in losses. There will be no dividing to less than four? Do I have your words, no less than four?”

They nodded agreement.

“Good then, it may be enough, let us go.” Just like that he agreed. Varei and Shade took their group right, and Danei and Grimtok took their group left.

Keron watched as Kayla walked away down the long corridor with Shade, and he felt the strangest feeling as though he would never see her again.

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It was not long before Varei and Shade had to part companies at another junction. It was easy enough to pass the small hallways, but when another large hallway crossed paths it was decided they separate again. It was easy to divide the groups as they had joined in collectives of four.

Varei lead her team as she always had watching for signs of traps or worse. Faeroes followed sword in hand, red armour gleaming on its own and in the faint light provided by her sword. Sabian and Greyhome followed behind hands at the ready to cast.

They were the quietest group of all, no words passed between them, and they moved almost without sound.

It was a long trek through the corridors, but eventually they came to a large stone door. Faeroes took the center, Varei took the back ready to fire over her shoulder, while Greyhome and Sabian stood to either side of the door.

It was the first door they had seen in this accursed place, it had to be significant, whether it held what they were looking for remained to be seen. It was large enough and ornate enough to warrant attention. No one would drag these giant doors so deeply inside a place for nothing.

Faeroes pulled on the iron rings, a cloud of stench billowed out and over them in to the hallway. Faeroes clenched her teeth to keep from retching over the smell, something moved inside. The moment of truth came; the decision to run or stay and fight was made in an instance. Faeroes threw up her hand and a ball of flames erupted several meters in front of her.

Hissing came from the blackened bodies that were engulfed by her fire; their bodies contorted and writhed. The stench they smelled was death, and death turned to look toward them with green pinpoints of spectral light.

Varei recognized the foul creatures as quickly as Faeroes had, Ghouls. These were dangerous undead, not just to unarmed peasants, but to unprepared adventurers; the second most deadly living dead in Keldorna. Normally a bow would do no good to her in a battle like this, but she wielded an enchanted bow. Three arrows flew into the room slaying with magic those Ghouls that were already wounded.

The Ghouls inside were not finished smouldering from the flames of Faeroes' ball of flame, when Greyhome threw in a larger fireball that almost encompassed the entire room. Several of the Ghouls exploded into pieces.

While they were still recovering their stances Sabian pointed an indignant finger into the room and uttered, "Filthy Ghouls." He then pointed at Faeroes, her flesh turned a solid gray like stone, her skin slightly cracked in parts. "Do take care of them would you dear?" Faeroes was already moving into the room.

The Ghouls didn't like the disturbance to their home and charged their attackers, not mindlessly like a Skeleton or a Zombie would, but with purpose. They brandished claws, swords and armour and knew how to use them. Faeroes meet them without fear. Although strong, they found it an almost impossible task to harm her, even if they passed her charmed armour, her now stone flesh barely chipped on a solid hit.

Two Ghouls that were unable to enter combat raised their bony, rotting hands and focused their powers on the wizards; the wizards felt their very life drain away from them.

Varei targeted the two Ghouls with her bow disrupting the magic that held them together one by one while they were focused. They crumbled to the ground.

Faeroes swung her blade and cleaved through those that came near her, three more fell to the ground.

Greyhome decided to strike with a solid blast of flame that concentrated all of its fury from the ground on the last Ghoul that vanished inside of it.

“What room is this that is guarded with such creatures?” asked Varei.

Sabian looked inside, “It is a large chamber.”

Faeroes spoke up, “Perhaps it was a dance hall.” She was serious and they took her seriously by nodding.

“This place makes no sense. It is as though it were a castle, but pieces of it are spread out so far apart to make it impossible to be liveable,” added Sabian.

“Perhaps that is what they want us to think?” added Varei.

Sabian looked at her inquisitively, “How do you mean Varei?”

Varei looked at the engravings on the wall, “It is rather strange, seeing such a room in the middle of nowhere, so deep amongst empty halls. It would almost make you feel comfortable enough to stay here rather than wander those halls for so long.”

“They look like they were Orcs. These things chose to stay here?” asked Faeroes as she looked down at the pale white flesh lying on the stone.

Varei looked into the hall they had just come in from, “Perhaps. But I believe strongly that the Chaos Elves were behind this.”

“Not the Shadow Elves or Hobgoblins?” questioned Sabian as he kicked a Ghouls’ dusty remains.

Varei looked at the enormous empty room, and the beautifully crafted door, “No. Chaos Elves. We wasted time and spells here, that is what this room was designed to do. Now we should hope that we were not overheard by our actions.”

“Shall we continue then?” asked Sabian. “Or return the way we came?”

“Running back,” added Faeroes.

Varei sighed with a grim look, “We shall move forward, our time is not up as of yet.”

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Grimtok and Danei made their separate ways down the corridors; their passages had also divided. Danei lead her group along the passage that continued straight, while Grimtok took the passage that had intersected it.

Danei’s group eventually came across a cavernous room; it was vast, but empty. They moved in slowly fearing they may have already found what they were looking for, and it might not give them the chance to react. Several walls were collapsed; even pillars lay in ruins on the ground.

Keron was about to take a cautious step forward when Arathane stopped him by the arm. Keron looked to where he was stepping and saw nothing that should indicate danger, so he looked back at the high elf. The elf was looking up in to the darkness above, at first Keron did not see what, but then he saw them.

A dozen or more stone carved gargoyles and warriors were perched or mounted on the walls overlooking the room.

They all waited.

Danei got Sibra's attention and signalled him to cast a spell at them. He nodded and began to draw the spirits to him.

Keron leaned over to her ear, "What's he doing? If those are real, we're going to be crushed by sheer numbers."

She leaned back, "They're not all real, if any are. They always like to make it look like there's more than there really are. Or they hide in a nearby room so they can decide whether or not they want to face whatever's attacking the statues."

Keron had no idea she knew so much more than she had already tutored him in. There was so much more to her travels than he could know.

Sibra's yellow energy sprang up from the ground and a feral eidolon shot forth from his hands. It streaked from his hands straight to a statue. He intended to draw out the creatures if there were any. They waited. Sibra prepared again.

Their answer came in the sound of shattering stone; chips fell to the stone floor from the statues of the warriors. Beneath a coating of stone roared the ugly form of what could only be Gargoyles. Glowing runes marked their bodies.

Keron jumped, "Ugh? I thought Gargoyle's were made of stone!"

Danei shrugged as she readied herself, "Don't look at me, I only heard stories of them."

Sibra chuckled, "So they can hide in stone shapes then? No matter, we know where they are now! Never seen em with runes before though."

Arathane aimed his bow, but the Gargoyles closest to them were already upon them. Danei was right about their numbers, there were only six of them... that they knew of.

One went after Arathane immediately trying to stay close to limit the use of his bow, this one was different, smaller, faster than the others. Arathane was faster still ducking its swipe he fired his bow point blank. The creature's stone like skin wasn't just for appearances, the arrow barely chipped into its flesh.

A Gargoyle swinging a stone axe clipped Keron's shoulder. Danei stepped up and chopped the creature down with two swings of her blade. She turned to face another swooping down, and noticed that the furthest Gargoyle flying down to them appeared to be wearing stone carved chain mail armour and carrying a long stone sword, shimmered from magic and rune radiated with arcane power.

At the other end of the room a staff-wielding Gargoyle threw his hands into the air revealing two runes which flashed with energy and then it vanished from sight.

Keron recovered his footing quickly and swung his swords at the Gargoyle beside him that was attacking Arathane. He managed to clip it, but his second attack was easily avoided.

Sibra focused his charm towards the shimmering Gargoyle. The creature suddenly dropped out of the air and crashed into the ground. Groggily it rose to its feet.

The lithe Gargoyle took a retreating swipe at Arathane, missing and it flew into the air. As it did this, another two larger ones wielding axes took its place. This time the longer reaching axe slammed into Arathane's armoured chest. The second Gargoyle slammed its axe into Keron's side. They all heard the breath come out of him; stunned he stayed standing.

The now enraged leader charged at Danei and swung its deadly long sword; Danei was ready. She was not ready though for the two bolts of electricity that shot out from the other end of the room; the heavy armour she wore absorbed it well enough that she only felt discomfort as she cleft into the chain covered monster in front of her. To her surprise it dropped to the ground. She did not hesitate and with a wide arc took care of the one that had stunned Keron.

Arathane's arrow glanced off of the Gargoyle in front of him; he had to move quickly to avoid being chopped in half.

Still reeling in pain, Keron stabbed at the last Gargoyle beside him. It was futile, he felt like a kitten attacking a rock.

Sibra focused his spirit to a location below the last Gargoyle and a feral force erupted from the ground beneath it. It screamed with rage, and swinging at Arathane took to the air. Arathane's luck had gone sour as the sword caught him across the face with the flat of its blade. He fell to the ground unconscious.

Before Arathane hit the floor the quick Gargoyle was back and Keron just getting his bearings narrowly evaded its stony blade.

Two bolts of electricity came across the room again, this time aimed at Sibra. He lurched growling with pain and shook it off.

Danei stepped between Keron and the Gargoyle, her first slash grazed it, and as it looked to see who was attacking it her back slash cut off its head.

Sibra, still surrounded by his swirling circle, tended to Arathane.

The last Gargoyle, sensing its odds, turned and fled through the other exit. Perhaps carrying out some ancient instructions.

Keron collapsed on the ground, his ribs aching.

Danei scanned the area for the Gargoyle using the electricity, but it had vanished as well. There was no way of telling where it was now. "The other one's gone too," she breathed.

Keron groaned, "I've got to check with Dakon again, I don't recall anyone mentioning that those things hit so hard."

Arathane was conscious again and he held his aching head, "I do not remember anyone mentioning that before either." He looked at Sibra who had attended to him, under a heavy breath, "And I presume that you are to thank for saving my life?"

Sibra looked at him flatly, "Again." He gave a broad smile, he knew the Elf would be good for it someday, if he kept stitching him back together. "Danei helped a little."

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Darva watched as Keron disappeared into the dark corridor, she missed them already. Grimtok, Drogeda and Karzden were Dwarves. Dwarves weren't given to idle conversation, unless telling stories over ale. There was no ale in sight.

Karzden moved ahead of the group watching for trouble as he had done the day before with Shade. Grimtok followed, then Darva, and finally Drogeda. Walking so closely behind Grimtok she dared not to try and converse with Drogeda, or face Grimtok's grim stare.

So, as they moved she studied the surrounding areas a little more. The corridor did seem huge now, spanning more than three men wide. The floors and walls were scraped, by what seemed to be huge claws and possibly weapons.

Some off shooting corridors were intricately carved, but Grimtok continued passed them without a glance, staying on the main path. Even when they passed a corridor that matched this tunnels size, Grimtok insisted on the route ahead saying that they were on the right trail.

Darva didn't know how he could be so certain; the corridors were pretty much the same. Faintly she started to notice the discolouration on some of the stone. Slightly darker patches washed over stretches of stone, or were spattered here and there in strange patterns. She wondered what kind of stone it could be to look like that.

The Dwarves probably knew, this was so close to their homeland, and they used to reside in this very mountain as well... long ago.

She watched the patterns on the floor intently as they walked through the darkness, their footfalls the only noise in the cold void of the corridor. As she stepped she noticed that one of the patterns matched the shape of her foot, she smiled thinking it peculiar. When she stepped again with the same foot she noticed almost the same pattern, this was strange.

She looked around to see if anyone noticed her studying the patterns, no one seemed to take notice. Taking two more steps she saw it again, but this one was smudged at the heel towards the wall. Her gaze followed the floor to the wall beside her; there was a dark pattern on the wall as well. She stared at it for a time wondering what one had to do with the other. Then her eyes widened in horror and she backed away from the wall.

Drogeda, who had now stopped and was watching her, furrowed her brow, “What is the matter child?”

Darva recoiled back further away from the wall, she covered her face with her hands as tears welled in her eyes. She could not control her breathing; it grew in intensity and she looked away from the wall to the ground. Her eyes moved to where she stood and she recoiled with a squeal from the dark patch that she stood on.

Thinking the girl was going mad Drogeda stepped towards her ready to dispel any evil upon her. Instead, trying to evade Drogeda, Darva turned to her and collapsing wrapped her arms around the Dwarf sobbing.

Grimtok and Karzden had returned by this time, they gathered around silently. They watched as Drogeda stroked her hair gently. Grimtok looked around for any signs of trouble, finding none, he gave an inquisitive look to Drogeda.

Drogeda did not look up from the girl, but she spoke softly, “She has finally noticed that blood stains even stone.”

They stood there waiting for Darva to regain her wits, ignoring the dark figures that danced around them; their final throws of life forever captured against stone.

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Shade covered the ground ahead followed by Hailian, Kayla and Sarandhu. Shade was very good at what he did, finding trouble before it was too late. Sometimes he made mistakes, but very rarely, and he was prepared most of the time for what happened.

Hailian was his backup if that happened, despite her rage in a battle, she was fairly clear of thought if there were no enemies nearby. He did not trust Sarandhu and Kayla as of yet, if he ever would trust them. It took years before Hailian was trusted, and there were limitations to that trust.

His pace was set just to stay ahead of the group in case there was a trap that he couldn't handle alone, in which case Hailian knew what to do. If it was an ambush the berserker would prove to be a welcome reinforcement; if it was a lethal trap, she had been given some elixirs to help him recover.

When they met four years ago, Hailian was still a child. They met in Kriegan's Pass after Hailian had been in a fight where she seriously hurt a few other kids her age, three to be exact. The boys were bullies and got what they deserved, as far as Shade was concerned, but it was still no concern of his. Danei, being the only form of "law" there at the time had determined that the people of Kriegan's Pass were right, that Hailian was too dangerous and should be kicked out.

As Shade and his companions were leaving that evening he had a surprise, Danei barred his path out of town. He guessed she was there to harass him, possibly to search him; although she hadn't done that since the time she found nothing on him, and was embarrassed to do it again.

Instead, she just stood there waiting. Shade asked her what she wanted, when the girl, Hailian, stepped out. Danei looked ashamed, but serious, "I want you to take this girl with you Shade."

Shade couldn't believe his ears; he almost fell back. His companions laughed. "What're you talking about girl?" chuckled the Barbarian Onra.

Danei was even when she spoke, "She has no family, no home, and no place here. She wants to travel, and I'm afraid for her if she stays. Take her with you Shade. You've seen her, you've seen what she's capable of."

The dark haired Dwarven Templar Kiris growled, "She's a berserker child. She'll be too much trouble." Her snarl indicated her thoughts openly.

Danei stood waiting for Shade to answer. She stared straight into his eyes, and knew for some reason that he was considering her offer. The girl was strong already; her spirit was that of rage, with the proper tutelage she could be useful.

He found himself looking at the girl, who looked into the woods already thinking about how she was going to survive on her own. Some distant memory of his lost childhood flashed before him and he knew what she would have to go through alone.

"She may join us," Shade spoke clearly so there was no mistake. Onra and Kiris displayed their distaste for his decision. But surprisingly enough, the Gypsy Wizardess Jarna, who had been silent in his group so far, smiled.

"If there are any problems with this, Onra or Kiris, then you do not have to come with us," he continued to walk down the road passing by Danei without a glance.

"Come child," Jarna had stopped and extended her hand for Hailian. The girl walked past Danei and Jarna with her eyes staring coldly past them both.

Shade knew that it was a hard thing for Danei to do. To ask a man of more than questionable reputation to take care of a child and keep the peace in her town, but that was not the reason for his acceptance. Shade felt old, he had no family of his own, and no prodigy.

It would be a lesson he would have a difficult time learning, taking care of a berserker, and a teenage girl at that. If it was not for Jarna...

They came across a series of rooms, intricate designs patterned each one, and there was ancient scripting above some of the depictions. "Nobody touch anything," Shade gave the order as he moved into the room.

He scanned over the writing without a word, checking the floors and walls for signs of trouble. Eventually he stopped and began to feel around a section of wall carefully. Pressing a small symbol the section of wall he stood in front of opened slowly, there was a small dark corridor inside. He checked the other side of the door to make sure he could come back through from this side. He indicated for the others to follow him.

It was a long, narrow corridor, room enough for single file only, but it came to an end where a hidden door gave way to a large corridor.

Shade decided to turn back, Sarandhu stopped him, "Why don't we check this corridor as well?"

Shade turned himself away from Sarandhu's light grip, "This passage has a layer of dust across it, if we're looking for a dragon the area would have to be at least somewhat traveled. We'll go back to where we were and continue looking from there."

Sarandhu seemed to accept this answer and they went back through the passage.

They moved into the second room, this time as Shade was searching a wall he heard a warning shout from Hailian, "Shade behind you!"

Shade turned to see a thick liquid oozing down from the ceiling in the room. Hailian had drawn her axe and was charging in. Shade shouted for her to stop, but he knew it would be futile.

Sarandhu sidestepped and moved into the room to get a view of the gelatinous creature and began casting.

Kayla stepped in also, "What's she doing? That's a gelatine, she can't hurt it with her axe anymore than I can with my arrows."

The gelatine seemed to react to Hailian's presence and lashed out, Hailian seemed to weaken by its touch, she swung her axe anyway, and the gelatine splattered, but was barely slowed by the magical blade.

Sarandhu finished his spell and unleashed it on the gelatine. Rays of energy washed over the creature from the ground, pieces of it flashed away from existence until it had completely decomposed before their very eyes.

Shade smiled, "Nice work Blackhands."

Sarandhu smiled and bowed with his hands folded.

Hailian shook, this time it was not from her rage, but from the effects of the creature. "Come here Hailian," Shade began to dig into his pack. He was not mad at her; he was actually just relieved that she was okay. She walked over with some effort straining to keep herself from collapsing.

Kayla made an offhanded remark, "I guess we're lucky that Sarandhu was here."

Shade pulled out an elixir and gave it to Hailian, "Yeah. Although we have a few things to take care of critters like that. So you don't have to worry about things like that little lady." He gave the archer a sly wink.

She smiled mockingly at his remark.

"How did you handle those things in the Forest of Tears?" asked Hailian.

Kayla seemed distracted momentarily looking around the room, "I traveled with Elves. They took care of them."

"The blue ones are the worst," added Shade.

Sarandhu interjected, "Actually there are far worse things in this world."

"Easy enough for you to say, you're a Sorcerer," replied Shade as he began to search the walls again.

Kayla stepped up behind Sarandhu and there was a grating clunk of stone. Sarandhu looked down as the floor beneath him and Kayla opened. The pair fell into the darkness below with a curse.

Shade turned around to see the floor closing back up and Hailian running towards it with her axe drawn to swing. Shade cursed himself for turning his back on them.

The darkness surrounding Sarandhu was all encompassing as the trap door shut above him. The torch that lay in the sand nearby did not provide much light, but it wasn't the lack of light that made him afraid, it was the rather familiar smell of rotting flesh.

Suddenly, light-headedness surrounded him in four distinct waves and a cold pain seemed to draw life from his body, a familiar cold that he knew well. The dizziness grew worse, all of a sudden, and he shook from a more powerful fit of weakness. Hands

trembling he engulfed a potion. He released the fiery spell of torchlight that confirmed his wickedest thoughts and he moved quickly away from what he saw.

The flesh of the dead encircled him and they stepped towards him in lurches, the light making them pause only briefly to release a moan.

He might not have felt too frightened by what he saw, after all they were only lowly Skeletons and Zombies that approached him, but it was the carefully wrapped figure that stood against a far wall in the next chamber that held his attention firm, its four pale guardians standing to either side their sharp teeth bared.

Someone, of importance, had more than likely been given a cursed item that had killed them and they had been left here as a guardian Mummy, how ironic that Sarandhu should find it. From the looks of it this trap was rather successful, there must have been thirty or so risen undead.

Then it suddenly occurred to him that he was alone in this large dirt floor room.

Two bolts of green ghostly energy shot forth from the Mummy's outstretched hands; the bolts hit Sarandhu fairly square. The Mummy and its guards were not moving towards him, perhaps they were made to guard the chamber they occupied, and Sarandhu was not about to wait to find out.

He uttered a word and his body shifted into a ghostly green vaporous form. He ran towards the closest wall passing directly through several of the shambling corpses that swung futilely at him, making sure to keep out of the Mummy's line of sight.

He had almost reached a wall when he heard the faint rush of air and felt a piercing pain shoot through his back to his chest. A gasp escaped him as something burst from out of his chest. He looked down at his chest in his ghostly state and saw a glowing metal arrowhead jutting out, blood flowing from the wound. He stared down at it in disbelief. He collapsed to his knees clutching at the wound and fell to the dirt floor eyes widened with the surprise of his misfortune. As his life ebbed away he heard the shambling footfalls of the undead creatures gathering around him.

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"This is ridiculous, there's nothing down these halls, they're all just leading to dead ends and traps," Keron was getting frustrated.

"The tunnels are repeating, trying to confuse us," added Arathane.

Sibra shrugged, "It worked, I'm confused."

Arathane shook his head and rolled his eyes.

Danei came back from another short corridor, "Nothing."

“Who built this place? It’s like they’re ruins, but they aren’t ruins. There’s living areas, but nothing is conventional, or even logical!” babbled Keron.

“Whoever it was built for, did not want to be found. I think the living areas were just temporary storage rooms, or living quarters for whoever built it,” Danei was lost in thought as she looked down some more corridors and halls.

“Do you think this place was built for the dragon?” asked Keron.

“Probably, or something else that didn’t want to be found,” answered Sibra.

Keron pondered a moment and then asked, “Who would work for a dragon? Can dragons even speak?”

Sibra shrugged.

Arathane did not turn to him, “If they are old enough.”

“Oh,” was all that Keron could think to say.

Danei still occupied with the conundrum of another hall trap continued, “Dark Elves, Harpies, Trolls, Hobgoblins, Orcs, Goblins, Kobolds, men...” She stopped her list.

“Sorry what?” asked Keron.

Danei was on the floor working to check for a trap, “Those that would work for a dragon.”

Keron repeated, “Men?”

Sibra nodded, “Gold is a powerful instrument.”

“But for a dragon?” he dismissed.

“Ey, for gold,” Sibra repeated.

Suddenly Danei screamed out as the wind torn sound of rushing darts came after some shifting stone. She stumbled back with two darts in her arm and side, holding them she grimaced from the annoying pain.

Sibra rushed to her with an elixir. Keron rushed to hold her still. He looked at her in his arms, usually so strong; he had forgotten that she was still a woman. He admired her so much he had forgotten this altogether.

She regained her feet, brushed herself off, and looked down the dark hall, “This is ridiculous, and we’re getting nowhere. I wouldn’t be surprised if Chaos Elves built this accursed place. No offence.”

Arathane did not heed her. “Perhaps, we are wasting our time. They’ve been known to make miles and miles of traps, simply to confuse. It matches their handy-work.”

Sibra nodded in agreement.

She looked at Keron. He felt out of place under her glance, and then he realized that they were waiting for his consideration. “I don’t know.” After he said the words he cringed, a feeling of embarrassment washed over him. He wished he could take those words back and just agree or disagree with them, anything except what he had said.

Danei looked down the long stony corridor ahead, with its several crossing paths and gave a resigned exhale. “We’ll head back to see what the others have found. We can always come back to this if they’ve found nothing. Agreed?”

The others just nodded, including Keron.

* * * * *

Varei stepped into the narrow corridor, inside was the strangest thing she had ever seen, it unnerved and even startled her. The others glanced inside as well. The corridor continued down a slope it was filled with archways along the passage every ten feet; what was so unnerving was that those arches were carved with dragon heads crisscrossing back and forth over the passage, their open mouths and sharp teeth were left to walk between.

“This is definitely a trap,” indicated Faeroes.

Sabian indicated, “Or an ornate threshold.”

“It is... unique,” added Greyhome.

“What say you, Varej?” asked Sabian.

“Yes. Unique is a good word,” Varej agreed as she stepped down the corridor searching the walls and floors for triggers.

Sabian tilted his head, “That’s not...” he let the words die as she entered the hall.

The air seemed to breath inside of the corridor making it even more unsettling, slightly humid and certainly washing back and forth over them. Their capes and cloaks moved back and forth ever slightly with each breeze.

As they passed through the dozens of archways Varej checked them to see if there were traps. She found nothing. There was one particularly strange thing about the corridor, where there should have been an archway, there was not one, instead there was a hole in the ceiling. Varej quickly passed through the area looking up into the darkness at an angle.

“Trap?” asked Faeroes as she stopped just in front of it.

“I’m not sure. Might be a way to trap us in this passage,” she whispered. She looked down the corridor that they were moving through. “Perhaps we should take a look down here first? That may just lead into the room we saw earlier.”

They continued down the corridor when the red glow of a glyph went off under Vareï’s feet. A fireball encompassed the corridor and swallowed them whole, only Greyhome was far enough back to avoid the blast altogether. Although, hurt the group survived thanks to their protective armour and some elixirs they had purchased from the Humans.

Scorched, they were not deterred from their course. They knew that returning along this passage would set off the glyph again, for each one of them that passed over top of it, but they had the power to get rid of the glyph. Using a separate elixir they decided to disenchant the trap and passed over it.

They came across a few normal traps along the way, and another glyph, but eventually the corridor ended in a dead end.

“I guess the room it is,” the blue-skinned Elf stated sourly.

“Yes Sabian. Let’s return,” Vareï was worn out from searching and she relaxed herself for the return trip.

They went back through the trapped area and returned to the hole in the ceiling. Vareï took her grapple and rope and stood beneath the hole. Faeroes watched as she stood Vareï seemed to disappear behind two curtains dropping from either side. Faeroes being the closest saw the shape of a dragon’s head shimmer into existence as it moved. Vareï only had enough time to look up as the semi-transparent jaws closed around her with a slamming crunch. There was no scream only the swish of the dragon’s head pulling up through the stone hole, leaving a spattering of blood behind.

“Vareï!” Faeroes screamed as she ran underneath the hole, she screamed again and pulled off her backpack, “Vareï! Dragon! Come back here you coward! Bring your worthless hide back here!”

Sabian and Greyhome were silent and still in shock as to what happened, Greyhome moved passed her down the corridor, but Sabian shouted to her, “Come Faeroes, we will use the main entrance, it is certain death to go after it this way! Come on.”

She wouldn’t budge, as she shook with rage. She swiped up her pack when she heard the swish of scales on stone; she looked up.

Sabian jumped at her slamming her away from the hole. The snap of powerful jaws closed behind them with a crash. “Let’s go!” he insisted.

Faeroes slashed her blade across the dragon's head as it recoiled into the ceiling; a roar erupted from it above them. She turned and followed Sabian down the corridor as a burst of fire came down the hole and filled the corridor. It pushed Faeroes down the corridor slightly, but she smiled with the satisfaction that it was enraged.

They found Greyhome standing in the entrance to the room, "It is gone. It took Varej with it."

"Where?" asked Sabian.

Greyhome pointed across the room to the exit.

"Then let us follow!" encouraged Sabian.

It was Faeroes' turn to act with reason, "No. It is gone."

"What does it matter?" asked Sabian, "We shall follow."

Faeroes sheathed her sword, "Who knows how many traps we shall encounter as we follow it, if we even can follow it while it is invisible. Check our numbers Sabian, the Dwarf was right not to want to separate. Varej is dead, we have lost her."

Sabian looked at Greyhome, the wizard nodded solemnly.

"I never understood your kind. You were ready to die for her a moment ago? The patience to be whipped out, and the strategies to wipe yourselves out, no wonder your races are dying out, and we flourish on the coast." Sabian accused each of them.

Faeroes raised her voice, "That is enough child!" His attack on the Stone Elves and Fire Elves was unwarranted, as they all knew Sea Elves were prone to doing. "The fight is over, pursuit is a different matter."

Sabian regained his composure, "You are eldest, what would you have us do?"

"We shall retrieve the others and exact our revenge accordingly. We know where to start looking when we return."

Sabian boiled beneath the surface, concealing it as best he could.

They looked across the room and bowed in honour, "For Varej Lostbark," they each said.

* * * * *

Shade and Hailian worked on the trap door a while longer, then the sound of grinding stone beneath them made them back away from the trap floor.

"It's resetting," Shade stated.

“We can open it and see what happened, if they’re hurt we can still help them.” Hailian was violent, but when she could see straight she did care about those she knew.

Shade looked around the room, “Okay, get that rock over there and drop it on this door, when it opens I’ll jam your axe inside to hold it open.”

She looked at him with a furrowed brow.

“What?” he said innocently.

“We’re not jamming any pit traps open with my axe,” she stated firmly.

He nodded, “Okay, okay. Let’s look around and see if there’s something nearby we can use.”

Eventually Hailian came back with a stick of wood, it looked like the shaft of a pole arm. “I don’t know how long it will last, but possibly enough for us to get an idea of the situation.”

“It stays open on it’s own for a few second anyway, he had a torch with him, hopefully that’s still burning. It looks kind of like there’s some light down there anyway. If it’s his torch it can’t be that deep.” Shade was focused as he analyzed the situation; it was his favourite part of the adventure, outsmarting the odds.

Hailian lifted and dropped the rock on the trap, the floor opened up and below they saw Sarandhu’s torch, around it stood several decrepit human shapes, the stench of death wafted up to them. Shade didn’t bother to jam the stick in the trapdoor as it closed up.

The pair stood there dumbfounded. “They’re dead.” Shade threw the stick back across the floor.”

“Maybe those were his undead,” Hailian suggested off-handily.

Shade looked at her, “I still think he’d be holding the torch, you know how he fears the dark.”

She nodded, “What do we do now?”

His silence indicated that he was weighing their options. “We’ll head back.”

“That didn’t take long,” replied Hailian.

“Let’s go, we can come back with bigger numbers.”

Just as they turned to walk away they heard a voice, “Hey!” It was Kayla’s. They turned and looked back, she stood across in the next room, torch in hand, and walked towards them. “Where are you guys going?” she asked as she came closer.

Shade and Hailian glanced at one another, Shade answered, “We were going to get the others. And come back to look for you.”

They all seemed suspicious of each other. “What’s our name, darling?” asked Shade.

“Shade and Hailian. What’s mine?” she countered.

“Hawkfeather, or Kayla,” answered Shade. “Where did we meet?”

“Just outside of Kriegan’s Pass.” Kayla’s suspicion was over, she just wanted to get going at this point. “Are you done?”

Shade paused before he answered her, “No. What happened?”

Kayla looked at him blankly, “Well, we dropped in that room down there, and there were all of these wretched creatures, Sarandhu seemed to be coming to his senses so I yelled at him to run and ran down a corridor. I found a symbol like the one you’ve been looking for and hit it, the wall opened up down that way to a set of stairs in the corridor. I’ve always had a good sense of direction, came in handy more than once in my life. I didn’t see Sarandhu though, I thought maybe he was just slow, but he didn’t follow me. Maybe he found another way out?”

“Was he holding the torch while he was down there?” asked Shade.

“No, it was just beside him, why?”

Shade didn’t answer her directly, “Then he’s dead.”

“How do you…” Kayla began.

“We’re leaving to find the others, let’s go,” Shade interrupted.

“But why don’t we continue searching the halls? Sarandhu might be lost,” asked Kayla.

Shade felt his stomach turn, “No, we’ll head back for the others.”

Kayla continued, “But I’m o-…”

“We’re heading back Kayla, now.” Shade cut her off sharply.

Hailian knew what he was feeling; she knew he felt the odds were stacked too high against him. He always preferred to know what he was getting into beforehand. His powerhouse spell caster was now missing; two strikes against continuing a search. She didn’t argue with him, he was usually right, as she had found out the hard way.

They began their retreat down the corridor, Kayla only paused slightly looking back down the hall she came from, and then slowly she joined the others.

* * * * *

It was a few hours before Grimtok stopped in the passage; Drimot marked the stone floor with some charcoal symbols.

Drogeda spoke in a concerned tone, “We should return soon, the others will be waiting by the time we get back.”

Grimtok huffed as he took a seat on his pack, “Yes, I suppose you’re right Drogeda.” He pulled out his wineskin, “I think I’m getting too old for this you know!”

Darva had remained silent and standing looking around the vacant environment.

Drimot checked the passage ahead several paces and then returned. Without a word, he sat down and pulled out his wineskin as well and took several large gulps.

Drogeda stood a while, removed a cloth from her pack, placed it on the floor, and then sat down on it. She removed a wineskin from her bag and offered it to Darva. Darva smiled weakly and accepted a drink of the water. “Thank-you,” she whispered.

“So you say you’re getting bored already are you?” asked Drogeda.

Grimtok looked at her surprised, “Bored? What ever are you talking about?”

“Hunting down a dragon is not exciting enough for you?” she stated.

“I never said that woman!” Grimtok argued.

“You said you were getting too old, did you not?” she questioned.

“Yes, too old to stumble around in these dark caverns looking for trouble that’s for sure, I certainly didn’t say that it wasn’t...” he came to stop and looked at her inquisitively. He then began to laugh, “You know what woman, you’re right I don’t find this thrilling! Not in the least!”

Drimot laughed as well thinking the warrior insane, “You don’t find this exciting? How could you not?”

Drogeda seemed serious, “Then you are old or stupid dwarf.”

Grimtok reassured her, “No, no. That’s not what I mean...well it is what I mean. I know this is dangerous, and that at any moment that lumbering eating machine could barrel its way around the corner, but I don’t want to be here. I’ve been doing this too long. Well, not dragons of course, but demons, elementals, spirits, trolls, if it’s not one form of terror it’s another! It’s too much like work now, my spirits not in it. Not like the two of you.” He looked up at Darva, whose lips quivered at his glance. “This is not a place for you either child, you have power, but you should do helpful things for people like Drogeda does most times in the villages.”

“Most times,” repeated Drogeda quietly.

Grimtok sensing a fight bowed his head, “As always lady Stonegem.”

Drogeda did not seem to mind and nodded back to him for the compliment, she did not mean to make him feel like he had to correct what he had said, she was just reflecting on her life. Those mistakes that had come to pass, and those deeds she had left undone.

“Then you must be getting old Glimdus, for this is certainly exciting,” continued Drimot. “There could be nothing more exciting than returning to Thahn T’kara and face a beast that cast us out so long ago!”

Darva interrupted him, “Thahn T’kara? What is that Drimot?”

Drimot stopped and looked up at her, his train of thoughts flying away.

Drogeda answered for him, “Long ago this mountain was inhabited by our people, it has changed much since that day I’m sure. It was the closest any gold dwarves lived to the mountain edges in history. The Dwarves of those days had taken a Dragon’s lair far to the North and built a stronghold there to remove its treasures. That battle was so very costly, for it was a very old dragon indeed. While they were gone another dragon seized the opportunity to attack Thahn T’kara, and take hold of its bounty and lair here. The Dwarves were chased back to Stonehold deep beneath the mountains, and that cowardly race of Orcs helped the creature to settle.”

“Why didn’t your people try to take it back?” asked Darva.

Grimtok continued for her, “When you lose so many brothers and sisters in a war, you grow a distaste for conquest. It was an age of rebuilding that fell upon us; they were kept busy defending themselves against the Orcs as well. The creatures were swarming the mountains like ants at a picnic, their population too big for their own land, they tried to take ours.”

“And the other lair?”

“Cleaned out and abandoned,” concluded Grimtok.

Grimtok sighed in reflection, “No child, it is no longer Thahn T’kara, then it was the Manticore Lathadahl’s before that. A place is just that, a place. In time it will change names, faces and ownership. It is no longer Thahn T’kara.”

Darva had forgotten about her worries and started to think about the history of this place, how many times it had changed ownership and how many different races had lived here.

“I’m going to check ahead. How much further are we going to travel elder Glimdus?” bowed Drimot.

“Very amusing Drimot, perhaps I should bend you over my knee like a whelp?” he threatened. “Half an hour, let them wait, I’ve still got some spirit left in me.” He hoisted his pack and they continued.

Darva whispered to Grimtok, “You’re not getting too old Glimdus, I see lots of spirit still in you.”

Grimtok glared over his shoulder, her smile warmed him and he felt himself blush slightly. “Ahem, eyes ahead people let’s look alive, we have a job to do.”

They journeyed only a few dozen paces when they came across something that reflected from their torches. They grew very cautious and crept as best they could towards the spot.

Something washed its way up the side of a wall glimmering like yellow steel.

“Well, well, what do we have here?” Grimtok whispered in awe.

A huge cavern lay open before them, the contents of it spilling forward. Unimaginable mounds of gold and gems lay in piles against the walls.

The cavern was immense and dark; they dimmed their torches and scanned the nearby area using a potion of elemental nature they called “Commune with Nature”. Darva found no trace of danger nearby, but admittedly the spells range was limited.

They starred in awe of the treasure one last time; it was all they could do to return to the meeting place.