

DUNGEON CRAWLER - DRAGON SLAYER

CHAPTER THREE: THE LAIR

The group met in the main corridor and they took in the news; the lair had been found, but at the cost of two lives and much of their supplies.

They took shelter in a small room, found using some markings that Shade had discovered for latches and releases.

Sarandhu's mysterious disappearance began to play on the minds of the company; if someone as powerful as him could vanish and never be found again then any one of them could discover the same fate.

The Elves only felt rage. Their hearts burned with a quest for revenge of their leader, even Arathane whom had not traveled with them seemed in a darker mood. No one felt any different about Varej's death, but Elves never seemed prone to such strong emotions, even Fire Elves.

There was a difficult decision to be made to go to the route the Elves had taken, or the route that the Dwarves had taken. Danei didn't like the sound of the route the Elves had taken at all; it reminded her too much of her own riddled passages from that same day.

The Dwarves had found a lair; a cavern littered with treasure, the Elves had lost someone close to them. Danei feared insulting the Elves and took a very painstaking long time to discuss the matter with them. They seemed solemn in her decision, saying very little, and with only a glance to the wizards Faeroes spoke, "We thank you Danei for taking our concerns to heart, but you are right, we walked into a death trap. I see that now, I should have recognized it then."

Sabian made a motion to correct her that she had known it was a trap, but she continued before he could intercede. "We know that the beast will return to the lair, and this will provide us with a certain advantage at least. We came to aid you Danei Sharewood, Varej knew the risks and has joined the elders that roam the lands. I will not allow our feelings to cloud our judgment, and I agree with you. We will go to the lair."

It was a long time after preparations before the camp settled into their predetermined watches and the camp became still with slumber.

A shout from Drogeda jolted everyone upright from his or her sleep, "Undead!" She whirled her flail above her head, everyone was awakened and tried to rush to her side. The attack had already begun.

The skeleton moved out of the darkness towards Drogeda, a rusted sword in its bony grip. It slashed at her with the crude weapon, but she easily defended against the

attack and countered with her own. The skeleton's rotted hide armour split from the impact of the magical flail.

Arathane stood back with his bow knocked and pointed it towards the dark corridor that the skeleton had come from, glancing occasionally towards the battle beside him. Waiting, Shade stood against the other wall doing much the same thing, short sword drawn and concealed behind him, his black gauntlet raised to throw his invisible knives from his dark corner.

Nothing came.

Drogeda parried another attack with her armour and her second strike landed home shattering the dusty creature to pieces.

Everyone stood in silence behind her, waiting. Nothing stirred beyond the range of their campfire. They watched the darkness with keen eyes and felt for some sign of danger, something that would sound the attack to come.

Nothing came.

The darkness remained, and the silence stayed without sway. Only the sounds of their own heartbeats and breath could be heard in their ears.

Danei indicated for Arathane and Keron to follow her, she moved towards the dark corridor step after step. Drogeda and Grimtok followed. Slowly they disappeared into the darkness one by one.

Shade watched them from his corner nervously.

Footsteps came from the corridor, "It is just us, and we're coming in." Danei's voice was calm, apparently unshaken by their investigation. Shade knew that she had guts of steel.

She emerged from the corridor followed by everyone else, Grimtok and Drogeda returned last leaving the shadows behind them.

"Nothing. There was nothing else out there, and no indication of where it had come from." She approached the shattered remains of the skeleton that had attacked them and crouched down in front of it examining it more closely.

Darva was the first to speak, "Rather strange there should only be one of them my Lady?"

Sabian agreed, "Strange indeed."

Lady Danei looked around; she agreed. When she stood she looked at the two openings that came into the room, "Someone does not want us to rest tonight. Even if

there are no other attacks, most of us will be letting our minds wander away with us. Also, the bones have not disintegrated.”

Keron looked around for someone to ask, but since no one else did, he had to, “What does it mean?”

Drogeda answered him, “It means that someone has been raising the dead.”

Keron looked surprised, “But raising is forbidden...”

Sibra’s harsh chuckle cut him off, “We’re not in Keldorna son, it’s a different world out here.”

Grimtok grunted in agreement.

“Do you think this is the Blackhanded’s work?” No one expected this from Greyhome. His deep voice, for an Elf, had not said much of anything since their meeting in the woods.

Lady Danei answered intrigued by the notion, “Perhaps.”

“Why don’t we seal the room, we won’t have to worry about anymore attacks?” suggested Keron.

“It’s not a bad suggestion Keron, does anyone have a spell that can seal these portals, and we’ll also need to open them again when we’re ready to leave?” Danei looked at the Elven wizards, Sabian shook his head.

Sabian spoke up, “A wall of Ice will not last as long as we need it to.”

“Greyhome can use his Wall of Stone spell,” answered Faeroes. “He’ll then have to use another spell to get through it in the morning.”

Danei was happy for the suggestion, “This is true. Greyhome can you make it so?”

“Yes. The spell will only cover one portal, its reach is limited,” the Elf answered.

Danei indicated the far portal, “one shall be suitable. We don’t want to be trapped in here or suffocate.”

The Elf prepared himself and then drawing the magical energies with a few key words brought forth a wall of solid stone across the corridor that more than covered it. Danei had seen the spell before and guessed it was several feet thick.

“A wall still may not guarantee our safety, we’ll have to keep with the watches,” finished Danei. She looked at the skeletal remains on the floor, “Drogeda?”

“Yes Lady Danei?”

She gave a slight bow to the Dwarven Priestess, “Will you see that this poor soul is properly laid to rest?”

“You need not ask my Lady, it will be done,” she answered with a slight bow in return.

As the remains were cleared Grimtok approached Lady Danei, “Were there any runes on the bones or equipment?”

Danei watched as Hailian dragged the pieces out the entrance portal for Drogeda, “No, there were no runes or glyphs.”

Grimtok gave a guttural approval, “Good, then it will surely not trouble us again.”

“The damage has already been done Grimtok,” she looked around at the camp that had settled down again, but most kept glancing at where the exit portal had been. Many kept their armour on and slept against the wall instead of near the campfire. “We’ll not be rested for tomorrow.”

She was right, although the remains were removed; no one slept well that night. Fitful dreams of undead rising from the cold floor beneath them grasping with their cold bony hands scraping against stone, the smell of dusty flesh hanging in the air, and moans of the dead filled their heads. The skeleton’s task was complete.

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Several hours passed and the stone over the portal was cleared by a Tunnel spell. He seemed uncomfortable expending a spell so early. It would be a long day, and that spell could have been used somewhere else.

Returning was not an easy task. The tunnels seemed to have changed slightly making their journey arduous as they argued over which direction they had come. The Dwarves swore that the tunnels had moved, but all of the stones were all so scraped it was impossible to tell which stone walls had been moved and when. However, most of the markings they had left behind with the charcoal were still there.

“Nasty little tricks she’s got in these tunnels I must say.” It was Sibra’s voice that broke the long silence held by the group as they moved through the halls.

Sabian nodded, “It would appear some of these walls have been moved to create new halls.”

Grimtok grunted in agreement, “I’ll agree with that, we certainly did not see that pit trap before this day.”

“Lucky for us Shade and Karzden are searching ahead then, eh,” added Sibra.

Grimtok gave him a warning glance; Sibra ignored it.

Drogeda answered him instead, “Yes Sibra, it is good that they are with us. And it is certainly better that Shade is ahead of us and not in our pockets.”

Sibra chuckled.

“I would swear that I could hear the shifting of stone in the night, I thought it had been my imagination,” Grimtok chuckled lightly from the thought.

Darva’s soft voice came to Keron’s ear, “Why are they so hard on Shade, Keron?”

Keron looked back at her surprised by her warmth even to someone of Shade’s reputation. Perhaps, he began to think, she was not aware of his reputation. “Shade has made far too many enemies in his day.” He paused thoughtfully looking into Darva’s soft eyes, thinking of what he knew of Shade, “Although he’s not all bad, I remember what Danei told me he did an age ago, in a battle she would most certainly have lost, he saved her life. She told me that he could have left her there for dead, but he came back for her. He showed up in the bleakest of nights, in the rain, carrying her into town. For his trouble, he was given a reward, but still not permitted in the temple where she was healed.”

Darva looked at Lady Danei’s armoured back thoughtfully and spoke under her breath, “That sounds so sorrowful.”

“Do not feel too badly for him Darva. He was the same man that killed the gray knight of Kriegan’s Pass, Leodan Ashmurg, a few years ago in a duel.” Keron felt a long dead sorrow swallow his heart again.

Darva interjected, “The duel was fair though, I heard about it in my travels.”

“It was fair, and a good man died for nothing.”

“He chose to duel and lost. Shade would have been killed had he lost, that was the knight’s intention wasn’t it?”

Keron could not understand why Darva would defend Shade, Leodan was a Knight, there would be no reason to question his motives.

She continued, “People think the worst of someone in a bad situation, I know. I have been subject to many unjust persecutions.” She lifted her sleeve slightly where a jagged scar ran across her arm, “It was made by a stone thrown by a mountain Barbarian when I was six. I did not understand their ways, how could I? People judge quickly and should learn to forgive or understand better.”

Keron smiled lightly, "I suppose it is true, but people make themselves. You can only trust people to do what you know them to do, that's what Danei used to say."

"She does not say that anymore then?"

Keron thought back on it, "No, she does not speak much of anyone anymore."

"Everyone has a place in the world Keron, even Shade," Darva persisted.

"She is right Keron," they were startled by Arathane's deep soft even voice. They looked at him stunned, he stood in front of them without expression, "Everyone has their place, even Shade."

Arathane turned forward again and moved ahead. They stood there in shock for a few moments, as the Elven wizards started to pass around them in the corridor. Arathane's skills were not as adept underground. He had kept back in the group letting Shade and Karzden cover the corridors ahead. They had grown so used to him not being amongst them, that his voice left them in silence, wondering if what Arathane implied was just fact or a statement meant for other purposes.

Kayla followed behind the group, Keron and Darva waited for her to catch up. "How are you doing Kayla?" asked Darva.

Kayla looked away from the corridor walls where she had been staring vacantly, "I'm fine Darva. I just want to get there."

Darva looked to Keron, "How much further is it?"

"Not sure, Grimtok said it wasn't much further, but with the shifting corridors it may take a while longer. Are you tired Kayla?" Keron asked.

"She's been through a lot Keron..." Darva didn't get to finish her sentence.

Kayla let out a sharp breath, "No. Would you stop coddling me, the Sorcerer is dead, I couldn't even find him in that room, and I'm fine-the undead didn't even touch me!"

Darva started to apologize, "I'm sorry Kayla, I didn't mean..."

Kayla stormed ahead of them, "I just wish you would stop asking me if I was alright."

Darva and Keron did not pursue her.

Ahead, Lady Danei and Faeroes lead the group, both women moved like seasoned warriors. They stayed slightly ahead of the group that was becoming too loose and talkative, Danei gave Arathane a sharp look. He went back through the ranks and reorganized them and hushed them.

Faeroes gave her a smile of approval as they stopped and waited. "You know, this corridor is too small for that creature!" she said softly watching her from the corner of her eye.

"It's not that creature I'm worried about in these corridors," replied Danei. "Those undead are coming from somewhere, and we don't have a clue as to where."

Faeroes smiled, "That was our mistake, Danei, assuming the creature could not fit into a narrow hall. It cost us dearly. Patience is invaluable." She looked back at the two wizards.

"I'm sure we'll make more mistakes before the day is done Faeroes." Danei's outlook on life had become pessimistic as the responsibilities of her people weighted on her in these dark days. She remembered Keron's words before they left, that they should wait for the messenger from Keldorna. Her words to him were those of her people; those bureaucrats had already taken more than a week, while people were dying. Fear had driven many to the town, but that left the farms deserted and food was beginning to become scarce.

The Orcish and Goblin raids were not helping matters. An attack on one of the few remaining farms was the last straw; Danei packed and sent word for Sibra at the tavern where Grimtok happened to also be spending the afternoon. She was glad her old friend was there, it might have well been suicide without him and Drogeda. They were always accountable on any day.

She knew something about dragons, but Grimtok knew where Cinder's lair was. He probably saved her days of wandering through the mountains.

They met Arathane on the road, roaming as he always does. She could not dissuade Keron from coming with her and Grimtok; it was too much for him to miss seeing them in action.

She looked at him now waiting patiently with the misfit gypsy girl. Her eyes passed over the group slowly, she realized what a strange contingent they made and allowed herself a faint smile.

Sibra strode up to the women, she realized he was going to speak and signalled for him to crouch and implied he speak softly. He actually obliged, "We've been wandering pretty far, eh?"

Shade rounded the corner in front of them from his scouting with Karzden, he interrupted the barbarian, "But we made it. This hall meets up with a large corridor just over there. Just around another corner is the lair." Shade seemed to be in shock from the prospects he had just seen, and the calculations running through his head.

"Any sign of her?" asked Danei.

Shade shook his head, “No. But, despite myself, I didn’t go poking around in there either.”

Grimtok grunted, “Well, even if she’s in there, this tunnel is too small for her bulk, we’ll be fine in here while we prepare.”

Faeroes clenched her fists, but held her contempt to the Dwarf’s statement.

Danei smiled at him, “Ok, let’s get started. Shade you take first watch on the lair. Take this potion just in case.”

“Ok.” He looked at the small vial she handed him, “What is it?”

“Firewalk.”

“Oh. Got it.” With that he drained the vial and walked down the corridor to wait for the others and watch for the beast.

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As they entered the vast lair they saw nothing but the hoard and a hollow darkness. They moved slowly into the room, until they could see that they were halfway inside. Danei indicated to Keron and Grimtok to examine the mounds of gold and gems to either side. The others continued to move across the room until they reached the far end, which opened into another long tunnel.

The Elves strained their long ears to the darkness and found nothing to indicate their prey.

Kayla and Arathane remained near the entrance, bows poised, ready to strike. Danei scanned the ceiling; its darkness loomed above them without giving a clue to its height. Danei tapped Sibra’s shoulder and gestured for him to cast a spell.

Sibra began his chant and rubbing his bone necklace between his fingers, a soft glow began to flood the lair. The gold sparkled in the light, and the ceiling gave way to reveal its hidden secrets. Solid stone lay above them perhaps ninety feet, vacant of what they sought.

Keron finished stabbing his swords around in the piles of treasure, Shade stopped grimacing when he did. Shade muttered, “Well, if she’s in there, she’s far more patient than anything I could imagine.”

They scanned the room, the warriors moving along the walls while the spell casters stayed near the middle. Danei noticed that they were clustering together and told them to spread out.

Time seemed to pass with each heartbeat, every footfall, and they waited every breath held a little longer as though if they disturbed the air they might miss some sound.

The darkness waited.

Faintly the sound of clinking gold coins and gems came from behind Danei, she turned to see Shade crouched at the base of a glittering pile filing a sack with the shining prizes.

Shade feeling suddenly aware that he was being watched, turned around and shrugged, "What? If we're just gonna stand around anyways, we may as well pick up something!" His voice was loud enough that it made everyone uncomfortable.

"This doesn't make any sense," muttered Danei as she scanned the darkness, "Dragons are supposed to be far more protective of their hoard than this?"

Grimtok looked nervous for a Dwarf, which was still pretty much like iron, "We've been here way too long Danei; she should have been here by now?"

Keron interjected, "Maybe she's raiding one of the farms for cattle and we caught her out of the den?"

Danei studied the darkness, "No. We would have heard or seen her leave, she wouldn't leave for longer than the night and she doesn't attack during the day. How long has it been Grimtok?"

"I'd say we've been standing around almost a half hour," he was beginning to relax, just like everyone else was. He glanced back and forth. "Perhaps we should set up a welcome for her?" He grinned.

Danei sat down on the pile of gold lost in thought. She ran her hand through the treasure and looked over its glittering surface, and something struck her all of a sudden, spoken more to herself than to anyone else, "There's only gold and gems here?" Her question did not fall on deaf ears, Grimtok, Keron, Faeroes and Greyhome looked at her.

Hailian kicked a gem across the dirt floor and gritted her teeth, "So?"

"There's only gold and gems...where's everything else?"

Drimot turned, "The weapons, armour, items..."

Sabian looked up from his thoughts, "A different room then?"

“But she would still protect this room, perhaps she’s on her way?” Grimtok added.

“True, unless she’s already here and is waiting for something?” Shade whispered.

Sabian almost sneered, “Waiting for what?”

Danei’s body tensed and she stood, “The spells, they’ve worn off!” As she spoke those last words she clenched her jaws and began to shake with fear, “Get your potions ready!”

Everyone returned to his or her ready stances, only Sibra and Grimtok seemed to understand what she was talking about and reached into their packs to pull out a potion vial.

The others were all drawn to the sound of a battle cry that came from the far end of the room; it was Hailian charging towards a great black serpentine head that unfolded from the wall. Its long neck extended and its horned skull shot out, not towards her, but instead towards the middle of the room where Sibra stood still holding his vial. Flames shot out of its enormous mouth and flowed like liquid into the room. Sibra was the only one that did not scream as he gulped the potion’s contents and closed his eyes. As the fire washed around him he heard Karzden, Sabian, and Darva scream out in agony.

Karzden was the only one of the three that was not completely engulfed in flames as he half jumped aside and was half tossed by the flames, most of his body smoked from the blistering wounds. Darva and Sabian’s charred bodies clattered across the stones from the force of the fiery blast.

Keron’s heart skipped as he watched Darva’s remains clatter to the ground, but caught beneath the giant beast’s head did not have time to think as he jumped aside from a vaporous claw descending upon him.

Hailian should have caught a long serpentine tail square in the chest as it unfolded from the wall, but instead it swished straight through her like a ghost. She was lost in her rage, swinging her glowing battleaxe wildly at the body of the dark red dragon before her. If it were an illusion then it bled, Hailian’s second swing struck into the scale-plated hide of the creature. She was the only one that stood her ground as the dragon roared, everyone ran in different directions getting as much distance between them and the beast as they could; except Kayla who seemed to be paralysed with terror as she stared at the monster unfurling before them.

The dragon, now fully inside the great lair, suddenly became reality, its ghostly form solidified. The dragon had a pair of crinkled jagged horns that arced back towards the sky, small frills decorated her jaws, a row of spikes ran from her nose down the length of her long neck and back, dark yellow plates ran the length of her belly, golden serpentine eyes scanned the lair, a mouth filled with long alligator-like teeth and dark red scales that covered her body from her nose to her spiked tail. This dragon was a ruby dragon, this dragon was old, and this dragon’s name was Cinder.

Only three figures stopped moving, the Dwarves. They shouted to their ancestors for courage and came to a sliding halt; their dread of the creature had suddenly washed away. Drogeda then began to chant as Grimtok turned and rushed back at the great beast alone. Karzden, biting his pain, hurled a throwing axe towards it. When Drogeda was finished, the companions felt the dragon's presence wash away from their minds and they began to think clearly.

As Faeroes and Greyhome continued to get some distance between them and the beast they summoned the powers given to high elves and wizards. Greyhome's spell was a Clone spell, intending to make a duplicate of the dragon for it to face, but a shimmering shield sprang up around the dragon and the spell fizzled off in a different direction, the spell was wasted. Greyhome cursed, "Deflect! Bah!"

Faeroes' power came in the form of a fiery stream from the ground underneath the dragon. As she ran she saw that the fire although it touched the creature's belly, was barely noticed by the monster.

The only sound of battle was Hailian as she hacked at the giant beast; everyone else had paused to size up his or her odds, Hailian had no such concerns.

Danei knew she would have to spur them on. She shouted as she moved into position from on top of the golden pile, "Intangible, she was intangible! Hit her now!"

This is what they had prepared for; the long journey to the mountains, the expensive potions and equipment, and the gathering itself. As one they turned to face their fears and one of the most deadly monsters known to Keldorna.

She took evaluation of the matter. Kayla remained frozen. Darva and Sabian were dead, beyond retrieval now except by resurrection, thanks to the cowardice of the team. Karzden was seriously hurt, but was still putting up a fight. Hailian and Grimtok were the only two close enough to face the beast this moment. Shade had moved around to the back of the beast, Danei wasn't sure of his intent. Drogeda, Sibra and Greyhome were casting. Keron and Faeroes were moving in for the attack.

Danei charged in to the fray, sword and shield at the ready.

The dragon lashed out its head arching towards Grimtok; he sidestepped the lunge getting clipped by the snapping jaws. The dragon did not stop there; its tail lashed out at Hailian smashing her and sending her skittering across the floor, she rolled into a stand and charged back. Its claw then came down at Grimtok, who assumed he was forgotten about for the time being, and batted him across the ground. Finally the biggest surprise was a crystalline sound that came from deep within the dragon and a wall of earth just like the one Greyhome had cast when they rested sprang up around Arathane! He shouted out in frustration as the stone encapsulated him within it.

Kayla, who was just a few feet from the wall, was pushed aside as it erupted from the ground beside her. This seemed to bring her back to the world and she made her way past the wall of stone out of the corridor.

“Arathane!” Danei knew it was the same spell that Greyhome had cast, but how did the dragon cast it? Arathane was trapped inside the stone, she knew it would be a slow death as he suffocated to death inside. They had to end the battle quickly in order to save those that had fallen, and keep it from getting worse. She was still too far from the dragon to act; she passed by Sabian’s charred body and grimaced.

This was more than most of the veterans could handle, those whom were truly seasoned recalculated their strategies.

Sibra held his charm and called the powers of the lands to give him strength, his body changed, coated in stone and wood, twisting bone and flesh in to a strange hunched creature of the earth.

Grimtok’s powerful axe barely penetrated the dragon’s armoured hide.

Karzden was on the move, heading towards the right flank of the beast, he threw an axe as he did so it glanced off of the dragon’s armour harmlessly.

Drogeda focused her deity’s powers to Grimtok; he glimmered with the strength and protection of her deity of light.

Keron reached the side of the creature swinging furiously, barely making a scratch on its scaled hide. Hailian appeared beside Keron hacking wildly at the creature, Keron wasn’t sure whether to pay closer attention to the berserker’s swings or the dragons crushing legs.

Shade appeared on the far side of the dragon, his gloved hand flashed forward and the five magical knives flew forward. All of the knives glanced off of the monster’s body.

Faeroes’ voice could be heard as she closed the gap between herself and the creature, “The dragon is an elder! I told you it could use magic!” She flung her hand at it, again a burst of flame erupted beneath it. It barely noticed the flames again.

Greyhome finished an incantation and a fiery ball exploded on the far side of the creature. Despite the powerful spell, the dragon barely noticed, but did glance at the Elven wizard with its cold serpentine gaze.

The dragon’s jaws snapped down at Faeroes, she jumped and twisted as she moved, one of the horns along the ridge of its head grazed her. She had the feeling it recognized her as it passed by, and had been waiting to strike.

As Keron moved away from being hit by Hailian, the dragon’s claw came smashing into him squarely. He hit the ground rolling, but did not get back up.

Hailian caught the tail across the side of her head flipping her over like a rag doll thrown by a child; she hit the ground and stopped moving.

That same crystalline sound came from the dragon, Grimtok was close enough to see one of the wounds close up completely. He felt very old, his bones ached and his reflexes felt so slow, but he stood back up and held his ground.

Danei took a position between Keron and Grimtok. Keron was alive and Grimtok looked fairly rough, but she knew he'd been in worse situations. Even so, she'd seen him in better spirits. Her sword bit twice into the dragon's flesh between scales, it roared in pain as she twisted the blade slightly to remove it, and it noted her presence.

Sibra pointed a stone and wooden claw at the monster unleashing a powerful primal spirit upon the creature, its glowing green and yellow form looked and roared like a boar of immense size; the armoured scales on the dragon's face were torn free by its savage claws and fangs, Cinder roared in rage.

Grimtok's spirit seemed to rise with Danei at his side and he cleft into the beast's hide with that vigour that he used to.

No one saw Karzden disappear in the fray except Kayla and she slipped around behind him as he climbed the mound of gold. "And where are you going Dwarf?" her voice was quiet and eerie.

Karzden turned annoyed by the interruption, "Where do you think girl? I have a job to do." His throwing axes still in hand he gave the girl a glance. What he saw made his eyes widen in surprise, his growl was cut short by an arrow that plunged into his heavy chest. A second followed sinking into his leg.

Kayla cursed as she failed to finish the dwarf with her second shot.

The stubborn dwarf threw an axe feebly at the girl as she fired a third and fourth arrow into his ribcage. He collapsed on the gold still clutching at the first arrow gurgling blood he gasped for air. She stood over him pondering a moment, her hand resting on her dagger, deciding whether or not the dwarf would die soon enough on his own. No one could see them, as the battle raged on the other side of the treasure mound; she had all of the time in the world.

Drogeda unleashed her deity's powers again sparkling energies washed over Grimtok, Hailian, Faeroes, and Keron. Both Keron and Hailian stood again.

Keron swiped at the giant form in front of him wildly, attempting more to get out from under it than do anything else.

Shade crouched down behind a mound of gold picking up glittering diamonds, jades, rubies, sapphires, onyxes, opals, and any other large gems that he could find. He giggled like a child at play completely unaware of the battle raging on behind him.

Faeroes' slender blade failed to penetrate the dragon's armour as she barrelled forward, she was kept off balance by the dragon's motions, and she was starting to feel singled out.

Greyhome cast a spell over himself, and moved closer to the line of sight of the beast.

The dragon's head came at Grimtok again, she rammed into him knocking him prone. Faeroes provided distraction to keep the dwarf from being gutted.

Keron felt the dragon's tail slap him across his ribs and knew they broke, the spikes had missed him, but it didn't matter; he wasn't going to get up from this one without help either.

The crystalline sound came again, this time it brought up a wall of stone around Sibra, the shaman struggled to no avail as the stones closed around him. The last thing he saw was Danei suffer from the strike of the dragon's claws sending her flying back. It would take him a while to free himself, by then the battle might already be over.

As Danei hit the ground she spun, and saw the strangest thing...

An arrow already lodged in her back a second arrow plunged into Drogeda and she collapsed to the ground face down. Danei looked back to see Kayla reloading her bow from the entrance of the cavern.

"Drogeda!" Danei ran to her drinking an elixir as she did, she took aim at Kayla and cast the spell. Nothing happened, the look on Danei's face grew wide with surprise and then anger. The girl was not bewitched, she had fired upon Drogeda by her own free will. Drogeda could be saved still; healing her now would prove to be futile with an archer poised to strike her down again.

A battle cry escaped her as she turned and charged towards the treacherous girl; the others that faced the dragon behind her could not hear her over their own sound of battle and the roar that harrowed the threat of death.

Kayla raised her bow and fired. The arrow glanced off of Danei's armour. A second arrow came, this one grazed her armoured leg. Still she charged forward, the girl seemed to panic but drew another arrow. The third arrow hit Danei in the arm and she screamed in pain, but still she charged forward blood trickling from the wound. The fourth arrow was almost point blank, aimed right at her throat, but at the last second the knight ducked to the side. That last arrow flew harmlessly over her shoulder. She took a few more strides and brought her sword across the girl's right shoulder through her left hip, the returning blade then cut across her belly, and the final arc brought it across her arm holding the bow.

The bow clattered to the ground. Kayla looked at her without expression. And then a smile spread across her face, "Didn't you find it odd that I didn't run from you?"

The sound of swishing liquid came from the girl and as Danei looked down at the girl's hand that entered her belly just under her armour, the knife appeared fused to Kayla's hand. She looked into the girl's eyes that smiled wickedly at Danei. Danei felt

the life and air draining from her as blood trickled into her throat. It was no knife; it was much much longer.

Danei was barely audible as she gasped, “Shapeshifter...” She shook from the agony and the realization that escaped her lips. Thoughts flooded to her of Shade’s words, “She was eager to come and didn’t ask for much in return.” Her head lolled forward weakly as she struggled to push herself off of the blade. She remembered the battle with the Orcs, when Kayla had taken the wound, there was no blood on her from the cut she had received, but everyone else had still been stained despite their healing. Her knees shook weakly as she held onto the girl’s hand.

Kayla shoved on the knife harder which pushed through to the chain armour on her back; Danei arched back and then slumped forward. Kayla let her fall to the ground. Blood fanned out from underneath the warrior’s body on the ground and Kayla stepped aside to pick up her bow and missing arm segment.

Kayla took aim at the Stone Elf this time and let the arrow fly, it reflected off of a shimmering essence around him. Kayla quickly knocked another arrow that traveled the length of her arm and watched as the gray-skinned Elf, Greyhome, looking straight at her already at the end of a spell. He did not look pleased. The second shot glanced off of the Elf’s stony skin.

Fire erupted around her from the stone beneath her feet. She screamed in agony, the scream of a hundred voices reverberated through her. She shook with pain, her flesh bubbled from the burns, and she looked at the elf with rage. She drew two more arrows and fired, the elf’s skin chipped but still resisted them. Now she ran, she ran with the true fear that all mortals feel when they have been marked to die.

The elf followed.

Grimtok sized up the situation around him and stood his ground as the great beast came at him he bellowed a harrowing battle cry and charged. Its great claw came down on him and crushed him to the floor, perhaps it was his armour that prevented the blow from killing him instantly, or his Dwarven stubbornness, but as he lay under the claw on the stone floor he shouted, “Faeroes! Get them out of here!” He swung his axe at the claw with his free arm, it drew blood and the bony claw withdrew.

Faeroes looked around the room as Shade disappeared down a corridor, bodies lay everywhere, “Get out of here now!” She grabbed Keron who was the closest to her and pulled him down the tunnel. “Greyhome, follow us!”

Greyhome looked at her momentarily and turned back to his target. His fingers danced with the incantation of another spell.

Keron wasn’t much of a match for Faeroes’ strength, but he still defied her, “No!” he gasped, “Grimtok is still alive!” And was forced to watch his friend abandoned to his fate as he was dragged behind her.

As Grimtok tried to stand, blood pouring from his mouth, he didn't see the dragon's powerful jaws striking at him. As he disappeared inside its maw his axe flew over the stone and clattered to a stop. The wet crunch of bones made Keron reflexively shake with horror.

The cavern behind them began to rumble, as though a small earthquake were striking inside of it. The dragon's roar echoed down the corridor they slipped in to.

Faeroes pulled Keron down the corridor after Shade and then hefted him across her shoulders. "My thanks to my ancestors for making your armour so light, warrior, but you are still heavy."

As they barrelled down the corridor they heard a scream ahead. It was Shade. They rounded a corner and saw a hole in the floor. A scream of rage came from Shade, as he seemed to come to terms with his situation.

Keron wheezed weakly, "We should help him."

Faeroes looked at him through the corner of her eye, and she lowered him to the ground, "We don't know how deep that hole is or where it leads. I also do not have any rope."

"I do," he gave a weak smile.

Faeroes looked back and did not see the dragon following through the narrow hall she pulled out a vial from her belt and gave it to Keron. She noticed that no one else followed them either only the low rumble that slowly subsided. Not even Greyhome followed. "I think Greyhome bought us some time."

She tilted her head towards the hole as Keron drank from the vial, "Forget about him he's gone."

Keron felt his ribs began to knit, "What?"

She looked at him with dark shining brown eyes, "He has run away. In the same direction we are heading."

Keron's bones shifted, his strength returned and then jumping the hole in the floor they made their way along the corridors probing with the swords and straining in the darkness to see any changes that might indicate a trap.

Keron mistook one of the hallways for one they had come from and was the target of a glyph trap. The spell went off and hit him, at first he thought he was dead, but it only took a moment to realize that the spell had not targeted him directly, but instead it had targeted his armour. The armour was heavy now, its enchantments gone. The trap had to be made to weaken Cinder's hunters before they reached the lair. He felt so stupid for running into it on the way out. He cursed himself for his luck.

It seemed to take forever as they wandered those corridors trying to remember which way was the way they had come in. The paths had definitely changed, and there were a few different traps they encountered along the way. When they came to the last long uncut tunnel, which flooded with light from the starry night beyond, they stopped dead in their tracks.