

## DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

### CHAPTER 4: UHLDRADAR

Between two walls of a frozen chasm on an icy crystalline platform, rising from the depths of a grand fissure, sits a great blue skinned creature watching a perfect pearl like sphere atop a twisted podium from his frosty makeshift throne.

The gaze from his pearl white eyes watches the small group at his doorstep, his breathing slow and deep as though in slumber, he remains unmoving. His great chest rises and falls slowly.

He watched as the two small groups part ways within the pearl and the pair of intruders made their way inside his lair. Below him trailed a circling staircase of ice winding down towards a morbid courtyard of bones, spiked heads and fully encased creatures.

Rising from his throne he proceeded down the long staircase towards the courtyard, pausing only briefly amongst his trophies, before striding across the icy bridge with the prowess of a great cat towards the mouth in the wall.

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A low growl was the only warning they had as Ulrik pushed Hela and himself against a frozen pillar, a heavy metallic trident plinked three holes into the frozen floor where she once stood. “Mr Ulrik...” her catty chatter was cut short by a heavy grunt from above and a great blue humanoid creature landed beside the trident just a few feet away.

A man-like creature stood before them, it stood nearly three heads taller than Ulrik and its face had rows of black horns which could be found on its shoulders and back. Its ears were akin to fins and pointy, its jaw protruded and two tusk-like teeth jutted upwards. Its body was long, muscular and mostly naked, its lengthy arms and legs ended in black claws, and long black tendrils much like hair fell down around its shoulders. It appeared like an icy aquatic hybrid of a creature. Its trident was a golden metal as were its bracers and belt. Most unnerving were its eyes, they were cold and white, like snowy crystals beneath a layer of darkened water.

Hela rolled away from the pillar to get some distance between herself and the monster.

The great blue creature withdrew its trident from the icy floor with little effort and prepared to strike again, Ulrik dropped to one knee and with hands held up he bowed low and shouted, “Mighty Uhlradar!” The monster stopped his trident from arcing down to strike the small figure before him. “We apologize for the intrusion on your home, and mean you no harm. We seek a friend of ours, a wayward traveler.”

Hela dropped her guard and watched the pair. The marid relaxed to a slightly less aggressive stature and backed away a few steps.

“They may have intruded your home unwittingly, for we are not from your realm.” Ulrik chanced a look upwards. “I ask your permission to look for them and take them home. May I do so?”

The creature responded in a deep voice, “You may. But, touch nothing else.”

Ulrik stood and moved away from the marid carefully.

Hela made a pair of uncertain bows to the creature and moved to join Ulrik, “Wow, that was easier than I thought it would be.”

Ulrik was still shaking, “Yah, easier. I’m just glad he understood the trade tongue.”

They could hear the marid scale the wall behind them, it appeared it would be watching from the icy arches above.

“Oh, good point. So who are we looking for?”

“I think we’re most likely to find Soola here, he’s a Sea Elf, and if he was thinking of home on the aether, this might’ve come the closest to his thoughts and dropped him here.”

After several searches down long icy tunnels, shaped more like winding tubes than cut corridors, they moved in to a large chamber where the walls were covered in bodies frozen in ice. The figures were contorted, often unconscious, surprised or shielding themselves from disaster, apparently to no avail.

“Well, if he’s in this room, he’s more than likely dead,” Hela’s comment was matter of fact.

Ulrik contemplated for a little while at the horror before him, all of these might have been travelers unfortunate enough to encounter Uhlradar without knowing where they were or what he was. He caught a glimpse of some poor souls that looked like they would certainly cut out his heart if they could. Of course, they could’ve been here to slay the marid or steal from him too.

His heart sunk a little at the prospect of finding his friend suffocated within a block of ice. Wait... a block of ice. He sat down and began rummaging through his satchel for his book, which he then flipped through several pages hurriedly until he found what he was looking for; ice cube. This icy spell was used to encase its victims, but it would bring them no harm, it was entirely possible that this was what was encasing Uhlradar’s victims.

“Uh, I dunno Ulrik, the only Sea Elf I’m seeing is a girl, any chance he changed genders since you last saw him?”

Ulrik thought briefly about it, “No. I don’t believe so. We’ll keep looking, perhaps if we ask Uhlradar he could aid us in finding him.”

“You do not know whom you seek?” came the growling voice echoing through the room from the darkness.

“No, we were told one of my three companions would be here, but not which one,” Ulrik responded. “One companion is a Sea Elf, a male by the name of Aramyth’suhla Coastspring, or ‘Soola’ as we call him. Another companion is a Gold Dwarf named Grimble Barragor. My last companion was a man named Kazgen, uh, oh my, I don’t recall his last name come to think of it, tall fellow, a cleric from Keldorn.”

No response came from the cavern.

Ulrik and Hela warily continued their search, but came up empty handed. They left the cavern and moved along a series of rooms before entering a vast chasm. An ice bridge extended here to a platform. The platform did not look very large, but it seemed to be made of shards of ice and arose in to the icy white chasm with a foreboding throne atop its peak. The path was long and narrow, Ulrik didn’t like the looks of it. “Perhaps we should go back and check some of the other corridors?” he turned to leave.

“Oh come on, we’ve come this far,” Hela chided as she moved out on to the narrow passage. “Besides ol lizard-breeches told us we could look.”

Ulrik rolled his eyes, “Okay, okay.”

After several treacherous steps along the winding bridge they arrived. Walls rose above their heads at the base, and it looked almost like a courtyard within. The only thing to great them though were several severed heads on pikes standing in the icy ground. Large chunks of ice littered the floor, many were taller than Ulrik. It appeared as though there were caves and stairs of ice leading in all directions. “We’re not going all the way up to that throne,” Ulrik declared.

Hela stopped and turned around, “Okay, where are we going?”

“We’ll search down here...,” Ulrik stopped speaking and fixated on a particular chunk of ice as he moved in to the courtyard. “Well, I’ll be. It wasn’t Soola afterall.”

Hela came over and looked at the face in the chunk of ice, “Looks mean, who’s that?”

“It’s Grimble.”

Hela cocked her head, “Well, he’s dead, guess we can move on.”

“Ah, but he’s not. Well, not necessarily. I looked up a spell while we were in the other chamber, and there’s a chance we can save him. Besides if he really is dead, I’m hoping to return his body to his family if at all possible. All we need to do is chip him out of here.” He drew his dagger and began chipping away at his ice encrusted ally, it was very slow going.

Hela, after a few moments, gave a twist to her staff and with a “snikt” a stiletto popped into existence at the metal end and she began poking at the ice as well. After a fair bit of work chunks began to fall off, until all at once the ice shattered and crumbled to the ground like broken glass. The dwarf crumbled to the floor heavily with it.

They both stood there uncertain what to do, but then the dwarf began to stir. Ulrik bent down to aid him, “Grimble are you alright? It’s me, Ulrik.”

Grimble seemed a little sluggish at first, but came around quickly, “Ulrik. Ulrik. Get away, there’s a monster loose in these parts, he bested me and encased me here, in this blasted courtyard. I was hoping I’d found something civil, instead all I found were these pikes. I saw it leave not too long ago, but it moves fast, we must get out of here.”

He was already regaining his feet despite being a little wobbly. He stood just over four feet tall, was almost near as round from thick shoulder to shoulder. He had a full trimmed beard, unusual for a Gold Dwarf to be so well kempt, but not unheard of. His hair was braided at the back into one thick tail and he wore heavy armour and furs. An impressive battle axe remained in his iron grip.

“You saw it coming and going?”

“Aye, could kind of hear things too, but all was kind of hazy.”

“What happened to you in the smoky room? You all just vanished?”

“I lost track of you all, I’d thought I’d found a portal back home, but when I stepped through the pool I ended up here. I saw some frozen lads up the way, and a huge vault of treasure...”

“Treasure?” Hela seemed to become lively at the mention of treasure.

“Aye, down below here.” He held out a flask and touched a fur cloak around his shoulders, “I’d hoped it’d provide some warmth and took the flask incase it had some spirits or could provide something to carry water in, if I ever found any.

That creature came at me calling me a thief. I let my axe do the talking, but before I knew it, it froze me here. How, how long has it been?”

Ulrik looked at Hela, “I think it’s been a few weeks now, how do you feel?”

Grimble moved towards the outer wall by the icy bridge and leaned against it while he scanned the long path.

“I’m not sure, I feel as thirsty as when I arrived, but other than that, I feel fine I suppose.”

Hela spoke up, “So... about this treasure...”

“Hela! Did you not hear what Grimble said, Uhldradar attacked him because he thought he was a thief. Grimble, you’ll have to leave the items you found here.”

Grimble looked baffled for a moment, “You know this creature’s name?”

“Yes sir, it’s a marid. Powerful creatures, and this one prefers to live in solitude, from what we can gather. Doesn’t like intruders or, I guess, thieves.”

Grimble, “Fine by me, as long as we’re getting out of here.” He dropped the cloak and the flask on the icy floor.

“I’m pretty sure once we’re out of the caverns I can teleport us away without offending our host.”

“Our host!” chuckled Grimble.

They began making their way across the icy bridge when they saw ahead of them the marid crawl over the edge from the bottom of the bridge onto the path.

The trio stopped, Grimble took a defensive stance. Ulrik decided to speak, he had to shout a little due to the distance, “May we leave in peace Uhldradar?”

The trident reappeared in its hand. Grimble muttered back to Ulrik, “I’m guessing that’s a ‘no’”.

“Uhldradar, you gave us permission to retrieve our friend and leave, is there something wrong?” Ulrik continued. They felt very precarious on the narrow path, it was not the most suitable place for combat.

The creature moved towards them, slowly, as though stalking them. The trio braced themselves as the creature made the slow plodding walk towards them.

Ulrik placed a hand on Grimble’s shoulder and whispered, “Do not attack him, I believe we have nothing to fear.”

Grimble grunted, and placed his axe head down on the icy bridge, Ulrik looked a little surprised, “I didn’t mean for you to drop your guard.”

Grimble responded with a sigh, but did not lift his axe.

The creature finally stepped before them, his shadow cast from the sky above loomed. He seemed to sniff them and look them over, slowly, scrutinizing.

Then he stood to the side and his trident vanished in to his bracer from what they could tell and he pointed towards the mouth at the wall. The growl shook their bones, “Yes, you may pass mortals. But never take from me again.”

With that the trio, ushered by Ulrik, shuffled passed the creature and pushed forward down the path to the far end of the bridge. Only Hela watched as the marid waited for them to leave and then he strode back in to his morbid lair.

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As Ulrik saw the main entrance they had come from he had to dart back around the corner that he had emerged from. Just outside of the entrance he had caught a glimpse of something in the wind which looked like white flowing hair.

“What is it?” asked Grimble.

“I think the giants are waiting for us out there,” Ulrik whispered.

“Giants?”

Ulrik nodded, “We ran in to two giants just outside of here, they also had wolves with them.”

Grimble acknowledged with a grunt.

“Well, we can try to sneak up to the entrance, and I can then teleport us out of here. But, we need to send a signal to Ila, so they can follow.”

“I can handle that,” and with a few arcane words Hela vanished from sight, “Ok, you two make for the entrance get their attention before you teleport, it’ll give me time to get passed them.”

Ulrik looked impressed, “That actually sounds like a good idea. Ok, go over to the entrance.”

“What?” Hela’s voice was very loud, and from the sounds of it, she was already very close to the entrance.

The giants responded by coming around the corner, a fiery bolt from Ulrik caught their attention, as did Grimble’s throwing axe. The pair of giants wasted no time moving at the small humanoids, a thrown spear leading the way. Despite the sheer size of the spear, the rugged dwarf deflected it enough that it slammed in to the wall instead of skewering him. Ulrik barely had enough time to cast another spell before the duo reached them and the pair vanished in a flash of light and ozone.

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Ulrik, turned from where they reappeared, the ship had moved, but his lock on its bridge remained firm.

“Woah boy! Now why didn’t you say you could do that!” came the higher pitched voice of the flying ship’s captain Svirnyl. He chuckled, then went serious, “Where’s the others then?”

Ulrik found his bearings and spotted the icy spire, “We ran in to some trouble, but I hope they’ll be following soon.”

“Hey now, bless me, it’s a dwarf!”

Grimble whom had been standing quietly nodded, “G’day gnome.” He actually smiled a little when he spoke.

“You look parched!” Svirnyl stepped down from the wheel and snatching a mug and cask as he moved towards the pair introduced himself. The dwarf happily took a drink of the whiskey and listened to the gnome prattle on about fine craftsmanship.

Ulrik watched the horizon for about half an hour, and the landing site which wasn’t too far away, when a single black dot appeared below. “There, there! Someone’s arrived!” The dot seemed to stumble and then fall on the snowy ground.

“Bring her down!” Svirnyl called to the shipmate now manning the wheel. “Who is it?” he then called to the gnome at the contraption.

The pipes and cranks clicked and craned out over the edge guided by the crewman’s hands, “Looks like the sorceress Capt’n.”

Ulrik’s heart leapt to his throat, “Hela.”

It was only moments but they dragged like hours before they reached a safe distance to disembark, Hela’s figure lay bleeding in the snow, she appeared to be clutching her side. He wanted to jump out and fly to her aid, or teleport, but he knew the spells no more.

He rushed to her side with an elixir at the ready, she was still breathing, but it was laboured, “Hela! Drink this!”

She waved a weak arm at him, “I’m not thirsty…” she said weakly. He decided to ignore her and put the vial to her lips and poured the liquid down her throat. She seemed to respond favourably to the healing, “I feel a lot better, can I have that drink now?”

“Hela. Focus, focus. What happened? Where’s Ila?”

The other’s had gathered around now and stood a few feet away, they all waited in silence.

“They stabbed me. Well, first she called me a traitorous sorcerer, then they stabbed me. I think I may have surprised her.”

Ulrik looked stunned, “What? What do you mean? Go through it step by step.”

She stood up weakly, “Well, first I saw you at the Traveler’s Inn...”

“Not that far back, what happened after we left you at the spire over there!” he pointed for reference.

“Oh, oh that. Well, I went invisible, then you guys got rushed by those giants. Turns out the wolves weren’t there when I ran outside of the cavern and down the path, I actually saw them down below near that log house. Well took me a while to spot Ila, guess they couldn’t see me cause I was invisible n such, but when I appeared in front of them and greeted them, she accused me of betraying you to the giants and drew her sword. I barely had time to warp myself here, but not before her guard stuck me with her spear. That really hurt.”

Ulrik looked to Svirnyl and Grimble for some kind of insight. Svirnyl was the one to speak up, “Undines can be quite unpredictable when it comes to passionate matters, what Hela says could be d’truth.”

Ulrik, stood up in disbelief. He looked towards the spire, “It’ll take hours to wait for them, and we can’t go back out to meet them. They seemed to be confident that they could avoid the giants on their own. Will they be able to make it home if we leave them here?”

Svirnyl thought about it, “I believe so.”

“Then I will send a whisper to her and hope she gets our message.” He cast a simple spell and let it go on to the winds, he felt his heart beat weaken with those words.

They all climbed back aboard the ship and as they ascended in to the sky, the swirling night debris that served as stars greeted them.