

CHAPTER 46

Behind the screen of trees, the Dungeon entrance loomed. It was a massive skull the size of a house. Little fires flared in its eye sockets, but its wide mouth was open, dark, and inviting.

At least for a certain type of person.

The sort that enjoyed spelunking and diving deep into dangerous territory, hoping for the glint of gold to be revealed by lantern light at the end of a trap-filled hall.

People like Mira, for starters.

And me, Hal thought to himself. He hadn't much opportunity to indulge, but this was definitely one of those times that he had to admit he was doing something he wanted to do, even if there was a good reason to do it.

Hal looked down at Durvin. He knew the dwarves trusted Mira, but he never plucked up the nerve to ask exactly how far that trust traveled.

Both Hal and Durvin knew—because Hal had told him—that the Dungeon would likely be unlike anything he'd ever seen before.

Based on Elora's experience, the Dungeon would be dredging up all sorts of horrors from his past. Anything that troubled him, past indiscretions that he would rather stay hidden. All of it would be out in the open and they would have to *fight* it.

Durvin had looked at him, grinning behind his fiery red beard only now streaked with tiny flecks of gray and white, and said, "Aye, lad. I reckon that's just what a body needs."

And that was the end of that.

However, when Hal brought up the potential of bringing other people along—even though they both knew it was best not to—Durvin's opposition was plain and clear.

The dwarf understood Hal's look clearly enough. They both looked at Mira, who was watching the entrance with great interest. She leaned into the giant skull's mouth and touched a weathered tooth the size of a gravestone.

When Hal looked back at the dwarf, Durvin nodded his approval.

Mira got on with *everybody*.

She was the sort of person who treated you like you were childhood friends and had only just seen each other a day ago. She wormed into your life with surprising ease, and you sometimes forgot that you hadn't known her forever.

Even after everything that happened, her spirits weren't the least bit dampened. It was truly inspiring. Then again, she did have a touch of the murder hobo about her, and that gave Hal pause whenever she accompanied him.

Something that seemed to be a bit of a recurring theme lately. Was it because of the dragons? She did have an affinity for them, though how much of that was her Dragoon Class and how much of it was the woman was anybody's guess.

As much as she treated everybody like an old friend, she was often quite cagey about her past and who she was. It had taken Hal a while of being teased to know for *certain* that Mira had also come from Earth.

She had tormented him something fierce, laying clues about "hulking out" and other Earth euphemisms and colloquialisms that nobody on Aldim would have any idea what they meant.

"We going in or what?" she asked, turning back to the two of them. "Some cool loot inside, I'll bet."

"I consider me soul a valuable artifact," Durvin agreed.

"Yes, well, that too," Mira chimed. "But I'm talking about the stuff that glitters and glimmers in the dark. The jewels and valuables that we can trade for cold hard cash."

"Sparks," Hal said.

"Right, whatever. Hal knows what's up."

Durvin looked between the two. "Might as well get goin' then."

He strode into the gloom of the Dungeon entrance and disappeared. Hal watched as his party menu flashed and Durvin's status grayed out, then Mira's as she followed.

With a deep breath, Hal took out the [Magicite] and palmed it.

Like most items, it wouldn't work if it was in his Inventory. He had to have it on hand or equipped in some way in order for it to be operational.

The moment he stepped into the darkness, Hal felt that familiar, unsettling sensation of a hook just behind his navel and a taste of blue raspberries on his tongue.

It was over in a flash, and instead of a roughly hewn cave as one might expect, they were standing in the middle of a grand dwarven hall with glinting stones casting a pale and soothing orange-red light over everything.

Durvin looked as if he had seen a ghost, but he didn't gibber or moan. He stared at it with a teary-eyed expression that Hal recognized as homesickness.

New Quest: Long Live the King

Protect Durvin long enough for him to reclaim the lost portion of his soul and ensure he does not succumb to the memories that haunt him. Like many other Dungeons, there appears to be a Memoria Crystal here. With your familiarity of Dungeons, you can sense its presence alongside the Dungeon Core. What you do to the Dungeon Core is your choice, but you will need to bypass it in order to approach the Memoria Crystal.

Objectives

- *Keep Durvin alive.*
- *Destroy [Memory Receptacles] 0/4.*
- *Decide the fate of the Dungeon Core.*
- *Attune to the Memoria Crystal.*

Rewards

- *Variable Experience and Sparks.*
- *Dungeon Lore.*

No pressure, eh? Hal thought as he clapped Durvin on the shoulder, though he had to hunch a little to do it. “Just remember, Durvin, this isn’t real. It twists your memories to trap you or make it difficult for you to fight back. We’re here for you, but a lot of this battle is in your rather hard head. Remember that.”

Like with Elora, the majority of the battles had to be carried out by herself. Hal was there to help her, but largely only because he had Hollow essence. Something he refused to use again due to its dangerous nature and the corrupting effects on his essences. He was here to *get rid* of the Hollow essence as well as free a part of Durvin’s soul, which would restore his Class Levels and all those missing attributes.

But as they entered the depths of the opulent dwarven manor, Hal realized that this place had much more time to get in sync with Durvin’s soul. It also wasn’t home to a ruler of the Dungeon like Naitese had been.

There was no suggestion of what the Dungeon had been like before this. It was, simply put, a walk down Durvin’s memories. Hal could help him fight, but in the end, if Durvin couldn’t get past his own demons, then there was no hope for any of them.

He had only been able to help Elora by offering her support and because the Dungeon hadn’t the time to acclimatize to her soul fragment like Durvin’s clearly had.

“What ye see here,” Durvin said, marching through the corridors, “Ain’t to be repeated, ye ken? I ain’t putting a geas on ye, seein’ as yer me friends, but this’ll be hard enough for me to face without worryin’ about you lot blabbin’ to everybody, right?” As he spoke, other dwarves wearing regal attire suddenly materialized and then rushed past, screaming or pulling at their beards in grief and despair.

“What’s this all about?” Mira asked, noticing that her own attire had changed to dwarven nobility. In a way, it was an upgrade, though clearly a lot heavier. “And why am I changed?” She looked back. “I notice neither of you are altered.”

Hal could feel the pressure of the Dungeon trying to fit him into its narrative. He knew well enough to resist, to keep enough of himself apart from the Dungeon. It didn’t hurt that his Dungeon Lore and what remained of his Hollow essence helped him further.

“Just fix yourself in your mind,” he told her. “The Dungeon is replaying memories. Twisted, but memories all the same. We’ll need to keep our wits about us, and your own sense of self needs to be forefront at all times. If not, the Dungeon will try to fit you into the memory.”

It might even whisk them away to a different area if their concentration slipped. Not an easy thing to do while fighting, but there was nothing for it.

Durvin had been wanting to come reclaim his soul fragment, but he never pushed for it, which was quite unlike him. Oh, he grouched about the lack of attributes and abilities from his Warrior Class, but he didn’t seem all that keen to go after it once he learned what Elora’s attempt had been like.

Despite the traumatic events replayed and twisted into versions far worse than they had actually been, Elora was remarkably forthright about her experience.

Not that she told anybody everything she saw, but it was enough to drive the point home that this wasn’t a normal Dungeon. They weren’t going to delve into a place full of enemies to bash and loot, this was more of a trial that the weakest person in the group—the one who lost their soul fragment—was likely going to have to do the most work.

Little wonder Durvin was more than happy to put it off as long as he could.

Banners rippled as the dwarves continued to run, and then the scene flickered, and those same running bodies were suddenly on the ground and cooling, as if they had always been there.

Bloodstains, dried and dark brown with age, were splattered across the heavy blocks that made up the manor’s walls. Tapestries were ripped, torn, burned, and bloodied. Nothing was spared.

Durvin’s steps came a little more hesitant, Hal and Mira falling into step on either side of him. After a few moments, the Dragoon managed to reassert herself, regaining her fish scale armor.

Hal drew his segmented chainsword, flexing the fingers around the [Magicite] he held in his free hand. This wasn’t about using raw strength, which would mean usually mean his Beastborne powers, but about manipulation and empowerment.

That meant he was firmly in the court of his Kol'thil powers and with the [Magicite] fully charged up and glowing like a little blue moon, Hal was more than ready for anything that would come at them.

He could blast an enemy into nothingness with his favorite spell, *Anvil Lightning*, but it wouldn't help. Especially not Durvin. There was a lot more to the dwarf than met the eye, Hal knew.

But if he raised a hand to do more than defend the dwarf, he felt he would be doing him a grave disservice. Not only because Durvin fought his own battles and was quite proud of that fact, but because the only way to get to the other side of something like this was through it.

Durvin knew it, and that was why it was only the three of them. Well... technically four, but Hal wasn't going to bring up his guest until he absolutely had to.

Besides, Durvin wouldn't object.

"I can't help but notice," Durvin said, peeking at Hal instead of the dead bodies, "that ye got a new cloak and ain't said nothin' about it."

"You noticed?"

"It does look pretty snazzy," Mira said, casting a critical eye on the black-as-night cloak that sometimes didn't *quite* move with Hal's cadence. "I wasn't aware we had a proper Weaver in Brightsong."

"We don't," Hal told her. "Besides, when did my fashion accessories matter?"

"When they start yawning," Mira told him with a snort of laughter.

Even Durvin chuckled.

Hal looked at his shoulder where the cloak was slightly split and a maw of hundreds of teeth were on display as the darkness itself split and a purple tongue lolled out as it yawned.

"Vorax!" Hal scolded.

The mimic opened an eye on the opposite shoulder to look at him, squint, and then closed its mouth and eye respectively so that it looked like a slightly too-dark cloak.

A week or so back, the mimic convinced Hal of a plan to help the both of them gain more power. Hal didn't fully expect *this*.

He had to admit, however, that it was nice to have Vorax by his side constantly now. It wasn't the unnatural closeness of Besal, which was probably for the best, but it was a comfort all the same.