

DUNGEON CRAWLER - DRAGON SLAYER

CHAPTER FOUR: THE LAST

They broke from the mouth of the cavern at a full run down the stony path not looking back, they had just reached the edge of the woods below when Faeroes' keen ears told her to look back through the dark night. A voice so distant she could barely make it out as she stopped and peered back. Keron came to a stop just after a few paces and listened through the light breeze too.

It was Shade's voice that reached them. They stared at the darkness in the cave and then thought they saw his pale white face appear from the mouth at a full run. They saw him only for an instant before a looming shadow struck out from the cave and Shade's figure was pulled back into the gaping darkness. There was a tremendous roar, the screaming of Shade's voice, the clatter of coins on stone, and what could only be the crunching of bones.

Faeroes drew her sword and its magic flashed in the night, she gritted her teeth and stepped forward, but Keron stopped her.

"No. It is a lost cause. He is gone."

She might have argued with him, but was not given the time as the serpentine shape of the dragon emerged from the cave and unfolding its massive wings took to the air towards them.

The pair of them did not speak, they did not have to, and they just turned and ran into the forest. The darkness of the forest made it hard to find their way. Faeroes was better adapted to seeing in the dark and slowed her pace for Keron. Keron, cutting the straps of his armour shed its weight as they ran. They made their way as quickly as possible through the encroaching darkness, splashing here and there through the darkest paths they could find.

There was only silence behind them. The woods were completely silent except for them.

A whoosh of air sliced above them, heavy was the weight that it carried high above. It inspired them to increase their pace still.

Behind them the crunching of treetops snapping beneath a terrible mass could be heard, and the heavy landing of something that could only be what they both feared it was. Onwards, the sounds of trees breaking under the force of something raging towards them, so close was it, that Keron could feel its presence reaching for him. Perhaps it was the heat of its body, or its breath, or presence of its awesome power.

A low growl was their only warning.

The side of the dragon's head slammed into Faeroes and she flew into the shallow waters of the woods to the side, she saw that Keron had been hit by the front of the dragon's head and had been sent into the air as well. She landed in the water as best she could and stood to see, again, the immense size of the dragon's body length-wise in front of her. She gained the fullest impression of its power now as though she were only a voyeur; most of the wounds it had received inside were gone.

Keron was regaining his feet, but unlike her, he had dropped his sword and was backed against a solid stone outcropping. The dragon seemed to stare at him content in its final victory, and appeared to study the man before him. It shifted slightly seeming to wait.

Keron was regaining his senses and was now looking for his blade. It was nowhere to be found. Blood trickled down his back from the horns on the dragon's head that had gouged him. He was unarmoured and unarmed. He looked into the darkness before him, the giant shape of the creature waiting in shadows glinting from the stars. Waiting... its snake-like shape coiled before him. Waiting. Waiting for what?

His eyes wandered around the darkness searching for an answer. There was nothing, just the great monster before him gloating like an untouchable god. He looked into its great blazing eyes that reflected the stars and moons in them and tried to gain his courage.

Exhaling, the enormous head tilted slightly. Then the neck drew back its great head and its massive jaws opened with the sharp intake of breath. Keron knew what would come next, his eyes opened in horror and he raised his hands to defend himself.

But instead he heard a scream, as though through a dream he saw the glint of red armour and dark red hair charge from the woods to the side of the beast a glowing blade in hand.

Flames already licking at its maw, the dragon pulled forward.

Faeroes charged straight for the giant monster a battle cry of rage and fear unlike anything Keron had ever known before. He stood in horror and his own scream became a warning; a warning that would be for not.

The dragon's head had arched and white flame washed out towards her like a stream. It hit her in mid air as she leapt and she vanished amongst its flames. Her blackened bones crumbled as though she were finishing a stride at the feet of the beast and her sword plunged head first into the ground as she came to rest.

Keron's voice was raw and tears streamed down his face, he stood shaking with fear, terror and pain against the cold stone.

The dragon's head pulled back again into the shadows, but this time there was no sharp inhale or exhale. It seemed to wait again.

Keron found himself on his hands and knees before the creature shaking, staring at the remains of the Fire Elf. His breath seemed to come sharp and sporadic; he began to picture Danei and the others as they were torn apart, stabbed, burned. A rage began to fill him, a hate unlike any he had ever known. And then as though the breath that left him stole away his spirit, it seemed to subside. It began to collapse, as he pictured them all dead in the dragon's lair rotting in the darkness, blood drying on its cold stone floor, and being eaten by vermin. He shivered from his own wounds and found himself facing the ground.

The dragon waited; its great lungs drawing air calmly and deeply.

He slowly regained his feet, one at a time. Keeping his eyes on the ground he turned his head away to the forest, towards the darkness beyond. His foot fell upon the grass; his breath shook from within him. His whole body shook from the cold within.

He felt the stare of the beast behind him now. Watching... waiting.

His other foot lifted and fell faster, just a little further than the first had. And then the other foot rose and fell again, and again, and again. Faster the footfalls came plunging through the dark forest. Branches and twigs snapped and crunched beneath the heavy footfalls and echoed through the cold night.

A hiss followed him through the woods; it came long at first and then seemed to rumble into short growls. His fear kept him going. Plodding through the darkness in a blind run. His terror was so great that it took him many weeks to realize that the dragon hiss was laughter. Its laughter followed him all the way home to Kriegan's Pass, echoing in his mind.

EPILOGUE

Keron stood in the forest with a spear in hand; runes and Glyphs encrusted it. Eleven men and women stood behind him, each garbed in armour and brandishing their own menacing weapons.

Keron looked out upon the crowd, their faces were those of seasoned veterans bought with the gold from his land. He looked out over them letting their coldness wash over him while a rage grew inside him.

His voice echoed out over the silenced soldiers with conviction, “The dragon shall be slain!”

“Aye it shall!” cheered another.

He read the contents of a scroll, and the next words to leave him were those of magic; the first warrior clad entirely in heavy armour encrusted with runes vanished from sight. The scroll crumbled and a new scroll was unfurled.

The next to speak the same words was a cloaked figure that held a spell book. The wizard had been teleported into the lair a day before, and now knowing the location, would be able to speed the process of getting the warriors inside the lair.

Keron and the Wizard both continued to speak spell words as warriors, mercenaries, priests, clerics and even templars vanished until they themselves followed.

When they arrived, there was no battle, no fire, no dragon, the men they had sent in all stood nearby weapons drawn and waiting. Holes and piles of fallen rocks riddled the cavern.

One man spoke, “Watch the walls and the ceiling!”

Keron looked around confused, “No. No!”

“What’s wrong Keron?” spoke a woman from under a great helm.

“This isn’t right! This isn’t right!”

One man returned to the center of the room, “There’s nothing here Keron. Look at this place, it’s a void!”

They all looked around the vast dark emptiness of the lair.

He continued, “Certainly it is big enough for a dragon, but there is nothing here! Maybe you got the location wrong?”

The wizard spoke this time, “No, I was here too, yesterday. This wall was covered in piles of gold and gems...”

Keron furrowed his brow, “Just this wall?” The wizard nodded.

The armoured warrior replied, “I don’t understand? Where did everything go?”

Keron stood in the cold darkness and felt a chill slide over him. “It was all a trap!” He crumpled to the ground onto his knees, “It was all a trap.”

“What was? What are you talking about Keron?”

His voice was almost a whisper, “She just wanted our magic... she laughed; she knew I’d be back. That’s why we found the lair the first time, she let us find it, and left it wide open.”

The others that had been wandering the dark cavern returned to the group to watch as Keron cried for the loss of his friends, and his subsequent denial of their vengeance.

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