

DUNGEON CRAWLER - JOURNEY

CHAPTER 3: PANDEMONIUM

“We’ve been walking for hours, do you know where we’re going?” Ulrik was a little concerned, the rocky terrain they crossed ended at a grassy field, but the environment changed so much and so drastically that he wasn’t certain of anything.

She stopped, “What are you talking about?”

He looked at her, “What do you mean?”

“How... would I know where we’re going? You told me to take the lead, so I did.”

He was beside himself, “I thought you knew where you were going!?”

“Of course not, I’m not even sure where we landed,” she dismissed him and sat on the grass taking a position of meditation. “You wouldn’t happen to have any water on you would you?”

“You don’t have any water?”

“No. Do you?” she said flatly.

“Yes, I do, but that’s not the point. How could you wander off to heavens knows where and not take some water with you?”

“Are you always so grouchy?”

He paced in random directions for a several minutes. Then an idea struck him, he looked in to his collar and carefully withdrew his familiar, “I can see what you can see... care to take flight and show me what’s around here?” The bird took flight almost immediately. Ulrik was amazed at what he saw from the bird’s eye view, and he lost his equilibrium and stumbled, finding himself seated in the grass.

As his familiar flew, he caught sight of a building of some kind in the distance, but below him, he saw a silvery line jetting towards his human body.

Ulrik looked confused momentarily, then snapped out of it as though from a daydream back to his own senses. He saw the silvery white line moving towards him, it seemed to skip off of the ground and arc back in to the air.

As he watched it bounce over him by ten or fifteen feet, it looked like it might be water. He stood up to get a better view. A few more arcing lines followed behind, and as he stood up a jet of water arced in to his shoulder. Surprising him he twisted out of the way and stumbled a few steps. The stream as it finished it’s decent didn’t bounce, instead it shaped a form, the form of a transparent woman. The woman quickly stepped towards Ulrik and touched his shoulder, he winced expecting excruciating pain to follow, but

instead her touch was cool and she absorbed the extra water around him. She then stepped back a few paces and her form seemed to solidify, skirt, brazier, shawl and all. The skirt covering her legs mostly seemed sheer, but there appeared to be a frosted center beneath it that revealed only the hint of what might be flesh. Her hair was white, long and wavy, her eyes were crystalline blue and her lips were full but blue in colour.

“Apologies traveler,” she bowed slightly, “seems I misjudged my aim.”

Ulrik, arms still partially up in defense slowly lowered, “M-my, apologies miss, it appears I stepped in your path.” He bowed lower than she had.

It appeared that the other streams had also formed women around him and they were closing in on the trio. The others wore white as well, but appeared to have silvery-blue metal cuffs, bands, rings and even weapons on them. Some had short spiky white hair, but all four were women.

He chanced a glance at Hela, whom seemed undisturbed, eyes closed and talking to herself.

“No need to apologize friend, you do not seem to be of the villainous variety. I am Ila.”

“Well met Ila, I am Ulrik, and my companion is Hela,” Hela did not respond, “She’s... occupied right now.”

“What brings you to our realm stranger?” she said it warmly and with a smile.

“We seek our friends, whom have vanished. We were told that one lies in the clutches of Hask’ mordikarrd, the other in Uhldradar’s lair, but we do not know the way and time is of the essence.”

“Hask’ mordikarrd and Uhldradar’s lair,” she seemed concerned, “That is rather unfortunate friend, both are far away, and you will need to cross expanses too far for mortal feet to carry you there quickly. Even our own methods of travel could not make the journey.”

“Is there some way to transport there? Unfortunately I am in a hurry and concerned for time.”

She only hesitated a moment, “I do have an idea, come we shall walk with you, and you can tell me about your journey.” She locked her arm in his and they began walking in the direction that he had seen the structure. Her touch was surprisingly warm, not cold like before. He looked around for his familiar, whom was perched on a twig, it followed closely watching the surrounding area.

Hela opened her eyes and stood up, “There’s not enough cobblestones!” she declared. She looked around her for Ulrik, he was walking down the sloping hill covered in grass escorted by five women, “Well, that’s unusual.” She followed behind them.

* * *

A few hours later they were moving across a wasteland when something came tumbling towards them. They looked like three thorny balls, like tumbleweeds, but they changed directions on their own. “What is that?” asked Ulrik.

Ila stopped him with her hand and motioned to the other ladies, “Don’t worry, we’ll take care of this.”

The women fanned out and readied their weapons, one drew a bow, but the others drew swords or spears. The air and ground around them seemed chilled.

The tumbling spheres continued their way towards them, the woman with the bow firing a chill arrow that cut through the air and pierced the average sized sphere, it unfurled, screeching and writhing! The sphere was a giant caterpillar of some kind with large mandibles. Ulrik took a step back at the sight and the same woman fired a few more arrows in to its writhing armoured form.

The other two spheres moved at the other women, one of the women shot her spear forward, the spear extended several feet in front of her and skewered the smallest creature which seemed to die immediately as ice formed on its body and behind its head where the spear had pierced it first.

The last two women using swords waited until the last moment as the largest creature unfurled and lunged at one of them, she liquefied herself and the other woman stabbed at the creature’s exposed side. Frost formed along its body as the liquid woman reformed and scissored the creature with her two swords as it moved in to bite the second warrior whom liquefied her own form. The creature was hacked and stabbed by the pair like this until it could take no more and fell dead at their feet.

Ila didn’t have to raise a hand. The four other women retrieved the pieces of their shattered weapons, which they then melted and absorbed, and moved back to stand with the trio. “What were those?”

“Thorn midges.”

“Ah, I pictured a midge to be quite small?”

“They do start off that way, but they cause different problems at that size.”

“I see.” That was a little disturbing, but meant nothing to him and so it didn’t matter in the here and now.

“They’re pests that can be found here like; lightning bugs or fire flies,” she smiled and they continued their walk. “Not much further now, Svirnyl lives just up that hill, there in that tower, he should have a device that can aid you.”

“Is he a wizard?” asked Ulrik. He looked at the strange squat tower, several bars of metal seemed to protrude from it and it either seemed under repair or in shambles, at this angle it was difficult to see against the rocky cliff like ledge it was built against.

“Oh, no, not a wizard. He’s a tinkerer of devices, that is his observatory.”

As they walked across the dusty wastes, Ulrik decided he should ask about his quarry, “Is there anything you can tell me of Hask’mordikarrd and Uhldradar’s lair?”

Ila smiled, “Certainly. Hask’mordikarrd is a salamander warlord whom lives in a magma infested fortress with his warrior army. Uhldradar’s lair is in the icy wastes a little closer than the fortress from here, not to say that it is close at all. The lair is home to a pack of frost wolves and a crazed giant. Uhldradar is a Marid that lives within the caverns.”

From the corner of his eye Ulrik swore he saw the ground move perhaps a hundred paces away, “What was that?”

“That was likely an earth elemental, just stay clear of their territories and you’ll be fine.” He watched the earth rise and then fall as they passed by a few areas. He was uncertain if there were several or if one was following them and cresting the surface periodically. He did not want to find out. He was well aware of their abilities having studied them. Studying is one thing, practice is another.

They came to the base of the cliff and there was an unsteady staircase leading upwards, we’ll see you at the top mortal.” With that the five women arced their way up the stairs, he could see them disappear over the top as the watery jet streams leapt ever upwards.

“Well, guess we’d better start climbing,” he said to Hela.

“Okay, just say the word and I’ll get us out of here,” she nodded.

He looked at her confused and decided to begin his climb rather than worry what she was talking about at this time. The stairs were quite steep and at times it felt as though he were climbing a ladder instead. Twenty minutes later they reached the top where the ladies awaited. Now he could see the observatory.

The observatory was constructed of mostly stone, metal and large beams of wood. Several wheels with blocky edges turned and clanked around the structure, there appeared to be a small door with a handle dead center. “Strange.”

He grabbed the handle and giving it a turn opened the heavy door. It swung open with little effort or complaint and inside many more giant wheels of various sizes and shapes turned inside. There was a distinctive racket inside. Steel hammers and rods pumped back and forth from recesses, platforms clattered and moved in rhythmic patterns, Ulrik was uncertain to what purpose, liquid bubbled, steamed, fumed and churned within basins and glass vessels linked by leathery hoses and metal tubes, steam released from pipes in the walls and there was a constant clinking and clanking from all directions.

“Eh? What do you want!” it was a high pitched croak of a voice over the commotion. The voice belonged to a tiny individual with a bent red conical hat and white beard. He was tiny, perhaps only two or three feet in height, and somewhat round in shape. Peering from steely blue eyes underneath thick white eyebrows over his long narrow nose he waited for an answer.

Ila was the first to respond, “It’s Ila, we’ve brought some company with us Svirnyl, mortals looking for Hask’mordikarrd and Uhlradar’s lair.”

“Wha!? Mortals? What kind? Any dwarves!?” his voice seemed to perk up with the mention of dwarves.

Ulrik spoke up, “I’m afraid not sir, just two humans.”

“Humans!? Well, if you’re friends of Ila’s you can’t be too bad, come on in, watch your step!” He began to climb down his contraption as he spoke carrying some tools.

As Ulrik stepped inside he noticed that the floor was really just planks of wood across girders of steel that created a framework that descended in to the stone beneath them. Below he could see other small folk working by candlelight on the various minerals and various platforms where they were melting minerals and forging parts similar to what was up top.

He beckoned the group over as he moved across a plank to a small round wooden door, he turned the handle and opened the door. Ila followed him, while the other ladies stayed outside of the observatory and shut the door behind them. Ulrik and Hela both followed, bowing down to enter the tiny room. As the door shut behind them, the clamour vanished! Ulrik opened the door to check again, to hear the clanking, and shut it again; he was fascinated.

“Ehn, what’s with him?” asked Svirnyl, a little perplexed.

Hela answered flatly, “They don’t have doors where he’s from.”

Ila ushered him over to a chair, as he whispered, “We have doors, but nothing like this!”

She smiled warmly, “You are a strange fellow Ulrik.”

Svirnyl pulled a kettle off of a fireplace and poured some tea for the four of them. Ulrik tried it, it was a bit bitter, but otherwise tasted like berries. “So, what’s this about Hask’mordikarrd?”

“And Uhlradar’s lair,” added Ulrik.

Ila spoke, “They are looking for friends, one of them appears to be in each location.”

Svirnyl grimaced, “Ugh, you don’t want to be going there looking for trouble.”

“Where?” asked Hela.

“Either place!” Svirnyl grabbed a platter and placed it on the table between them all. It looked like scones on the platter, Ulrik and Hela were both very hungry and although Hela just grabbed and started eating Ulrik looked to Ila whom nodded to indicate it was alright, and he moved cautiously to take one. They were sweet and buttery, flaking apart in his mouth.

“These are delicious,” muttered Ulrik.

Svirnyl seemed lost in thought, “Thank you, my wife made them. Now, if we took the ship we could get there fairly quick, but we’re no match for either.”

“That would be kind of you to get us there, as we do not know our way.”

“Don’t know your way... hmm, well, come up here, I’ll show you the way.” He turned and walked up a tiny flight of stairs.

Ulrik whom had been seated, stood and followed, it was a struggle to squeeze up the stairs and not slip on the steps. Hela followed, but with a crash she landed face down on the steps. “Hela!” Ulrik turned to lend her a hand.

“I’m fine!” she muttered, “Just leave me, need a minute.” He tried to help her up, but she slapped his hands away and remained lying face down.

Ila hid the chuckle she felt rising and ricocheted up the stairs past her and reformed on the other side.

Ulrik turned to see where he was. It looked like he was on top of the observatory, some kind of contraption occupied the center of the rooftop, which only had a low rail around it.

Svirnyl moved over the contraption and pulling levers and cranks, he made the device move, extend and swivel all the while he put a steely eye against it until he was satisfied with where it was positioned. “Here,” he beckoned Ulrik over.

Ulrik moved over to the contraption and stood there. “No, here.” He pointed at the thing he had his face up against. Ulrik looked to Ila, but Svirnyl grabbed his collar and pulled him down, “Put your eye there!”

Ulrik did as he was commanded, then he staggered back, “Woah! How?” He looked up at the sky which swirled with clouds, balls of liquid and masses of rock or ice and then looked back in to the device and was amazed. The icy mass so very distant from him now, looked like he could step on its surface. He laughed excitedly, “Svirnyl, this is amazing!”

Hela whom had crawled the rest of the way up the steps stood up and raising her arms exclaimed as well, “Amazing!” She twirled around on the rooftop looking at the sky.

“Did you want a look Hela?”

She came over to the contraption took a quick look, “Oh that. Yeh, it’s a block of ice.”

Ulrik pointed in to the sky, “Yah, but that block of ice is waaaay over there Hela!”

She did not seem to change her mood, “Yeh, and there’s a block of ice right over there.” She pointed to the horizon where a glacial formation rested, “They’re kinda everywhere Ulrik.”

“Fair enough. Well Svirnyl, I’m impressed.”

Svirnyl exchanged a glance between the pair, “Good enough. Well, as you can see, you can’t just walk there, you’ll need to fly.”

“How long to fly there?”

“A few hours, I suppose.”

“Great when do we leave?”

Svirnyl looked surprised, “We? When do we leave? What do you mean? You can’t fly?”

Ulrik looked bashful, “Well, not for hourly durations...”

“Ahhh, I’m just foolin, I’ll go get some stuff and we’ll head over,” he laughed to himself as he descended the stairs, “Can’t fly!”

Ulrik looked to Ila, “Ila will you be coming?”

“I don’t see why not, you could probably use the help,” she smiled.

Several thumps could be heard as Hela slid down the stairs and came to rest on the stairwell on her back. “I’m okay,” Svirnyl could be heard saying something down below about a near miss.

“So, how are we going to fly there exactly?” asked Ulrik.

Ila took his hand and walked over to the edge of the rail, “There.”

He followed her finger tip to a ship that was tethered to the land mass by enormous stakes. Great sails were tied to the masts, a similar, but smaller contraption to the one on this observatory rested on the deck. The ship floated there as though resting on water. “Simply amazing!”

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There were several of the small humanoids, very much like Svirnyl aboard the ship in less than a half hour. They had brought food and drink, and what appeared to be supplies. They boarded the ship and released the tethers holding it in place.

Svirnyl stood on a stool, which was fastened to the captain's cabin roof in front of what looked like an oversized ship wheel in comparison to him. Standing at the wheel, he pulled a few levers and the two sails were released from their bonds against the masts. The ship was a good size, perhaps thirty feet long from what Ulrik suspected. Made of solid thick wood and reinforced with iron. There was a hold below, a forward castle and a captain's cabin at the back; steps leading to all three.

The ship wobbled at first as it set off, and then drifted upwards and away from the land mass, which Ulrik thought looked like a floating paradise from up here. The scenery all around him was breath-taking.

Ila's maidens sat on the deck watching the horizon in all directions, while the three; Ila, Hela and Ulrik sat in the middle. Amongst the little men Ulrik felt like they were giants.

"Thank you for taking the time to bring us to Uhlradar Svirnyl!"

"No problem at all son, it'll only take about half an hour to get there, then you can have a talk with him," the short man bellowed, despite his high pitched voice, from the ship wheel.

"Speak with Uhlradar?"

"Aye, he don't like visitors... I can't imagine you were going in there to fight with him were you son?" he laughed.

The thought hadn't occurred to him as to what he was going to do upon arrival, "I suppose I hadn't thought that far ahead... what do you know about this place?"

"Well it's cold, that's for certain. Uhlradar lives in the middle of the icy spire you took a peek at. We can't land on the spire, hell we can't get close enough 'cause the winds are too torrential. We'll land in the snowy outer region, but this is where the wolves and giants hunt, you'll need to use caution."

"Ah yes, the wolves. What about teleporting in?" asked Ulrik.

Svirnyl chuckled, "Very risky my boy. Good chance he'll just blast you to smithereens if you try that. If you approach on foot he'll give you the benefit of the doubt, but you just jump in to his abode and he'll take it as act of aggression."

Ulrik absorbed as much as he could, "Unfortunate. How about these hunters? Where are they located?"

"They have a long house in the snows near the base, but they roam the area, watch for traps in the snow. If you see tracks it's not theirs, they're too cautious to leave a trail.

They're creatures of cold, so they don't like heat, and they can definitely seek it out. Speaking of cold, we brought some furs in your sizes and a few supplies, should help you survive a little longer."

Ulrik smiled at the small captain, "Many thanks, your generosity is truly incredible."

Svirnyl seemed to blush a little, "Lost soul like yourself can't be left to wander around endlessly can they." He chuckled.

Ulrik moved over to the contraption on the deck, "How long until we reach the snow fields?"

"Just a couple hours, weather permitting," answered the captain.

Hela had approached Svirnyl and spoke up, "I heard of spell casters flying ships like this, powering machinations with their magic through a crystal, but I don't see one on this ship."

"We don't need no fancy crystals to run this ship, that way no fleet footed wizard type is gonna take off with ol' Bluecrest here. They don't know how to fly it with our gismos then they're stuck adrift til we come get them." He gave her a wink.

Ulrik let them have their conversation and decided to speak with Ila. She was beautiful, but so strange to his world. He pondered briefly about how, or if, something could work between them, "Ila?"

"Yes, Ulrik?"

He seemed bashful, "You're a noble aren't you?"

She coyly replied as she twirled her hair around a finger, "Why do you ask such a question Ulrik?"

He could not find a suitable sentence, "I'm from a farm, I mean - I grew up on a farm. I'm nothing really, and-."

She silenced him with a single finger to his lips, leaned in close and gently spoke, "You are a wizard, Ulrik, and you are a kind and thoughtful mortal. You are more than the sum of many nobles I have known, that would not have dared to journey through an unknown world for their companions. From the moment we met, you have showed no arrogance or presumptuous notions, you travel with a troubled girl and do not judge her for her trade or her faults. You are a great man to me Ulrik of Ara, and most noble to a fault."

He felt he should have kissed her then and there, but she leaned back against his shoulder as they sailed towards the icy shard in the sky. He brought his arm around her shoulders, she was as warm as any woman would be, solid and real. He could not hide the smile that came across his face.

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The ship had almost set down against the snowy fields a rope ladder dangled off the side, “Best of luck to ye boy!” cheered the small captain. “We’ll be nearby and wait all day if we need to, but hurry in and back, it’ll be dark soon. ‘An more than likely the hunters have spotted our landing, and might come to investigate, so you’d best not doddle.”

Ulrik and Hela picked up their packs from the snow, the four undines said they needed no supplies as they had eaten already.

The rope ladder was pulled up and the ship drifted upwards in to the sky. Ulrik felt both excited and stranded all at once.

“Well, let’s kill us some trolls!” Hela cheered, she giggled and jumped up and down a little. The other ladies just looked at her and moved up the trail. “Sorry,” she whispered to Ulrik, “They’re not trolls are they?”

Ulrik shook his head, “No, nothing like that Hela. But, we’ll have to be quiet while we move through here, there may be giants and wolves.”

“Oh, I love giants, they make the best feet!”

He had no idea what that meant, but smiled and nodded anyways, “Shall we?”

As they crossed the snowy fields the winds above them stirred wildly, drifts snaked across the snow covered ground and crested like great white waves captured in motion. It seemed like nothing could live here. Only the great icy spire ahead seemed to mark the land.

Occasionally Ulrik would send out his familiar to check on the surrounding area, he did manage to spot a pack of large white wolves before they came across their paths and avoid them, but it was very cold for the bird to be out for too long.

All was going rather well when they spotted the longhouse at the base of the spire. The house was hewn of enormous wooden logs that baffled the mind as to how they had gotten here.

Night had settled in. The swirling vortex above that collapsed in to what should’ve been the sun had descended over the horizon and they faced speckled swirling night instead. Ulrik surmised that it was actually the icy chunk they had settled upon that had turned away from the swirling vortex, but it was impossible to tell.

“One night down,” Hela reminded him. “Not to worry, being a servant of Asmo’s not so bad.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me –“ Ulrik stopped speaking. A distant howl had cut him off, the howl came from behind them.

The group looked to one another. Ulrik sent his familiar in to the air, and sure enough, it looked like the wolves were making a beeline straight for them.

“You think we can make it to the spire?” Ulrik said aloud.

Hela looked at him with glee, “Race ya!” She took off at a full run, which admittedly was not all that fast. Ulrik chased after her, and the undines shot in to the air, arching all around them.

They ran until they were out of breath, and the baying became louder. “Well,” she gasped, “I suppose... we could cook... these wolves, how many... did you see?”

“I dunno... around eleven.”

“Eleven! Well forget that, run for your life!” she began running across the snows again.

Ulrik decided they were close enough he could cast a spell, “How are you all holding up Ila?”

Ila reformed beside him and didn't even seem winded, “This is how we usually travel, it's no trouble for us.”

Then they heard a scream up ahead, a pair of great shadowy figures had stood up straight out of the snow in front of Hela, “Feet!”

Ulrik quickly cast his flight spell as Hela deftly evaded a huge axe and a spear, but was running out of options. The group took to the air and in mere moments entered the fray unfolding only a few dozen yards away from them.

The giants spoke to each other in a language that eluded Ulrik, but it looked like the elder was telling the younger giant to stick on their first target while he handled the rest of them.

The one with the spear seemed younger and had long flowing white hair, while the elder one had braided hair, a braided moustache and a full beard.

As Ulrik flew up to the giants he realized just how tall they really were, they probably reached around twenty five feet each, and their weapon's reach was lethal. As the wind knocked him around in the air, he finished another spell and unleashed it just as the elder flung a throwing axe at him, a fireball erupted on the giant's chest and the axe handle clipped his right thigh. The elder howled in pain, its pale blue flesh now charred and he seemed to take focus on Ulrik at that point, the women reformed in to fighting figures.

Energy burst just in front of Hela and in to existence came an Ogre, the Ogre standing only twelve feet was positioned between the Giant and her and swung its morning star crashing in to the giant's arm. Dark blood trickled out of the wound, but the giant, which stood over eight feet taller than the Ogre, used its spear to jab in to the unarmoured

abdomen of the Ogre. Hela decided to blast the giant with a hammer made of energy as well, which caught him just under the chin, knocking him back and a few teeth loosened.

Despite the efforts of the undine warriors, the elder giant was an accomplished combatant, he waited until they reformed after they moved and hammered one to the ground with the back of his axe and chopped another in half with his back swing. The two ladies did not recover as blood poured from their wounds. Ila screamed out in rage, she had been fighting as well using a spear and trying to keep her distance.

Ulrik knew the two would not stand again. He unleashed a lightning bolt, which tore through both giants and knocked the elder to one knee. The elder giant coughed up blood, and then he laughed and said something in that guttural language Ulrik could not understand, but he knew to look behind them.

Over the crest of the snowy fields charged the wolf pack.

“Ila, retreat!”

She did not need another prompt and the last three undines shot out of the battle as the elder ignored them and moved towards the other battle.

As did Ulrik, whom swooped down and grabbed Hela off of the snow and made a hasty retreat towards the spire as low to the ground as he could maintain to keep out of the winds.

“Bah! I was winning!” she protested as she watched the battle unfold behind them. Her Ogre was then split in half by the elder giant’s axe as he rescued the younger one from certain doom. “Oh poo.”

They raced the pack to the spire, the undines keeping ahead by a few minutes and gaining distance. Ulrik was getting tired carrying Hela, he told her to climb on to his back, which she did and she held on to his shirt and cloak for the duration. They passed the longhouse, which they were certain had smatterings of blood nearby, possibly where they butchered a hunt. They did not stop to investigate.

Ulrik landed and waited for the undines to arrive. When they did, Ila was in tears and stepped in to Ulrik’s arms. “I’m so sorry Ila.”

“They were my friends,” Ila sobbed. He watched the two undine warriors over her shoulder, they were angry and they hid the tears that streamed down their cheeks by turning away from the others. Ila felt cold in his arms.

“We should get up the spire, that pack will catch up with us soon,” interrupted Hela.

Ila pulled away from Ulrik, “We can not face the marid with you Ulrik, the marid control water and ice. As undines, he could have control over us and could do you harm if he so chose. I would not risk that.”

“Where will you go?” Ulrik was thinking of the pack and the giants.

“We will keep moving, they can not track us easily and will tire long before we will. We will keep a watch out for you at the entrance and come to you when you return.”

“Be safe my lady,” they held hands for a moment, then Ila turned and went to her companions.

She looked back one last time, “Take care not to anger Uhlradar, and hurry back.” Then the trio jetted off in to the night.

“I get it, you like her, just be careful mortal you’re not long for this world. But, I like her, she seems nice,” Hela’s voice held no malice, but her words couldn’t be more true. She grabbed on to his shirt back and commanded, “Weee!” with tug.

Ulrik obliged her and they left the icy ledge behind and flew up to towards the cavernous entrance against the protests of the winds which battered them in to the walls more than once.