

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

7

The Haunted Cistern

I suppose, in hindsight, I was bound to stumble into an area where I was ill-equipped to tread. I must admit, however, that the possibility seemed always remote, and I was little prepared for it when it happened thanks to my own lack of foresight. I'm surprised to find myself saying as much, but were it not for Ferguson I believe my project would have come to an end this week.

However, I can present you with no more concrete proof that the dungeons on this world are not random generations than by exploring a dungeon that was built by government employees.

<!--more-->

As we wound down from our previous adventure, I with my notes and Ferguson with an ale and an eye for barmaids, a rather boisterous group came barging into the common room of the inn. They threw their travelling gear in random directions and dropped into the chairs, heaving their mud-encrusted boots onto the tables and barking orders at the inn-keep.

I would've brushed them off as boorish louts if Ferguson's attention hadn't clearly been pulled in their direction. I wondered if he intended to relieve them of the bulging coin purses they carelessly dropped onto the table, having seen Ferguson's light fingers in action on more than one occasion already, but I soon realized that it was their conversation that he was studying.

And they were not shy nor quiet about it.

They were adventurers. The money was payment for a job they had just completed in the neighboring city just across the river (I had already planned on making that my next stop. One could say that these two cities were actually one, cleaved in twain by the river that they shared). From what I could gather from their loud, increasingly intoxicated conversation, some of the nobles there had paid them handsomely to remove some creatures that had moved into the rain cistern below their section of the city. Seems their pumps had stopped working and the city workers refused to attempt repairs because they kept getting eaten when they did.

I caught Ferguson's eye and saw it roll incredulously.

"In the morning we find one of the city workers," I said to him. "I must see this cistern."

Ferguson sighed deeply and it occurred to me that perhaps his eye roll was not directed at the adventurers.

In the morning, we crossed the bridge to the other side and sought out a municipal office. We found one, and in the fashion of municipalities the world over found it staffed with lazy loungeabouts who were "on break". Eventually we found a worker who was on the clock, and he directed us to another office. Where we were redirected to yet another office.

Eventually, we were directed to a warehouse where the sewer workers reclined in various poses.

"I need to hire a guide," I said. My words echoed through the warehouse ineffectually.

"I'm willing to pay top coin", I added. There was still no response.

“Please?”

“Time-and-a-half for an afternoon walk-about and you get to go home early,” Ferguson yelled. “Who wants it?”

They practically trampled each other crossing the warehouse space and forming a circle around Ferguson and I, shoving each other out of the way as they raised their hands and yelled “me! me!”

“You,” Ferguson said, pointing to one at random and walking out. I watched him go, then looked back and saw the disappointment in the crowd. After checking that I was being followed, I ran after Ferguson.

Our guide ended up being a man named Manny who, fortunately for us, was one of the very workers responsible for maintaining the pumps in the cistern and who had refused to do his job simply because his life was threatened. We asked Manny if he knew about the adventurers cleaning out the dangerous creatures. Not only did he know about it, but he drew the map the party used.

“So how did they get in?” I asked.

“There’s a rain catcher at the edge of town,” Manny told me, “which leads to a half-mile tunnel into the cistern.”

I was processing the possibility of a half-mile walk through a sewer tunnel when Ferguson spoke up.

“How much for the shortcut?” he asked.

“Three stags,” Manny replied without missing a beat.

And soon we found ourselves at the back alley behind a bar where we found a locked shed. Manny produced a key and led us down a staircase to a cement-lined hallway. The passage was surprisingly dry, until we emerged into the cistern proper.

I must admit I was not prepared for the beauty of the structure. The room was huge. A series of glass inserts, similar to deck prisms, brought down an orange sunlight from the skies above, giving the whole chamber a fiery glow as if lit by a giant torch. Ornate columns lined the room, holding up the magnificent rib vault ceiling.

The entire room was covered in a layer of gently rippling water, although I couldn’t discern the depth because the orange light gave the water an almost black appearance. A network of rough wood plank walkways, hung from the columns with random chains. The walkways hubbed on a raised stone platform in the center.

“It’s beautiful”, I said.

“The pumps are that way,” Manny said, pointing across the room to a smaller area.

We dropped down onto the first walkway, finding it surprisingly sturdy for such haphazard construction but extremely slick from a layer of slimy mold. Manny went first, then myself, and Ferguson who had drawn his sword.

“It’s been cleared,” I said to him with a smile.

“Maybe,” he added in a way that troubled me.

We travelled, I would guess, another ten freebs before he was proven correct. I paused for a moment to look at the swirling ripples gathering under the walkway, but Ferguson shoved me on rudely. As I turned to complain, the first of the fish jumped into the air, and I had a glimpse of its fearsome teeth before Ferguson's flashing blade knocked it aside.

"Run!" Ferguson yelled.

I did.

In moments, we were on the stone platform in the middle, surrounded by churning water. We scarcely had a moment to catch our breath before two scaly hands grabbed the stone behind us and a shaggy, mossy figure lurched onto the platform with us. It hissed and started making its way toward us. Other hands reached up the walkway which we had just vacated. How close had we come to being knocked off?

"It's the beasts!" Manny yelled, falling into a squat with his hands over his head.

"You mean the adventurers didn't kill them all?" I asked.

"It happens", Ferguson said.

"What do you mean it happens?" I shouted.

"Only a truly neurotic party takes the time to kill every monster in the dungeon", Ferguson said. He looked over his shoulder and pointed at another walkway. It lead toward the smaller area, but a large section of it had broken away.

"The pumps are that way?" he asked.

"Yes," Manny said.

"Move!"

Manny looked confused, but Ferguson shouted his command again and the sewer worker jumped to his feet. We ran as a group toward the broken walkway and I wondered if I would be able to make the leap across the span. I didn't get to find out.

Manny skidded to a halt at the edge of the walkway - or, at least, tried to. He paused for a moment, waving his arms like a baby bird read to make its first leap from the nest. Then he leapt. Or, rather, fell. I started to look around for something that I could use to pull him back, but Ferguson shoved past me. With a graceful stride, he landed his foot on Manny's face, then hopped over to the far side of the gap as if skipping over a stone in a river.

"Come on!" he yelled at me.

I looked from Ferguson to Manny, then back to Ferguson. My mind was made up by a deep hissing that seemed to emit from directly behind my right ear - I ran the short distance to the edge and jumped. Manny saw me coming and raised hands defensively, creating a natural platform for my boot. I kicked off and realized quickly that I would not clear the distance. I collided with the other side at speed, taking the broken plank at the end of the walkway directly along the bottom of my ribs. The wind left me and I started to slip backwards into the water.

Ferguson was there immediately, pulling me onto the stone workman's platform that lined this smaller area. Behind me, I could hear Manny calling for help, each call more

watery than the last. And then they were on the walkway with us and Ferguson was fighting his way to one of the access doors. The next few minutes are a blur in my memory as I fought to keep up with Ferguson while barely able to catch a breath.

But soon we were through the heavy iron door, which Ferguson immediately shut and locked behind us.

The room was dark, no glass carried light in here. Fortunately, my companion had a pair of torches in oil-soaked leather. I squinted as he lit one. By the torchlight I could see the massive metal body of the pump.

"They lied," I said.

"Probably killed the first one they came across and brought its head back for payment," Ferguson said. He was working his way around the pump, tugging at various points.

"But they lied," I repeated, feebly.

"Adventurers do that," Ferguson said. He first tugged, then shoved his knife behind a panel on a great metal pipe and quickly had it off. He stuck his torch in the hole, then waved me over. "Let's go."

"Up there?"

"Up there."

An hour or so later, we emerged in the basement of a rather large house on the edge of the city. The house staff looked at us quizzically, but Ferguson simply waved and said, "sewer inspectors".

As we sat in the common room of the inn later that night, after the longest bath I have ever taken, I pondered the events of the day and what they meant for the future of my quest. I have now gathered notes on two dungeons that I can absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, prove were the design of man. That I would continue my quest was not in question, but how I would continue from this point remained to be seen.

"Perhaps," I said, over my book, "I will buy a sword tomorrow."

Ferguson nodded thoughtfully, then left his seat to pursue a barmaid.

