

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

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The Demon Forge

Sometimes, nephew, the events that move us around this world seem utterly, and dangerously beyond our control. It was this very feeling that weighed on me a week after our adventure in Petora as I sat in yet another inn staring at the necklace wrapped over my knuckles. The necklace had lost its glow, but not its fascination.

"So," Baleban said, dropping four mugs of ale on the table, "where are we going next?"

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"We're a party!" Baleban replied.

"We're not a party," I said.

"We go to Agaricus," Ferguson said. His words seemed to stun Baleban. Indeed, the general volume level of the inn itself seemed to drop at the proclamation.

"That's a trip," Baleban said, his self-confident smile returning to his chubby face. "Why might we be going that far?"

"It's on the way to the king's temple," Ferguson said, then dropped his boot from the table to the floor. "But more importantly, it'll prove a point."

"And what point might that be?" Baleban asked.

"Ma'att here believes the dungeons aren't placed by the gods," Ferguson said. Baleban chuckled. "I will show him Agaricus."

"And what is Agaricus?" I asked.

"It is an infamous cave dungeon," Baleban said. "Few who enter there ever return."

"And what does it look like?" I prodded.

"A cave," Ferguson said. "A perfectly natural cave untouched by human hands."

I thought about this for a moment. I had been considering reversing my hypothesis. Since I was now convinced the dungeons were all made and not "spawned", I had thought to begin seeking dungeons that could not have been manufactured.

This "Agaricus" seemed perfect, if what Ferguson said was true.

"But Agaricus is at least two weeks journey from here," Baleban said.

"Not if you cut through Molotok."

If Ferguson's previous words took some of the wind out of Baleban's sails, this proclamation left him in a doldrum. Whatever pleasure I took in the little man's dismay was tempered by the fact that my lack of experience left me unsure if I should be upset as well.

"Molotok?" I asked.

"The demon forge," Baleban said in the same hushed tone the superstitious use for prayers.

"And what's so bad about Molotok?" I asked. Baleban was shocked.

"You are hard, my friend. Molotok is a very high level dungeon that has killed many parties, totally, and you are completely unafraid!"

Baleban waved his hand at Ferguson.

"No, no," he said, "impossible. If nobody else has made it through how can we three?"

"I've made it through."

I looked at Ferguson and debated. On one hand, a truly unknown dungeon, even one unknown because its explorers were extinct, would be a fascinating study. On the other hand, I've only known Ferguson to be a competent adventurer, and if he was confident in our chances why should I doubt?

I know, nephew, both of those hands are on the same arm.

"When do we leave?" I asked.

A few days later we were rappelling down a pit on the side of a mountain to a cave system below. The mountain was part of a range. I don't know what I was expecting,

but a continued day-and-a-half journey underground was not it.

We were a few hours into the trip when Baleban, after his fashion, broke the silence.

"That necklace, how does it work?"

"I don't know," I said, honestly. I stopped, then pulled the necklace out of my pack. "The last time, it took us out of the dungeon to the entrance."

"You should test it," Baleban said. "It would be good to know if such an escape is available to our party when we encounter danger we cannot handle."

Although I was annoyed in the extreme by Baleban's use of "when" in place of "if", I could see his point. I held the necklace out in my hand and studied it, trying to remember what it was I had done to trigger the effect the last time. I could think of nothing. Then, to my surprise, I could feel - a resistance, if that is the right word, in the necklace. I imagined I was pushing against the resistance and, to my surprise, it fell over and we were back at the entrance of the dungeon, at the hole where we'd come in.

"Ah!" I said. "I think I've figured it out."

"We appreciate you doubling the last few hours' worth of travelling," Ferguson said, proceeding down the tunnel ... again.

I've never hated someone as much as I hated Baleban as the fat man gave me his cherubic smile over his shoulder. I slipped the necklace into my hip pouch and followed along.

We were not far beyond our original distance when we began to see signs that the tunnels we were following may not have been 100% natural. There were occasional flat surfaces and right angles in the tunnel design, but there were no chisel marks leaving my admittedly limited knowledge of stonework insufficient to determine how it was done.

A side tunnel was so cunningly dug into the

wall that I'd passed it by completely and Ferguson had to pull me back. The tunnel was narrow and curved sharply upwards, so that I was nearly out of breath by the time we'd reached the top.

I was expecting more tunnel, I think, but what I found instead was a narrow gallery overlooking a great hall. There were ornate, octagonal or similar sided columns extending maybe eighty feet from floor to ceiling. But the most troubling aspect was that the hall was filled with men - well, men after a fashion.

From where I stood, high above the hall, these men appeared much shorter than normal men. But for their diminutive height, they were still as wide, or wider perhaps than a normal man. Adding to their fierce countenance was a coarse hair that extended from their knuckles, up their forearms, over their shoulders and back, and down their face in ornately braided beards the like of which I've never seen.

"Demon men!" Baleban whispered.

Ferguson responded by shoving us further along the gallery. There was a short tunnel at the far end that terminated above a yawning void. Far below an orange glow lit up the rocks of the wall.

There was a stone bridge here of the same style as the columns in the grand hall. The bridge was a hustle and bustle of the strange, hairy men.

"We're trapped!" Baleban said. "Use the necklace!"

"No," Ferguson said. He produced a length of rope and began tying it off.

"We're climbing down? Down where?" Baleban said. "There's molten rock down there!"

"Not there," Ferguson said, pointing toward the bridge. I had the sinking feeling that I knew exactly what he had in mind.

I was right.

We scaled our way down the wall on Ferguson's rope until we were well below the level of the bridge. We then picked our way across the rocks so that we were directly under it. I wondered, through the entire trip, if we would be spotted from the bridge, but the hairy men were oblivious it seems.

Our next step was far less obvious. The bridge was built over two L-shaped channels and, before I could raise any questions, Ferguson pulled himself up onto one of them and began sliding along it. I followed suit.

The channel was scarcely wide enough for my frame. Even with my left arm crammed against the wall, my right arm still dangled frightfully over the side. The channel was short as well; I could scarcely raise my head without tapping the back of my skull on the stone.

Slowly, for what seemed an eternity, we picked our way up the slope of the bridge. Then the slope evened out and I realized with a heavy weight that we'd only reached the middle of the bridge. I was fairly well wiped out when we finally reached the far wall of the chasm.

"In there," Ferguson whispered, pointing toward a drain protruding from the wall.

I was hoping for a cool, damp drainage tunnel. I was only half right. There was an inch or so of water in the tunnel, but it was as cool as pot of tea. After being directed through various branches and offshoots by Ferguson, who did seem to know where he was going despite Baleban's concern, we reached a section of tunnel that arced around in a large circle; that's when I learned why it was so warm. The tunnel curved around an open shaft, and the orange, shifting light that came up from below explained all I needed to know. There were several monstrous chains in the shaft as well, and when one of them pulled up a silver bucket filled with glowing red liquid, I understood why the place was called "the demon forge."

The tunnel reached the far side and soon we were heading off, away from the intense heat of the lava shaft. Although I knew this section was just as warm as the first one we entered, it was blessedly cool compared to the tunnel around the shaft.

We were well away from the shaft when Ferguson pulled up alongside a ladder set into the wall of the tunnel. At the top, he slid aside a filigreed cover and disappeared over the edge. After a moment, his hand appeared and waved us up. Soon, Baleban and I were standing in a tunnel as ornate as the great hall we first saw, with the walls carved to resemble columns and archways.

Behind us, I could see that the lava shaft was lined with gigantic pulleys. The bearded men were moving in shifts, some filling baskets with rods of metal, some removing buckets from the ends of the long chains. On the far side of the shaft were chambers moving out like the spokes of a wheel, and I thought I saw more men working anvils in each.

"This way," Ferguson said. "There's a bridge to a tunnel out of the mount-"

He didn't get to finish because as he pointed up the tunnel in the direction of the bridge, one of the bearded men appeared carrying a bucket filled with sparkly stones.

Ferguson and the bearded man recovered simultaneously. Ferguson's blade leapt into his hand while the bearded man produced a curved metal tube; it was similar in shape to a cucumber, but one end was open. Whatever it was, it obviously trumped a sword as Ferguson pointed his upward and raised his other hand in surrender.

"Ger," the bearded man said, menacingly. "Stay air, you."

It took me a moment, but I wondered if I'd heard right. It almost sounded like he was speaking our language - although a much bastardized, clumsy version of it. Could they understand us if I spoke to them?

"I'm sorry," I said, holding my hands up.
"It's just that we -"

"Hold yer box!" he snapped, shifting the cucumber to his other hand, "while I grab the dog 'an bone an' give a Brussel ta Bill."

He pulled another metal tube off of the wall and held it up to his ear. After a moment, a small, tinny voice started hollering out of it. The bearded man held the tube a few inches away, and waited while the other voice spent itself. It didn't. After a moment, he started yelling back.

"Bill!" he yelled. "Ger! Shut yer hole, Bill! I got a coupla berks in C Hall. Come 'ave a butcher's an' we'll toss 'em in'a flower."

He hung the device back on the wall and raised the cucumber toward us again with a grin. I noticed Ferguson was still holding his sword and wondered if he was preparing something.

I didn't get to find out.

Four more bearded men appeared at the end of the hall near the lava shaft. They were carrying wicked looking spears and wearing armor stylized in a way that matched the stonework of the tunnel.

"The necklace!" Baleban whispered. I looked at him, then at Ferguson, who nodded back.

I slipped my hand into my hip pouch and pulled out the necklace. I closed my eyes and thought for a moment about the resistance I'd felt earlier, trying to find it again. It wasn't there. I panicked and started "searching" frantically, but the wall of resistance which triggered the effect before was completely absent. I opened my eyes and found both Ferguson and Baleban staring at me expectantly.

I shrugged helplessly.

"Ah well," Baleban said with a smirk and a shrug. "It must be a daily power."

The shouting took us all by surprise, and when even the bearded man turned to look

I realized that it wasn't for us. Then came the lusty, cheering howl. The four armed guards stopped and turned around in time to see a humongous warrior in gleaming armor charge along the platform around the lava shaft. Bearded men were clinging to various parts of his body while he swung a gigantic two-handed sword. Bearded men flew in different directions with every step and every swing.

A pair of smaller, perhaps normal-sized people in leather armor and helmets followed along behind him, cleaning up. A fourth figure, this one thin and clad in brown robes tied with rope, brought up the rear, occasionally raising his hand with a flicker of bluish white light.

The bearded man behind us coughed and I heard a wet, trickling noise. I turned and looked, but found that I was looking at the bearded man but I couldn't see his head. I had another moment of panic as I tried to figure out what was wrong with my eyes before I spotted his head rolling along the ground behind him.

Ferguson was holding his sword and waving us along toward the bridge.

We were well out of the mountain before I even thought to breath again, Nephew. I don't mind telling you that this was the most fearsome experience I've had yet in any dungeon. Clearly, the demon forge earned both its nickname and its deadly reputation. I began to call into question my unquestioning faith in Ferguson.

But Molotok was no random projection from the bowels of the world. No, Nephew. The bearded men and constructed every part of it with their own hands, of that I was certain.

What else they were building, I hope I don't live long enough to find out.

Ferguson assures me the road to Agaricus is well traveled and secure, with a handful of roadside inns along the way.

