

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

11

Agaricus

Another week, nephew, another lesson in the life of an adventurer. If there is one bit of advice I hope for you to take away from these letters of mine, let it be this - when an adventurer says that a road is "well-traveled and secure", what he actually means is that the road is filled with scoundrels and bandits, but that said adventurer is secure in his abilities to best most of them.

Ferguson's plan was to head into the valley below Molotok and pick up the road there. Given Molotok's reputation, the road between towns took a wide swing around the mountain and I immediately saw the truth of Ferguson's earlier words; travelling under the mountain took a week or more off of our trip.

Also, given Molotok's reputation, the merchants who used the road tend to travel with their own hired security. As I learned from talking to other travelers, that extra security resulted in two things - a small percentage of merchants who hoped to gain free protection by following larger caravans that hired security, and a growing number of small bandit groups that hoped to prey on those merchants.

The first result meant that we found plenty of camps willing to trade for supplies and host us (and our weapons) for the night. The second meant that on more than one occasion we had to fight our way out of attacks by small groups of highwaymen.

It didn't take me long to realize that the sword I'd purchased was not fit for regular use. It could have been the dull grey visible inside the deeper nicks it sustained, or it could have been the gems popping off during my second combat. Not that I wish to imply I'd actually done much fighting; the majority of my sword play was defensive while I sought to stay alive until Ferguson could lend assistance.

I'd resolved myself to replacing the sword as soon as we reached the next town of any decent size. Imagine my surprise then

when Ferguson led us off the road and overland.

"Your friend," Baleban said as we struggled up a rocky hill, lagging behind Ferguson, "he doesn't discuss his plans much does he?"

I looked up the hill at Ferguson and realized Baleban was right. Unlike our previous adventures, this was very much Ferguson's outing, and we were just along for the ride.

But I resigned myself. I've been on the road with Ferguson for months now. I had no reason to begin doubting him at this point as he'd proven himself nothing if not capable.

And so, nephew, we found ourselves two days later on a vast plain which stretched almost endlessly in any direction. Mountains off in the distances were the only evidence that the entire world were not so and several times I came back to myself with a start, having either drifted off into some deep rumination or some form of sleep while my body continued walking on. It was one of those instances that led to me almost knocking Ferguson into the hole.

"You wanted a dungeon not made by men," he said, pointing into the hole. "Here it is."

The hole was perhaps three or three and a half frungs wide, gently sloped at the top and ringed with a fine sand. I'd seen the design before, but couldn't place it at the moment. A tall and narrow rock, twice the size of a man, was, I assumed, Ferguson's landmark for returning to the spot.

Without saying a word, Ferguson leapt into the hole. I glanced back at Baleban and was alarmed to find the rogue had drawn his dagger. He used it to gesture toward the hole.

"You first," he said. "Squishies in the middle."

I had no idea what he meant, but I complied and climbed into the hole.

Despite its sand-ringed entrance, the main

portion was solidly built and quickly sloped to a more manageable tilt. I found Ferguson a short distance away lighting a torch.

As we picked our way down the tunnel I slowed occasionally to study its construction. It was roughly circular, an almost perfectly consistent diameter for the full length we walked. There were uneven gouges that belied some tool or another, making me suspicious of Ferguson's claim.

Soon, however, I was distracted from my studies by a musty, wheaty odor. It didn't come on slowly, as if we were approaching its source. The odor's appearance was, more or less, sudden and complete. It wasn't unbearable, but it was a thick smell, tacky in the lungs.

The tunnel continued in a continuous leftward slant that made me think of cork screws. And then, suddenly, there it was. I had to step forward, putting Ferguson's torch behind me, before my eyes could be convinced of the vision before them.

The chamber wasn't enormous, but it was large enough to impress. A river formed in a far wall, fell down to a pool, and then squiggled its way across the center of the chamber; the water looked like ink in the dim light of the cave. And dotting both sides of the river, thick enough in places that I couldn't see the ground through them, were massive mushrooms. They all had the same purplish glow, lighting up the walls of the chamber. A second color, bluish, was even across the walls of the entire cavern; some kind of moss?

The air was thick and heavy, the kind of air you find at a hot spring. I stepped to the edge of the ledge and looked down. More mushrooms grew below us.

"Astounding," I said without really meaning to. I turned back toward Ferguson. "But a big mushroomy cave is not a dungeon."

"We're not there yet," Ferguson said. He

turned on his heels smartly and began picking his way along the ledge as it continued narrowly along the inside of the cave.

Baleban and I followed.

We soon met the waterfall. The ledge continued along just in front of the waterfall, and a slick layer of slime grew happily along the wettest part. As we carefully made our way across in front of the waterfall, I happened to glance down in the cavern below us and spotted movement. I stopped. There was surely movement.

"There's something moving," I said, "but all I can see are mushrooms."

"That's right," Ferguson agreed.

I pondered that, afraid of its implications.

"The plains above us," Ferguson said, unprompted, "were once green and lush. Then the treasure of the insect lord Ximakax was stolen and brought down to these caves. Ximakax rampaged across the countryside until a group of adventurers came down here and brought the treasure back to him."

"Who brought it down here?" I asked.

Ferguson merely pointed.

It took me a moment to make out the dark forms in the dim light on the ledge, but soon I spied them, moving in a line from another tunnel and down into the mushrooms below. They looked for all the world to be ants the size of a large dog. They were marching from the tunnel down, and then back up with chunks of mushroom in their mandibles. The glow was fading rapidly from the pieces they carried. A yellow, feather-like structure protruded from between their antennae.

"Ants?" I said.

"An entire colony," Ferguson agreed.

"And we're going in there?" I asked.

Ferguson nodded. I thought for a moment,

then shouldered my pack.

"I'm done," I said.

"But you wanted to see a dungeon not made by men," Ferguson said.

"This is no dungeon," I replied. "This is a cave made by giant ants. Creepy giant ants with things sticking out of their foreheads, but ants nonetheless."

I looked from Ferguson to Baleban, trying to read their expressions but finding nothing.

"Let's head back."

I'm sure, nephew, that there are those in the scientific community who would scream in despair at my having passed up the opportunity to study the ant tunnels, but this is not my current purpose and I can not get sidetracked. Perhaps, later, I would come back on a new expedition.

Ferguson, for his part, showed no disappointment in our return. Baleban seemed more concerned with the cost of the supplies expended getting here. I hadn't considered that it was, indeed, my responsibility for bringing him along, although I would rather he hadn't. My reserve of funds, although significant, would not last anywhere near as long as I'd planned if we continued these long-range jaunts, especially with a third person along.

Ferguson dropped his pack and scurried up the sharper end of the tunnel toward the exit. I turned to speak with Baleban about reimbursement, but lost that train of thought when Ferguson was suddenly pulled up the tunnel. There were other voices outside, sounds of a struggle.

I poked my head around and saw two men in identical green soldier's uniforms. They were armed, and they were removing Ferguson's gear. One of them grabbed Ferguson's shoulder and roughly spun him around and we locked eyes.

Ferguson, with his hands up at shoulder

height, let out a sigh and closed his eyes. As one of the soldiers stepped to reach across him, Ferguson latched his hands onto the man's arm. In the same motion, Ferguson brought his knee up, driving it into the side of the man's thigh.

The soldier howled and fell sideways like a felled tree. The other soldier reached for his sword, but Ferguson was already moving toward the stone next to the hole. He grabbed it, met my gaze for a moment, and then pulled. It toppled over and fell, top-down, into the hole. I jumped back, expecting to be crushed, but the stone lodged itself in the entrance like a cork.

The tunnel was dark.

A moment later I saw sparks. The sparks repeated a few more times, then Baleban appeared holding an oil-soaked sheet of paper, which he applied to a torch. Soon we had enough light to see each other.

"What now?" Baleban asked.

I thought for a moment.

"The necklace?" I said.

"Only if you want to end up inside that rock," Baleban said.

There was only one option and I knew it, I just loathed the thought of saying it out loud.

"There must be another exit through the ant tunnels," I said, regretting it the moment I said it.

Baleban smiled, a trace of excitement spreading across his face and I felt the hatred I normally felt for the man returning to my chest, it's familiar, comforting weight settling in. I smiled back.

"We'll take turns lugging Ferguson's gear," I said, then started shouldering what I could.

Some time later we were outside the ant tunnel, where I stood for a moment

gathering my courage. I clutched my sword in my hand, slightly less confident of its abilities than when I bought it and painfully aware of the bite marks on its untempered blade. It was, however, my only means of defending myself.

I steeled my nerves and entered the tunnel. It was much lower than the tunnel into the mushroom lair, and both Baleban and I had to bend over, although neither of us are particularly tall men.

An ant came in the other direction. It stopped in front of me and cocked its head sideways. I readied my sword. After a pause, the ant leaned forward and tapped its antennae against my face and I got a close look at the "feather" - I could see now that it was a collection of narrow stalks with small round ends; it was clearly fungal. The ant, not getting what it expected from me, took a step back, paused again, then continued along its original route past us.

I heard Baleban resume breathing behind me.

We continued further into the ant colony. More ants passed us, only a few stopping to "inquire" about us with their antennae, but only two showed signs of aggression. In a larger tunnel, we were confronted by two ants with massive heads such that I half expected them to constantly pitch forward at the weight. Their pincers were formidable. They were walking side by side, taking up most of the tunnel and stopped when they encountered us. After a moment's wait, I realized they wouldn't budge, so I gestured to Baleban to back up to the last intersection.

Once we were out of the tunnel, the ants continued on, followed by almost two dozen others walking in single file. Every fifth ant was another macrocephalic; the others carried squirming white grubs in their pincers. No damage was being done to the grubs, although whether that meant they were ant young or ant food was more than I was able to determine with the current evidence.

After the train of ants concluded, we continued on. Before long we found ourselves in a larger chamber where several lines of ants intersected. After some thought, I pointed toward a tunnel on the wall opposite us.

"There," I said.

"How can you be certain?" Baleban asked.

"Those ants are bringing in food" I replied, pointing to the fruits the ants were carrying.

We followed the tunnel the ants were coming along and soon the sweet maple scent of the ants was replaced with fresher, cooler air.

"We're almost there", I said, to myself more than Baleban.

Then something caught my eye. The ants coming in, on occasion, would turn toward an offshoot tunnel and drop their booty into it, but they never entered. I approached and leaned in to see what was inside. I got a glimpse of a funnel-shaped room with a large hole in the center.

But a glimpse was all I got as the side of the tunnel collapsed and I was pitched headlong into the funnel. I frantically clawed at the side as I slid down it, coming to rest with my feet over the edge. I tried to shimmy backwards, but each movement slid me slightly further toward the hole.

"Baleban!" I hissed.

A moment later he slid down next to me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"You just called for me to join you."

"When someone falls down a hole and then calls out for you, you say 'what?'" I said through clenched teeth. "You don't join them!"

Baleban started to reply, then stopped.

There was a sound in the tunnel, a low, rapid drumming the like of which I hope to

never hear again. I looked at Baleban and we both drew our weapons.

The creature looked much like the ants, but far, far larger. It had wings which it beat frequently, vibrating the chamber. Like the red ants we saw, its head was large and rectangular, as was its thorax, and its mandibles were as large as my leg. It pulled itself up from the hole with three-fingered hands twice the size of mine.

And it stared directly at us with a multitude of eyes.

I saw below it a bloated, yellow abdomen that writhed and pulsed as it vanished out of sight into the hole.

This was their queen, and she didn't want us there.

I screamed, leapt to my feet, and ran. A moment later, I looked and Baleban was right behind me and the queen to my right. I ran harder. I looked again - Baleban was still there, the queen was still to my right. Then it occurred to me that I was running around the funnel.

The queen lunged, crashing into the ground just inches from my feet and gouging a huge clod from the earth. I ran harder and felt her wings thrum again. She spun around and prepared to attack me again and I pulled back my sword. She lunged, I dodged, and then I swung.

The sword collided with her head - and then shattered. I was left staring dumbfounded at the blade now reduced to slightly less long than my forearm.

The queen dipped her head down and pointed her mandibles at me. Then Baleban threw himself against her head, grabbing hold of her antennae.

She - roared is the only word I can think of to describe the sound. It was both a high pitched scree and a feminine wail.

She reared back, lifting Baleban into the air. He spun sideways with the motion, then

lost his grip on one of her antennae. The other wasn't up to the task of supporting his weight and came loose with an audible snap. The rogue was sent tumbling sideways and the queen curled up before quickly retreating into the hole.

I ran to Baleban and he waved me off.

"Just," he gasped, "the wind - be OK."

I grabbed our gear, surprised that I could, then helped him to his feet. He scurried up the slope to the (an?) exit and over the lip. I tossed gear up and then he helped me out of the hole.

We hurried toward the fresh air as quickly as we could and soon found ourselves looking at sunlight. The tunnel opened into a ravine over a small, slow-moving river. We both tumbled down to the water and threw ourselves on the ground, gasping.

After a moment, we started laughing.

"So what now?" Baleban asked, when we'd regained our composure.

"Now," I said, "we find Ferguson."

