

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

8

Bridgebelly

After my last adventure, I sought a few days' refuge to collect my thoughts, with the notion of further exploring the underground of our world being the furthest concern weighing on my mind. We'd heard talk of an excellent weaponsmith working out of the town on the other side of the pass and I decided to follow through with my promise to arm myself - far from the events of the previous day.

If I could put wagers down on the humor of the fates I would be a very rich man.

As we walked along the path through the mountain pass, we met many travellers heading in both directions. From quick questions and bits of overheard conversation I was able to discover that the town was situated on a large lake. I could feel the sunlight and the damp air on my face long before we'd even crested the mountain ridge. I determined that I would leave Ferguson to his drinking and rent a sail boat for the afternoon.

The town was exactly as I hoped. It was vaguely pear shaped, with its broadest end spread out along the shore of the lake. The buildings were low, single or two level construction, and covered with a tan mud which the locals painted in soft blues, oranges, and greens. It was as idyllic a scene as any painting.

We easily navigated the town via a main street that proceeded along the axis and eventually deposited us in a large common area in the center of the "fan" end. All along the boulevard, and especially here in the open court, merchant carts and booths had been set up to deal various wares. A good sized crowd meandered from dealer to dealer.

"Swords!" a voice called out. "Get your swords here!"

I tapped Ferguson with my elbow, eliciting more than the usual amount of surl, and headed toward the voice. A red-faced man in a leather apron was shouting toward the crowd. The sword he swung above his head gleamed in the sunlight, a glittering blue gem in its hilt tracing lines in the air.

"Buy your own Silver Claw, the sword that brought down the corpulords!"

I approached, my money pouch in hand.

"I would like to buy a sword," I said.

The barker looked from me to my pouch and smiled. He placed the sword down on the counter in front of me and I could see now that its face had been polished mirror-fine. I was entranced.

"It's beautiful," I said. "Surely this would be a fine sword to carry?" I asked Ferguson.

"If you're a mummer," he replied.

"I'll take it," I told the smith. Then curiosity got the better of me. "What's this about corpu-whatsits?"

"Corpulords," he said, pocketing my money. He produced smaller coins and began counting them. "You've heard of them, no?"

"No," I confessed.

"Ah," he nodded, and stopped counting. "An out-of townner. Well, sir, that fine sword you hold is an exact replica of the one used by an adventurer who ventured into Bridgebelly and slew the brutish corpulords - a council of five sluggy fat beasts of men who ruled the

under market.”

“Under what?” I said.

“The under market,” he continued, pointing down the street behind us. “That’s Bridge Street. Years ago, it was an actual bridge. Salesmen and traders built more and more elaborate shops on the bridge to sell their wares, until eventually they’d boxed it in entirely. But the space under the bridge is still there, now home to dangerous rogues and vagabonds from the world over. Although you can be safe with your own copy of Silver Claw!”

This last part was added as he produced another silver sword and waved it in the air, addressing the small crowd that had gathered behind me as he told his tale.

I turned and walked a short way up the street. I stopped and looked at the lake, then back toward the street. A dungeon made up from the underside of a bridge. I had to explore it, as little as I wanted to.

“Find us a way in,” I said, without turning to see Ferguson’s smug head shake.

A short while later, I realized the merchant had never given me my change. I was about to return when Ferguson appeared at my arm with a bedraggled old woman in tow.

“I hear you wants to see Bridgebelly,” she said, stretching out a filthy, fingerless gloved hand toward me. “I knows the way.”

I held my breath and produced a coin, which I carefully dropped in her hand. She bit it, then nodded and started walking away. I looked at Ferguson questioning, but he simply tilted his head toward her, suggesting I follow.

A short time later, she was pulling aside a wire fence and ushering us into a litter strewn alleyway. At the end of the alley was a culvert which she disappeared into. Ferguson, sword drawn, followed her, and I brought up the rear with my new weapon in hand.

We found ourselves in a low, round-ceilinged tunnel at the end of which was flickering fire light. The old woman abandoned us halfway down, gesturing with her hand that we continue. The tunnel ended in a pair of entryways into a large, open chamber. It was, indeed, the underside of a bridge. Four massive stone archways stretched above us more than thirty feet. On the outside of the bridge space, the walls were made of various combinations of stone, brick and wood - a haphazard construction that threatened to fall at any moment.

Although broken off into smaller areas by pallet walls and stacks of barrels, the main portion of space here was devoted to blankets and tents, a low version of the market upstairs. The “merchants” here were dressed in shabby robes and grease-stained suits rather than the finery and leather above.

“More vagabond than rogue,” Ferguson noted, echoing the sword salesman.

I walked into the market and started looking around. On one mat were an assortment of broken tea cups and pots. On another sat a single, ancient leather saddle with a broken arrow shaft protruding out a nerg or so. A third merchant had nothing but bleached bones on his grey wool blanket.

“Trash,” I muttered.

"You expecting rare magical items and an assortment of ammunition, perhaps?" Ferguson asked. "These people have nothing, so they have nothing to sell."

"Buy a nut?" A voice asked. I turned and saw an old woman, a doppelganger of the one who led us here but in a different outfit. She was standing behind a wooden crate turned upright for a counter. A cracked bowl sat in the center, filled with some sort of dark brown nut.

"No," I said, "thank you."

"Oh, a tourist," she said, pointing a filthy finger toward my sword. "Sorry, the grub kings are all gone, adventurer, nothing here for you to kill."

"I ..." I started, then I caught myself. "No. I want to know what happened here. What did the adventurers do?"

She looked at me for a moment, then opened her hand. I put a coin in it.

"The did something to them," she said. "All of the people that lived here. They did something to their minds, made them like animals. When the adventurers came, well, they fought like wild animals but what can a wanderer with no armor, even one controlled by monsters, do against a trained swordsman?"

I could picture it in my mind. The corpulords, whatever they were, ruled over an ever growing army of transients in this underground hive. I wondered how long they'd been down here, preying on those who would not be missed, before the adventurers arrived.

"Those of us who stayed away from the fat ones, we came back after they were gone, but we still stay out of the caves."

"The caves?" I asked.

She responded by pointing between two of the center pillars. I looked around and could see that a section of the wall had fallen away, leaving a large tunnel. Some attempt had been made to erect barricades in front of the tunnel, but the lack of any real building material made that futile.

"Take a torch if you go," she said.

I shook my head. I had no desire to enter those tunnels.

"Let's go," I told Ferguson.

I would explore no further. This was no dungeon, it was a tomb where many innocents died.

I will revise my theory, nephew, for although I do not believe the dungeons spring forth whole from the minds of dice-wielding gods, I think perhaps there might be more at work than what is visible. Perhaps the nature of a dungeon lies less in its construction and more in the evil that resides there.

Maybe it is not the dungeons the gods create for the amusement of the adventurers, maybe it is the adventurers the gods send to protect us from the things that dwell in the dungeons.

