

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

10

Sturdyrock

When a tavern patron begins a conversation with, "do you want to see something really wild?" one need not think too hard to realize where that conversation might lead and excusing one's self from the table is typically the best course of action.

And yet, that's exactly what I did not do when I found myself in that situation, much to Ferguson's annoyance and my later inconvenience.

Ferguson and I had passed most of the day in silence, I reflecting on the events of the last few days, he possibly pondering his next cask of ale or dalliance with some shopkeep's daughter. As evening rolled on, we found ourselves in the great hall of a fairly busy tavern. As our meal wound down, I proffered Ferguson's pay for the week.

"You'll be off then?" I asked. "There's a lively card game in the other room."

"After you've retired," he replied. "You won't last the night with that shiny sword on your hip before someone rips you off. Besides, you're always in bed early enough that I've enough time to enjoy a evening."

I pondered that. There was certainly no harm in an early slumber as one awoke early in the morning refreshed and ready for the day. However, I knew he meant it as an insult.

"Where are we off to next?" I asked.

"I think I'll take you to the temple of the king," he replied.

"Which king?"

"*The* king. The king of adventurers."

"It exists?" I asked, unsure.

"Of course it exists," Ferguson replied.

Before I could press him for more information, the gentleman behind Ferguson turned around and reached his hand across the table.

"Names Baleban," he said. "Sorry to

eavesdrop, but are you adventurers?"

"No," Ferguson said.

"Sort of," I said at the same time. Ferguson glared at me. "We're more ... secondhand adventurers."

"Ah!" Baleban said, excitedly dragging his chair over to our table, "looters!"

Ferguson glare rolled skyward and I knew he was right. I felt an immediate dislike for Baleban. His round face was lined with greasy black curls on the top and a thin, patchy beard on the bottom. His black and maroon jerkin was dirty and faded with a knife hole on the left side of the chest. He smiled entirely too often.

"Do you want to see something really wild?" Baleban continued. "I just came from a dungeon not too far from here that's only been recently cleared by adventurers. There must be a ton of loot still in there!"

"Not interested," Ferguson snapped.

"What does this dungeon look like?" I asked, kicking myself immediately for letting my curiosity get the better of me.

"It's done up like a city with a mountain on it."

It took me a moment to decipher what he meant.

"Oh," I said, "like an underground city."

"No," he replied. "There was a city, then a mountain fell on it. Squished it flat. Looks just like a real city, there's even dishes on the tables!"

I understood what he was saying, but had a completely different interpretation of the meaning than he did.

"You can lead us?" I asked.

Baleban's answer was prepared. "Of course."

Two days later I was talking to a pair of goatherds in a mountain pass, asking about Baleban's dungeon. They knew of the place, a city once known as Petora. According to

local lore, the city was constructed along, and sometimes into a cliff face known as Sturdyrock. Although the exact reason has been lost to the ages, the gods became angry with the residents of Petora and sent a great earthquake which brought Sturdyrock down, burying the city.

Except for stories passed down by the local herdsman, the city was mostly forgotten. Then, a month or so ago, some kinds found a newly opened cave entrance. One party of adventurers visited a couple weeks later, and now we were here.

We followed Baleban down a craggy hole in the side of an otherwise nondescript mountain. It took no stretch of the imagination to think of the passage as simply space between boulders, in fact several wall portions were simply piles of rocks. The trip had more of a feel of walking between covered monoliths than traversing a cave.

"Here," Baleban said.

I could see that the tunnel ended perfectly flat, but I had to get closer before I realized it was a brick wall; its surface had been covered in some sort of white wash, causing it to blend in with the surrounding rock. A portion of the brick wall had been crushed, the offending boulder stopped a short way into the wall's structure while the damage continued several feet down, creating a comfortable passageway.

Inside, we found ourselves in someone's dining room. The room was remarkably intact considering the situation. As Baleban had described there was still furniture, a simple wood table and a trio of matching chairs. The table was covered with a thick layer of dust and detritus.

While Baleban searched the other rooms and Ferguson stood ready to strike him down, I walked to what I took to be the front door of the residence - and found myself looking out over a wide courtyard. A colonnaded square kept the cracked

stone ceiling from falling down into the area below. Down the wall to my right were more building entrances. Whatever had been to the left was buried under the mountain.

"This way," Baleban said. He had a sack over his shoulder, already partially filled.

We crossed the courtyard to a thick stone wall with an arched city gate. The wood and metal of the gate, along with the massive lintel, had fallen in, blocking passage.

"Give me a hand," Baleban told Ferguson, picking up an ancient board.

"What's beyond?" I asked.

"How should I know?" Baleban said with a smile. "Why do you think I brought you guys along?"

I looked at Ferguson who just shook his head.

"I thought you told us adventurers had already been here."

"It's true, I did," Baleban said. "This is as far as they got too. Two thieves, a cleric and a bard, not exactly a balanced party. Put your shoulder into it!"

This last to Ferguson. The two grunted in a manly way and the remains of the gate gave way. Baleban straightened up and slapped dust off his hands with a triumphant smile. With a waggle of his eyebrows, he ducked through the hole.

I looked at Ferguson, I looked back toward the cave. Ferguson drew his sword and followed Baleban through the hole. I frowned and did the same.

The stone wall continued off in some distance in either direction. An identical wall ran parallel fifty feet or so away, creating a wide avenue. As we walked the lane, our torches cast dancing shadows behind the rocks and debris that littered the area, making me feel as if we were surrounded by crouching assassins. I clutched my sword tighter.

"This is dangerous, yeah?" I whispered.

"Yeah," Ferguson said.

"Could be anything in an unexplored dungeon," I added.

"Yeah," Ferguson said.

"Could be - wait a minute," I stopped short and waved my torch around. "If we're the first ones in here since the city got buried, where are ..."

"Yeah," Ferguson agreed.

It sounded at first like a distant wind blowing over a bottle. As it increased in volume, it started to sound more like a groan. Baleban took a step backward toward us as, not far up the avenue, a figure appeared. It was moving toward us with a lazy, shuffling gait.

"Back!" Ferguson snapped. We turned around to run back toward the gate, but saw two more shuffling figures behind us.

"Forward!" Ferguson hissed.

Ferguson ran without looking back. Baleban and I looked at each other just the briefest of moments before we followed.

I never saw him draw the knife, or even throw it, but I did see Ferguson's arm snap downward and there was suddenly a knife in the figure's forehead. I took a moment to look at him before we moved on and saw that the man was ancient, desiccated in such a hideous way that only the darkest magics could keep him animated.

I was pondering that when I ran into Ferguson's back. He raised a hand and I saw what brought him short. The avenue curved around into a plaza. Here, the buildings were two stories tall and the stone ceiling seemed even more precarious. The remains of a half dozen trees dotted the area. This must have been an incredibly beautiful space in its day.

Then I spotted them. Among the trees and

other debris in the center of the plaza were more figures, all ambling about with the same meandering shuffle. This was why there were no bodies in the rubble, they were ambulatory.

Ferguson waved his hand to the right, two fingers out. We took his meaning and made our way toward a store front. We entered the door as quietly as possible and saw a convenient hole in the wall between this and the next store. This continued for some distance and we picked our way, as quietly as possible, along the plaza.

When we could go no further through the buildings, we found a staircase and headed up. This provided us access, via another collapsed wall, to the next street over. As we stood on the second floor of this apartment, looking down on the street below packed with more shufflers, I couldn't help but wonder if we'd made a mistake.

Ferguson slid his sword into its scabbard and climbed out of the window and onto the ledge, then vanished. Baleban followed with a lithe quickness that I would have never expected given his soft, stocky build. I won't lie, nephew, I had a moment where I weighed my chances of slipping past the shufflers with my chances of not falling off the wall. The ledge won out, but just barely.

Hours, possibly days after I stepped out onto that ledge, we arrived at a single-level structure at the end of the street. Ferguson was already on the roof when I became aware that I'd reached the end of the ledge. He was examining a hole in the roof as I inched my way to safety.

Again, we found ourselves in a residence, although the damage here was much more extensive. Several times we had to belly crawl through gaps in the debris that were mere semibros high. I wondered more than once if our torches might not use up more air than was available.

However, we did make our way out of the complex eventually and found ourselves in

another plaza. It was empty of both debris and shufflers. Looking up gave me vertigo as it looked like the entire cliff wall and simply draped itself over the area. Across the plaza was an ornate, semicircular building. It had the feel of holy buildings the world over.

We were halfway across the open area when Ferguson's sword flashed out. The shufflers were on us before I'd even known they were there. I screamed as one raised its arms and fell toward me, bite end first. I raised my sword defensively and it slide sideways into the shuffler's mouth, splitting its cheeks with a dry, crispy rasp.

The shuffler shoved forward, hard, jamming the sword against its jaws as it began biting the blade in its mouth. I pushed back, grabbing the non-hilt end of the sword with my free hand, but I was no match against the shuffler's strength.

I fell backwards, the shuffler coming with me. I landed flat on my back and the sword blade cut into the palm of my unprotected hand.

Then the shuffler's weight caught up.

Its movement shoved the sword blade clean through its head. The body, along with the still attached lower half of the head, collided with my chest. The top half of the head collided with mine, forehead to forehead, and I saw stars.

I rolled over to my side frantically clawing for breath, the wind having been knocked out of me. Ferguson dragged me to my feet and pulled me along, although I was only dimly aware of the distance. He threw me to the floor, then barred a door behind us. I continued sucking for air for several minutes.

When I could catch wind, I looked around to see that we were in the narthex of church of some sort. There was very little damage here, and many of the icons still sat on their pedestal and hung from the walls.

I raised my torch and admired the vaulted architecture. Without waiting for the

others, I made my way around to the nave. It was even more beautiful - high, ornate columns reached into the air and I was so enraptured by the complexity of their fanned vaults that at first I completely failed to notice the second light source. Or the congregation.

A quavering blue light came from an altar on a dais at the end of the aisle. As I made my way toward it, I noticed that all of the pews were occupied by ancient, dusty figures. None were moving, all were laying sideways in the seats.

As I stepped onto the dais, I noticed more figures lying on the floor. These figures had ornate robes and one, with the most ornate vestments, clutched a beaded necklace in one hand. It was this necklace that was casting the blue glow. I picked it up.

"Damn," Baleban said, "beat me to it."

Ferguson stepped past me and approached the altar, then sighed deeply. I stood up and as I walked over I saw a stone plaque on the altar. It had a hideous, demonic carving on it.

"Think it's worth anything?" Baleban asked.

"I think it's the reason the mountain -" was all I got out before he picked the tablet up.

The result was immediate. The ground began to shake and lines of dust fell down from the arches above. Baleban put the stone down with a sheepish grin and stepped back as Ferguson pursed his lips and raised his fist.

Then the congregation moved. Slowly, they sat up, then stood up. They flowed into the aisle and began making their way toward us. Ferguson ran around behind the altar and started looking for another way out, but there wasn't one.

I pulled my sword and readied for attack. Ferguson did the same. Baleban hefted his sack over one shoulder before producing a dagger.

The shufflers paused at the dais, then charged, much faster than I expected. I pulled my sword back for a swing, but the shuffler was on me before I could hit. I raised my free hand to block the attack and suddenly everything went white.

I wondered, briefly, if I were dead, but then trees and sky resolved themselves from the white. I looked around and found myself at the cave entrance where we first came in. Ferguson and Baleban were here as well, equally confused.

I was still holding my sword. I reached to put it away and realized I was clutching the necklace. Could this have been the source of our salvation? I would definitely have to have someone knowledgeable take a look.

"That was an adventure, huh?" Baleban said with a laugh. I looked up and noticed he was watching me. I put the necklace in my pocket and the moment it was out of sight his attention turned to Ferguson.

"Where are you off to next?" he asked. "I'd like to join your party."

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

"What? You have to be! You two work well together!"

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

As you know, nephew, the dungeons I've been have showed evidence of being created by human hands, but this was the first human habitation I've seen that has been reworked into a dungeon.

If the dungeon were accessible for years, it would be easy for it to pass into local lore, or even for a fabricated lore to pop up around it to explain its existence. But this dungeon wasn't a dungeon until recently, and yet its existence predates the lore.

This is conclusive proof that dungeons do not simply appear from the planet for our amusement. I mean the amusement of adventurers.

And so, with a spring in my step, I head off to my next location. I think I would like to see this temple to the king of adventurers.

