

The Adventures of
Uncle Dungeoning Ma'att

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The Warren

As a man of science, I find myself, more often than not, on the side of rational behavior and not following the footsteps of men more prone to foolhardy actions. In short, nephew, left to my own devices I would choose cowardice over heroism every time.

However, despite my enlarged sense of self preservation, even I could not deny that I owed a debt to Ferguson. To abandon him at this point without at least making the effort to help would be tantamount to an outright rejection of our friendship.

And, yes nephew, despite our differences, I now considered Ferguson a friend. However our paths were united, I now understood that the naivete with which I undertook my quest would have undoubtedly led either to my death in a dungeon or my death at the hands of a scoundrel should I have not been paired with an honorable adventurer. The debt of my very life demanded that I make an effort to rescue him, should he still be alive.

And that was how, a week later, we found ourselves in a busy inn at the edge of a border town with the kingdom of Malvadia. The area was occupied, armed soldiers in green uniforms were visible in every street, and it was only through the skills of Baleban that we were able to make contact with a secretive crew of thieves and ne'er-do-wells.

The fat man had his ways of uncovering underground contacts, and on more than one occasion I believe that he was having two different conversations with the same person - one a verbal but bland conversation about the weather and the local economy, another a silent, more secretive discussion via hand gestures and other body language. The deftness he displayed when dealing with other rogues impressed me greatly, although I would not have given him the satisfaction of hearing me express such. Instead, I did my best to stay quiet and look tough.

We learned that Malvadia had been making incursions across the border for months now, mostly uncontested by the local military. It was known that they were taking hostage whatever skilled adventurers they happened upon, although for what purpose none knew for certain. What was known was that they had a camp a few miles into Malvadian territory which they called The Warren where prisoners were taken.

The group we made contact with, the Lyrers, were no fans of the Malvadians and were more than willing to share what information they could with us. Miss Dranner, their leader, even offered us supplies for the trip to the Warren and assigned one of her top people, a man named Ladron, to help us get there.

Ladron responded to Miss Dranner's summoning by walking into the room in full Malvadian soldier's uniform. Both Baleban and I leapt from our seats, eliciting laughter from the lyrers in the room.

"Ladron's been undercover", Miss Dranner explained, but offered no more. "He'll take you to The Warren as prisoners. That'll get you inside. The rest is up to you. I hope you find your friend."

We travelled over land, avoiding the trails used by the groups Malvadian soldiers. Ladron explained that The Warren had been built hastily; a hundred slaves had been brought in from central Malvadia just for that purpose. Ladron believed that whatever they were doing there, it was only the precursor to a larger invasion.

Whatever image Ladron's explanation had put into my head, The Warren managed to completely contradict them. The valley floor was flat and dry, and canvas tents dotted it for quite some distance. There was a central area, multiple circles of tents, arranged in rectangular groups, ringed a dual-level, hexagonal building. I saw no prisoners; were they kept in the tents? Put to work somewhere else?

We stripped off our gear and Ladron showed me how to conceal a dagger in the small of my back. Our packs, and Ferguson's, were dropped into a small dirt pit, then buried them. Ladron marked the spot with a pile of stones assembled in such a clever way that I would not have thought it anything but a natural formation; and having seen him stack them, I could now pick the stack out as a marker with no difficulty at all. I tested this as we walked away from it and even at a great distance I could still discern it.

Ladron led us down the hills onto the main trail, then into the camp. I waited for someone to stop us and question us, but none did. We walked directly toward the stone building and I could see that there were large metal doors, standing open, on the side facing us. A cluster of guards stood at the doors waiting.

"Two for the pits," Ladron said as we approached. A guard nodded and came over to us.

"I'll take them," he said. "Magical skills?"

"None," Ladron said.

"All right," the guard replied. "Go see Pago for your bounty."

Ladron nodded and left, never one betraying that he had known us as anything other than prisoners.

The guard tapped us with his halberd, directing us through the metal doors. We complied.

There were no windows inside the building. As our eyes adjusted to the change from bright sunlight to torch lit darkness, we could see a massive staircase leading down into the ground. It was wide and steep, dropping away into the darkness to a stonework hallway below. The guard stayed behind us, leading us down and through a series of heavy doors. At one point, we even travelled through a narrow hallway with a guard window.

I wondered, with some despair, if I hadn't been a fool for undertaking this mission. Baleban's face never changed from his usual cocky smirk.

Eventually we were led through a large room occupied by metal tables and chairs. The walls were covered with racks of weapons. I wondered what a training room would be doing in the middle of an underground prison, but then it occurred to me that the weapons were more likely used on the prisoners.

We were brought down a long hallway lined with doors. The stone was rougher here, and a damp cold permeated. We were told to stop and the guard, behind us, opened a door. I assumed he'd be placing us in a cell, but when we crossed the threshold we found ourselves in another long hallway lined with doors. If the other doors each led to another hallway lined with cells, there must be space down here for hundreds of prisoners. For a second time since our arrival, I felt a heavy despair. How would we ever be able to locate Ferguson in this massive complex?

The guard produced a ring of keys and began fiddling with a door handle.

"You two are lucky," he said. "The block where the more dangerous prisoners are kept is far less comfortable."

There was a small, damp clicking noise and the guard froze. I wondered if the door might be stuck, but a heartbeat later, the guard stood up and looked at me with a surprised look on his face. He looked down and he and I both saw a dagger sticking out from between his ribs. He looked at me again, then dropped to his knees.

Baleban pulled the knife out, then shoved it into the man's back. The guard fell to the floor dead.

"Get the keys," Baleban said, pointing to the door while he began rummaging through the man's uniform. He produced a

short sword in a scabbard and began lacing it around his middle.

I pulled the keys out from the door where they had been left hanging.

“What now?” Baleban asked.

“Ferguson is most likely being kept in that far more secure area the guard mentioned. We need to find that.”

Baleban helped me throw the guard into the cell, then we started to move.

These lower depths where the cells were kept were sparsely patrolled. In fact, until we left this cell block, we saw no other guards at all.

We crossed the torture room and entered another hallway. There were two large, iron doors at the end of this hallway and two smaller doors on either side. As we reached the end, the two larger doors started to open. Baleban and I ducked to either side through the smaller doors.

I found myself in a narrow stone hallway with a trough down one side. The walls were blackened with ash. I puzzled over this for a moment, then heard voices. There was a slot above the trough running the length of the room; I assumed there was one on the other side where Baleban went. A man with a shovel was walking up the middle of the room, his companion having already opened the doors and left.

After some time, I opened the door back into the hallway and exited. Baleban was already in the hall, looking through the metal doors into the room the men had come from. It was long and narrow, and the far end sloped down into an underground lake. The interior of the room was also burned black as the side room had been.

“What do you think it is?” Baleban asked.

“It’s a furnace,” I said, wondering how many had come into this room and never come back out.

“Come on,” I said.

We made our way down another hallway and the temperature dropped again. Through the door at the far end we found ourselves in another rough-hewn hallway lined with doors.

“Crowberries!” I swore under my breath. “How are we going to -”

Baleban cut me off.

“Ferguson!” he yelled, his voice echoed down the hallway.

“I’m here!” a dozen voices responded. Baleban growled.

He began running down the hallway and called again. I followed. A moment later, he stopped short and raised his hand.

“Did you hear that?” he asked. “Ferguson!” This time I did.

“Shut. Up.” Ferguson said, emphatically.

We practically skipped our way up the side tunnel to his cell.

“I am both impressed and amused,” Ferguson said as I unlocked his door. “What’s your plan for getting us out?”

“We haven’t gotten that far,” I admitted. Then an idea occurred to me. “There’s a lake. A cavern just around the corner.”

“It’ll have to do,” Ferguson said.

We ran our way back to the furnace and had just crossed through the metal doors when Ferguson stopped us short. He shoved me to one side of the doors and he took the other, a finger to his lips. Baleban stood next to me, his dagger in his hand.

“In there!” a voice said. A half dozen men in shabby clothes stumbled into the room, driven further in by the end of a halberd.

Ferguson reacted first. He stepped forward from his hiding spot and grabbed the halberd, pulling it into the room. The

surprised guard fell forward and Ferguson spiraled the weapon around his shoulders and down onto the guard. Baleban stepped out through his dagger. I heard a cough from the hallway and then a scream.

“Dammit!” Ferguson said as the scream moved off into the distance.

The men who’d been shoved into the room with us stood still, shocked with surprise.

“We need to move,” Ferguson said. “We need to find weapons.”

“There’s a torture room,” I said. “There were swords and other weapons there.”

Ferguson nodded approvingly, looking at me expectantly. It took me a moment to realize that he wanted me to lead the way.

“Come with us, or don’t,” Ferguson said to the other prisoners.

As I stepped out of my hiding spot I stopped short. One of the prisoners was a heavysset bald man in a canvas robe tied with a rope.

“I know you,” I said.

“You do?”

“Well, not specifically,” I admitted. “You were in Molotok. You were following that giant lunatic with the preposterously large sword,” I added.

“Ah, yes!” He said. “That was my previous adventuring group.”

He looked off for a moment, grinning as if recalling some great event.

“They’re all dead now,” he said. “At least, I’m pretty sure they’re dead. We stumbled onto a pack of orcs on the road home from Molotok. Shame, really.”

“Can we catch up later?” Baleban asked.

I apologized, then ran. It took us almost no time to cross the complex back to the torture room, but we could already hear

the sounds of alarm being raised. I suppose that should have been my clue to exercise a bit more caution.

“Through here,” I said, opening the door to the torture room. I started to walk in, but found I couldn’t. This confused me, and I pushed even harder. Then I realized that what was keeping me from moving forward was the sword stuck in my chest. I looked up and into the face of a young guard. Then I fell.

And I left.

When I came back, the man in the canvas robe was kneeling over me. A blue glow was fading from his hand.

“You’re all right,” he said, “just a scratch.”

I looked around and saw the others were busy grabbing weapons off the wall. The young guard who had stabbed me was on the floor not far away.

“You’re a healer,” I said, not sure what else to say.

“Yes,” he agreed.

“They’re coming!” someone shouted.

The healer stood up and I saw the others moving tables and chairs against the door.

“What’s out the other doors?” Ferguson asked.

“That one’s the other cell block,” Baleban said, “what’s down that one?” He shrugged.

Ferguson nodded and opened the door. A moment later he waved us down.

This hallway was also roughly hewn and cold. We could hear running water somewhere farther down.

A bang followed by several shouting voices brought us short. The door had been shoved open and guards were making their way through. The prisoners had decided to make a stand and were attempting to

fight them off. Ferguson kept moving and I followed.

The hallway terminated at a swift moving underground river. From the debris on the small beach, it seemed as if the guards, or at least their mess crew, had been using this river as a garbage dump.

The water was dark and I could feel the cold from where I stood. I looked back and saw that the prisoners were losing, buried under an increasingly thick tide of guards.

Was this to be my end, then? Brought back from the land of the dead only to meet my fate at the end of a pike?

Fortunately, it was not. My fate, apparently, was to drown in the black waters of an underground river. Or, at least, that was Ferguson's view as he shoved me from the beach into the river.

I stayed afloat a short distance before the river moved under a rock face. There was little space between the river and the stone and, unable to swim against the flow, I was pulled down into the darkness.

