

Dei Merenar – A D&D story

"They could've at least ran a mop through it first," Uriel spoke slightly hurt.

Miguel softly kicked a chunk of charred meat that may or may not have been the bandit leader's left foot. "If they did, though, it wouldn't smell like freshly roasted bacon," the bard quipped as he attempted to blow the bandit-residue off of his boot.

Francis, who had been breathing through his mouth in an effort to mask the rancid smell, let out something between a chuckle and a gasp. He automatically inhaled through his nose, taking in the unadulterated stench of decomposition and burnt flesh. His face turned grey and the rogue sprinted towards the door. Right hand covering his mouth, he managed to get to the front door. With his left he attempted desperately to find the door handle in the near-darkness of the hallway, yet it was too late. The contents of his stomach were ejaculated with tremendous force, spilling onto the floorboards of the group's brand-new hideout.

To call it brand-new, however, would have been a gross exaggeration. After their skirmish with a local gang of thieves and cutthroats in the run-down warehouse, the group was granted permission to use it until they found a more permanent residence in Fairhold.

When they had first entered the premise the night before though, it had been in far better condition than it was currently in. The amount of furniture had decreased, its simple wooden chairs and tables replaced with burnt wreckage and ash. The number of severed limbs spread across the floor had increased quite significantly though, the blood-splattered walls indicating a staunch disagreement with the previous tenants.

The dwarven captain of the guard, Karnak Tosh, had been quite pleased with the swift justice this new group of mercenaries had handed out. After witnessing what was left of the gang however, Karnak wasn't so sure if the results could be filed under 'self-defense'. Two of his guardsmen had gotten sick on the spot. One of them was still recovering from the trauma. As a punishment and/or reward, he had lent the warehouse of horrors to them in the hope that they would clean up after themselves.

A short scream echoed through the warehouse. Instinctively, weapons were drawn and then swiftly returned them to their scabbards as the source of the howl stomped into the room, not dangerous but merely quite annoyed.

"Keep ya skeletons in check, necromanca." Vodunn spat out. "Unlike dem, I cannot see in de dark." A creaking skeletal servant lumbered into the room right behind him, grinning its deathly smile almost sarcastically.

"I thought you'd like the extra protection. They always make me feel so incredibly.." Uriel patted his minion gently on its bony shoulder, ".. secure." He smiled darkly.

Vodunn shrugged. "Before ya creature surprised me," the sorcerer shot a dirty look at the skeleton, "I found somethin' dat might of interest. Bring a torch or two."

Wiping his mouth on a frayed piece of cloth unspoiled by the massacre, Francis reentered the room. "I think I saw a few lying around in one of the storage rooms." His gravely voice sounded slightly weakened. Francis limped out of the room, his leg still damaged from the trapped chest they found. While it did provide him with a shiny magical dagger, the cost had been a hidden blade to the leg. An expert Bowman, his trap disarming skills had taken a hit lately due to his intense combat training. The gaping wound in his calf was a reminder that he'd have to practice more. That, and to get himself to a healer at short notice. He started rummaging through several crates stashed away along the breadth of the storeroom.

Vodunn's heart finally returned to beating at its usual rate. In his exploration of the backrooms, his curiosity had overtaken his common sense and he'd forgotten to recast his light spell. He had just discovered a strange hatch in the floor, when the enchanted coin that contained his spell suddenly dimmed, cloaking the entire room in thick, impenetrable darkness. Cursing under his breath, Vodunn had started reciting the familiar incantation. As the coin flared up again, he had felt something brush past his leg, accompanied by a loud, creaking noise. He quickly turned around, empty sockets and a smile of broken teeth greeting him.

He grimaced at the thought of this being a regular occurrence now that he would be living together with a necromancer. An elf necromancer even, though he still wasn't sure why others thought the 'elf' part was the big deal. Wasn't an elf just a skinny, white human with different ears? He made a mental note to ask Uriel about it later.

"There they stood, in full force. Except the half-elf, in search of a torch." Miguel sung, strumming his lute. The throaty voice of Francis interrupted the verse: "Found one!" Miguel continued, a severed head and some heavily burnt body parts his target audience:

"Crispier than bacon and deader than wood,
nothing left of their enemies 'cept puddles of blood.
easier than lifting a two pound rock,
the battle's span shorter than a halfling's cock!"

Uriel clapped slowly, but didn't look all that amused. Vodunn inquired to the size of halfling genitalia. Miguel shook his head disappointedly: "My talents are obviously wasted on you barbarians." He paused. "So, what did you want to show us, big man?"

Torches lit and light spells refreshed, the group followed Vodunn into the back rooms of the house. "I mighta knocked ovah some things on ma way out," their front man said apologetically. Avoiding toppled furniture and miscellaneous junk, after a few moments Vodunn halted. The bluish glow produced by the light spell illuminated the large back room eerily, casting unnaturally deep, angular shadows around it. At first glance, the place Vodunn stopped was nothing more than a wooden floor, however upon closer inspection the wood pattern seemed slightly off.

His uncovered, dark arms straining in the near darkness, Vodunn started pulling on the floorboards. With a loud crack he dislodged the nails from the wood, revealing a black hatch. After removing the remainder of the planks, he gently tapped the hatch with his knuckles. "Ta-akat," he said surprised. Miguel and Uriel started at him in anticipation of a further explanation. It came from Francis, who was studying the hatch intently.

"Darkwood," he whispered. He attempted sound casual and tried to contain a smile. His lips curving upwards ever so slightly, revealing his simultaneous surprise and ecstasy. Noticing none of his companions were buying his façade, he continued: "One cubic meter of this stuff is worth more than this entire warehouse."

"Out in da Mazitic, we build our huts an armor from it. Hard to craft, even harder to break." Francis' eyes grew wide. "Just a shame da treants only shed once every few years." Francis' sighed, his get-rich-quick scheme dissolving as rapidly as it had appeared in his mind: "Oh of course, the trees are alive. And probably dangerous too.."

The darkwood was fastened to several iron hoops with a thick chain. After close inspection from Francis, no locking mechanism was visible. Vodunn janked the the chain hard, to no avail. The bard plucked at his string twice. Uriel sighed dramatically and rolled up his sleeves.

"Observe, simpletons." The elf gently touched the chain with the index and middle finger of his right hand and began murmuring an incantation. His other hand reached into his component pouch, clenching a small object firmly. Enormous heat emanated from his fingers, a dark red circle spreading outwards across one of the chain's links. The metal bubbled and deformed, the link snapping in twain seconds later. Uriel stepped aside, made a slight curtsy and looked up at Vodunn, a sly smile on his face. "A truly subtle application of power, if I say so myself."

"Ya ya, I realise dat de previous application of mah powah could have been less.. explosive."

In their gang-related incident of last evening, the full extent of Vodunn's destructive power had become clear. The young sorcerer possessed a natural affinity with fire, however did not yet have the control necessary for precision in stressful situations. While the decimated remains of the bandits were a testament to his raw spiritual strength, the wild fire had spread throughout the warehouse, taking a large part of both its interior and inhabitants with it.

Uriel lifted the heavy darkwood hatch, his slightly trembling arms and clenched jaws giving away the monumental effort of the task. The thick wood passed its center of gravity, the sudden fluctuation in weight causing Uriel to lose his grip. The hatch crashed onto the floorboards with a deafening bang.

Miguel, who had been studying the contents of the crates stashed away in the room, jumped up and turned around, both sword and lute at the ready. Vodunn and Francis grinned at the bard, who sighed in return, put away his sword and smiled back.

"Dei merenar," Uriel suddenly gasped. They all turned back towards the hatch and saw the elf kneeling next to the opened hatch, staring at the darkness below, his hands resting on the ancient stone forming the circular pit. "Dei merenar," he repeated softly. "One of the lost elven cities..."

Quizzical looks greeted the elf.

"These ruins housed my people for thousands of years, long before your kind ever set foot in these parts. Kings were buried here. Long forgotten magics and secrets lie with them."

The faint light of the torch only revealed several feet of carved stone bricks. It was almost impossible to tell how far down the simply stone shaft led. Two metal hooks were hammered into the stone. Francis immediately noticed two small metal hooks hammered into the stone, their sheen revealing they had to be new additions to the otherwise decrepit shaft. He waved his torch around the room and quickly found a crummy wooden ladder that seemed of similarly recent fabrication. "Guess someone else tried to get down not too long ago," the rogue said.

"And then locked the door and threw away the bloody key. Probably with good reason, I reckon." Miguel remarked.

The party pondered Uriel and Miguel's comments in silence for a moment.

Francis broke the silence, a mischievous expression on his face. "So, Uriel.. By secrets, you wouldn't happen to mean treasure, right?"

"By secrets, I mean glorious architecture, eons of lost Elvish culture, tomes of dark and terrible magicks, ancient relics of unimaginable power. Things obviously lost on a half-breed's uncultured mind."

Ignoring Uriel's spiteful comment, the half-elf's brow furled into a thinking expression and before long, something seemed to click. "So.. treasure of unimaginable wealth then?"

The elf sighed, shaking his head softly and rolling his eyes for dramatic effect. "Yes. That too."

The half-elf's brow unfurled and his signature roguish smile reappeared. "In that case, what are we standing around here for?"

Sharing the rogue's affinity for the promise of mountains of gold (and who can blame him), the bard plucked at his lute's strings inspired.

"We might get eaten, we might get killed.
Or leave rich men, our pockets filled."

"Well, it has been far too long since I have come across such an opportunity for mental and cultural enrichment." Uriel spoke gravely. Vodunn and Miguel rolled their eyes at each other, Miguel wording 'ponce' in silence. Vodunn snorted.

"Don't ya pretend it is not gred fuelling ya interest in da city. Da thirst for knowledge is no less strong than dat for gold."

"As long as you remember any scrolls we find are mine," Uriel answered matter-of-factly, his pretense gone. He looked at Francis. "It's not as if any of you can actually read them."

"You have something to say, then say it, wizard." the half-elf snapped. Uriel made a clearly fake attempt at looking apologetic.

"I guess dat settles it den. An expedition into de heart of de city. Grab ya gear, friends!"

As rapidly as the party had decided their new course of action, they readied themselves for the exploration of the uncovered tunnel. Supposedly linking Fairhold to the ruined underground city of Dei Merenar, the lure of riches and myriad of secrets was too great to resist for the adventurers. No doubt Miguel was correct: the hatch was likely locked for a good reason. Reinvigorated by their recent success and the easy reward of the night before however, they seemed to throw caution, or at least proper preparation, to the wind. Armed with a mace, a longbow, lute and a spellbook, packed with spare torches, some rations and a compass, the party was itching to leave the relative safety of their still corpse-strewn home behind.

Fully equipped, torches in hand and anxious to get on with it, the party regrouped at the edge of the shaft. Miguel rummaged through his pockets and found a silver coin, which he looked at shortly. He shook his head, put it back and continue searching the contents of his trousers until he pulled out a copper one. Pleased, he tossed it into the black pit. "Silver can buy some decent companionship. Copper.. Not so much," the bard quipped. The adventurers listened for the sound of the coin hitting a solid surface. It came, eventually, meaning the pit was awfully deep. "Guess they don't call it a hidden city for nothing, eh?"

Francis dragged the rope ladder to the shaft, fastened it securely to the metal hooks and kicked it down. The ladder plummeted downwards, clattering loudly. Alarmingly, the falling ladder took far less time to come to a halt than the coin. "Who's going down first?" the rogue asked.

The rest of the group looked at each other, remembering clearly why their mission of reconnaissance turned into a wholesale slaughter. Francis had offered to scout ahead, only to have 'stealthily' fallen off the side of the building several times before managing to enter it, followed by another painful tumble through the attics' rotten floorboards. It was a miracle the bandits hadn't heard him earlier. Afraid that Francis had been captured or worse, the remainder of the party had decided to try to talk their way in. Needless to say, the bandits weren't up for much talking when they finally discovered their intruder at roughly the same time the party had been invited in. The stains in the floor and rusty smell of the air was a testament to their failure at further diplomacy.

"With de climbin' expertise ya have shown, perhaps de smartest course of action is for YOU ta test de ladder's depth." Vodunn cast a light spell on one of the rogue's daggers and gave Francis two thumbs up.

Oblivious to the thinly veiled insult, the rogue planted his left foot firmly on the first step. "Fine. Stand aside, cowards." he spoke valiantly. The ropes creaking and the wooden steps visibly cracking from the strain, Francis slowly began his descent. He sincerely hoped his performance from last night before wouldn't be repeated. "Focus, Francis Villon, focus." he murmured to himself. As the ladder wasn't fastened to the wall at other points, the farther down Francis got, the harder it was to control its apparent urge to swing around violently.

The soft clatter of wood against stone, as well as the faint light of the glowing dagger reassured the group that the rogue was in fact still alive and well. "At least if he falls, we'll have soft ground to land on, in case we take the plunge ourselves." Uriel said matter of factly. The others nodded in silent agreement.

Down in the shaft, things seemed to be going well. Carefully checking the integrity of each wooden plank, Francis swiftly descended. Taking care to avoid missing steps and checking for frayed rope, every so often he looked down for any sign of the bottom. Before long, he thought he saw something in the distance. He unsheathed the glowing dagger and tossed it down the shaft. His keen eyesight had been correct: several feet below him, the dagger hit solid ground. With a nimble jump, the rogue followed swiftly.

After a confirmation from Francis that he had not only reached solid ground, but was indeed still in one piece, the rest of the party followed suit. One by one they clambered onto the ladder, slowly but surely making their way down. Vodunn and Miguel managed their descent without incident, however when Uriel was halfway one of the steps broke clean through, causing him to lose his balance. He banged his head against the shaft's hard surface, barely managing to regain his grasp. Loosened by the sudden movement, two

healing potions from his belt were knocked down. One missed Vodunn's head by mere inches, breaking on his shield and spilling its contents over his legs. "At least they weren't the acid vials." Uriel remarked half-apologetically as he climbed down the last few steps into the light.

After collecting their wits and making sure each party member was in relatively good shape ("No just go on, this rather large, gaping hole in my forehead won't slow me down in the slightest.."), the party surveyed the room they had just entered. The large tunnel they had climbed through was reminiscent of an ancient stone drainpipe, with the room they had just entered looking like an upside-down basin of sorts. The ceiling was a large oval dome, with the tunnel connected to its highest point. The walls, which were rounded at the top, ended in a square floor pattern. "I believe this what they used to transport and store the water from the lake above." Uriel explained that the elves of old had used powerful magical devices to control the water flow, allowing them to easily manipulate the direction in which the liquid moved.

The theatrical elf touched the walls dramatically: "When I was a young student many decades ago, I.." Rudely interrupted by Francis grabbing hold of his robes, Uriel started to protest only to realize the rogue had prevented him from stepping into a deep hole.

"I'm expecting traps as well, be on your guard," Francis whispered. Uriel's attention turned again from the history of civilizations long gone to the eminent danger of exploring the dangerous remnants left by those very civilizations.

The east of the room was covered in sand and rubble, partially obscuring the way forward. A wall had collapsed inwards, an event that Miguel observed to have taken place quite recently as the pickaxes lying around the room were of recent fabrication.

"Dat explains da fresh corpses den," Vodunn said, pointing at a figure seemingly crushed under the rubble. Although the man's blood had dried and turned black, there were few signs of decomposition except for early corpse bloat. "Crushed by de falling debris, I reckon. Probably only a day old, two perhaps. I cannot say with so few maggots or flies around."

Now that Vodunn had indicated the lack of corpse feeders, the party noticed a disturbing lack of spiderwebs or other signs of (insect) life. It seemed the ruins of Dei Merenar had only recently been accessed by the first living creatures in decades, if not aeons, and those humans hadn't lasted very long.

"So Vodunn, do you know of any crumbling walls that carry scimitars?" The bard remarked, nodding towards another corpse hidden behind a large fallen brick. "Because this poor fellow had his throat cut and my gut tells me it wasn't caused by an accidentally falling pickaxe.."

Unsheathing their weapons, the group finished their sweep of the room. Besides the holes in the floor with a diameter of roughly a foot ("I can tell you all about Dei Merenar's water transportation systems if you want, I have this exceptional tome on elven architecture.."), the only obvious exit seemed to be the tunnel that led them down into the room. Francis and Uriel studied the collapsed wall, which appeared to have been partially reconstructed from the other side, as if a group of lazy builders had quickly placed the fallen bricks back in the hope their blind foreman would not discover their negligence.

As Uriel and Francis began aggressively discussing the structural integrity of the makeshift wall, Vodunn shot Miguel a quick, mischievous glance. The warrior-priest softly hummed what sounded to Miguel like a nursery rhyme in a language he had never heard before, after which he scratched his left shoulder, drawing blood. Immediately, Vodunn's body was glistening with sweat, muscles bulging and veins pulsating with unnatural vigor. A loud howl escaped his mouth, causing the necromancer and rogue to snap out of their ceaseless bickering. Realizing too late what was going on, they could barely protest as they witnessed Vodunn rushing towards the middle of the stone barricade with immense speed, the misty form of the oxen spirit-beast surrounding him as he ran. The summoned spirit enhancing his already formidable physical prowess, Vodunn hit the debris shoulder-first, sending it flying with thunderous force. To call the sound that engulfed the deathly silent

tomb 'deafening' would have been a gross understatement. Francis, whose back had been turned towards the ordeal, jumped up from the shock and dove behind a fallen pillar. Uriel hid his face behind his robes and cast an instantaneous shield spell in an effort to protect himself from possible flying debris. Miguel just smiled and took a deep breath.

In an instant, the room filled up with a thick cloud of dust. The sounds of crumbling stones and its accompanying echoes died out slowly, giving room to loud coughing and someone muttering an incantation. Moments later, an ice-cold breeze swept through the room, chilling the party to their bones, sending a swirling tornado of icy wind and the dust cloud through the newly re-opened hole in the wall.

After a short moment of silence, Miguel started laughing.

"Well, there goes the element of surprise," a dust-covered Francis spoke ironically, a smirk on his face. Uriel shook his head disappointedly, not able to find words to appropriately convey his emotions.

A dust-covered, frost-bitten Vodunn climbed out from the rubble, the oxen spirit having left him looking slightly tired and worn. "Do not fret, companions, I am doing fine. And behold, I have opened the entrance to the city," he spoke, pointing at the large hole in the wall behind him.