
Beneath the Tomb

It was a circular affair, which on the surface, resembled a small hill. On one side there was a long, stone-lined corridor ending in an open doorway. Once it may have housed a door, but it had vanished eons ago. Jaxo and his companions would not normally disturb such a structure, but the storm raging outside was fierce. Rain lashed their skins like an overseer's whip.

The little group hurried through the doorway, seeking shelter. Once inside, it was obvious the hill was quite artificial. Beyond the entrance was a circular room with a vaulted ceiling, the outside of which was merely concealed by earth, grass and shrubs. What may have been buried in this tomb had been removed about the same time as the door.

Water poured in, soaking the stone tiles which made up the floor of the tomb ... all except for one. Where the rain freely traveled along the channels made by the joints between the floor stones, it disappeared as it reached the single dry stone in the tomb. Examining it Jaxo observed water running into the cracks, but instead of filling them up, the liquid escaped into a subterranean passage below. "Draxl, bring the tools. I've found some kind of trap door."

His companion brought over a heavy leather bag, the clanking inside gave notice this was the requested bag. Jaxo rifled through it until he found the prybar. Wedging it into the crack, Jaxo worked to jar the stone loose. Yet the tile remained unaccommodating. Jaxo edged the bar into another crack and yanked.

"It's loose," cried the younger Krisk, "I heard a bolt snap." The two worked in unison to wrench the stone up. With the others assisting them, they were finally able to pry the stone away. Beneath the crypt they could make out a dirty room. It was covered in dust and crawling insects.

"I care not for tomb robbing," the superstitious Grakz declared.

"You'd make a good thief," Jaxo declared, "I've never seen you shy away from looting the bodies of our fallen foes."

"True," Grakz admitted, "But tomb robbing goes beyond picking trinkets off the bodies of those slain in battle. Sifting around rotting remains for offerings left to the gods. It's not right. Besides, it's the stench of it I can't abide."

As if to illustrate Grakz's point, their nostrils filled with an exhalation of foul air from the chamber below. "Don't think of us as tomb robbers." Jaxo announced, "We are intrepid explorers on a quest into the unknown."

"And if we happen to stumble upon some treasure," Draxl remarked, trying to wipe the smell off his nose, "so much the better."

Tired of their pointless bickering, the impetuous Krisk pushed them out of the way and leaped into the darkness below, smashing a goodly number of insects beneath his feet in the process. Having been shown the way, Jaxo and his companions swiftly followed. Like the chamber above it, the lower cavern

was circular, only the outer walls were filled with small alcoves. Some of the niches were filled with broken pieces of statuary. In a few, the sculptures survived. They all depicted an odd-looking biped, something out of the mists of prehistory. They had unusually small heads and feet. Hideous creatures, they hardly appeared sentient. Yet even the most intact statue was weathered as if devoured by time itself.

Even in their weathered state, Jaxo could recognize what they once depicted. He had never been impressed by the ruins of these creatures. Stupidity, arrogance and pride all in the same package; efficient, but not exceptionally pleasant. It was a good thing they were long extinct.

The floor of the dark room was covered in roots, scurrying insects, rat droppings and puddles of water. On the far side of the room was a heavy metal double door. It may have once been bronze, but what it was now was mostly decay. The entrance was wrapped in other metal bands in crisscrossing diamond shaped pattern, cruelly decomposed by time and the elements. Draxl and Grakz went to work on the crack between the doors with crowbars, while Jaxo and Krisk pounded the hinges with hammers. Unlike the floor stone in the upper room, this door seemed immobile as if it were merely a facade, with nothing but stone behind it.

Grakz bent his back into pulling on the crowbar, "This is the other thing I don't care for in tomb robbing."

"Not being able to open doors?" Draxl braced himself, heaving sideways against the steel rod.

Grakz shook his head, "No, I don't like work. It tires me."

The two strained mightily, groaning and grunting for long moments before abandoning their attempt. They sat down upon the ground, breathing heavily, and swearing at the immovable door.

Jaxo, in frustration, struck the center of the door with his hammer. It sounded like a gong. As the echoes of the sound reverberated across the empty chamber, dust and air seemed to escape from the space beneath the doors with a great hiss. The doors creaked and proceeded to open by themselves as if bidden to do so by an internal force. Jaxo and his companions lined up to meet whatever was opening the door, shields locked together, spears forward.

Yet once the door was open, the roomed lapsed into silence. All they could make out was a pile of dust on the other side and a few bones protruding from the filthy heap. In one or two places, sat a gruesomely misshapen skull. Jaxo motioned his associates to close ranks behind him as he strode forth to investigate. The back of the door and the walls nearby were covered in hand prints. Jaxo had seen primitive artwork, signed this way, but this was different. Rather than being distinct, the hand prints overlapped each other, as if they were recording a failed attempt to escape.

Following close behind Jaxo, Grakz stepped forward. Digging in the piles of dust and bones at the base of the door with the point of his spear, "I don't like the look of this. Ending up an unknown pile of bones inside this tomb was not on my plan for today."

Jaxo crept forward into the darkness, "Well, everybody winds up dead sooner or later."

"Well, if you're smart you try to postpone it as long as possible," Grakz replied.

Jaxo smiled. "Wedge the door with wood," he instructed Krisk, "I don't want to be trapped in here, like these poor retches were."

Krisk jammed in several thick wooden wedges and forced them deep between the door and the floor using a large wood hammer. "These should hold it."

Motioning his comrades forward, they proceeded along a down sloping passageway, descending deeper into the ground. They passed a few more passages, most of which had collapsed or had been dead ends to begin with. This part of the structure was strangely empty. In places the only break from the monotony of the dust were roots working their way between the stone work in the ceiling, as if they too desired to rob the tomb of its riches. Grakz stopped dead in his tracks, "Where's the water?" he asked. "All this time there had been puddles on the floor. Now it is dry as a desert canyon."

"Were here to get rich," Jaxo scolded the superstitious, "Not to question the drainage."

Grakz glanced at his leader ominously.

The passage changed from cut stone to a cavern, crudely cut from the rock itself. The passage narrowed, but it had a high, pointed ceiling to allow the air to ventilate. The sloping ground changed to a steep stairway, winding its way ever deeper into the earth. Finally, they arrived at a great, vaulted chamber. It was littered with dust and bones ... not to mention those horrible misshapen skulls. They seemed strewn about everywhere.

But around the neck of the skulls were necklaces of gold, encrusted with jewels. Jaxo's companions wasted no time, but got down to collecting the glittery refuse with reckless haste. Draxl set about untying an ornate silver chain, blackened with age but covered in gemstones, from one of the creatures overly short necks. The odd part was, the chamber was littered with paper, as if someone had spent hours tearing the pages from a book. To Jaxo it seemed out of place. Why had the paper survived in this eon's forgotten tomb unchanged, escaping the rot which had so effectively devoured the other occupants of the room?

As the others gleefully collected loot into their bags, Jaxo watched as one of the pages floated slowly across the floor as if it was riding on a cushion of air. Yet the room was still, like a ship becalmed on the ocean. Several of the pages jumped toward the ceiling, and stayed in the air, without falling back down to earth. They were joined by another and still more followed. The paper began to swirl like they were caught in a storm, their motion increasing with ever more speed. In the gloom, it began to form a shape. The papers now looked like a skirted robe, tall and thin, with two long arms. At the end of each appendage, the papers formed lengthy talons in place of fingers. At the head, the papers formed a sort of hood. Within, there was no head, but a swirling cloud of red gas forming into a single eye ... not unlike the eye of Jupiter. Behind its back Jaxo could make out a set of boney extensions, which took on the aspect of skeletal wings. Some of the papers clung to this wing-like anatomy, like leaves hanging from a tree.

Jaxo's comrades and the tall apparition stared, unmoving, at each other for a brief moment. All at once it charged. The tomb robbers were instantly embattled. The chamber was alive with thunderous roars and a single, high pitched scream from the wraith. It flew about the air with unnatural speed, striking strong blows against the robber's turtle shelled shields. Using one talon-like hand, it grabbed Krisk's tail

and dragged him off his feet. In a moment, the spectral creature sliced him into bits, severed limbs flung about the room.

Soon the room was spattered with the green blood of Jaxo's companion. They could not hope to hold their ground, or even fall back in any orderly way. The group broke and ran for the stairs in a rout. The extremely narrow steps had been difficult to descend, but they were almost impossible to climb with their webbed feet in any kind of rush. Even Jaxo stumbled as they ascended, desperately trying to keep the unearthly wraith at bay.

"Idiots," Draxl mumbled, "Why couldn't they at least build a decent staircase?"

Jaxo's great green lizard neck spun around and he saw the creature, still in pursuit. The bones of his head crest extended to make him appear more fearsome. It was instinctual, of course, so Jaxo couldn't prevent it. He opened his great alligator shaped head and displayed his teeth with an ancient growl, but the wraith seemed unaffected. He fought the nightmare as he backed his way up the stairs, thrusting his stone tipped spear uselessly into the column of papers.

Once he was sure his companions had escaped, he bolted for the entrance. In the empty room, beyond the metal door, he quickly found the grappling-hook rope his comrades had used to make their escape and started his climb. As he pulled himself up, hand over hand, he was sure the creature would attack him in his helpless state, but it seemed to have abandoned the chase at the great door.

Reaching the outside, Jaxo found his fellow lizardmen, basking in the sun. The storm had passed.

Grakz gave Jaxo an unpleasant stare, showing off his teeth, "You see why I don't like tomb robbing ... and those human tombs ... they're the worst."