

GARGOYLE

I slip and fall on yet another one of these accursed puddles of slimy water. A frantic look around reveals that I am still in no immediate danger and I leap up to continue my flight. The long winding roads I travelled taught me endurance and no time is better to put it to use than now.

As I run, glancing back frequently, led by hazy memories of the way down and the unnerving glow emitted by some of the mushrooms, I try to recall what happened. We were resting, gathering our thoughts around a dim campfire when the attack came. Our lookout was the first to fall, her neck and chest pierced by thick, black-feathered arrows. Where do they even get feathers down here, for All-Mother's sake? Then, just as the warriors in our company were raising their weapons preparing to defend themselves, they were overpowered by armored figures jumping out of their hiding places. Quick, efficient slashes of the assailants' glaives exposed that our warriors were not very capable as they fell one after another. It only took a second for me to realize that staying and fighting was not an option. So, I did what I do best, and I got out there as fast as I could. The wise woman who told us the stories of the riches awaiting us had the similar idea, but she wasn't as fast, and I saw an arrow catch her leg.

The environment down here was unfamiliar, but I knew how to make myself at home in strange places. Knowing an edible type of berry here and spotting a moss that purifies water, collecting some drops to stave off the thirst. Alert and quick on my feet I managed to avoid at least two goblinoid patrols – a couple of small goblins bickering over a dead rat, dragging their clubs behind them, then, sometime later, a lumbering giant who looked like the fattest tallest goblin I ever saw, strong enough to crush a tree trunk with his monstrous hands. Countless other times I thought I saw movement only to be fooled by a trick of the dim light. Hiding behind rocks I managed to remain unseen, even finding enough safety in a hidden crevasse to sleep for a short bit. The way back would not be as easy to locate but I remained ever hopeful that I could learn enough about this place to stay alive and find my way.

A surprise waited for me the next time I carefully peeked over a rocky outcropping, surveying the gaping cave, ahead – the vast open space almost seemed like an underground plain, punctuated by stalagmites and boulder piles as well as mysterious ruins with crumbling statues. Far off I saw the wise woman from our group, resting with her back against a decrepit wall of a ruined building. She seemed exhausted and the blood-soaked bandages over her leg led me to believe she was suffering from that arrow wound, but she was alive nevertheless! A welcome ray of hope in this dark place! I looked around to make sure making my way to her would be safe and raised myself from my hiding spot. Not making my presence known yet I dashed between boulder piles, getting closer, until I was forced to freeze, seeing movement.

As the wise woman sat, her back against the wall, resting, the statue on top of a crumbling pillar nearby seemed to shift. A winged monster depicted by the statue was terrifying, surely to demonstrate the might of whoever built these ruins long ago. But was it only fear that was keeping their enemies at bay? My eyes widened as a long, twisted tail lowered from the pillar behind the monster, a wicked barb on its end, poised to strike. The wings unfurled in utter silence of the vast cave, revealing a powerfully built body and the monster raised its ugly horned head, its eyes filled with unnatural pale blue light. Its malicious unblinking gaze was focused on the unsuspecting victim below.

Moments stretched out as I considered my options. Warning my companion would give her a slim chance of survival but would give me away. Me and my makeshift club against the stone-hard skin of this monstrosity, its jagged claws, and its spiked tail. I did not like my chances. I covered my mouth with my hand. I could not do it.

I turned and I slipped away, zigzagging silently from stalagmite to stalagmite, remaining hidden from view, diving into one of the side tunnels to put some distance between myself and the monster. A scream filled with terror and pain coming from the cavern made me stop in my tracks. It did not last long. Shaking my head I continued my journey, fighting the guilt. These caves make monsters of us all.