

Shapes in the Dark

By Jimmy F.

"Let's rest up here for a while, this damn wind is unbearable." Said Olinthia Yrivel as she entered the cave. She was the self appointed leader of this pitiful gathering of wastrels and so called "adventurers" on this horrible expedition. The rest of the crew wholeheartedly agreed with her proposition and promptly collapsed onto the cold, hard cave floor. The wind that had constantly assailed them for days continuing to rage outside. Grothmir Blackstone, a stocky duardin despite his relatively old age, attempted to start a fire with a small tinderbox. "I thought your kind were supposed to be good with fire." Said Lljad jaegersson, a human mercenary with a past as scarred as his face who'd proven to be quite the scout, relative to his price of course. Next to Lljad sat Sejana Ulithaer, a mountain of a woman who would easily be mistaken for an orruk were it not for her dark skin, and Vhknathi, a khainite aelf who was mostly responsible for the scars on Lljad's face after one too many comments on her figure. "Quiet, umgi, before I use your man skin as kindling." Barked Grothmir. Lljad threw his hands up and smirked "oh no! Whatever would I do without my beautiful man skin?" He said jokingly and the two of them laughed.

While the crew fraternized around the fire, Olinthia once again began the fiddle with the lock on the chest they'd found. Just days ago they couldn't believe their luck. Not only had the stories of dread pirate lord captain Ulfred Buford's ship the mercy's bounty been true, but it had been almost entirely untouched. She lay listing slightly on her side, half buried in a massive snow drift. After painstakingly climbing aboard they made their way to the storage compartment. Piles of bones littered the place, "probably the crew." Olinthia said softly. "Must have drowned trying to get their share. Damn fools." "Greed never killed a good man." Replied Sejana. The spoils of the ship were vast and the crew took all they could carry. What caught Olinthia's attention the most however, was an unremarkable chest sitting alone in the corner. The chest had engravings of skulls adorning all over and contained a rather unique lock. It was locked down tight. Tighter than any chest she'd seen in her life. No matter how much she picked away at it the lock wouldn't give. Olinthia had becoming slightly obsessed with opening it, even though she had no idea what could be in it. It was very heavy so it definitely contained something, but shaking it produced no sound at all.

"Quit picking at that stupid box, there's nothing in it and I'm tired of having to carry it around for you." Yelled Grothmir. Olinthia looked back at him with venom in her eyes "shut your mouth you little man or I'll send you out back into the cold!" She snapped. "Who do you think you are to call me little, you knife eared harlot!" Screamed an offended Grothmir. The two began a contest to see who could hurl the most profanities at each other while Sejana held Grothmir back and Lljad watched in awe at the sight. While the verbal battle raged on, Vhknathi wandered to the cave entrance to get away from it. While staring into the endless winter night she noticed a pale blue figure standing in the distance.

Lljad, in an attempt to also distance himself from the fight, came up behind her and asked what she was looking at. Without looking away she said "I don't know exactly, it looks like a man, but who would be out in this? Much less just to stare at some fools arguing." "Well, we were out there." He responded. She nodded "I suppose." "I'd forget about it and get some sleep, probably just some crazy old man who likes to stare." Said Lljad. She pointed to the brawl in the cave "sleep? with this lot? I'd rather take my chance with the snow." Lljad turned back to face the rest of his crewmembers "Are you both done yet? I would like to sleep sometime this year." Olinthia looked past him toward the cave entrance "where's Vhknathi?"

Lljad turned to find the aelf had completely disappeared. "Damn, I didn't think she was serious." He thought to himself. Grothmir smirked "I guess that means no more facial reconstructions for you, umgi." "Quiet" Olinthia snapped "I'd rather not have crewmembers start disappearing." Lljad peeked out of the cave, the weather had worsened to a full on blizzard that severely limited visibility. "I can't see anything" as he continued to look into the distance he noticed the pale figure again, it was much closer this time, almost to the point that he could make out what it was. He shouted out to it "vhak, is that you?" He stepped out of the cave briefly to try and get a better look. The figure began to approach closer and closer until finally it was face to face with Lljad. He looked up to see an ethereal blue figure before him, wearing a cloak of darkest black and an emotionless skull looking down at him. It's pitch black voids that once were eyes looking into his very soul. Lljad was frozen by fear. No amount of stories about the dreaded servants of some old necromancer god could ever have prepared him for one staring right through him like this. It remained there, unmoving and unaffected by the blizzard.

"Why did that fool run after her like that?" Asked Sejana to no one in particular. "Perhaps the umgi has fallen for the murder aelf." Replied Grothmir "I doubt that, we all saw what happened last time he tried anything." Said Sejana. The three of them approached the cave entrance in an attempt to locate their lost comrades. They each began screaming their names into the harsh night to no avail, none of them wanting to risk leaving the cave only to become lost themselves. "We can't just stand here and do nothing!" Cried Sejana. "We have to help them find their way back!" "In this weather? Face it, they're gone, and if we go ten feet from this cave we'll join them." Said Grothmir. "The duardin's right, Sejana." Said Olinthia. Sejana knew they were right but the look on her face made it clear she wished they weren't. Sejana pleaded with the others "But, there has to be something we can do. I mean, what if we-" her cries were interrupted by an ear piercing scream. One that neither Lljad nor Vhknathi could have produced. The three held their hands to their ears in futile attempt to block out the sound.

"By Grimmir's balls what is this infernal noise?!" Cried Grothmir. As the horrible scream finally subsided, the three noticed a large gathering of blue lights in the distance. "That has to be them! Come on, let's go help them!" Said Sejana "No wait, that can't be them!" Olinthia screamed to Sejana as she charged forth to help her friends. "She's gone now, aelf, what should we d-" Grothmir was cut off by a swarm of ethereal beings emerging from the pale. They floated along the ground at a rapid pace, cackling in a dreadful hissing voice. Their ethereal forms making it nigh impossible to see them as they charged out of the night. They focused on Grothmir first as cuts and gashes seemingly appeared on him. He tried to swing his axe in retaliation and though it didn't seem like it was damaging them it did hold the horrid forms at bay. Unfortunately for Grothmir the forms were innumerable and quickly overwhelmed him. Cutting off both of his arms and then dragging him off screaming into the cold night. Olinthia, horrified and confused, retreated into the cave, the fire had gone out leaving only the light of the forms to see. She huddled the chest and began to sob. Regretting every choice she made up to this point as the forms circled her and laughed. Why were they tormenting her like this? She hoped that the others had been at least taken quickly. Between her sobs she managed to squeak out "P-please, let me be, I promise to leave your cave just please let me go!" The forms began to laugh even harder in their horrible raspy voices. "Please just kill me then! Stop laughing and just do it you cowards!"

Suddenly she noticed a glow in front of her and the laughter had stopped. She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked up to see a large blue figure staring down at her with pitch black voids for eyes. She looked in absolute terror at the sight of him as he produced the same deafening scream she heard earlier. It was much louder this time, so loud her ears began to bleed and all she could hear was ringing. She managed to look away from the figure and saw the chest, still unopened. It was then she realized who this figure before her was. "Captain Buford! You're here for your treasure aren't you?!" She screamed as the figure continued to stare silently at her. "well you can have it! I don't want it just

please let me live! I don't want to die! Please let me-" she was interrupted by a loud click as the lock on the chest finally unlocked and the chest opened slightly. Olinthia found new resolve within herself, if she was going to die she was at least going to learn what it was all for. She slowly opened the lid of the chest only to be grabbed by a massive slender hand with long claws as an emaciated corpse rose in the box. It's mouth horribly elongated into a maw of razor teeth which promptly bit into her arm and tore it off. As she recoiled, screaming in pain, the creature's other hand grabbed her skull, it's thumb driven into her eye. With a terrible inward moaning sound the creature dragged Olinthia, thrashing and screaming into the chest with it as the lid shut and the lock reset.