

Putting to Rest (?)

In which we escape Hellgate Keep without leaving it

A shock of coldness washes over me. Hitting the sewer waters once again, now pursued by an angry lich, breathing – well no, *not breathing* – down our necks, I would stop to question my judgment being involved in all of this at all. I would, but then again, it is not as if we really had a choice. Not to be whisked back here through time, at the day and hour that Hellgate Keep was given its name. And besides, at the moment, stopping does seem like a really bad idea.

Efira, seemingly without effort, still hoists up the chair – no, not any ordinary chair, it's an artefact, to be sure - with the girl sitting on it. Who is she? How could she hold such power, to keep the demons at bay? There is no time to ask her any questions; not here, not now. Besides, she still seems nearly oblivious to the world around her.

We rush through the tunnel, trying to head back to the captains that could organize the evacuation. This corrupted bastion has now been overrun by demons. A place of learning, gone forever? But it was doomed anyway; it could not have stood forever against these hordes. Perhaps this sudden implosion will serve as a distraction. Perhaps some of the local populace will be able to escape the chaos and destruction to which this city has fallen prey. But just as I think this, I notice Nethander and Uziel head off into the *other* tunnel, the one that heads towards the castle. Kendalan, Efira and I call out to them, but to no avail. Before we can even make up our minds on whether we should split the party, a blast of utter cold hits us in the back. The lich has caught up.

Through the magic of the artefact, the girl seems unhurt. Reed conjures up a floating disc to transport her, and we speed on, feet splashing, trying to stay ahead of the maddened undead wizard, but heading into newly dangerous territory. A sigil marks the walls: we leave the domain of one Lord of Hell, only to enter another's. My time studying the tricky tongue of the infernals was not spent in vain. Wards protect the boundary, but I signal that we should be able to break through them with little trouble. Alarm bells, of course, start ringing, but that is to be expected, and frankly, it is the least of our worries. The wards may even keep some of the liches' minions from following us.

It can be hard to get your bearings underground, but I think I remember from the guide to the sewers that we are now, indeed, heading into the direction of the *other* building still protected from the demons – the tower. If we breach it, too, it will be the last 'safe' place in this city to fall. Whose side are we on, really? But there is no questioning our direction, no real choice to be made. For some reason, Uziel and Nethander again elect to take another way, but they soon find out it's a dead end – quite literally, as the sewers pour down and out of the mountainside, into the precipice. I shout as much to them, take point, and, remembering the map, lead the way into the other direction.

Up! I scramble up a long ladder – fifteen feet or so – pop my head out, smile politely, and blast the guard full in the face with a shot of electricity before he manages to bring down his axe on my neck. Saved – for now, I let myself drop down the ladder to give the bruisers a shot at clearing a path. Yet unluckily, I bash up against Efira on my way down. What follows is – well, a mess. Everybody's swinging axes and swords and shooting at each other, or sometimes, themselves. I see Reed weave a spell that forces back the arrows aimed at us. I see Uziel, moving like a shadow, thrust a dagger into the bowels of a mage. I see – no, I don't see them yet, but I can sense them - the lich and his minions coming, threatening our rear. Efira scales the ladder easily, reaches up, extends her claws and simply brings one of the warrior's crashing down the chute. He nearly impales himself on Cuura's spiked armor. Yet, even as Kendalan calls to assist him in bringing down our new friend, I ignore the warriors around me, and focus on the lich. If he were to catch up with us.... I manifest two energy walls,

moving down the corridors, not blocking but following their length. Because of their spacing, those pursuing us must, necessarily, walk through one of the two. It should be a nice discoura-

All goes black – then grey – then white – then grey again, and as I nearly black out completely, I see reality twisting around me. The lich must have traversed the gauntlet, must have come near enough to... to...

My companions, some of them, seem to sprout wings, claws... just for a moment, and then the illusion disappears. Others clutch at their hearts, as I clutch at my head. I stop, pause, and face myself. No, not myself: a shadow: my worst impulses, my bad ideas, some evil that lies, alongside the good, in the hearts of all thinking creatures big and small. But I am guarded against this, certainly since what nearly happened in Shou Lung. I've already encountered this – this essence of hatred and control, trying to take over, trying to turn me against myself, and I will not have it!

I catch sight of the lich rounding the corner, just as the words he speaks shatter reality, and the stonework starts to give way. And then... *time* happens. I am assaulted by a compressed wave of my own conscientiousness, thoughts and feelings, surging, growing, shaping, evolving, rescinding, all mingled, all...

My companions around me all fall down stunned, yet I call upon my third eye. I will my eyes to be open, and see...

See...

SEE...

the

Earth and walls, shifting; collapsing... bodies, decomposing.

Yellowing clothes, disintegrating; My friends, still asleep.

Everyone around, motionless.

Stone, crumbling... and time... Time... moving past. And I dream

of Time.

When I come to, tired, and worn out, it seems like I'm the last to wake from a collective bad dream. But down below, in the ruined stonework, subtly shifted from what we can recall from before, some items belie what happened. That, for whatever reason, we really did go back. We dig and burn our way through earth to scour through and divide the guards' possessions. The chair, however, is gone, and so, fortunately for her, is the girl. Some of the ropes that held her are still intact though, frayed and nearly dissolved by five hundred years of decomposition, and I concentrate on them, hold them, feel for echoes of their previous owners. The last person who handled them – some sort of chaotic good human, although a strange kind of chaotic, and a strange kind of good, too – saved girl and chair both. This I am sure of. Did we do what we were supposed to do? Was freeing the girl and the artefact from the lich's grasp what we were sent back for? Perhaps the lich would have been able to answer that question. For once, though, I don't mind not getting an answer.