

## THIN AIR

26 Rova, 4707 AR

There's a comfort to the wilderness I don't find in cities. Everywhere I travel I see life of all different types, each creature thriving in its own particular environment. From bogs to forests, mountain slopes to grassy plains, every living thing in Golarion has a place to call home.

Except, perhaps, in the mountains of Belkzen. Never have I seen such an inhospitable place. Peaks seem to spring fully formed from the rocky plains. Sheer cliffs drop so suddenly that I keep an incantation to slow my fall always at the forefront of my mind. The lower mountains slope sharply into points as menacing as a row of spearheads. Not a shrub or bush grows in this rocky soil, and crags of razored stone jut from the rock walls, sharp enough to tear a hole right through my cloak and shirt and into my skin. I think the only way this place could be less hospitable is if it were actually on fire.

My mood darkened steadily this morning as Joskan and I climbed further into the hills. The sun beat down in the empty sky, and I saw no birds, no snakes—not even any insects. I almost would have welcomed a dragonwasp. The lack of any activity made me anxious, and the vastness of the empty sky made it seem as if the sun weren't moving at all.

By the time dusk finally settled we had covered a good deal of ground. I took out my wayfinder, and though we'd had to wind and double back a bit due to the restrictive mountain trails, I guessed we had made progress.

There was no wood with which to build a fire, but the night air wasn't too cold. Joskan volunteered the first watch and I found the least rocky patch of ground on which to sleep. As I drifted off, a crag of rock digging into one shoulder and gritty mountain-dust clinging to my face, I thought a person would have to be utterly, raving insane to try and make a home in this wasteland.

I woke in darkness with terror gripping my heart. I scrambled for a weapon without knowing what was going on. I knew only that I couldn't see, that I was cold and my shoulder ached, and that I was as frightened as I'd ever been.

"Shh!" Joskan's voice brought me back to reality. I crouched beside my guide, shivering and stiff, holding my blade in numb fingers. I scanned one direction, then another, but saw nothing but vague shapes in the blackness.

"What is—" I began.

Then a howling erupted that chilled the marrow in my bones. Not a scream, not a wail, but a vicious, wordless



howl that rose from a chorus of throats to rattle over the slopes and peaks. The cacophony carried with it promises of death—and not a quick and heroic one, either. I crouched motionless, paralyzed with fear, until the howl died away. More mundane shrieks and the bangs of fists on drums followed, but the sounds did not seem to be drawing closer.

“Joskan!” My voice shook, and I wondered if I could blame it on the cold. “What in this blasted land was that?”

I could barely make out Joskan’s features in the dark, but I thought I saw a look of revulsion and fear cross his face. “Mountain orcs,” he spat.

A high-pitched screaming overlaid the savage roars. A mountain cat, perhaps, or an unfortunate traveler. I started to rise to my feet, but Joskan put a hand on my shoulder and shook his head.

“They travel in packs,” he said, “and rip apart anything they find. When they can’t find anything else, they rip apart each other. We wouldn’t last a minute against a pack of mountain-dwellers. We’ll circle around them after dawn. Can’t risk moving in the dark.”

“That’s interesting,” I managed to whisper.

“What?”

“Apparently, you do have to be totally insane to live here.”

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Joskan told me more about the highland orcs the next day, as we ventured further into the mountains rather than risk exposure in the orc-infested foothills around the pass between Varisia and Belkzen. “Raving,” “bloodthirsty,” and “savage” were his favorite adjectives.

As always, Joskan was reluctant to provide details when asked direct questions. I inferred from his stories, though, that Joskan’s people were lowlanders and somewhat more civilized—or at least organized—than their bestial cousins. “Some of them don’t even enslave their prisoners before they eat them,” he noted with a sniff. “Some say they made their homes so high on the slopes that they went mad from the thin air and from staring too long at the empty sky.” I had noticed that the higher up we climbed, the harder I had to work to keep up with Joskan. I couldn’t seem to get enough air, thin and lifeless as it was this high in the tors.

Joskan also pointed out the stirrings of life in this seemingly unlivable wasteland. What I had taken for barren earth contained burrows for the small mammals that lived in the area. Scrubby brush the color of slate clung to the ground, and once I spotted mangy mountain goats leaping from rock to rock.

I watched for the highland orcs from the night before, but saw no signs of pursuit. When I said as much to Joskan, he grunted in his particular way that I’ve yet to interpret. “What do we seek up here?” he asked. “I’ve no wish to stay any longer than we must.”

The hard weight of the wayfinder swung inside my pocket. “Good question. I have a feeling I’ll know it when I see it.” I squinted up at the horizon, passed a hand in front of my eyes, and stopped. “Maybe that’s it there.”

Joskan looked up and also stopped.

Wrapped around the mountain peak ahead of us was a dragon.

It was so large that, had it hunched up between peaks, I might have mistaken it for another mountain. Its immense size allowed me to see the beast in exquisite detail, even at this distance. Scales as large as a man covered its sinuous body. Claws as long and thick as trees dug into solid rock, shearing aside the ancient stone as if it were flesh. Its mouth, large enough to fit a house in, was open, and its tongue unfurled as if tasting prey on the wind. White smoke drifted from its mouth as the monster breathed.

Its hide was stone-colored as if in a pitiful mockery of camouflage. Nothing could disguise this beast. Beside me, Joskan clutched fruitlessly at the haft of his axe.

We stood there for several breaths. Finally I relaxed, realizing that the great beast couldn’t possibly care about prey as small as we, and had not seemed to notice us. In fact, it didn’t seem to notice anything, not even the lone bird that circled near its head. Its gaze remained fixed and unblinking, its tongue still unfurled, and although the white smoke issued from its mouth, its sides did not move with each breath.

“It’s a statue,” I murmured.

Joskan grunted again, but it lacked the usual implied disdain. He pointedly released his axe and folded his arms, as if feeling more confident against a few thousand tons of rock.

I shook loose of my awe and took a few steps forward. “Come on!” I shouted as I resumed the climb. “I want to get a better view.”

With a final grunt and a shake of his head, Joskan stalked after me.

“That’s the spirit,” I said. “Just keep your eyes out for trouble and try not to think about golems.”

“I’m not thinking about golems,” Joskan said. He spat into a pile of scrub and joined me in the climb. “I’m thinking about what could have built something like that, and if the sculptor’s still here.”

He does have a knack for snuffing my enthusiasm.

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We spent most of the day climbing and camped another night without incident. Joskan found trails I admit I would have missed—steep, narrow, and rock-strewn, to be sure, but they eased our passage nonetheless.

I focused on the scenery as we passed, and the more I looked, the more I discovered. Belkzen came to life around me. Rust-red lichen blended into the rock face so perfectly, I only discovered it when I put my hand out to steady myself



## FLORA AND FAUNA OF BELKZEN

Numerous plants and animals thrive in Belkzen. Although not unique to the area, they are indigenous.

**Aurochs:** The primary source of meat, wool, and leather in Belkzen, the great herds of Belkzen aurochs are of a breed distinct from their counterparts on the Storval Plateau, having thick, yak-like fur designed to keep them warm as they migrate back and forth from the Realm of the Mammoth Lords to Belkzen's southern tip, often following the Flood Road.

**Belkzen Brambles:** These twisted, thorny branches appear dead at first glance, but a closer inspection (DC 10 Spot or Search check) or prior knowledge (DC 12 Knowledge [nature] check) reveals supple wood and living sap. The sharp, tricorn thorns can be used as caltrops if harvested carefully (DC 15 Survival check), although the thorns are destroyed after use.

**Belkzen Puma:** These tawny mountain lions move with exceptional stealth and hunt the other native creatures of Belkzen. Smaller than regular mountain lions (use leopard statistics), Belkzen pumas rarely attack adventurers unless a pack comes upon a lone traveler.

**Firemoss:** This rust-red moss catches fire slowly and burns steadily. A fist-sized clump of firemoss burns for an hour, making it a favored substance for crafting torches.

**Mountain Goat:** The brown mountain goats of Belkzen possess razor-sharp horns and phenomenal dexterity, and are prized for their milk and flesh. Use statistics for a donkey but add a gore attack (+1 melee, 1d4 damage) and increase Dexterity to 16.

**Pickpocket Shrew:** These rodent-like creatures measure 6–10 inches in length and make their homes in burrows. Their name comes from the shrews' uncanny silence and penchant for gnawing their way into stores of food while travelers sleep (use statistics for a cat).

and felt its stiff-soft bristles. Dun-colored shrews huddled among the rocks and scurried off once we'd passed. My cloak caught on a thorny, dead bramble, and when I paused to untangle myself I saw the black wood oozing oily sap; what I'd taken for thorns were seed-pods, tightly screwed to pointy tips.

Every now and then I looked up and caught sight of the massive, fantastic dragon coiled on his mountainous throne. Each time, the sight sent a shiver running through me and refreshed my awe.

"I take back what I said before," I commented. We halted for a moment so I could catch my breath, and to allow a mountain cat the size of a sheep to prowl by. She snarled at us but had no desire to tangle with such large prey. "This place is beautiful, once you get used to it."

By this time, we had left the narrow, treacherous trail for the broader and more comfortable mountain slope. I felt nervous with no stone walls on either side. Although the slope was gradual and a fall would bring

nothing worse than a skinned knee, I couldn't shake the sensation that I was extraordinarily, dangerously high up. I looked up at the dragon again, at the stretch of sky above and around. No clouds marred the azure expanse, nor birds—only miles of blue nothing. For a moment I felt dizzy, and I could well imagine a man going mad with too much time staring up.

Then movement caught my eye. Another bird circled by the dragon. Even though I knew the monster to be a statue, I half expected it to come to life and snap up the intruder in its jaws.

I frowned. The bird was far away and indistinct, but it seemed to be the same type as the one I'd seen before. The enormity of the dragon skewed all proportions, but it seemed the bird was too large. It struck me, too, that I'd seen no other birds of any type, and now that I knew life indeed thrived in this barren place, their omission seemed odd.

I turned to Joskan to comment about the birds. He was stopped, body rigid, and looking over his shoulder with a face as gray as campfire ashes.

"Joskan?"

"We're being followed."

Joskan and I raced up the mountain slope with as much speed as we could muster. Unfortunately for us, our mustering was embarrassing.

"It's hard... to hurry... this high up," I panted. I leaned forward as I climbed, grabbing rocks and shrubs to pull myself higher and ease some of the burden on my legs and lungs.

"I've been away... too long," Joskan huffed. "Takes time to... get used to moving like this again."

Retreat was impossible. The five orcs had waited until we were midway up the slope, exposed and trapped, before they ventured out from the rocks below. I glanced back only once, but that was enough.

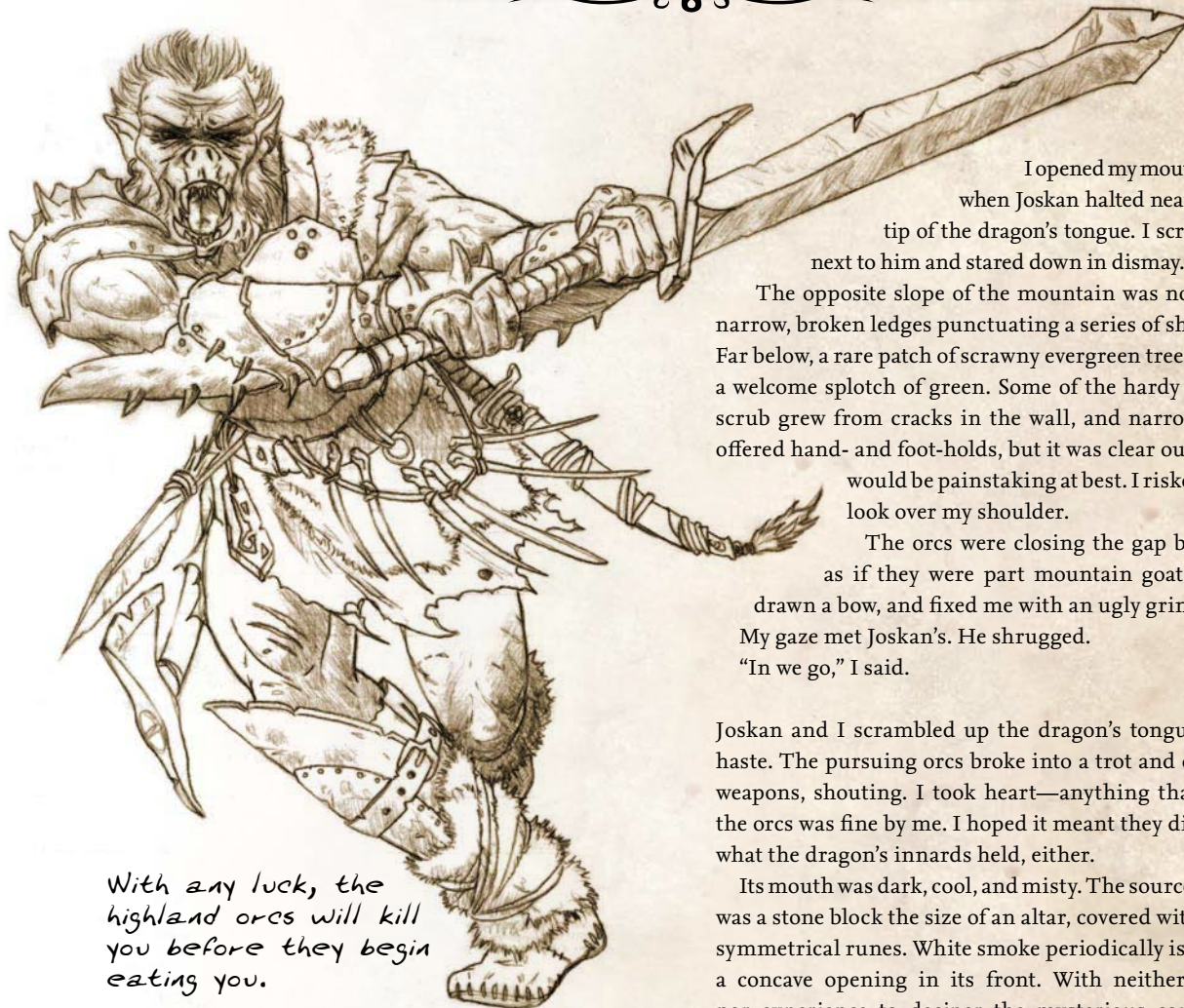
Crude tattoos, brands, and scars covered their bodies in chaotic patterns. They wore tattered outfits that they must have assembled from mismatched bits and pieces of their victims' armor. Each bristled with as many weapons as he could carry. Bone and metal needles pierced their ears, nostrils, and cheeks. Now that they were in the open, they screamed and caterwauled with the same terrifying yells that woke me my first night here.

"Bad luck... we only notice them now," I gasped as we struggled onward. "Earlier we might have... doubled back... lost them..."

"No chance," Joskan said. "They chose now... to be seen. To trap us."

"There has to be a way forward." I breathed rapidly, panting, trying to draw enough of the thin air into my lungs to continue. "Maybe on the other side... of the dragon."





*With any luck, the highland orcs will kill you before they begin eating you.*

Above us, the massive figure of the stone dragon cast its shadow over the mountain slope. We climbed past one of its forelimbs. Its stone claws sank three or four feet down into the solid rock. Ahead, the stone ribbon of its tongue touched down on the rocky slope. A haze of white mist spurted from the dragon's mouth, but when the haze cleared, I noticed something.

"Joskan! Look at the dragon's mouth. It's not solid, it's hollow. I think we can get inside."

Joskan grunted as he heaved himself up. The angle of the slope grew steeper. "So?"

"Maybe we can hide there, lose the orcs in the fog and then double back."

Even as I spoke, though, I realized the flimsiness of the plan. I scanned the dragon and saw patches of stone scales ripped away in spots, and the blackness beyond suggested these holes were windows into some structure within the statue. But what laired there or how large (or safe) it was, there was no way to tell. Better to continue down the slope on the other side and lose ourselves in the twisting mountain trails.

I opened my mouth to say so, when Joskan halted near the stone tip of the dragon's tongue. I scrambled up next to him and stared down in dismay.

The opposite slope of the mountain was nothing but narrow, broken ledges punctuating a series of sheer drops. Far below, a rare patch of scrawny evergreen trees provided a welcome splotch of green. Some of the hardy mountain scrub grew from cracks in the wall, and narrow crevices offered hand- and foot-holds, but it was clear our progress would be painstaking at best. I risked another look over my shoulder.

The orcs were closing the gap between us as if they were part mountain goat. One had drawn a bow, and fixed me with an ugly grin.

My gaze met Joskan's. He shrugged.

"In we go," I said.

Joskan and I scrambled up the dragon's tongue with all haste. The pursuing orcs broke into a trot and drew their weapons, shouting. I took heart—anything that angered the orcs was fine by me. I hoped it meant they didn't know what the dragon's innards held, either.

Its mouth was dark, cool, and misty. The source of the fog was a stone block the size of an altar, covered with strange, symmetrical runes. White smoke periodically issued from a concave opening in its front. With neither the time nor experience to decipher the mysterious contraption's purpose, I left well enough alone.

Joskan and I paused but a moment in the dragon's mouth to catch our breath. I was prepared to make a light, but the occasional missing scale let in dusty yellow daylight, just enough to see by.

Rows of benches lined the walls of the cavernous mouth, and the dragon's teeth, which curved up and down like scimitars, formed a prickly barricade for any who might try to enter. "I think this used to be a guard post," I whispered.

Joskan nodded and ran a hand over one of the benches. Although wooden, it seemed as solid as if it were fashioned yesterday. Dust puffed in a cloud when he lifted his hand. "We can move these to form a barricade. Make a stand here?"

My fluttering heartbeat steadied, finally, and I felt as if my lungs were working properly again. I peered into the back of the cavern. A tunnel stretched on. "Let's go deeper. I'd rather not fight if we don't have to. Five raving orcs against two ordinary—albeit exceptionally brave and handsome—travelers sounds like poor odds."

We hurried through the mouth, and I longed to be able to stop and investigate the carvings on the wall—scenes of battles, mostly, in which I recognized the dragon statue



in several backgrounds—and a strange circular motif in the architecture that kept repeating. It might have been a calendar or record of events. With the orcs coming up fast behind us, though, I had only time for a longing look as we raced past.

From the mouth, a tunnel threaded through the dragon's curving neck. The floor was solid, but I noticed patches of scales chipped away above and thin cracks in the walls. How old this statue was I couldn't guess, but whatever enchantment held it together seemed to now be weakening.

A two-foot-tall opening ran the entire length of the tunnel. I had a breathtaking, panoramic view of the surrounding area as we raced past, and again I noticed elaborate carvings above and below it. These ones made me stop and risk a few precious seconds to look closer.

"Joskan, look at this!" I whispered. "The carvings—they match the scenery outside. See? This slope continues here," I traced where the landscape became the drawing. "And look, this waterfall must flow into a lake, you can see it on this—this map, I guess. Wait, the drawing shows a mountain here, but there's none outside. How old do you think this place is?"

"How old do you think we'll get to be if those orcs catch us?" Joskan snarled.

I tore myself away from the bizarre and beautiful panorama and followed Joskan, but couldn't resist sticking my hand through the window.

I heard the rustle of armor, the growls of the orcs, and the clash of their weapons beating together, distant but fast approaching, as we neared the end of the tunnel. A larger room opened up before us, probably the first of many chambers hidden in the dragon's abdomen. Years of experience led me to slow down and tug on Joskan's sleeve.

"Easy, now. No sense jumping out of the kettle and into the fire."

Joskan grunted but stopped. I stepped ahead of him and moved quickly and quietly to the next room.

The sight overwhelmed me. The large chamber held eggs—eggs of all shapes and sizes, from robin to roc, but each one fashioned from some precious material. Gold glittered in the dim sun. Sapphire flashed as deeply blue as the sky outside. Marble gleamed white as bone,

and obsidian glistened like the oily sap of the Belkzen brambles. For a moment, I forgot about the orcs chasing after us and stared in wonder at the collection.

Some eggs stood on pedestals, others in niches in the walls. Light that came from nowhere illuminated each, and I caught a glimpse of etchings on several of the larger ones. I couldn't look too closely, though, because something stirred deeper in the room.

Along one wall, a large patch of stone scales had broken away and left a jagged hole like a giant picture-window. On the floor next to the hole, two bizarre creatures slept.

I saw the nearest one most clearly. Its hind legs, those of an oversized mountain goat, kicked restlessly as it slept. Long, golden hair covered its hindquarters but gave way to sandy scales and a ridged spine further up its back. Its front legs ended in huge paws, from which I saw the tips of retracted black claws, each one probably as long as my dagger.

Two leathery wings wrapped around the creature's midsection, and I realized with a sinking feeling why there were no birds in this area. It would take a lot to feed a creature with three heads, I'd imagine.

The head nearest to me was that of a mountain goat, one with spear-like horns and unnaturally sharp teeth. The middle head was a mountain cat like the one Joskan and I had passed earlier, but three times as large. The last head looked like a miniature replica of the dragon's head through which we'd entered this strange place. Chimeras. I'd read of such creatures before, and from what I knew, they were as ill-tempered as they were ugly.

I backed up as quietly as I could and found Joskan waiting, muscles tense and axe in hand. The clatter of our pursuers grew louder, and I wasn't sure if the orcs would catch us before the chimeras awoke and devoured us.

"Well?" Joskan asked.

"Definitely the fire," I replied. "Don't worry. I've got a plan."

The hardest part was waiting until the orcs caught up to us. It took only a minute for the orcs to come around the curve, spot us, and charge, but it seemed much longer. Even though I expected it—anticipated it—the sight of the five orcs in their makeshift armor, spittle flying from their mouths as they gnashed their teeth, cast serious doubts on my scheme.



*What possible function could these strange eggs fulfill?*





*With three heads, you'd think at least one would be friendly.*

I had no time for insecurities, though; the chimeras were waking up. I grabbed Joskan's arm and we bolted into the egg chamber.

My heart sank at the sight of the lovely sculptures as we dashed through the room; how I wished I had time to come back and study them all! The chimeras pulled themselves out of sleep, and the one nearest to me lifted its goat head and blinked while its cat head yawned hugely. Heart in my throat, I leaped over the dragon head and pulled Joskan between the two sleeping beasts. My foot caught on the chimera's horn and I almost fell, turning my stumble into a sharp kick in the monster's flank. The beasts came fully awake and sprang up with roars and bleats.

The growls of the pursuing orcs turned to screams of rage as they realized the trap. Without pausing, Joskan and I pushed past the chimeras and flung ourselves out the jagged hole.

A sheer cliff dropped hundreds of feet. Joskan and I fell through the air; vertigo assaulted me as I struggled to complete the phrase on my lips. Joskan shrieked something, but the wind caught his words and tore them away. I reached out, my hand scraping the cliff face as we fell, and gasped the last syllable.

Instantly our fall was arrested. Instead of plummeting to our deaths, Joskan and I floated down at a steady, peaceful rate, light as feathers.

"How's that for a plan?" I grinned at Joskan, and he grunted back. From above us, the sounds of orcs howling and chimeras roaring drifted down the cliff.

"That should keep them busy for a while." I let us sink magically as long as I dared, then reached out and grabbed at the cliff until I found solid hand and footholds. Joskan stretched out a hand and grasped the edge of my cloak, and I reeled him in like a fish on a line. Together we inched our way down and west until we reached a ledge capable of taking the two of us abreast. In that one leap, we'd circumvented at least a solid day's worth of hard climbing.

I checked the wayfinder—still pointing due east, as always.

"Joskan," I said with a sigh as we picked our way down the slope, "we make a pretty good team."

He gave a brusque nod, which I interpreted as his version of a smile. "Dangerous. And foolish. We should be more careful from now on."

"If there's one thing I've learned," I said, "it's that trouble finds the prepared and unprepared alike. No matter how careful you are, something new is always coming." I inhaled as deeply as I could in the thin mountain air. "You can smell it on the wind." Joskan only grunted.

Side by side, we continued down into the darkening forest.