

THE QUARRY

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Phaedrin set down his cup and looked about him. The cave had little decor and only stone furniture. The whole dwelling seemed as sparse and cold and hard as the stone from which it was cut. The only decoration... a portrait of a man and woman, which hung above the fire place.

"More Vellian mineral tea?" a voice asked. Phaedrin looked back to his dinner companion who held a small stone pot poised, offering to pour.

"No. No more, thank you. But it was all delicious," Phaedrin quickly added, seeing a slight frown on Jaskar's wrinkled face. "The black mushrooms, the roasted sandcrawler, the thunder mead. It was all delightful. But I would really like to get down to business."

"Then about our business we shall be. Tell me, Phaedrin... why do you seek out an aging stone wizard who is out of favor with the courts. I was banished from Arkalia when this war began," said Jaskar, eyeing the medallion that hung around the young mage's neck. "My Drakkelian wife was executed, my lab taken, my land forfeit. The king would have you put in irons if he knew you consorted with such an outlaw wizard. You might be banished yourself."

Phaedrin shifted uncomfortably under the older mage's penetrating gaze. "My visit is not politically motivated. I come to you for wizardly counseling. Your reputation as an earth elemental is widely known. You were the best magus of the royal court in years past and not a better alchemist walks the land. The answers I seek must rest within this cavern."

A smile slowly spread across Jaskar's face. Phaedrin returned the smile and picked up his quill and book. Carefully setting his ink bottle within easy reach, he prepared to write.

"What questions have you?" asked Jaskar.

"I have been assigned to investigate the disappearance of loaded mining carts and sightings of a creature at the Vargek Mithril Mines." Phaedrin began. Jaskar closed his eyes and slowly nodded. "The baron sent a small group to investigate," continued Phaedrin. "Only the scout and the mage returned... both of them babbling about a demon made of stone which rose from the ground."

"So I have heard."

"Then you know we've made little progress. The mithril production of Vargek is imperative to the war effort. Without the mithril, the Drakkelian Alliance will overrun us. The baron wants us to identify this creature, find it and kill it. At any cost."

"Why come to me? I'm just a lonely old man." Jaskar said, his eyes going to the portrait.

"After much research, I believe I have identified the creature as a xorn."

Jaskar's eyes returned to Phaedrin's and the smile returned.

"You were researching the xorn when you were banished, were you not?" asked Phaedrin.

"I was."

"Then sir, I beseech you. Aid me in finding a way to stop this creature before it forces the mine to close and irrevocably turns the tide of a war!"

Jaskar sat for awhile and seemed to contemplate the agate ring upon his finger. Phaedrin waited anxiously until finally Jaskar drew a breath and began...

"The xorn is unlike any creature you have ever studied before, Phaedrin. It is not a creature of flesh and bone and blood as you and I are. It is a living creature composed of mineral and metal. Everything of the xorn is of the earth. The muscles of a xorn, for instance, are fibrous like a mammal. But a xorn's muscles are denser and have a great deal of iron in the fibers. This is because xorn muscles are magnetic in nature rather than chemically activated.

"What of the creature's hide? The scout reported that she broke her blade upon it."

"The xorn exterior is covered by a thick layer of rock-hard, horny plating. This exterior plating is composed of a greyish, opaque crystalline compound which greatly resembles rock. Although not organic or cellular, this compound is able to heal wounds as flesh does due to its crystalline nature.

Damaged or missing crystals are simply regrown. This xorn shell is harder and stronger than most types of rock, despite its crystalline nature."

"This plating is the creature's skin?"

"Skin, armor and more. The creature has no internal structure. No bones. The plating is a form of exoskeleton."

"The scout and mage report that the creature rose from the very stone upon which they stood as if it were part of the stone. How is this possible?"

"It is this crystalline exoskeleton that allows that xorn to phase through rock. I do not fully comprehend how this is accomplished, but it has something to do with the crystalline lattice of the exoskeleton resonating in phase with the surrounding material. This allows the xorn to physically merge with and pass through stone as easily as a man walks through the air. The resonance of the exoskeleton works only with dense solids such as rock, mineral and metal. A xorn has difficulty phasing through semi-solids such as sand and dirt."

"This must be how the beast so easily evades our search parties and surprises the miners. Is there any way to fight such a creature?"

"Phasing is the xorn's most effective attack... that is, being able to surprise opponents by attacking from underneath them. But there are ways to anticipate a xorn's movement. To protect the eyes, the crystalline armour covers the eyelids as well. An observant warrior might notice that a xorn always closes its eyes just a split second before phasing into rock. And, the rock through which the xorn phases will vibrate slightly. Sometimes, a vibration can be felt just before a xorn emerges from a rockface. Usually, in combat the xorn appears too quickly for this to be of any help. However, if the stone about you begins to vibrate and hum, a xorn is phasing through the rock. Near. Very near."

Phaedrin swallowed his fear. Several times he had felt a slight tremor in the rock beneath his feet while walking in the mines. Had his quarry been so close?

"Can a xorn phase through a surface to avoid impact from a fall?"

"Interestingly, the xorn cannot. A xorn cannot fall and phase into a stone floor. Resonance with surrounding stone takes a moment and even though a xorn can merge with stone faster than a

man can draw his sword, it is not instantaneous. If ever a xorn were to fall from a great height, it would suffer from the fall as surely as would a man."

"But a xorn normally does not phase through rock. It actually burrows through stone as a mole burrows through dirt. That much I do know. Why does the xorn tunnel through rock instead of phasing?"

"It seems that the xorn expends a great deal of energy in order to phase and prolonged phasing is quite taxing for a xorn. A xorn can phase and unphase during combat with little problem but traveling great distances phased is too much for the xorn to accomplish. There is also another reason." Jaskar said, taking a sip of his mineral tea.

"And that is?"

"The xorn cannot unphase inside of a solid. It can only terminate phasing while in a fluid such as air or shallow water where the medium can be displaced easily. The xorn would not be able to stop and eat if it came upon a mineral deposit while traveling phased. So the creature normally burrows."

"But how could any living thing dig its way through the bowels of the earth?"

"Yes! The xorn's most common habit is also its deepest mystery! How does a creature tunnel through solid rock? Even one as strong as the xorn and so well equipped with talons like rock could not possibly burrow through solid stone! But Nature has granted the xorn a most fascinating method. When burrowing, the xorn emits a shock wave every few seconds. This shock wave is directed ahead of the mouth and is strong enough to break even stone. Again, I do not fully understand the method, but it does have something to do with the phasing ability. It seems that the xorn partially phases distorting the space in front of it. The xorn's body is designed around the mouth. The arms and claws tear the weakened and cracked stone apart and shove it into the mouth. The sound of this tunneling shock wave travels far underground preceding a xorn's approach. So if ever you are underground and here a deep, thunderous pounding, a xorn may very well be in the area."

Phaedrin thought back to his discussions with some of the miners. They had mentioned a distant pounding noise, as if the rock beneath their feet had had a heartbeat. "But a xorn couldn't possibly eat all that stone!" said Phaedrin, shaking himself from the memory.

"Ah! There again is a myth. It is true that the xorn is sometimes known by the appellation, Stone Eater, but that is a misnomer. The barrel shaped body of a xorn is actually a conduit. Through muscle contractions, most of the stone is channeled through the body and expelled out the back. Only the most digestible metals and minerals are consumed. The rest is simply displaced as a trail of rubble in the beast's wake."

Phaedrin's quill scribbled furiously across the page.

"How does a xorn navigate when it burrows, especially with its eyes closed."

"The exoskeletal plating of the xorn resonates, yet it is also sensitive to vibration. The xorn navigates by listening to the reflections of its own vibrations. It is similar to the echolocation used by bats. The xorn can accurately locate the surface, caverns, mineral deposits, changes in stone type and other burrowing creatures. Xorn can also detect movement on a stone surface above them, even the soft tread of a footfall."

"Is this also how the xorn hears. By sensing sound waves in the air through the plating?"

"Yes, but more than that! The plating not only allows the xorn to hear, but to speak as well."

"To speak?"

"Most definitely! When a xorn speaks, the vibration of the xorn's plating produces sounds of the air. Very similar to that infernal electric device you brought back from your journey last year. What did you call it? A Magma Fox?"

"A Magnavox. Sub woofer."

"Whatever... Are you beginning to understand the beauty of this creation? Is not the xorn one of Nature's finest triumphs?"

Phaedrin ignored the gleam in Jaskar's eye and the affection Jaskar seemed to have for the beast.

"It seems that the xorn relies heavily upon its stone exoskeleton. How vulnerable is the xorn's shell to damage?"

"Always violence is the answer for your king. Ha! Violence will gain you little against the xorn. A xorn's shell is almost indestructible. It resists sword blows as would a boulder. It is completely invulnerable to cold and seems to be able to endure rapid changes in temperature."

"What of magic? Is the shell impervious to dweomercraft?"

"Not entirely. A phase door spell may slay a xorn. If cast when the xorn is merging with stone, the spell will disrupt the resonance field and cause the xorn to physically fuse with the surrounding stone. A most terrible death. The passwall spell affects the exoskeleton similarly, but only causes the resonance to fluctuate and part of the xorn's shell to shatter. Not lethal, but still quite painful. A move earth spell will move and stun a xorn by overloading its shell with vibrational signals. Stone to flesh and rock to mud spells temporarily alter the structure of the xorn shell from crystalline to cellular which renders the xorn very vulnerable."

"What of fire?"

"Fire does no more to a xorn hide than it would to a stone wall. In fact, a xorn could bathe in an ocean of flame and emerge unscathed. Only the very hottest of fires would have any chance of harming a xorn. Total immersion in lava might damage the xorn shell, but I suspect this would only cause the crystalline exoskeleton to slowly dissolve."

"I am curious as to why it plagues the mithril mine. For food it would seem. What can you tell me of its dietary habits. How does the creature digest metals and minerals?"

"The internal conduit of a xorn through which rubble passes acts as the xorn's stomach. It is electrical rather than acidic as our stomachs are. The electrical field breaks apart metals and minerals at the most minute level. Flesh and vegetation cannot be consumed because of their high water content which unfocuses the electrical field."

"It would seem such a creature has an unlimited food supply."

"The xorn can digest almost any metal or mineral but the "digestion" process is less efficient with metals and minerals that are composed of many different elements bound together. The xorn greatly prefers pure and untainted elements which are alchemically uncombined."

"Such as?"

"Of the metals, the xorn favors pure metals instead of alloys. Copper, silver, gold, mithril and adamantite are among its favorites. A xorn is able to survive on iron if it must and iron is certainly plentiful. The xorn also consumes precious stones, but only as a supplement to its metallic diet. I have not been able to find any pattern for gems. The xorn consumes all manner of precious stones. I suspect, though, that xorn only consume minerals that are crystalline."

"Does a xorn excrete any bodily wastes?"

"Nothing except unconsumed stone. A xorn's body is like a tunneling engine and requires a great deal of fuel to sustain itself. Perhaps a tenth of the matter that enters the mouth is actually consumed. The rest is expelled out the back. The only thing a xorn leaves behind is a tunnel full of rubble that even a blind goblin could follow."

"Perhaps we can retrieve something of value from the body once we have slain it..."

"So you plan on killing it?"

"Those are my orders, Jaskar. Speaking of its death, what happens to a xorn when it dies? Does it stiffen and rot like an animal's carcass?"

"No. Nothing so crude. The xorn body does undergo a gradual metamorphosis. Shortly after death, a xorn body begins to crystallize. Within 24 hours, the entire body is solid mass of mineral appearing to be nothing more than a rough stone statue. Within the stone corpse, trace amounts of precious metals can be found along with the occasional undigested gem. But certainly nothing worth the risk of confronting a live xorn."

Jaskar reached out a hand and gently caressed the cold stone wall. "Xorn view death as a return to the living rock. They view this as neither good nor bad. They view everything with the same cold, hard indifference." Jaskar continued to run his fingers along the smooth, grey surface, lost in his reverie. He seemed to have forgotten Phaedrin for the moment as he concentrated upon something within the rock. Phaedrin caught up in his notes.

"Did you know that the xorn worship no gods?" Jaskar asked suddenly, looking straight at Phaedrin. "Nothing as complex or artificial as the gods of the surface dwellers. No. The xorn simply worship the rock. They are in many ways the children of the earth. They view the stone as master and

teacher and friend. They revere it in a way that we will never fully understand. The resonance that allows them to phase into rock... they call that the Stone Chant. They simply sing to the stone and it allows them to pass. Beautiful, isn't it?"

Phaedrin looked back down, not quite sure how to respond, and continued his frenzied scribbling.

"Some at the mines," mumbled Phaedrin, "are concerned that there may be more than one. Do you know anything of that? Might there be others?"

"On the elemental plane of earth, xorn travel in clans roving about grazing on the minerals and metals that are so plentiful there. But here, xorn are always solitary. They only appear in this world if they are summoned by magic or if they stumble upon a natural bridge between the two worlds. But such interdimensional accidents are rare."

"What about when they mate?"

"Xorn do not mate."

"They don't? But how-"

"Once during its life each xorn spontaneously generates and expels several large stone spheres from its body. These spheres are the eggs of the xorn, of course. They are dark grey and quite dense. They might easily be mistaken for mineral growths or some other natural phenomena."

"We have encountered nothing such as that."

"Not surprising. Xorn eggs are exceedingly rare, as you can well imagine. Each egg is deposited in a small air pocket which is usually packed with gems and coins and other mineral rich substance. The parent roams the area searching for food and guarding the safety of the eggs. On occasion, creatures stumble upon a xorn egg cache believing they have found a hidden treasure trove. Few live to tell of it. Within days after being deposited, a xorn emerges from each egg. A miniature replica of its parent. The young xorn consumes all food in the cache and then tracks the parent xorn down by following the tunneling noises. Young xorn stay with the parent for eight to twelve months until achieving some semblance of maturity and then leave the parent. I suspect that a full grown xorn with

young avoids all contact with other creatures since I know of no incident where an immature xorn has been sighted."

"We have no eggs or infants. We know of only the one. You said earlier that the xorn speaks. Is the beast intelligent? Could we communicate with it?" asked Phaedrin, dipping his quill and turning to a fresh page.

"Intelligent... yes. And their own language they have. Though our language a xorn would not understand unless instructed or aided with magic."

"What is the xorn language like?"

"The xorn language is powerful and beautiful in an eerie way. It consists of deep rumblings, shudderings and booms. It grates and echoes in a way that sets the teeth on edge. Their language is very specific for all that interests them. They have twenty seven ways to say the word "gold" indicating different levels of purity and texture."

"And the voice of a xorn-"

"- is the grinding of boulders. It is as deep as the caverns and cold as ice. Xorn words flow together into a continuous cacophony of sound. This is because a xorn speaks through its shell and never pauses for breath."

"Xorn don't breathe?"

"Of course not. Where xorn live, there is little need for breath and little air to breathe."

"So a xorn could remain underwater indefinitely."

"Yes, except that xorn despise water. They are poor swimmers and clumsy when forced to function in a watery environment. A xorn cannot phase through water and its echolocation is slightly distorted in fluids."

"We have noticed the beast avoid the lake to the west. Perhaps we can use it to our advantage. With this information, we may be able to lure..." Phaedrin's voice slowly trailed off. He looked about the room. The cups and plates on the stone table were beginning to rattle.

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Jaskar with a smile.

The floor in the center of the cave began to slowly rise and take shape. It rose with the sound of grinding stone which shook the small cavern. Three claws, each with three talons, first shaped themselves from the rock. Phaedrin stood up, upsetting his ink bottle, and took a step away from the spectacle. The claws rose up on three long arms which began to converge. Then the floor erupted in a gaping mouth followed by a barrel shaped body, rising up as if pushed from underneath. Its ascent came to rest when its powerful legs and taloned feet rose to the floor. The rumbling drifted off distantly as the creature opened its eyes and gazed at Phaedrin. Phaedrin gazed back.

It was huge. Much larger than Phaedrin had imagined. He was just eye level with it and could not see into the mouth. The creature's long arms stretched from wall to wall. Its claws opened and closed rhythmically as if flexing.

Jaskar turned toward the xorn and lightly caressed his agate ring. "Is it complete? Has the mithril been depleted?"

A soft rumble emanated from the xorn, as if in answer.

"Then you have eaten well, Stone Brother. Your job here is done. I will return you to your home. I, Jaskar, thank you."

"You... summoned this beast? Why?"

Jaskar slowly turned to face the younger mage. His eyes burned with hatred, his fists slowly clenched. "Revenge is a dish best served cold. Stone cold, you might say... Go back to your petty king. Tell him his precious mithril mine is dead. His kingdom is lost. Drakkel will win this war."

Phaedrin's eyes went to the portrait and back to the stone wizard before him. Disbelief slowly gave way to comprehension. "All for the death of one woman?"

"Yes... All for the death of one woman."