

Cresthaven: The Shattered Path: Chapter 7 – The Corridor of Choices

written by A J | April 17, 2025

The corridor ahead, hewn from a dark, unyielding stone, seemed to breathe with a silence so profound it pressed against their eardrums. The air, thick with the musty scent of ages and something else—something faintly metallic—grew close as the walls narrowed, as if the very rock intended to squeeze the breath from their lungs. Their footsteps, once hesitant probes into the gloom, now struck the stone with a more resolute rhythm, each echo swallowed quickly by the oppressive stillness. Every rustle of fabric, every small shift in weight, became a significant event in the taut anticipation. Behind them, the gruesome remnants of their recent struggle—shattered bones gleaming dully in the faint light—served as a stark reminder of the dangers they had already overcome. Before them, the unseen stretched like a tangible darkness, a coiled shadow pregnant with unknown perils.

Kaelen adjusted the leather straps of his armor, the soft creak breaking the silence momentarily. His fingers brushed against the hilt of his longsword, *Whispergleam*, its enchanted metal cool beneath his touch—a small comfort in this suffocating passage. The blade had tasted much blood this day, and he wondered grimly if it would soon drink again.

“Stay close,” he whispered over his shoulder, the words barely audible yet somehow filling the narrow space. “These ancient halls have claimed greater warriors than us.”

The passage opened abruptly into a circular chamber, barely ten feet in diameter, yet feeling somehow vast in its suffocating intimacy. Two narrow hallways, like the gaping maws of subterranean beasts, diverged from this central point—one snaking away to the left, the other disappearing into the right. Above, the ceiling arched in a surprisingly graceful curve, its stonework catching the ethereal glow emanating from the crystal held aloft by Aelinthir. The light danced across the surface, revealing intricate carvings that spiraled along the walls—ancient beyond reckoning, their sharp edges softened by the relentless caress of time, almost eroded into a smooth, unsettling uniformity. Yet, despite their worn state, the patterns remained, a language of forgotten artisans, legible enough to stir something deep and primal within the mind. Spirals intertwined with angular runes, a mesmerizing and disquieting tapestry. These were not the comforting symbols of faith, but rather the stark geometries of confinement, the cold logic of traps laid by long-dead hands. They felt like locks of immense complexity, intricate mechanisms designed to hold something terrible at bay, now sprung and waiting.

“The air tastes of old secrets,” Aelinthir murmured, her slender fingers adjusting the height of the crystal, causing shadows to dance across her

face. Her eyes, ancient and wise beyond her youthful appearance, narrowed as she studied the markings. "These runes speak of containment... and warning."

Durim snorted, his breath causing his braided beard to sway slightly. "Warnings are for the cautious, lass. And we left caution behind in the daylight world."

"Two ways forward," Kaelen murmured, his gaze sweeping from one shadowed passage to the other, settling finally on the left-hand opening. "What's your read on this, friends?"

Durim, ever grounded, dropped to one sturdy knee, his calloused fingers tracing the cold stone floor of the left-hand path. "Boot prints," he declared, his brow furrowed in concentration. "Not old, neither. And something was dragged... see there?" He pointed a thick finger towards a long, shallow scrape etched in the fine layer of dust that coated the floor. The mark spoke of weight and resistance, a silent narrative of struggle.

"He came this way, then," Kaelen said grimly, thinking of the necromancer they pursued—the one who had left a trail of desecrated graves and hollow-eyed undead in his wake. "And it seems he didn't travel alone."

Thimara, her feline senses heightened in the enclosed space, tilted her head, her delicate ears swiveling independently as she sniffed the air. Her whiskers twitched suddenly, detecting something beyond the obvious. Something wrong with the air here—not stagnant as it should be in these sealed passages, but subtly shifting, pulsing faintly against her sensitive fur.

"Blood," she whispered, her voice barely audible. "Faint, but undeniably recent. And..." her nose twitched again, "oil? Or perhaps... some kind of unguent."

Her tail swished once, revealing her agitation more clearly than words could. The tabaxi ranger's whiskers trembled as she crouched lower, her lithe form seeming ready to spring at the slightest provocation. Her golden eyes caught the crystal's light, reflecting it back with an almost preternatural glow.

"The kind of oil used for preserving flesh?" Aelinthir asked softly, her voice catching slightly. They had all seen too much in their journeys together, witnessed horrors that would have broken lesser souls.

"Perhaps," Thimara admitted. "But something else mingles with it. Something... arcane." She paused, focusing on the strange current she felt against her whiskers. "And the air... it moves strangely here. As if the stones themselves are breathing."

Aelinthir, her elven intuition often proving more reliable than mere observation, shivered slightly, despite the lack of a discernible chill. "The left path... it feels wrong. A discordant note in the symphony of this place." She paused, her gaze meeting Kaelen's. "Which, knowing our luck, likely means it's the correct way."

Her delicate features were cast in sharp relief by the crystal's glow,

accentuating the wisdom etched into her face by centuries of wandering. The silver threads woven through her dark hair seemed to capture and amplify the light, forming a subtle halo around her head. Her hand drifted unconsciously to the spellbook secured at her hip, seeking reassurance in its familiar weight.

A wry smirk touched the corner of Kaelen's lips. "Good enough for me. After what we just faced, wrong might be an improvement." He gestured towards the left passage. "Shall we?"

Durim hefted his mighty warhammer, running a thumb along the runes inscribed on its head. "Aye," he rumbled. "Though I'm beginning to miss the simplicity of open skies and honest combat." Despite his words, there was no hesitation in his stance. The dwarf had never been one to shrink from danger, especially when the safety of his companions hung in the balance.

They moved as one, stepping past the central junction and into the shadowed embrace of the left-hand corridor. Their fellowship, forged through trials and triumphs alike, made words unnecessary as they fell into their practiced formation—Kaelen leading with Durim close behind, Thimara prowling at their flank, and Aelinthir bringing up the rear, her crystal casting long shadows before them.

The trap sprang with a brutal, instantaneous finality that stole the air from their lungs.

A deafening clang reverberated behind them, a sound like the very bowels of the earth slamming shut—the closing of a tomb intended to hold its occupants for eternity. With a thunderous finality that shook the stone beneath their feet, a massive slab of rock descended, sealing off the circular chamber they had just exited, severing their path back to whatever relative safety it had offered. Simultaneously, and with an unnerving precision, the corridor ahead also sealed shut. Two more slabs of stone, impossibly thick and perfectly fitted, slid down from the ceiling and up from the floor, meeting in the center with a sickening thud. They were entombed.

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. The shock of their sudden imprisonment fell upon them like a physical weight, crushing their spirits as surely as the stone walls confined their bodies.

"What in the nine hells—" Durim roared, spinning on his heel and slamming the flat of his warhammer, Oathbreaker, against the newly formed wall behind them. Solid. Seamless. Not even the faintest crack betrayed where the door had been. The craftsmanship was beyond even dwarven mastery, belonging to an age when magic and mechanism were one and the same.

"Save your strength," Kaelen cautioned, placing a restraining hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "That stone won't yield to brute force."

Aelinthir raised her crystal higher, the light revealing that they now stood in a perfect cube of stone, perhaps twelve feet on each side. Her lips moved silently as she recalled ancient lore, searching her vast memory for any

mention of such a trap.

Then came the hiss.

Hssssssshhhh.

It began as a faint whisper, a dry, insidious sound that seemed to emanate from the very stone itself. From tiny, almost invisible holes in the ceiling, a fine, pale dust began to trickle down, followed by the slow, steady flow of fine, golden sand. It cascaded like a silent, deadly rain.

"By Moradin's forge..." Durim breathed, watching the growing curtain of sand with wide eyes.

At first, it seemed almost benign, a harmless inconvenience. The soft patter was almost soothing, like gentle rain on a summer evening—a cruel mockery of comfort in what was clearly designed as their tomb.

Then it wasn't. The volume increased. The gentle patter became a steady stream, the individual grains merging into rivulets that began to pool at their feet.

"What fresh hell is this?" Kaelen muttered, stepping back as a soft wave brushed his boots. A chilling premonition settled in his stomach, heavy as lead. He had heard tales of such devices in the ancient tombs of the desert lords—timepieces of death that measured one's final moments in falling sand.

"It's a trap," Aelinthir said grimly, fingers already dancing through the somatic components of a spell. "A classic compression design. Sand fills. Airless. Crushing." Her words were clipped, her usual eloquence abandoned in the face of immediate danger. A shimmer of arcane energy gathered around her hands, then dissipated uselessly. "My magic finds no purchase here. The walls are warded."

"Not fond of either," Durim growled, testing the door seams with the edge of his dagger, seeking any flaw in the perfect stonework. "Death by suffocation or crushing—poor choices for a dwarf." Despite his grim jest, fear flickered behind his eyes. To die entombed was every dwarf's nightmare, too reminiscent of cave-ins that claimed so many of their kin.

The sand poured faster now, as if responding to their desperate attempts to escape. What had been a gentle shower became a torrent, the individual streams merging into sheets of golden death. The room began to fill with frightening speed, the sand climbing their legs with the persistence of a living thing.

It reached their ankles. A gritty weight. Then their knees. A suffocating embrace that made each step an effort, as if the earth itself sought to reclaim them.

Thimara hissed, her natural agility hampered by the rising tide. "We can't wade through much longer," she warned, her voice tight with controlled panic. Her people were creatures of open spaces and forest canopies—this slow burial

was perhaps the most terrible end she could imagine. She felt the strange currents in the air intensify, fluctuating rapidly now as the sand rose higher.

"We can't dig through," Kaelen said, his voice strained as he fought against the inexorable press of sand. The resistance was immense, each movement requiring twice the normal effort. His mind raced through their options, dwindling with each passing second. "Aelinthir, any chance of teleportation? Durim, could we break through the ceiling instead?"

The elf shook her head grimly. "The wards are complete. No magical egress."

Durim grunted, the sand now at his waist. "Stone's too thick. Would take hours."

Thimara's keen eyes darted from the ceiling to the walls, her survival instincts triggering a frantic search for any advantage. Her claws twitched with nervous energy as her gaze caught something—a slight indentation along one wall, barely visible above the rising sand line.

"There!" she cried, pointing to a raised ledge. Just wide enough to delay their burial, if only for precious minutes. "A shelf!"

With a leap that belied the drag of sand, she was there, balanced precariously on the narrow outcropping. Kaelen followed, using his height to advantage. He turned and hoisted Durim up, the dwarf's sturdy frame making the effort considerable. Aelinthir clambered onto the rising slope, her slight weight giving her an advantage the others lacked. She slipped.

Kaelen's hand shot out, catching her wrist. "I've got you," he assured, pulling her to relative safety beside him.

The sand continued its relentless rise, sheets of it sloughing away beneath their feet. Thimara's whiskers twitched more insistently now, the air currents growing stronger around certain points in the wall. Her sensitive ears picked up subtle changes in pressure—like a giant, slow heartbeat pulsing behind the stone.

"Something's active behind these walls," she murmured, her eyes narrowing as she tried to pinpoint the source. "Not just the trap, but... mechanisms."

The slope grew treacherous. Kaelen slipped, sliding several inches before grabbing a tiny imperfection in the wall. Durim lost his footing entirely and landed hard, half-buried in an instant before Kaelen hauled him up with desperate strength.

"By the goddess," Aelinthir gasped, her face pale. "Look at the walls!"

The room groaned under the weight of sand, compacting beneath its own mass. Soon it would be like being caught in solid stone.

Then Thimara's eyes locked onto something. Through the gloom and the swirling dust, her feline vision caught what human eyes might miss.

The wall. A grid. Faint beneath the sandline. Nine runes. Three by three. Each different, yet related—part of a pattern that tickled at the edges of recognition. The air currents she'd been sensing seemed strongest around these symbols, pulsing in a rhythm she was now certain wasn't random.

"Runes!" she cried, her voice cracking with urgency. "Top wall! A grid of symbols!"

Aelinthir scrambled toward it. "A puzzle! No time—" The sand was at her chest now, threatening to swallow her smaller frame entirely.

"Then guess right!" Kaelen shouted, reaching to steady her.

Thimara followed, her natural agility allowing her to maneuver across the treacherous surface. Her whiskers spread wide, reading the subtle shifts in air pressure that no human could detect. As her paw hovered over the grid, she noticed something else—some of the runes were smoother than others, their edges worn from repeated touch.

She reached the first rune. Pressed it with extended claws. It sank slightly into the wall.

Nothing happened.

Second rune. Wrong choice. The sand doubled in speed, pouring now like water through a broken dam. A punishment for their error.

"NO," Aelinthir barked, her mind racing through possibilities. "Symmetry! Each corner—"

"Middle," Thimara said suddenly. Her pupils narrowed to slits as she focused every sense on the wall before her. "Then top-left. Then bottom-right." She felt it clearly now—the way the air changed with each symbol, the subtle difference in resistance when her paw hovered over certain runes. These three runes were smoother, polished by countless fingers before theirs. "It's these three," she explained. "They're worn from use."

"How can you tell?" Durim called, fighting to keep his head above the rising tide.

"Trust me," she said simply. "I can feel the difference."

Aelinthir nodded, trusting the tabaxi's senses without question. "Do it!"

Thimara hit the center rune. Blue light flared beneath her paw, startling in its sudden brilliance. Then she struck the top-left symbol. A low hum vibrated through the stone. Then, stretching to reach it as the sand threatened to pull her under, she pressed the bottom-right rune.

The sound changed.

The hiss stopped.

Then—a groan—deep, grinding stone against stone, like the awakening of something ancient and reluctant.

A slot opened in the floor, previously hidden beneath the sand.

The sand began to drain.

First a trickle. Then a pull. A tide reversing. Downward it flowed. Into hidden seams and channels. Pulled like water down a drain.

They slid with it. Tumbling. Coughing. Gasping. Fighting to keep their heads above the swirling surface as it dragged them toward the central vortex.

Then the floor reappeared, solid stone emerging from beneath the vanishing sand.

The rush stopped.

Silence returned, broken only by their ragged breathing.

Kaelen lay flat on his back. Sand clung to his face, his hair, filled every crease in his armor. His chest heaved with each grateful breath.

Then—laughter.

Not maniacal. Relieved. Genuine. The laughter of those who have stared death in the face and, through luck or skill or both, lived to speak of it.

Durim roared a laugh that echoed in the now-empty chamber. “Well! Nearly a short tale that was!” He pounded the sand from his beard, sending small clouds billowing around him. “Would’ve made a poor ending for the saga of Durim Stonehammer!”

Aelinthir caught her breath, brushing sand from her robes with trembling hands. “No magic. All mechanics. Horrifying in its elegance.” She looked around with newfound respect for their ancient adversaries. “Whoever built this place thought beyond spells and counterspells. They built for eternity.”

Kaelen pushed himself up to a sitting position. Sand poured from the folds of his cloak in small cascades. “Next fork we come to, I vote we starve to death trying to decide,” he said dryly. “Seems safer than picking.”

Thimara wiped sand from her eyes, her fur matted and clumped with the stuff. She flicked her ears, dislodging more grains. “Left smelled wrong,” she said simply, not quite an apology but an acknowledgment. “Right would have been worse.”

She looked at the open hatch where the sand had disappeared. A dark mouth in the floor, leading deeper into the unknown.

The wall behind them closed with a soft click. A gentle sigh of air escaped as the perfect seal reformed, as if the trap had never existed.

“Let’s keep moving,” Kaelen said, rising to his feet and helping Aelinthir

up. "Before it gets creative again."

The four companions gathered themselves, brushing away the worst of the sand. Their bodies were weary, but their spirits were strengthened by survival. Each trap overcome was not just a victory but a lesson—and in this place of ancient malice, they would need every advantage they could gain.

They moved onward. Slower. Every step deliberate. The memory of choking sand clung to their boots and weighed heavy in their minds. Ahead, the passage continued its descent into darkness, promising nothing but further trials.

But they would face them together, as they had faced all else. For the bonds between them had been forged in fires hotter than any forge, tested and proven true. And in the lightless depths beneath the world, such bonds were the only compass worth following.