

# Princes of the Apocalypse

As told by Groin, LLC.

## episode 4: feathergale spire

“Who wants to steal some hippogriffs and get the hell out of here?”

The adventurers all looked at each other, then back at the woman who was standing on the landing of the stairway in an obvious state of distress.

“Well I would sure appreciate a lift back home.” Said Larmon, as he rubbed his wrists where they had been bound.

“Fine, we’ll go. But there are a few things we should see to first.” Said Skelator, who looked to Diamachus “You said you went through Thurl’s room, right? And you’re sure you were thorough?”

Diamachus smiled and held up his satchel “I did alright... Though... did I check his chest, or just the desk?” He looked down, trying to remember. It had been a long and well supplied night.

Skelator shot hot air out of his nose in frustration, and then turned to Ganon. “Check it out, leave no stone unturned.”

“I’ll go with him.” Perry said, heading to the stairs with the paladin. Before he reached the stairs, a familiar face peeked up from the lower floor.

“Sir? As you can see, the other servants are sleeping under the table in the hall, which means the kitchen is... empty...” It was the servant girl from earlier in the evening. Perry smiled for a second, then furrowed his brow.

“Not right now, dear. But I do have something important to ask.” Her eyes darted to the floor nervously, but he continued. “I need you to watch the door. If anyone comes up the stairs after us, make some kind of signal.”

“What kind of signal?”

“Oh it doesn’t matter, just make noise. I’ll know it’s you.” With that she blushed and smiled, and then her face quickly darkened as the Halfling ran up the stairs two at a time.

Skelator turned to Savra bowing his head low, a gesture he had learned made him appear less threatening, and actually a little tender, to humans. “You go prepare the mounts. I want the Griffon.”

“Well of *course* you do.” She said, taking Crotch by the arm and heading for the stables with Diamachus and Larmon in tow.

This left Skelator and Kazzius the only waking occupants of the great hall.

“What do we do?” Kazzius asked, expecting the orders to just keep flowing from the band’s manager.

“You try not to look like such a creep. I have another drink.” The Dragonborn laughed and he stepped over two sleeping knights to approach the keg they had fallen asleep under.

As Ganon and Perry approached the 4<sup>th</sup> floor they could hear voices coming from one of the rooms. Three of the rooms had closed doors and the voices, one male and one female, were coming from the open door. As the two neared, the conversation became intelligible. They could hear an articulate, sweet and gentle female voice; “This is no great emergency, Thomas. Calm down. Simply delay the intruders until our gift from the demonic envoy has a chance to prove its utility. When Merroska returns, politely inform him that his breach of duty will not go unpunished. Oh, and Thomas...”

“Yes my queen?”

*“If you ever take that inappropriately familiar tone with me again I will have your head MOUNTED atop the SPIRE!!!”* Suddenly, the sweet gentle voice had turned into a screech that made their hair stand on end.

Ganon and Perry quietly headed back down to the great hall and relayed what they had heard to Skelator. He tapped a claw on the scales of his snout for a second before turning to Kazzius. “You go upstairs with these two; they may need your spells. I will go down to the stables and tell the others. We will fly our mounts to the roof and fight our way down. If possible, do not engage until we have taken position up top, we shall attack from two directions.” The group immediately broke to enact this plan.

In the stables, Savra was nearly done saddling the mounts. “How many do you have left?” Skelator asked.

“I’m going as fast as I can, and a hell of a lot faster than I should. You want to be able to ride these things, right?” She flipped a lock of hair out of her face. “They should be watered, and I should be grooming their flight feathers, but we don’t have time.”

“You don’t know how right you are. There are enemies upstairs planning an attack as we speak. We must get to the roof immediately to support our friends.”

Suddenly, the relative quiet of the spire was broken by a bestial roar from the south that echoed off the steep canyon walls. Diamachus crinkled his nose “why does that sound familiar?”

“We just heard that roar a few hours ago. It’s another Manticore.” Skelator said, his expressionless face turned to the south, eyes scanning the mists that blanketed the valley.

Within minutes Skelator, Diamachus and Crotch were atop their mounts, Larmon seated behind Diamachus, and Savra was climbing on hers. “Ok, the fastest way to get up to the roof is to spiral around the spire, so follow my lead and keep an eye on the windows for any activity.” She spurred her

steed into action, and as it leapt out of the stable the others watched, in shock, as the Hippogriff plummeted to the bottom of the canyon in a tumble of feathers.

“SAVRA NOOOOO!!!” Crotch screamed, smacking his own Hippogriffs rear despite the shouted warnings of his friends. He, too, rode a blur of feathers toward the bottom of the canyon.

As the loose feathers blew around them like snowflakes, one happened to land on Skelator’s snout, and he could clearly see that it was only half a feather, cleanly sliced straight across, halfway up its length. “They’ve clipped the *wings*!”

As if on cue, two men in white robes jumped down from the archways above the stables and attacked. Diamachus hopped off his mount and defended himself against the dagger wielding cultist, while Skelator, still atop his Griffon, watched with amusement as his mount snapped its great beak at the now hesitant cultist, managing to take a chunk out of his shoulder.

Ganon, Perry, and Kazzius crept up the spire’s central stair. They approached the 4<sup>th</sup> floor, where they had only moments earlier overheard the conversation. They heard nothing and saw no signs of movement, so they peaked in the open door to Thurl’s room. The room was empty. The three men entered, with Kazzius keeping watch by the door. Ganon searched the room for evidence of its former occupants and found none. Perry, looking to the floor-to-ceiling windows, decided to see if it was possible to exit the room through the window. He peeked his head out, and just as he noticed the ample ledge that ringed their floor, a dagger whistled past his head. He managed to pull himself back in the room as the cultist who had been lurking just outside took another wide swing, struggling to keep his balance on the ledge.

Crotch’s world had become a blur of ground, then sky, then ground, then sky, with the constant futile flapping of wings. He instantly realized that his mount had been sabotaged, and he did the one thing he could think of; he healed it. As he shouted the healing word in the Hippogriff’s ear, he could feel each flap of its wings begin to have more and more of an effect on their rate of descent. The Hippogriff leveled off and began to climb mere feet from the rocky ground at the base of the spire’s column. He circled around and was about to land near the bloody pile of feathers that used to be Savra’s Hippogriff when something above, near the spire’s stable level caught his eye.

As the cultist placed a hand over his bleeding shoulder and cursed, the Griffon reared back on its hind leonine legs and raised its talons to strike. The cultist dove for the small space between its legs, and sprang up behind it, his hands raised in the arcane gestures of a spell. With a blast of thunderous force, the Griffon and its rider were propelled out of the stable into the open air. Skelator gritted his teeth and waited for the fall, but as the Griffon’s wings spread he could feel their weight stabilize and he let out his own triumphant roar as the Griffon pumped its wings and they climbed to the spire’s roof. Behind him, he could hear his attacker’s surprised curses.

Diamachus was engaged in melee, swinging his swords with deadly efficiency against the obviously outmatched attacker. He was leaning in to his attack with a bloodthirsty grin when the cultist surprised him by blowing a stream of air out of his mouth that sent the deadly Halfling tumbling out into the air.

Keeping a clear head, Diamachus could see a figure rising to meet him. It was a Hippogriff, and on its back was a Dwarf who was desperately urging his mount onward. Crotch managed to intercept Diamachus before he reached his final destination on the canyon floor, but when he failed to grab the Halfling's arm in time Diamachus was only saved by his ability to cling to the leather saddle straps at the last second. With his awkward cargo, Crotch followed Skelator's Griffon to the pinnacle, taking a long hopeless look at the bloody mess on the canyon floor. As they flew up past the stables, Diamachus secured himself and saw his attacker's back as the cultist advanced upon poor Larmon, and from the back of the Hippogriff managed to put a crossbow bolt in the villain's back.

While Perry defended himself from the attacker at the window, Ganon ran to the room's other window, about twenty feet to the left of the window Perry was engaged in. He hesitated for a moment, looking down at the great height and trying not to remember the sensation of falling. With a wince, he stepped out onto the ledge and pointed a finger at the cultist. "STOP" he said, and the power of his pantheon caused his voice to echo in the man's head until the cultist had no choice but to lay down his daggers and peacefully walk into the room. Perry smiled, and began binding the man, stopping to throw an occasional punch or kick a particularly tender spot. The three heroes took a few minutes to interrogate their new prisoner, but their efforts proved fruitless. They dragged him up to the roof just as the two winged mounts were touching down. Watching them land, Ganon noticed, in the background, three sets of wings in the distance. They were approaching from Knifepoint Gulley.

"Not the bird-men again..." he said, rolling his eyes.

"No, those are bigger..." Kazzius said, and he was right. Now that Ganon looked again, he could see that whatever they were, they were big enough to carry riders.

"Our enemies bring reinforcements. We may have to make a stand." Skelator observed.

"What is *that* one doing?" Diamachus asked. One set of wings, the biggest of the three, had turned and was heading south, into the valley. Silhouetted against the glowing eastern horizon, a long tail could be seen trailing behind the winged creature."

"There's no way to tell. We must prepare!" Ganon said, turning to the group. "We have to funnel them into one place, where we can all fight them at once."

"We could board up the windows on the floor beneath us; they already did that to the room Larmon was being held in." Perry said.

"Oh no, *Larmon!*" Diamachus put his hand over his mouth. "He's still in the stables, with those two cultists!"

"Well, those birds approach, we must hope that the shepherd managed to flee or hide." Kazzius said. "I will stay with the prisoner and... ask him a few things..." he turned towards the bound cultist, rubbing his hands together.

"I will stay up here with him and keep an eye on *them*." Crotch said, looking at the approaching wings through the spyglass. "They look like vultures. And they're... *carrying* something..."

Ganon, Diamachus, and Skelator went down one level to start boarding up windows. Skelator went for Thurl's room first. He found the room empty and began dragging furniture to the windows. Diamachus entered the room Larmon had been held in and Ganon was faced with two closed doors. He picked one at random, and kicked it in. The three knights who were sleeping in the room awoke with a start, and began fumbling around their beds, presumably seeking weapons.

"What is the meaning of this!?" one screamed as he sprang to his feet with a knife he had produced from under a pillow.

"The Spire is under attack! It's the Divine Wind, they are traitors!"

Perry ran down the stairs all the way down to the great hall, where the servant girl was waiting.

"Listen, we don't have a lot of time. Those religious guys, they are evil. They are trying to kill us, and I need you to—"

"You know!? Oh, thank god! You have to help! There are two of them in the kitchen; they said they would kill us all if I didn't bring you down there! I *had* to, my family... I..."

"It's alright, I understand. You did well. Come, we'll deal with them now."

"But they're waiting for *you*, they know you're coming!"

Perry's brow furrowed. "That won't help them, but we have more than two cultists to worry about, we need to arm the staff!"

The knights looked to each other, dumbfounded, then back at Ganon. "The priests? But..."

"Where is the Lord Commander?" the eldest looking knight asked, his voice low and his eyes narrowed.

"It seems Merroska is their agent. He attacked us, and fled when we fought him off."

"The Lord Commander... *fled*?" The Knights raised their meager weapons.

Seeing how things were turning, Ganon exclaimed "There is no time! Rally the others! We must defend the Spire!"

"Wait." The eldest knight interjected, turning to his two bunk-mates.

They both bowed to him. "David, you are the Lord Commander's right hand, we look to you..."

The Knight, David, straightened his posture. "You, rouse the men. You, keep an eye on *him*." He motioned to Ganon. "*I'm* going to find Thurl."

Crotch watched the two Giant Vultures approach, impatiently pacing in a tight circle before the spyglass. He cast a few nervous glances at Kazzius, who seemed consumed by whispering into their captive's ear. The captive was trying his best to look unfazed, but he was beginning to wriggle against his bounds.

"Enough! I'll be right back; you keep an eye on him." Crotch said quickly, as he hopped on his Hippogriff. Singing one of the overly-romantic love ballads of the Selkies, that race of aquatic shapeshifters who appear as human on land and as a Seal (get it?) in the water, he dove straight for Savra's Hippogriff, allowing his mount to get dangerously close to the ground before pulling up and landing on a nearby flat spot. Fighting back the tears as the melodramatic lyrics about roses and graves continued to pour out unabated, he began grabbing chunks of horse-bird meat and casting them aside searching for any trace of Savra's remains. When he had no more stones to turn over, he stepped back from his grizzly work. There was nothing, not a scrap of her cape nor a raven colored hair off her head, to suggest her fate.

"Savra!" He yelled, not caring about revealing his location to any enemies that may be lurking in the mist. "SAAAVRAAAA!!"

"Crotch!"

He turned around full circle, trying to tell where the voice had come from.

"Crotch! Up Here!"

He mounted his steed and began spiraling up the Spire's base column. As he rounded the side, flying beneath the retracted drawbridge, he saw the form of a human female scaling the cliff. He smiled to himself; "Well, isn't she just GRAND!" As he looked for a place to perch, he heard the sharp cry of a Giant Vulture. He saw how near they had gotten, and had just enough time to get to the pinnacle before they did. "Savra, I can't stop!"

"What?! What do you mean?? Come GET ME!!"

"But I can still HELP!"

"HOW??"

He strummed his lyre;

"Savra's where it's AT, she climbs better than a CAT, used to be an aristoCRAT, thank the gods she didn't go SPLAT!"

Savra stopped climbing to pick up a rock and hurl it at the Dwarf. "Useless..." She resumed climbing, the words of Crotch's ridiculous song bouncing around her head. "Godsbedamned, but that song is *catchy*". As she continued to climb, the words and rhythm of the song became almost like a mantra, and she found she was climbing at almost twice her previous speed, despite her annoyance at its ludicrous lyrics.

As he burst into Lord Merroska's room, David saw Skelator, who was admiring his work having just finished blocking the windows with Thurl's bed and desk. He turned to the knight with a look that, if the knight were experienced in reading Dragonborn body language, would signal surprise and confusion. As it was, he tightened his grip on his sword and awaited an explanation. "uh... We're under attack!" was all he got.

"Where is the Lord Commander?"

"I don't know where he is, he's gone! But we need to prepare, they're coming!"

"That's what the paladin said, I want an explanation! Who is coming? WHERE IS THURL??"

"Look, we really don't know exactly what's going on either," the warlock bluffed, "let's go down, gather the men, and we'll figure this all out."

"...very well." The Knight led Skelator out of the room and down the stairs.

Skelator stuck his head in the room Diamachus had entered to find the Halfling sitting on the floor smoking his pipe. "Really Diam, *now*?"

"What? The windows are boarded up..."

"What was that you said about arming?" a soft voice said behind him. Perry turned to see an elderly man in simple robes patiently standing before him.

"We need to arm the staff, the Spire is under attack!"

"Then we know what we must do." He gestured to the servants who had been watching from their bedrolls under the great table. They all quietly packed up their blankets and started filing towards the stairwell.

"What are you doing, you need to grab weapons! This is about good and evil!" Perry said, frantically looking for anything they could use to defend themselves.

"My dear boy, for ages the powers of good and evil have waged war against each other with no regard for those who scramble underfoot, yet we survive. The servants of the castles that house the most powerful men of this world have learned that their survival depends not on those powerful men, but on their ability to weather the storms of war. We are going to a safe place, one that you may not enter." He patiently turned his eyes to the young girl.

"I..." she looked at Perry with a longing "I'll stay and help."

The old man looked hurt. "My child, your place is with us..."

"I think she just told you where her place is, now leave us, go and hide!" Perry finished with the old man and led the girl down the stairs by her hand. They stopped at the landing on the ground floor.

"There are two in the kitchen, waiting. There are also two out there, standing guard." She pointed to the front hall.

"Very good, thank you. Now, stay here. Don't move no matter what you hear." Perry judged the distance to the door.

"What are you going to do?"

Perry looked at her and smiled. "Take out the guards."

With blinding speed the Halfling was inside the front hall pummeling the first guard with a flurry of tiny fists that punched holes in the man's ribcage like balsa-wood. As the girl watched through the open door in amazement at his prowess, she felt a hand wrap around her mouth and a dagger blade poke her back.

"Not one word, you useless little wench. You failed us, and will *die* for it. But I have a use for you yet..." a voice hissed in her ear as she was roughly led back into the kitchen.

Perry took a hit to the side from the guard's partner before finishing the first one off and turning his attention toward his attacker. He made quick work of the second guard, then motioned for the girl to follow. She wasn't there.

Confused, he cautiously made his way into the hallway and saw that the kitchen door was open. He rushed to the door to see two cultists and the servant girl struggling against each other on the ledge of the window. When the cultist holding the girl's neck saw Perry, he sneered and threw her off the edge, raising his dagger in a taunting gesture.

Crotch landed on the roof just in time to dismount before the two giant vultures dropped the contents of their talons, a pair of young looking men in white robes, and flew off in wide circles.

"Kazzius!" Crotch shouted, but the warlock was already prepared, sending blue magical energy out to lance one of the men in the chest.

At that moment, everyone in the vicinity of the spire heard a great crackling and tearing coming from outside. Those on the roof and all who were in a north facing room saw an orange light shining from a point in the sky about three hundred feet from the Spire's pinnacle. Ganon, following a growing crowd of knights down the stairs, began to feel ill.

"What in the hells?" a knight beside him asked.

"Precisely... Whatever that noise was," Ganon said, steadying himself against the rail, "it's fiendish..."

Crotch, upon dispatching the remaining cultist, turned to the great orange light slowly growing in the sky. "What *is* that?"

"It's a portal... to one of the Hells, by the looks of it." Kazzius said.

“Oh, lovely” Crotch managed before being knocked to the ground alongside the warlock by the blast of a lightning bolt. His ears ringing and shards of stone falling around him, Crotch looked up to see one of the Giant Vultures pass overhead, its rider crackling with the remnants of the magical lightning he had just discharged. “Lovely indeed” he said as the other Vulture, now circling around, shimmered out of view. “Oh, yes, and an invisibility spell to go with that lightning bolt. Kazzius, downstairs!”

The two heroes bounded down the stairs, meeting up with the others in the great hall. Taking a quick headcount, Skelator noticed the absence of the Monk.

“Where is Perry?” He asked.

After the question bounced around the room for a minute, they all decided that they had not seen him on any of the higher floors, and that he must be on a lower level. Ganon and Crotch went to investigate, followed by a contingent of knights who were sent along by David more as chaperones than support. When they reached the ground floor, Ganon heard voices coming from the kitchen. He kicked in the kitchen door to see two men in white robes trying to carry the tied up body of a Halfling to the window.

“Stop Right There!” He said, drawing his sword. “Release the Halfling and surrender!”

One cultist laughed and threw the body over his shoulder while the other ran to the doorway to engage the paladin. From behind Ganon, who was blocking the doorway as he skirmished with one cultist, Crotch could see the other man heading for the window with Perry.

“The *hells* you do!” he said, as he began weaving a spell. While Ganon finally ran his opponent through, the cultist dropped the Halfling’s body as he was doubled over with uncontrollable laughter. Ganon walked over and unceremoniously removed the cackling head from its shoulders.

“Is everything with you one big fucking *joke*?” he asked the Bard.

“Hey, it worked, right?” Crotch offered as he untied Perry. “So, what happened here?”

Perry, as soon as he was untied, ran straight for the window.

“Oh, really? Interesting. Let me tell you about the day *I’m* having...” Crotch said to nobody.

Perry scrambled out the window and immediately began climbing down. He found the crumpled form of the servant girl and picked her up, which proved no small feat for the Halfling. By the time he had gotten her back to the window, Crotch and Ganon helped him bring her in. As Perry caught his breath, he again heard a familiar voice.

“May we have our child back, *now*?” He turned to see the patient face of the old man.

“You guys go back upstairs and deal with whatever the *hells* else is going on right now, I have to talk to this guy.” The Halfling said. After watching the others climb the stairs, satisfied that they were alone, the old man walked over to the floor near the central stairway and tapped his foot on a particularly lightly colored floor stone. The stone rose up, and a pair of eyes could be seen underneath it.

"You may follow" the old man said to Perry.

He led the Monk down a rope ladder that took them to a small dirt-walled room. There, they found the Spire's service-staff, all hunkered down and preparing to hole up in the hidden room for what looked like weeks.

They began tending to the girl's wounds, as well as Perry's. Soon, her eyes fluttered open. She immediately scanned the room in a panic, and settled when she saw Perry.

"I'm sorry, they grabbed me and—"

"It's ok, it's not your fault." He tried to sound as soothing as possible.

"Shut Up! I have heard ENOUGH of this. The Lord Commander is *NOT* a traitor, and unless you start coming up with an explanation that makes sense, we are going to--" David's words were cut off by a piercing shriek that rattled the teeth and churned the stomach. More than one knight doubled over, hands over their ears. The building shook as a resounding "BOOM" filled the air. Out the east windows, rubble could be seen falling. A knight rushed down the stairs.

"Sir, the demon had breached the great hall and is now *inside* the tower!"

Minutes ago, they had all caught a glimpse of what came through the portal as it approached the spire; a hellish beast that resembled a vulture, a reptile, and a humanoid all at once. Covered in twisted rotting flesh the creature carried with it the stench of the hells. With this new development, they all turned nervous eyes to the ceiling. Within moments, the bodies of knights began falling past the windows, half eaten torsos and limbs falling one at a time, shedding armor and weapons as they passed.

"What is that thing, what is it doing?" a knight asked.

"It truly is a demon. I can feel it." Ganon said, impassively looking out the window for a sign of the creature. "It has come to kill."

One brave knight stepped forward, and confronted David. "Sir, I have as much faith in the Lord Commander as you, but when we signed up for this, there was no talk of *demons*!"

"We make a stand, men. In our liege's absence we will defend the spire. TO THE GREAT HALL!!"

Before the heroes could talk the men into a more rational course of action, the knights all began stomping up the stairs.

"Wait, we don't know what that thing can do!" Diamachus pleaded.

"It doesn't matter." A female voice said. "They are men of honor and will defend their home, regardless."

They all turned to see the panting, dirt covered figure standing in the doorway.

“Savra! You made it! Man, what a woman! Ain’t she the BEST!?” Crotch ran to Savra, his arms open wide to embrace her, until her foot found itself planted firmly in the Dwarf’s namesake. The others cringed. Outside the window the demon screeched as it flew by, again circling the building.

“No thanks to you! Some help! I *still* have that *preposterous* song in my head!”

Crotch, now on his knees, looked up at her with a hurt expression. “It was supposed to inspire you to climb faster...”

Savra looked down at the crumpled figure before her, her resolve suddenly broken. “Well. It may... have...”

“Quickly, we must help them!” shouted Ganon, interrupting their heartfelt reunion.

As they joined the knights in the great hall, they took positions and waited. Soon, a pair of wings could be heard beating just outside the window. Hands gripped swords, teeth gritted against each other, and brows furrowed as the beating grew nearer and nearer the large hole that had been knocked out of the wall.

Eyes widened, mouths went slack, and shields lowered as the hole in the wall was suddenly filled with the image of not the demon they were prepared to battle, but a Wyvern. As the Wyvern entered the great hall, ten feet above the floor, it dropped the body of a Manticore which splintered the large oak table as if it were a child’s toy.

Riding on the Wyvern’s back, covered in blood, his armor in pieces, his hair disheveled, his face showing a deadly scowl and three clear red scars running across its former perfection...

Ganon’s face reddened with instant rage. Crotch breathed a soft “no...”

Lord Commander Thurl Merroska.