

## Demon Hunters: Part 3 - Twisted Truths



Story and setting based on the Out of the Abyss campaign produced by Wizards of the Coast. Demon Hunters is written by and original characters by GM4Him. Some descriptions of characters, places, events, etc. are taken directly from the Out of the Abyss campaign. And, of course, MAJOR SPOILERS for the Out of the Abyss campaign... though not really any spoilers in this particular part of the story. This part is original.

## Chapter 1: The Unending Nightmare

Derivell stood with his sword raised, light shining brightly throughout the massive cavern. He stood upon a natural stone bridge, his companions behind him. Before him, beneath him, and above him, the darkness moved. The darkness had come to life. He couldn't stop trembling. It was beyond his abilities. There was nothing he could do. There was no way he could save them. Within moments, they would be swallowed up.

"SELUNE!" he cried with all his might, but it did no good. In response, there was a flash of purple light, and Shar was before him. She was identical to the image on the door of the Sharran fortress except she was in the flesh.

A smile played across her lips. "Selune. Selune. Selune," she said mockingly. "Don't you ever get tired of that name? I do." She removed her helmet to reveal an amazingly beautiful woman with straight black hair and cold, obsidian eyes. "My name is prettier, I think. It's much more pleasant to say. Shar. Try it. Shar."

"Never," said Derivell harshly. "I will never serve you."

"Won't you? Never? Really?" she said, feigning offense. "Why do mortals like to throw around extremes like that, especially religious types? Never is SUCH a final, eternal word. Never means you will NEVER EVER EVER EVER NEVER FOREVER serve me."

Then she laughed. "But you already ARE serving me. Fool!" She became more vicious. "With each passing moment, you are ridding me of my enemies. You are a tool - to me, to the drow, to the demons of the Underdark, to your companions, to your mother, and most of all to Selune. Get it through your head. You are not some champion or hero. You are A TOOL! Nothing more. Nothing less."

"Your lies are meaningless," he spat, his voice like an animal's.

She lightened up again, laughing as if she thought he was cute. "Ah yes. Of course. I MUST be lying. Here you are, trapped in the Underdark, surrounded by evil. Where is Selune? Is she REALLY with you? No. She leaves you to fight these battles alone. Sure. She channels her power through you from the safety of her realm. Isn't that nice? She's safely sipping tea while you fight drow and spiders and exploding gas spores - WHILE YOUR FRIENDS DIE. Yes. That's so 'good', isn't it? Ah, but you aren't a tool. No." Her sarcasm was dripping like poison from her lips.

"Silence, Creature!" Selune's voice cut through the darkness all at once like a crack of thunder. "Take heed, Derivell. Take heed. This is not my sister." Then a shaft of light shone down from above, illuminating her, and Shar melted away to reveal Havvah, Derivell's mother. "Nor is this your mother."

And with that, Derivell awoke. He sat bolt upright, breathing heavily. Vlynrifane was keeping watch, and everyone else was still sleeping. The drow only glanced in his direction to make sure he was okay. Then she went back to looking out through the blanket they had draped in front of the entrance.

Derivell carefully made his way over to her and sat down. "Sorry," he said in a whisper, not knowing what else to say. He was a bit embarrassed about the nightmare.

"Why are you apologizing?" she whispered back.

"Nightmare," he told her. "I didn't mean to alarm you."

"Nightmares are common for those who sleep in the Underdark," she said. "Nightmares are one of the reasons elves don't like to sleep. Did you know that elves CAN sleep? We just don't like it, and we don't have to do it. So, we don't."

"I did not know that," said Derivell. Then, after a pause, he decided to share his experience with her. "Mine seemed to be influenced by the Sharran outpost we came to before we stopped here. And yet, I felt like it had meaning; like maybe Selune is trying to tell me something."

Vlynrifane looked at him thoughtfully. "Did you want me to try to help you figure it out?"

He shrugged. "Sure." Then he related the entire dream to her in as much detail as he could. "What do you think?"

"<sup>1</sup>I think you have multiple spirits trying to influence you. That is the meaning of the dream. Ultimately, you're being warned by your goddess," she said.

"Really? So you DO think Selune's warning me in a vision?"

She nodded. "Don't trust appearances. That's the meaning behind Shar transforming into your mother. Shar is the epitome of what you fear; your greatest enemy. Whoever is messing with you is trying to intimidate you, to make it seem like they are more powerful than they truly are. They're trying to crush your faith."

Then she gave the whole thing additional consideration. "Also, they don't want you to trust those closest to you. Have they somehow been using your mother to plant seeds of doubt?"

"Yes," he said. "In a different dream. Graiyla said she thought my mother was a demon. Maybe she was right."

"Most likely," said Vlynrifane. "Is your mother someone you trust?"

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<sup>1</sup> Insight check, DC 10. Vlynrifane rolled 10+4=14. Success.

“My mother is an angel named Havvah,” he replied. “She appeared to me years ago. It was because of her that I became a paladin of Selune and joined the order. She convinced me that I had a destiny and a greater purpose. I wouldn’t be here right now if she hadn’t visited me.”

“Well, it sounds like Selune is trying to encourage you,” Vlynrifane told him. “Don’t believe your enemy’s lies. Someone is using intimidation and trickery to lure you into a trap.” Then she sighed. “And it sounds like that trap is about to be sprung. That’s not exactly comforting, but that’s what I think the dream means. Selune is warning us to be prepared. But, Shar wasn’t Shar, so I think that means that though the situation may seem really bad, it isn’t as terrible as it appears. Don’t give up just because it looks bad, and don’t fall for the person’s schemes. Watch for it. Trust your gut. Make sense?”

He smiled. “Perfect sense. Yes. Thank you.” It was unexpected, but he felt immensely better after talking with her. “You know, I find you to be one of the wisest people in our group. I’m glad you’re back. I really am.”<sup>2</sup>

Just then, Ront woke, and with him everyone else. After all, he stretched and issued a loud groan. So loud was his racket that several of the others thought they were being attacked. Jimjar, Topsy and Turvy jumped to their feet, weapons ready. Eromani also rolled into a crouch and had her staff in both hands, and Rini had grabbed her bow and was right next to her. Zen was in front, protectively.

They gave Ront a hard time for a good five minutes before finally calming down. Then they enjoyed a meager breakfast. They were running out of spores and such, but now that Vlynrifane had returned, they weren’t as concerned. As long as they were with her, she could cast the Goodberry spell again and provide them with much needed sustenance. They also found enough freshwater at various places to refill their containers. The closer they got to Darklake, the more it seemed they were able to find various underground rivers and streams.

At last, the party left their camp, and they set out. No one seemed to be on guard. Everyone was in a good mood. In fact, Derivell noted that they were all a bit too relaxed. And so, he decided to tell them about his dream. “Therefore,” he said as he concluded. “I think we need to be especially vigilant today. Let’s...”

Sarith came to an immediate halt. “You were saying?” he said, throwing his hand out to stop the aasimar.

No one else could see what he was talking about. They’d just entered some sort of larger cavern and had gone maybe a hundred feet. There was a sheer rock wall on their right and a drop on their left. The path was about ten feet wide, allowing them to walk roughly two at a time. Ahead, they could hear a waterfall which crashed loudly into the depths below. The bottom of the cavern was nothing but a void to everyone, probably a good two hundred to three hundred feet down.

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<sup>2</sup> Both received Inspiration for this conversation.

“What?” hissed Derivell, more than a little concerned. “I can’t see anything.”

“Light. We’ll want that,” Sarith advised. Derivell cast Light on his sword, and Rini did as well on her bow. Before them, beneath them, and above them, the darkness moved. The darkness had come to life.

The dream! It wasn’t quite the same. They weren’t on a stone bridge, but it was close enough. ‘No. Wait! It IS a bridge,’ he thought in horror. ‘The same exact one!’ Now that he could see more clearly, he noticed a gap between the path they were on and the wall on their right. It was a good ten feet across. ‘Selune!’ he thought, and he almost cried out the name. He caught himself, though, at the last second. He didn’t want to replicate the dream. He wanted to change it.

But it was happening. He couldn’t stop trembling. He fought his own body, but it was beyond his abilities to stop. There was nothing he could do. ‘There is no way I can save us. Within moments, we will be swallowed up.’

Manes hovered at the edge of light before them, clinging to the stone wall below them, on a ridge to their right and above them, and clinging to the wall on their right both above and below. They were everywhere - short, blobby, sickly gray-skinned, hairless, sore-infested, stinking, horrifying fiends that were considered the lowest of demons. When a chaotic evil soul died, they were sent to the abyss, transformed into a mane to be the “fodder” for greater demons. With so many in the area, a greater demon was most assuredly near. ‘Shar. My mother,’ he thought.

The evil creatures smiled horrible, jagged-tooth grins at the party as they shielded their eyes from the light with their hands. It deterred them, but it did not hurt them. Their eyes would adjust. It was only a matter of time before they’d attack.

“Bet you ten gold we’re all gonna die,” Jimjar muttered.

Then came a whisper; a woman’s cold, vicious voice. “Bring them,” she said, and the manes suddenly attacked.

<sup>3</sup>As soon as the massive sea of fiends began to close in, the defenders sprang into action.

<sup>4</sup>Within seconds, many manes died, but not nearly fast enough. Derivell dropped his Light spell, for Rini had hers active, and he cast Divine Favor, igniting his blade with holy radiance to

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the sheer volume of dice rolls in this chapter, names and combat dice rolls have been truncated. The first number(s) is To Hit. The second is Damage. For characters with multiple attacks, damage is combined for all attacks. RIP refers to the number of enemies slain.

<sup>4</sup> Fi 12 & 21. 7. Turvy 11. 5. 1 RIP. Vlyn 1. Rini 6. Deri 22. 12. 1 RIP. Topsy 23. 9. 1 RIP. Ront 10. 7. Eld 1 & 12. 7 dam. 1 RIP. Shr 16 & 16. 13. 1 RIP. Zen 20. 9. 1 RIP. Prince 15 & 22. 15. 1 RIP. Arla 20. 6. Jim Crit. 21. 1 RIP. Nini 23. 7. Sar 6.

increase his damage potential. He then rushed forward and hacked an enemy in half, sending both ends tumbling into the abyss.

This had the desired effect, at least from the enemies in the front. A moment later, they mostly swarmed him, ignoring his companions. Still, many manes came from both sides of the bridge, attacking while holding on to the rock walls. They also came from behind and above. This gave targets to Zen, Shreiken, Ront, Prince Derendil and others who were stuck in the middle and only used melee or natural weapons.

But for every mane that died, another replaced it in a neverending surge. <sup>5</sup>They were everywhere, but their attacks were weak. Few managed to penetrate the party's defenses. Those that did caused very little harm. Still, it seemed that it was only a matter of time before the party was overwhelmed, for there was no telling how many demons there actually were. All they knew was that as many as they had killed within just a few seconds, it was but a drop in a rather large bucket.

In the beginning, many in the party used ranged weapons, but within a very short amount of time, they were all swiping or stabbing at manes in a full-on melee brawl. <sup>6</sup>Graiyla and Ront were guarding the back while Derendil and Derivell were at the front. Graiyla's sword was dancing with lightning even as she hacked the head off of the mane that just took a swing at her with its fist.

<sup>7</sup>With the enemy so close, Fiovey resorted to her shortswords instead of daggers. She killed one with a jab to the face and severely wounded another with a stab to the gut. A moment later, Turvy finished off Fiovey's survivor and ran a second through with his war pick. Vlynrifane slung her bow over her shoulder and cast Flame Blade, creating a fiery scimitar in her hand. She then slashed a fiend who had dropped into their midst from above across the face. The creature tumbled into the void with its head on fire.

Closer to the front, <sup>8</sup>Rini had her mace out, recasting the Light spell on her shield so she could continue to see. She bashed a mane in the chest, but its rubbery flesh deflected it. Derivell was much less effective than he had been a moment earlier. He tried to hack the head off another demon, but he only put a gouge in its already marred flesh. Topsy managed to dislodge another, but Ront entirely missed his enemies. Eldeth battered the skull of yet another, causing it to crumple to the ground, and Shreiken shredded one that popped up over the edge on their

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<sup>5</sup> Manes attack. All missed except 2; 1 hit Prince Derendil for 7 damage and 1 hit Jimjar for 3.

<sup>6</sup> Bup 13. 4. Gra 22. 11. 1 RIP. Stool 7.

<sup>7</sup> Fi 15 & Nat 20. 9 & 8. 1 RIP. Turvy 12 & 21. 9 & 9. 2 RIP. Vlyn 20. 10. 1 RIP.

<sup>8</sup> Rini 10. 3. Deri 22. 6. Topsy 14 & 23. 13. 1 RIP. Ront 8. Eld 17 & 16. 10. 1 RIP. Shr 21 & 13. 13. 1 RIP.

left. <sup>9</sup>On and on this went for what felt like an eternity, though it was, in reality, only about thirty seconds.

Then, all at once, two flashes of blinding light seared the darkness. When it vanished, two glowing angels appeared, one at the front of the party near Derivell, and the other at the back. When Derivell could see, he immediately recognized his mother standing with him, the manes retreating in terror.

“Quickly!” Havvah said. “Follow Habrax.” She gestured towards the angel at the back of the group. “He will guide you to safety. GO!”

At this, the male angel held his gleaming longsword high, and it shone as bright as the sun. Manes retreated from before him in absolute fear. “Come!” said Habrax in a booming voice. “Selune’s light guides us!” Then he charged back through the passage the way they had come, guiding them out of the cavern swelling with demons.

Meanwhile, Havvah protected their flank, her light also frightening the manes into submission. The party did not resist, for more than a few were showing signs of fatigue. Arla had been taken down by a couple of manes at one point, but Rini had restored her to health. Stool, however, was also rendered unconscious, and though he was stable, Rini hadn’t had time to heal him. Eldeth had scooped up the poor sprout at the last second and was carrying him now in her backpack.

They wound their way through the tunnels, Habrax in the front and Havvah continuing to guard the rear, until all of a sudden, Drathrinar appeared before their eyes. <sup>10</sup>That’s when Derivell knew in his heart that it was the right time to strike. Without warning, he enchanted his blade once more with radiant power. Then he spun on his mother and attacked.<sup>11</sup> Though she in no way expected this, she was quick to respond, dodging to the side so that he only clipped her.

Fiovay and Vlynrifane were watching him, and seeing him strike, they instantly followed his example, attacking the male angel at the front. Fiovay screamed, “It’s a trap! Attack! Attack!” even as she dove, rolled and stabbed.<sup>12</sup> Vlynrifane swung with her flaming scimitar, but Habrax was too fast. Shreiken was there with her, biting and slashing at his legs, and Topsy, Ront, Arla,

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<sup>9</sup> Due to the sheer volume of enemies, all logging of dice rolls has been suspended. For narrative sake, I am only now detailing the most important events of the encounter. Please note, however, that all rounds were played out. All in all, the combat lasted for 5 full rounds up until this point, ending after Fiovay, Turvy and Vlynrifane on the 6th round. 58 manes were killed. Arla fell in Round 2, but Rini used Spare the Dying in Round 3 to save her. In Round 3, Derivell lost 18 HP from a Critical Hit and a second mane hitting him. However, he used Lay on Hands in Round 4 to heal 15 HP. Stool fell in Round 4 when two manes ganged up on him. Rini used Spare the Dying in Round 5. She was hit by 1 mane out of 3 on her way, triggering Attacks of Opportunity. She then cast Healing Word on Arla to restore her to full health, fearing a mane might kill her while she was down.

<sup>10</sup> Insight check, DC 15. Derivell rolled 12 and 16, using Inspiration. Eromani rolled 1+2=3. Rini rolled 7+2=9. Fiovay rolled 20+4=24, and Vlynrifane rolled 16+2=18. Graiyla cannot be surprised by fiends.

<sup>11</sup> Surprise round. Deri 15. 19 radiant damage with Divine Favor and Smite.

<sup>12</sup> Fi 7 & 20. 3 (due to resistance). Vly 14 & 1, using Inspiration. Shr 21 & 20. 4.

and Graiyla joined in a split second after. All four had also sensed something was wrong because of Derivell's dream, and they ganged up on Habrax, leaving the aasimar to face his "mother" alone.<sup>13</sup>

Before the "angels" could retaliate, Turvy, Eromani, Sarith, Jimjar, Buppido and Rini entered the fray. Though they had no clue why their companions were attacking their saviors, they were not about to take the time to question them. Turvy, Jimjar and Buppido attacked Habrax while Eromani, Rini and Sarith joined Derivell in attacking Havvah. <sup>14</sup>During the fight with the manes, Eromani had cast Alter Self and had grown claws, like the claws of a black dragon. She now used them on Havvah, even as Rini hurled a radiant bolt at her and Sarith fired his crossbow.

Havvah swore. She was beyond furious. "Habrax! Run!" Then she vanished into the Ethereal Plane. Her final, mournful words echoed around the party. "Derivell! Son! Why? Why?"

<sup>15</sup>Habrax did not need her to tell him to flee. Many of the others ganged up on him, hacking and slashing at him and pegging him with arrows and bolts until he was near death. Zen had even snatched his left wrist, and with a great thrash he jerked the "angel" off his feet. Habrax fell to his knees, bleeding from multiple wounds. Derivell was just coming to finish him off when he vanished into the Ethereal Plane to join his partner.

Topsy swore. "They got away! What were they?"

"Demons," said Graiyla without a doubt. "They took the form of angels to trick us. They most assuredly want us to go to the Sharran fortress."

"But why?" asked Jimjar. "They had us surrounded by manes. Now we're free. I..."

The doors of Drathrinar were thrown open with a tremendous bang. The party was close enough to see two fiends making their way inside; a succubus and an incubus. The succubus was screaming in the Abyssal tongue. Graiyla was quick to translate. "She's calling for backup! We have to move. Now!"

But then, as if things couldn't get worse, another shriek went up in the dark. "THERE THEY ARE! GET THEM! GET THEM!" Looking to their right, they saw Mistress Ilvara and her replenished army of drow, quaggoths, and giant spiders. They were entering the cavern from the direction of the fissure where Ilina had died. Several of them were already raising their crossbows to fire.

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<sup>13</sup> Topsy 14 & 12. Ront 16. 5. Arla 14. Gra 15. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Round 1. Turvy 1 & 1. Fi 15 & 20. 6. Nini 21 & 12. 6. Rini 22. 10. Ront 15. 4. Sar 12. Jim 21 & 15. 9. Bup 17. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Prince 8 & 10. Shr 10 & 10. Arla 9. Vlyn 20. 5. Gra 17. 6. Topsy 23 & 6. 2. Eld 13 & 22. 4. Zen 20. 4. Habrax Strength save, DC 11. 7-1=6. Failure. Prone.



That's when the horde of manes arrived, pouring into the cavern behind the party screaming and wailing in fury. This caused Ilvara and her drow to hesitate, for they could not be sure what this unknown force was or where it came from. Were they somehow allied with the prisoners?

Eromani saw the enemy's hesitation and took command of the situation. "Follow me!" she cried, and she took off running straight for the Sharran outpost.

"What are you doing?" cried Arla as she and the others followed. "You're not actually running TOWARDS the ominous, evil outpost where the two head demons just went. Are you?"

"Better than the horde of manes and drow. Right?" asked Eromani.

"Is it?" asked Jimjar, clearly hysterical. "Bet you you're wrong."

"What's your plan?" asked Derivell, ignoring him.

Just then Ilvara cried, "NO! NO! Kill the manes! Don't let the demons kill my prey!"

"That," said Eromani. Then she yanked a length of rope out of one of the pockets of her pack, handing the other end to Arla. "Take this. Weapons away - everyone. Get ready to climb. Anyone who has rope, give me one end and keep the other. Don't question. Just do it." They were already at the open doors, but she led them to the left, following the wall along towards where it met the cavern. The manes immediately angled to try to intercept, putting them roughly between the party and the drow.

One by one, everyone began to hand the sorceress one end of the ropes that they'd recovered from the drow armory. Then, all at once, Eromani began to chant. Before she was finished, they reached the corner where the crafted wall met the natural one. Into the air she flew, straight up twenty feet, and she kept rising towards the top of the fortress's wall, the ropes trailing behind.

Vlynrifane then understood her plan, and she let her flaming blade die. "I can carry the gnomes, Shreiken and Zen on my back," she instructed. "Shreiken. To me. Rini, tell Zen to let me web him. I'll drag him up behind me in a sac." Then she changed into a giant spider. The gnomes did as they were told, climbing aboard.

Unexpectedly, Buppido joined them. "I suck at climbing," he said, and he grabbed on just behind Topsy and Turvy. Jimjar was in the front.

Rini cast Speak with Animals. "Zen. Go! Let her web you and carry you up." The wolf also did as he was instructed, and a moment later Vlynrifane was ascending swiftly with all her baggage.

Eromani reached the top at last and pulled herself over the wall. A few moments later, she tied the ropes together around one of the battlements. "Now!" she cried. "Climb! Climb! Bring the

ropes with you.” And she ran to one end of the battlements and started raining fiery missiles down at the army of approaching manes.

<sup>16</sup>Up the party went, most scaling as if an army of demons was on their tails. Rini, Arla and Eldeth, however, struggled to get going. They slipped and lost their grips several times, dropping back to the base of the wall. The army was coming closer. Within a few seconds, they would be upon them. <sup>17</sup>Finally, the trio managed to ascend beyond the ability for any mane to attack them, but all of a sudden Sarith fell, landing hard on his back.

Eromani saw this and sprang into action. Summoning every ounce of magic within her, she cast Levitate once more, sending the drow twenty feet into the air just as the manes swarmed the area beneath them. “Just hold on until the others get to the top,” the sorceress instructed as she continued to raise Sarith. “Don’t even try to continue. You’re safe there. We’ll pull you up. Just hold on.” But the manes started to pile on top of one another in order to reach them, causing the three stragglers to panic. That’s when Eromani had another idea. “Sarith. Anchor yourself to their ropes. I’ll pull you all up together.”

“Hurry!” Arla cried at the top of her lungs. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold on, and they’re getting closer!”

<sup>18</sup>As everyone else continued to climb, Sarith did what Eromani said. He snagged Rini’s rope and used it as an anchor. Then he laced his leg around Arla’s and grabbed Eldeth’s. Finally, he wrapped one arm around the halfling’s and the other around the dwarf’s so that he wouldn’t accidentally lose his grip. “I’m ready,” he called, and Eromani began to raise him once more. Sarith groaned in pain as the ropes dug into his flesh, but he endured as they lifted higher and higher.

<sup>19</sup>Vlynrifane reached the top with the gnomes, Zen and Buppido. She’d been struggling against the weight, but being a spider she was able to climb much faster than the others. As she pulled Zen carefully over the edge, the rest dropped off to join Eromani. Then Ront, Prince Derendil and Graiyla also finished the climb, spinning around to see who was left that might need some help.

That’s when Derivell and Fiovay both lost their grips and dropped onto the swelling pile of manes. Eromani nearly lost her concentration, barely managing to keep Sarith afloat. Arla let

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<sup>16</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Fiovay rolled 18, Ront 22, Sarith 12, Rini 7, Derendil 14, Arla 5, Graiyla 16, Eldeth 9, and Derivell 11.

<sup>17</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Fiovay rolled 6, Ront 11, Sarith 1 (Dex save, DC 10. Rolled 8. He fell 11 damage and was prone), Rini 12, Derendil 21, Arla 12, Graiyla 9, Eldeth 14, and Derivell 3 (Dex save, DC 10. Rolled 20. Caught himself).

<sup>18</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Fiovay rolled 11, Ront 13, Derendil 17, Graiyla 12, and Derivell 21.

<sup>19</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Fiovay rolled 4 (Dex save, DC 10. Rolled 9. She falls 30 feet onto a pile of manes. Suffers 4 damage gaining resistance since she lands on manes to break her fall), Ront 23, Derendil 18, Graiyla 19, and Derivell 4 (Dex save, DC 10. Rolled 9. He falls 30 feet onto a pile of manes. Suffers 3 damage gaining resistance since he lands on manes to break his fall). Each mane they landed on suffered the same damage.

loose a blood-curdling scream as absolute hysteria began to take hold. Two people she knew just plummeted to their deaths.

At least, that's what her mind registered. Fiovey started chanting immediately as demon hands tried to grab her, and all at once, the manes under them fell asleep<sup>20</sup>. This allowed the pair to at least get to their feet as Fiovey yelled, "Quick! Drop us another line!"

The end of Ront's rope hit her in the face a moment later. Derivell snatched it, wrapped it around his wrist, grabbed Fiovey around the waist and shouted, "Pull us up! NOW!" The orc and prince did just that, yanking hard in tandem to draw them up like fish in a net out of the sea. Swiftly they rose as demon hands clawed at them. Manes tried jumping up to snag a hold, but none succeeded.

That's when the crossbow bolts started flying. <sup>21</sup>One bounced off the fortress wall near the paladin and rogue, and Derivell looked to see the drow wading through the ever diminishing sea of demons. One of them had decided to try to aim for the escaping pair, hoping to render at least one of them unconscious with drow poison before they reached the top.

Fiovey was now wrapping both arms and legs around the paladin, curling up almost into a ball. This allowed him to have a free hand. He pulled out his shield. "Just keep holding on to me," he told her, and she laughed.

"You think I'm going to let go?"

<sup>22</sup>Five more bolts flew at him as everyone above started to work together to haul them up, but not a single missile penetrated the paladin's armor and shield. At last, they were at battlements, and their companions grabbed them and hoisted them over together.

"My hero," said Fiovey, and she kissed Derivell on the cheek. "You really know how to show a girl a good time." Then she winked as they got to their feet.

"Spiders! Get up there!" Eromani then heard Ilvara commanding in elvish, and she glanced back out at the approaching army of drow. Reinforcements from Menzoberranzan had indeed arrived, increasing their numbers to more than a hundred at least. A dozen giant spiders were rapidly detaching from the force, making their way towards the wall.

Vlynrifane, back in drow form, looked around. At the top of the sloping roof, at the very back of the cavern wall where they merged, there was a single iron door. "There," she pointed. "Everyone follow me. A door."

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<sup>20</sup> Fiovey rolled 5d8 for her Sleep spell. She rolled 25. Two manes under Fiovey had 6 HP while the two under Derivell had 5 each. All four were put to sleep, totalling 22 HP.

<sup>21</sup> 11+4=15. Miss.

<sup>22</sup> 8, 11, 7, 9, 14. Miss.

No one argued. No one had any better ideas. Together, they ran as hard as they could. They were about ten feet from the entranceway when the giant spiders finished scaling the battlements. They were, fortunately, some distance away along the wall closer to the main doors, but they were closing in fast. The party reached the iron door, praying to every deity they believed in that it wasn't locked, and as Vlynrifane grabbed the handle...

... it didn't budge. It was locked. The deities weren't listening, it seemed.

"Bash it in!" Topsy screamed. "They're closing in."

"Get out of the way," said Fiovay. She had recovered her thieves' tools from the armory back in Velkynvelve. Everyone moved aside, drawing weapons and taking potshots at the approaching spiders. <sup>23</sup>Before Jimjar could even place a wager on whether she'd succeed or not, the lock clicked, and the ornate door, crafted with similar design to the main entrance, swung open. The party nearly trampled each other to force their way inside. The last one through, Derivell, slammed it shut behind.

"Welcome to Drathrinar," Shar's voice whispered in the Selunite's mind. "Welcome to despair."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Thieves' Tools check, DC 15. Fiovay rolled Nat 20+7=27. Success.

<sup>24</sup> XP Rewards. 500 party XP total for killing 58 manes (reduced due to receiving lots of aid from NPCs). 360 party XP for Havvah and Habrax battle (also reduced due to receiving lots of aid from NPCs). 500 party XP total for escaping into Drathrinar.

Havvah



Shar



## Chapter 2: No Time to Contemplate

Arla froze. Her heart would not stop beating violently in her chest. Her body was shaking. She was cold as ice and yet her ears were burning. She was lightheaded and hyperventilating. 'I need to calm down. I need to calm down,' she kept repeating to herself, but the more she fought the panic, the more it escalated.

The light from Rini's shield filled most of the chamber they were in as the halfling held it out in front of her. And so, the first thing Arla noticed was that there was a granite altar on a raised dais opposite the doorway. Three round stairs the length of the platform led up to it. The altar had a giant black circle complete with purple rim suspended over it, dangling from two golden chains, one on each side.

"Shar," she said aloud. "I'd know that symbol anywhere. Gods!" She tried to grip the wall for support. "It was all over Urmlaspyr when I was just a kid. The shadovar were everywhere back then, and they were terrible. I wasn't very old when we overthrew them."

Then Rini came over and took her hand. "Hey. Just look at me." Arla did as she was told. "It's gonna be okay. We're gonna be fine. You'll see. Come on. Breathe with me." She slowly took in a deep breath and let it out with equal speed. Arla tried to match her, knowing full well that it would help. There were actually only a few times that she'd been scared for her life prior to her experiences in the Underdark, and each time if she just tried to control her breathing it helped.

Still, this was by far the worst thing to ever happen to her. Ever since that now fateful day in the marketplace, she felt like terror was her new eternal master. She wore studded leather and carried a shortsword and hand crossbow, but those only made her feel like a little girl playing dress-up with mommy and daddy's clothes. She'd gotten used to her gear since their escape, learning how to fight at least a little, but she continued to wonder if she would ever see the light of day again.

'Breathe,' she told herself, closing her eyes. 'Breathe.'

"Gods, Shar's full of herself," Buppido commented as he perused the chamber. "Big ol' altar with big ol' Shar black symbol over it with four big ol' Shar statues; one in each corner. The center floor tiles even form circles with funky lines through them and runes."

"Not to mention those," said Topsy, pointing at two chests, one on either side of the altar. Each had the symbol of Shar painted on its lid. "Do you think those books will have something useful?" She pointed to two bookcases that were five shelves high standing along the back wall behind the big hanging symbol and altar.

<sup>25</sup>“This is a Contemplation Chamber,” said Derivell gravely. “This is where the high priest or priestess of the fortress would go to be alone with Shar.”

“Who cares?” said Turvy. “I don’t see a way out.”

“There should be,” said the paladin. “The head cleric would not want to get trapped up here should the fortress be attacked. The exit is probably hidden. Fan out and search.”

“Some of this stuff is fairly expensive looking,” said Fioyay as she looked at a few of the implements on the altar. “Ceremonial, jeweled dagger. <sup>26</sup>Looks magical.” She picked it up and turned it over expertly as she examined it. She grinned. “I think I’ll be keeping this one.” Arla then noted that the rogue was pocketing some other items as well. At least one was a necklace, and there were two candleholders slipped into the kitsune’s pack.

As most of the party searched for a secret door, Fioyay continued to loot the place. <sup>27</sup>The two chests were easily picked, and within one she found a suit of black half plate armor while in the other she found a matching shield, complete with Shar’s symbol on it, as well as a black mace with purple handle.

“I’m sensing a theme,” said the kitsune with a chuckle. “Black, black, purple, black. How drab!” <sup>28</sup>She didn’t know anything about the mace and shield, but she was sure the armor contained magic that allowed the user to be more stealthy. She handed it to Rini. “I know Derivell won’t wear it on account that it once belonged to a Sharran priest, but you wanna give it a go? I’d wear it, but it’s a bit too bulky for my tastes.”

<sup>29</sup>Rini looked up at Eromani who took the armor and examined it. She shrugged. “I trust her. Seems okay. I don’t think you have to attune to it.” The halfling then looked at Derivell to see if he was also okay with it, and he nodded. And so, she took off her scale armor and donned the half plate. As she did, Graiyla replaced her own chain shirt for the halfling’s suit. A few adjustments had to be made to expand the armor to fit the yuan-ti woman, but within a few minutes, they were both better equipped.

As this was happening, Eromani examined the other two items. “These are both magical as well. The mace is a Mace of Disruption. It DOES require attunement, but it isn’t Shadow Weave. It’s safe. You won’t need the Light spell anymore if you wield it. The mace automatically generates light while holding it.”

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<sup>25</sup> Religion check, DC 15. Derivell rolled 9 and  $15+2=17$  with advantage due to his knowledge of his nemesis deity. Success.

<sup>26</sup> Arcana check, DC 15. Fioyay rolled  $15+2=17$ . Success. Dagger + 1.

<sup>27</sup> Thieves’ Tools check, DC 12. Fioyay rolled  $14+7=21$  and  $7+7=14$ . Success.

<sup>28</sup> Arcana checks, DC 15. Fioyay rolled  $16+2=18$  for the armor,  $6+2=8$  for the shield and  $6+2=8$  for the mace. Half Plate of the Night. No Disadvantage on Stealth.

<sup>29</sup> Arcana checks, DC 15. Eromani rolled  $11+3=14$  for the armor.  $16+3=19$  for the mace and  $20+3=23$  for the shield. Mace of Disruption and Shield + 1.

“And this is a magic shield. See these runes?” She turned it over for Rini to see in the light of her current shield. “They’re minor protection wards. It’s certainly better than what you’ve got.”

“If it doesn’t require attunement, maybe we should give the shield to Derivell,” said Rini. “He’s the one always rushing up and trying to get the enemy’s attention.”

“As long as he’s okay with wielding a shield that has Shar’s symbol as large as life on the front,” said Eromani with a smirk.

Derivell shrugged and came to examine it himself. “Looks like I could paint over it, and as long as Shar doesn’t actually have any power imbued on it, I’m fine with it.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind that Shar’s pissed all over it?” asked Vlynrifane with a chuckle.

Derivell laughed. “I can always wash it off and purge it with lots of holy water.”

Just then, something slammed into the door reminding them that they were still being pursued by demons and drow. Arla almost jumped out of her skin. “Have we found the way out yet?” she asked. “I think we should focus just a bit more on finding the way out and a little less on looting the place.”

<sup>30</sup>“Relax,” Fiovey told her with a look of utmost confidence. “Fear not, for I have found it.” Then she gestured to the statue’s crossed left arm that she was standing next to. It was the statue in the back left corner as one faced the altar. Without further hesitation, she grabbed the arm and pulled down.

*FOOM! BZZT!* There was a metallic booming sound as the arm gave way, sliding forty-five degrees downward. It was followed by the sound of electricity. Everyone looked around to see if they could find the opened secret door, but they noticed nothing new...

... until the four statues came to life! Arla spotted the one closest to her as it stepped down from its base. Once again, the peasant woman let loose an ear-piercing scream as she fled to the center of the chamber. ‘They’re coming to life! They’re coming to life!’ her brain wailed over and over again.

Everything happened so fast, Arla could hardly take it all in. Topsy had her war pick in hand, and she immediately took a couple good swings at the statue in the back right corner. She was surprised to find that the animated giant deflected both attacks with its weapons. <sup>31</sup>Meanwhile, Buppido fired his light repeating crossbow at the one in the front left corner, but the bolts bounced off as if they were nothing more than gnats.

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<sup>30</sup> Investigation check, DC 15. Fiovey rolled 5+2=7. Failure.

<sup>31</sup> Topsy 8 & 17. Buppido 10. Statue 1 = 1 & 23. No damage to Topsy.



Then the statue Topsy attacked countered with a swing from each “sword”, which wasn’t sharp by any means. This was good, for the statue’s left weapon caught the gnome in the thigh. It was a decent hit, but it didn’t seem to phase the gnome in the slightest, for some reason.

As this was happening, the statue that Buppido attacked ignored him entirely. Instead, it went for Graiyla who was closer. <sup>32</sup>Before the yuan-ti could dodge completely out of the way, it managed to bash her in the right shoulder, sending her spinning and almost toppling to the floor.

<sup>33</sup>Then Graiyla retreated a good fifteen feet from the construct who dealt her a minor parting blow as she went. Just a few feet from Arla, she spun and lightning flashed, streaking out from her sword. This was no lightning bolt she projected. It remained connected to the construct as if it was a chain of energy. Arla had never seen anything like it before, and she marveled for a second. That was when Eldeth, Jimjar, Vlynrifane and Shreiken ganged up on the metal monster, battering it or shooting it from every side.

Out of the corner of her eye, Arla also saw the statue in the front right corner going for Eromani, but the half-elf sorceress was like an acrobat. She sidestepped, crouched, rolled backward, and sprang back to her feet, leaving the twelve foot tall Shar giant utterly confused as to why the woman wasn’t splattered goo on the floor. Then she launched three energy missiles into the construct’s right side. <sup>34</sup>It staggered a bit from the force, leaving it exposed as Derivell, Rini and Zen arrived to help. The halfling once again had her bow out, and it was glowing with divine light.

A split second later, the fourth statue smacked Fioyay in the side. The rogue was still on her feet, but she looked more than a little worse for wear. She tried to slash and jab at it in return, but it defended with little effort. That was when Prince Derendil and Ront rushed to her aid. They did nothing but scratch it and draw its attention, but Fioyay looked quite relieved.

Then Sarith caught Arla's attention. He crouched behind the altar, using it for cover, as he fired a bolt right past her head, aiming for the same statue that Graiyla was battling. <sup>35</sup>Unfortunately, it only bounced off the metal hide. At that moment, Turvy roared in fury and ran to his sister’s aid, swinging his war pick wildly. His first strike bounced right off, but his second dug in. A moment later, he tore his pick free, preparing for another savage blow.

All this took no more than six seconds at most.

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!** The outer door thudded again and again, this time with a series of strikes. It was clear that more of the enemy had arrived, and they were trying to work together to break in.

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<sup>32</sup> Statue 2 = 6 & 19. 6. Statue 3 = 10 & 14. Statue 4 = 12 & 23. 7 off Fioyay.

<sup>33</sup> Statue 2 Attack of Opportunity. 14. 3 damage off Graiyla. Graiyla Witchbolt 19. 11. Shreiken 17 & 15. Eldeth 17 & 22. 7. Jimjar 20 & 17. 11. Vlynrifane casts Flame Blade and attacks 11. Miss.

<sup>34</sup> 2, 3 and 5 damage to Statue 3. Zen 18. 6. Statue 3 DC 11. Rolled 16. Success. Derivell 22. 5. Rini 21. 9. Fioyay 11 & 1. Derendil 10 & 11. Ront 7.

<sup>35</sup> Sarith 16. Turvy 6 & 20. 5.

That was when it suddenly dawned on the glassblower from Urmlaspyr that she should also be doing something. She looked around, trying desperately to see if she could find the secret exit that Derivell was sure should be there.

<sup>36</sup>Immediately, she noticed the tiles she was standing on. There was a small center ring and a larger outer ring. The outer ring had four smaller circles attached to it, like four orbiting moons. Four lines, like spokes of a wheel, protruded from the center ring almost like the hands of a compass pointing to the four moons. Each moon had a rune etched into it. The first had one squiggly line and a dot. The second had two squiggly lines and four dots. The third had a squiggly line going one way and another perpendicular to it with no dots, and the fourth had four squiggly lines with eight dots.

As she was examining this, the battle around her continued. <sup>37</sup>Topsy managed to chip a huge chunk off the statue she was fighting, but Buppido's crossbow was useless. The statue battered Topsy, but once again it seemed to be completely ineffective. The statue Graiyla was fighting lashed out at Jimjar, knocking him around a bit, and the statue fighting Eromani turned and started to focus on Derivell. Nevertheless, it couldn't get past his new shield. Meanwhile, the statue fighting Fiovay saw Prince Derendil as its most vicious opponent, and it switched targets, clubbing him with little effect.

Then Graiyla sent a surge of power from her sword which caused her enemy to finally topple over and fall apart. With that, her chain of energy fizzled out as if it had never been. At the same time, Eromani launched three more missiles which blew the head off of the one focusing on Derivell. The rest of it crumpled into a heap a few seconds later. As for the one Prince Derendil was practically wrestling with, it also died as Zen pulled it off its feet and he, Fiovay, and Shreiken tore it apart.

Only one statue was left, the one battling Topsy. Now that Derivell was free, he ran up to it and stabbed it in the chest where a person's heart should be. As this happened, Sarith repositioned himself down the stairs, standing near Eldeth and Rini as they fired their ranged weapons. At the same time, Ront, Turvy, Jimjar, and Vlynrifane joined the fray.

Suddenly, Arla solved the mystery of the floor tiles. She was sure of it. As she was stooping down, she noticed that the "spokes" in the pattern were actually grooves. 'The tiles were meant to slide down along those lines. Stairs,' she thought. 'I bet it forms a circular staircase if we twist the correct floor tile or something. Those runes look like numbers... maybe. I'll twist the tile that looks like a 'One.'

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<sup>36</sup> Investigation check, DC 15. Arla rolled 6. Failure.

<sup>37</sup> Topsy 21 & 7. 6. Buppido 8. Statue 1 = 15 & 22. No damage to Topsy. Statue 2 = 18 & 1. 6 damage to Jimjar. Statue 3 = 9 and 15 against Derivell. Statue 4 = 16 & 11. 3 damage to Prince Derendil. Graiyla 11 damage with Witchbolt. RIP Statue 2. Eromani Magic Missile 5, 5 and 3 damage. RIP Statue 3. Sarith 7. Turvy 9 & 7. Shreiken 23 and 23. 11 damage. Eldeth 11 & 16. Jimjar 7 & 13. Zen 22. 7 damage. Strength save, DC 11. Statue 4 rolled 10. Failure. Prone. Fiovay 19 & 19. 13 damage. Vlyn 13. Derivell Nat 20. 11 damage. Derendil 22. 4 damage. RIP Statue 4. Rini 7. Ront 17.

It was the wrong tile. Instantly, the world fell away. The tiles dropped into grooves in a circular shaft that was roughly twenty feet in diameter. Arla couldn't scream this time, for it took everything she had to catch the edge and hold on<sup>38</sup>. Graiyla was not so fortunate. She had been standing on the edge when the floor fell away, and the yuan-ti was not prepared in the slightest. She cried out in shock and dismay, tumbling past Arla into nothing.

"HELP! HELP!" Arla wailed, utterly losing her mind. 'I just killed Graiyla!' was all she could think about - that and the fact that she was already starting to lose her grip. "HELP!"

But her words were somewhat drowned out by the fact that a thick stone wall had sprung up to seal off the altar area. It shot up to the ceiling so quickly that no one had time to react before it divided the room in two. So the only ones who could rush to the woman's rescue were Sarith, Eldeth, Buppido, Rini and Eromani. Everyone else was with the last statue on the other side.

It took several seconds for Eromani and Rini to recognize Arla's voice and realize where it was coming from. When they did, they ran, dove and slid to the edge, grabbing onto her arms just before she let go. <sup>39</sup>Together, they quickly pulled her up as Sarith, Eldeth and Buppido joined them, forming a protective semi-circle around them.

*Click!* The outer door's lock suddenly popped, indicating that their enemies had picked it. In moments, the room would be filled with drow and their allies. Somehow, Arla's blood ran colder than it already was. She froze, staring in horror at the entranceway. She went completely numb.

"Time's up," Eromani said in desperation. Then she unexpectedly shoved Arla into the pit.

Arla returned to life, clawing at the air and screaming with everything she had. Then she hit water - or rather, what she THOUGHT was water - and fought to resurface. The fluid she was in had a life of its own, however, and strong currents grabbed her legs, pulling her down harder in a spiral. She took in some water, choked, sputtered, gagged, and blackness started to take her.

But all at once she was sucked into a smaller slanted shaft and deposited into what could only be described as a cell with a single iron door. The room was empty and made almost entirely of stone, roughly ten feet long by five feet wide. The water drained quickly through a grate in the floor, allowing her to breathe again. This left her coughing violently and gasping for air. A moment later, she heard someone drop into a cell next to hers, followed by several more. Then, just like that, everything went silent except for Arla's own hacking.

This only lasted a few moments, though. In the cell next to hers, Eromani started to chant. Over and over again, she used the same spell, and it sounded like she was hurling or projecting something at her door. Finally, there came the sound of a chunk of metal falling to the stone

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<sup>38</sup> Dex save, DC 15. Arla rolled 15. Graiyla rolled 5.

<sup>39</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Help Action. Eromani and Rini roll 9 & 13. Success.

floor, and within moments, the mage was at it again, pounding the spell into Arla's door. The lock and latch superheated after maybe thirty seconds. Then a swift kick sent the door flying inwards. The sorceress stood before her.

"You okay?" she asked as she saw who it was that she'd just rescued.

Arla nodded, though she didn't feel okay. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "This is all my fault. I..."

"You saved our lives. The drow were about to capture us," Eromani said sharply. She had no time for such things. "You gave us a - fortunately - safe escape route. But they're likely not far behind. I saw them entering the Contemplation Chamber as we jumped in after you. That means they probably saw us too. It won't take them long to figure out how to follow us even though I saw the shaft seal up as we hit the water. We need to get moving."

Then she hurried to the next cell, hurling fiery missiles at its lock, just as she had her own and Arla's. Several minutes passed, but eventually those who had dropped into the pit were reunited. This included Eromani, Rini, Sarith, Eldeth, Buppido, and much to Arla's relief, Graiyla. "I think that's everyone," said Eromani. "The rest were trapped on the other side of the wall back in the Contemplation Chamber. Now let's get out of here."

"Wherever here is," said Buppido. "Looks like we're in a dungeon. Lots of corridors and cells. I..."

A woman's voice cut him off. She did not speak in a language Arla understood, but Eromani knew it. The two had a brief conversation. Then Arla asked, "Wha - What's going on?"

Eromani was on edge. "She speaks Celestial."

"Celestial?" asked Arla. "As in like angels and stuff?"

Eromani nodded as she led the way. "She claims she is an angel named Havvah," the sorceress explained in lower tones. "Derivell's mother."

"Gods!" hissed Eldeth. "Didn't he warn us that Selune said not to trust her?"

"Exactly," said Eromani as she continued briskly along. "But we can't just leave her here. What if it actually IS his mother? There's no way the enemy could have expected us to come down here. Right?"

"Um," said Buppido. "Wrong. I heard an absolute that was not true. You said 'we CAN'T just leave her here.' However, I'd like to point out that we very much CAN leave her, and we SHOULD leave her if we suspect her to be a trap."

“An angel would make a powerful ally,” said Rini. “And what if it IS his mother? Derivell would never forgive us for leaving her here. Also, he might abandon us to try to fight his way back inside if he finds out she’s here. This could be our only chance to save her.”

“And we can remain vigilant,” said Eromani. “Take her with but not trust her.” And with that, she stopped. “Third cell from the corner. That’s what she said.” Then she talked through the door in Celestial. A moment later, there was a weak but hopeful response from within. “Yeah. This is it.” Eromani took a few steps back and blasted the lock until the door swung open.

What they found was shocking. The cell was splattered with endless amounts of dried blood and gore. It was all over the walls, the ceiling and especially the floor. At the far end lay a once beautiful woman, now a truly horrific sight. So terrible was her condition that Arla lost what little she had in her stomach as she retreated back into the corridor. She wasn’t even sure what happened after that, for she started to pass out. To save herself, she dropped into a crouch and forced herself to once again concentrate on breathing.

The next thing she knew, the sounds of others dropping into cells filled the halls. Arla stood and was about to shout a warning when Eromani emerged, the remains of the angel woman on her back. They had draped a blanket over her to give her at least some modesty, and Eldeth was now carrying both her own pack and the sorceress’s.

On they went, hurrying down the passage. The sounds of loud banging began to permeate the dungeon. Whoever else had arrived, most likely drow, they were attempting to break out. Eromani led the way with Rini, Graiyla and Eldeth right behind. Next was Sarith and Arla, with Sarith keeping just a bit ahead of her. Buppido came last.

<sup>40</sup>Then, unexpectedly, Arla felt something sharp stab her in the left side. She cried out in pain and instinctively threw herself against one of the stone walls. She could feel herself starting to black out again, but fear helped her fight back. Everyone stopped and turned to see what was happening. “What is it?” asked Rini, a look of utmost concern on her face.

Buppido was beside himself. “I...” He pointed at Arla’s side. There was a strange look on his face; a look of guilt. A crossbow bolt was stuck in her, and she was freaking out at the sight of it. “It came out of nowhere. I...”<sup>41</sup>

Arla’s eyes went wide. In the light of Rini’s bow she could see red on the derro’s left hand. “Y-you tried to kill me,” she gasped. “You st-stabbed me. Why?”

Buppido’s expression suddenly turned psychotic as he started to back away. His light repeating crossbow was in his right hand, and a wild look took over. Then he started to laugh maniacally. “Well, you’re a bit more resilient than expected. I thought you’d drop as quietly as the fish.”

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<sup>40</sup> Stealth 12. Surprise Attack Nat 20. 4 off Arla. Drow Poison. Constitution save, DC 13. Arla rolls 19. Success.

<sup>41</sup> Deception check. Buppido rolled 1. Everyone could tell he was lying through his teeth.

“Holy \$#@!” breathed Eldeth. “He’s the killer.”

Everyone was frozen in place, fearful about what the derro might do next but ready to fight. He just laughed again - a truly insane cackle. “Ah well. I underestimated the girl; thought she’d crumple like a house of cards. Didn’t think anyone would notice as I dragged her off into one of these cells to offer her as yet another bloody and wonderful sacrifice to MYSELF!” Then he laughed even more riotously.

“He’s nuts,” said Graiyla in awe, but she was one step away from rushing in and attacking. As she was saying this, Rini hurried to Arla, pulled the bolt from her side and healed her.<sup>42</sup> It was a moment of excruciating pain followed by soothing warmth. As soon as the halfling was finished, both retreated behind Eldeth and Eromani.

Buppido didn’t notice any of it. He continued with his rant. “TREMBLE NOW, MORTALS!” he bellowed. “I am the living incarnation of the great Diinkarazan! I am THE avatar of murder. One-by-one I will gut you, offering your bloody carcasses up as sacrifices. I shall create a path of carnage throughout the Underdark for my people to follow to GLORY! This - all this... This is all according to my ‘divine plan.’” Then he laughed again as if he’d told the funniest joke.

“Yes, I appear to be outnumbered by you. Yes, it seems you will defeat me, but no. I - even I - Diinkarazan, am INVINCIBLE! I cannot be killed. This mortal form? Do you think it means anything? NO! Hahahaha! Kill this form and...”

“Okay,” said Eromani, cutting him off, and without warning she let go of the angel on her back and chanted. Palm outstretched in a heartbeat, three glowing darts pelted the twisted psychopath.<sup>43</sup> As he backpedaled from her assault, Eldeth raised and fired her bow<sup>44</sup>, putting an arrow in his right lung. The derro fell, blood pouring out of his fatal wound. Not satisfied, Graiyla hurried up and hacked his head off. Arla turned away just in time, pressing her back once more against the wall for support.

That’s when she noticed that Rini had slipped behind Eromani while Buppido had been monologuing. When the sorceress had dropped the angel, the halfling had caught her. She quickly carried her to the wall as well, keeping her enshrouded in the blanket. Now that Buppido was dead, Eromani hurried to reclaim her, and Rini helped.

“Come on,” said the cleric when the angel was once again secured. “We’ve lost precious time.” Then they hastened off, leaving Buppido to rot in a pool of his own blood.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Healed Arla 4 HP to full health.

<sup>43</sup> 3, 3, 2 damage to Buppido.

<sup>44</sup> 14. 12. RIP Buppido.

<sup>45</sup> Award 250 XP to the party for the battle with the four statues and 50 XP to the party for killing Buppido.

(Note: I fully expected that Buppido was going to kill Arla in this chapter; which is partially why I made this chapter from her point of view. In my mind, he'd been watching her for some time, eager to ambush her and drag her off. He viewed her like Shuushar, one of the weakest members of the party, so it made the most sense to me that he'd attack her next.

Then, to set the stage even more perfectly, the dice worked in favor of this. Fiovay failed the Investigation check, triggering the statue attack, and Arla failed the Investigation check as well, making it so that she'd trigger the floor trap. From there, it simply made sense that the ranged characters would be trapped on the one side of the chamber with the melee on the other. Since Buppido is mostly a ranged character, he'd get to be in the group with Arla.

After that, it again made sense that while the smaller party of ranged characters was escaping the dungeon, Buppido would start to linger behind a bit, preparing to make his move. Arla was terrified, so she'd want as many in front of her as possible, also lingering towards the back. Finally, I expected Buppido was going to succeed in dropping her with one strike of the crossbow bolt and/or drow poison like he did Shuushar. She literally has no bonuses to dice rolls, and I thought for sure she'd fail and fall unconscious, or Buppido would deal 8 damage. After all, I gave him advantage on his attack roll, and he rolled a Crit. I never expected him to roll snake-eyes on his damage dice.

I had it all worked out. I was going to make it like some dark, scary thriller. I was going to write how she wakes up later to find herself tied down. In the dark, a cloaked figure appears, sharpening his ceremonial dagger. He mentions something about her being a sacrifice to HIMSELF, the great Diinkarazan. Then I was going to have him hover over her with the knife, describe her absolute terror, and end it with a blood-curdling scream that everyone throughout the fortress hears.

After that, I was going to have Buppido missing from the party - no one knowing where he went or what happened to him. Periodically, traps throughout the Fortress of Despair would be sprung, traps laid by Buppido to isolate more party members. He was going to take out characters one-by-one until I randomly rolled one of the PCs. That would be when the big reveal was going to occur. Buppido is the murderer and a final fight would ensue between him and the PC he was trying to murder.

But that was not how fate would have it, I guess. Even though I rolled Nat 20 on Buppido's attack roll, he only rolled 4 damage. 4! To add to this, I had decided to increase Arla's HP to 8 and gave her proficiency in Light Armor, Hand Crossbows and Shortswords prior to this chapter to show that she, too, was growing as a character. After everything she'd been through, I figured she deserved at least a small boost in HP from 4 to 8 (rolled a 4 on a d4, so again fate was on her side) and to become proficient in items she'd now been using and sleeping in/with for days.

This wound up being what saved her life, in the end. Turns out, between unlucky damage dice for Buppido, an unlucky Deception roll, and a lucky saving throw for Arla, she managed to survive this encounter and Buppido had to die. So, Buppido's plan to prey on multiple people while they made their way through the Fortress of Despair was cut short, changing the story's direction considerably and unexpectedly.

Oh well! That's part of what makes playing D&D so fun. You never know what's REALLY going to happen. One dice roll (or in this case several) can change everything.)

Shar's Symbol





## Chapter 3: Smoke and Mirrors

<sup>46</sup>Topsy tried to penetrate the statue's defenses with a swipe from right to left, but the metal Shar deflected with its left "sword". The gnome growled fiercely, spun, and came from left to right with the same result. Then the statue clubbed her in the head with its left, throwing her off balance, and it followed up with its right, beating down on her from above with a second blow to the head.

Still, remarkably, she acted as if the construct was using pillows as opposed to weapons that were like hammers. When she recovered, she hissed defiantly at it even as Turvy buried his pick into its right shin, forcing it to its knees. Finally, Jimjar jumped up on its back, ran to its head, and brought his own pick down into the back of its skull. With this, Shar's image gave up the ghost, its magic becoming severed from its physical form. It collapsed on its face, lifeless.

Derivell had been about to strike, but seeing it fall, he stepped back and looked around, reassessing the situation. He sensed the wall cutting him off from some of his companions, but he wasn't fully aware of the details of what had happened. Who was missing? Was there any way to get to them? It didn't take him long to realize Eromani, Rini, Graiyla, Arla, Buppido, Eldeth and Sarith were gone; and with them Stool who was in Eldeth's backpack.

It also didn't take him long to realize that they needed to find a way out of their section of the Contemplation Chamber, and fast. He could hear Mistress Ilvara on the other side, screaming in elvish at her minions. The wall, in fact, was their present salvation, but who knew how long it would remain up?

"The others got away," Vlynrifane reported, coming up to stand next to him, her flaming blade crackling in her left hand. "Ilvara saw them drop down a hole in the floor. Our enemies are trying to figure out how to reopen it."

The wall started to descend. Derivell's heart leapt into his throat. He spun on his heel. "There's likely still a secret door out of this section. Spread out! Hurry! <sup>47</sup>Check the bookshelves. They most likely slide sideways to reveal a secret passage."

"Too obvious," said Vlynrifane. Then she dropped into a crouch next to the altar, feeling along its base. Her index finger snagged a small indentation. Pressing it, there was a click, and all at once the altar slid forward towards the descending wall. Beneath, a ladder dropped roughly ten feet to a hallway. "Shreiken. To me," she commanded. Then she dropped into the passage without even using the ladder. Her companion was right behind her, landing in her arms.

"That's it!" Derivell cried, more relieved than he could imagine. He frantically waved the others over to him. "Go! Go! Go!"

Down they went, Derivell taking up the rear with Vlynrifane leading the way. As he descended into the shaft, he pulled his gauntlet off and felt the bottom of the altar, just as the druid had done. Finding the indentation, he pressed it, glad to see that the altar was sliding back into place as a result.

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<sup>46</sup> Topsy 9 & 1. Statue 21 & 22. No damage. Turvy 19 & 12. 5. Shreiken 16 & 16. Jimjar 7 & 19. 15. RIP Statue.

<sup>47</sup> Investigation check, DC 15. Topsy 14, Turvy 16, Jimjar 9, Fiovay 14, Vlynrifane 19, Derivell 2, Derendil 18, Ront 6. Vlynrifane rolled the highest.

But they were not safe, by far. By the time the paladin hit the switch, the wall was more than halfway down. The drow forces were climbing over and dropping into the chamber. They reached the altar just a split second too late. They didn't even have the ability to aim and fire a crossbow bolt at him, but they saw him as he escaped. They knew full well where their former prisoners had gone, and it would not be long before they also figured out how to open up the secret passage.

"They're right behind us!" he called towards the front. "There won't likely be traps in this passage. It's an escape route for the priest or priestess."

Vlynrifane rolled her eyes. 'Translation,' she thought, more than a little annoyed. 'Run faster! As if I'm not running as fast as I can already.' She reached a spiral staircase and took two steps at a time. Shreiken was riding on her right shoulder, clinging to her tightly. Directly behind her was Zen followed by Ront, Prince Derendil, Turvy, Topsy, Jimjar, Fiovay and finally Derivell in single file.

The stairs wound down about twenty feet, ending at an iron door. There was no handle or keyhole, but a lever to the right was larger than life. She grabbed it and yanked down. <sup>48</sup>It didn't want to give at first, but with Ront and Derendil's help, she finally managed to slam it into place.

The door swung open on its own, allowing them to pass into an intersection with three ways to go; right, left or straight. Vlynrifane had no idea which way to go, but she didn't hesitate. She knew they didn't have time. 'When in doubt, go right,' she told herself. It was one of the oldest rules she'd been taught when trying to find your way in a dungeon, and it came to her instantly.

Off they went, racing down the right passage, and as Derivell exited the stairwell, he threw the lever back up. <sup>49</sup>The door snapped closed behind him right in the face of one of the drow soldiers.

<sup>50</sup>Vlynrifane reached the far end of the corridor, and it turned left. By the time Derivell reached it, the drow were pouring out of the stairway. One of them even dropped to one knee and fired at him, but the shot bounced off the wall way after the aasimar was gone.

There were doors on both the right and left, but Vlynrifane was not about to explore. The last thing they needed was to get cornered in a room. They needed to somehow find a way to lose their enemies and fast.

<sup>51</sup>But the Fortress of Despair was built with many traps for those who didn't belong there. The original Sharrans who constructed it didn't want to kill their intruders. They wanted to terrorize and torture them until they converted to the faith. "Dare to tread upon Shar's domain, and you are begging to become her acolyte," had once been a common saying amongst those ancient believers, and it was carved into more than one plaque in Drathrinar's dungeons.

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<sup>48</sup> Strength check, DC 10. Vlynrifane rolled 9. Failure. Second attempt with Ront and Derendil using the Help Action. 6 & 19. Success. It took 12 seconds to finally get the lever into place. Drow rolled 12 & 20 with the Help Action to find the secret switch on the altar. It only took them 6 seconds to begin pursuit.

<sup>49</sup> Strength check, DC 10. Derivell rolled 17. Success.

<sup>50</sup> Strength check, DC 10. Drow rolled 19 & 8. Success.

<sup>51</sup> Perception check, DC 12. Vlynrifane rolled 6. Failure.

And so, one of those traps took control of the situation, removing all choice from the party. Vlynrifane did not see the trigger mechanism. She didn't even realize it was there after she'd tripped it. For the rest of her life, she would never know what it was. All she knew was that the floor in front of her suddenly slanted sharply at a sixty-degree angle.<sup>52</sup> She lost her footing and tumbled end over end. Zen gave no thought to it, following his present pack leader without question. Ront didn't realize what was happening until it was too late, and he joined them. After that, everyone else simply dove and rolled, thinking Vlynrifane was intentionally leading them that way. The floor snapped back up into place just as the first enemy drow arrived.

The world became a slick, stone slide that twisted and spiraled ever downward. A slime coated the circular shaft, making it impossible to slow their descent. For a good fifteen seconds, they continued until at last they were thrown out into what appeared to be an arena with no spectators.

The chamber was roughly two hundred feet in diameter and about fifty feet from floor to ceiling. Eight circular portals, crackling with purple energy, were at even intervals around the circumference. They were ten feet in diameter. Directly above each was a circular slide shaft; one of which they had just been projected out of. Above each slide shaft was a glowing purple sphere embedded into the stone walls. There appeared to be no physical exits of any kind.

The portals flashed. Eight shadow demons emerged. Their forms were silhouettes against the backdrop of the portals. Their upper halves were humanoid with bat-like wings and long, sharp talons. Their lower halves were ghost-like, wisping away into nothingness. They had wide, toothy maws, sharply pointy ears, and pupiless white eyes that almost seemed like holes in their black, shadowy faces.

One seemed about to speak, but it was interrupted by the sounds of others sliding into the room. The party of escaped prisoners danced away from the shaft they'd dropped in from, for two dozen drow suddenly appeared, landing in heaps. Shoor, Ilvara's consort, was among them. He had confidently led the force in pursuit, refusing to let Jorlan claim such a victory for his lady. This, of course, was exactly what his rival had wanted. He offered to be the one to risk his life first, knowing full well that Shoor would take the bait. He could only hope Shoor would fail and die in the process.

The chief demon laughed, a deep and intimidating sound. "Greetings, intruders," he said in an almost cordial and friendly manner. His voice was as deep as the Abyss itself. As soon as he finished speaking each sentence, the other seven demons repeated what he said in other tongues to ensure everyone understood. "It has been a long time since someone has activated these portals. Welcome to Drathrinar, the Fortress of Despair. Shar welcomes you. Thank you for coming. This is the Hivoriles, better known as the Pit of Hopelessness in the Common tongue. Thank you for joining us."

"Here is how this works," the demon continued after only a moment's pause. "Surrender and swear your soul to Shar, and you will be allowed to leave after you have been branded and imbued with the Shadow Weave to confirm your loyalties. Resist and we will attack you, render you near death in the most painful way we can, and then we'll drag you off to torture chambers where you will be revived and tortured, revived and tortured, and revived and tortured until you submit or die of old age - assuming you are of a race that can actually die of old age. If you can't die, you'll live on forever in torment until you submit. Now, isn't that pleasant?" His

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<sup>52</sup> Dex save, DC 15. Vlynrifane rolled 6. Ront 3.

sarcasm while speaking those final words was evident. Then he chuckled a few times as if he'd made a fairly humorous joke.

"If you surrender, simply step into one of the glowing portals," the demon concluded. "Someone will assist you in your initiation as an acolyte of Shar. It's really just that simple. And, just in case you have no intelligence, let me break it down for you. Go through portal equals no pain. Stay here equals lots of pain. The choice is yours. You have three minutes to decide."

Shoor was quick to take command of the situation. Brazenly, he stepped forward to address the chief demon. He spoke in Common, just as the demon had, hoping to also intimidate his prey in the process with his confident words. "I am Shoor Vandree, lieutenant and consort of Mistress Ilvara of House Mizzrym, commander and priestess of Lolth at the outpost known as Velkynvelve. These are escaped slaves that we have come to reclaim. Surrender them to us at once and release us from this place or suffer the wrath of Menzoberranzan; even Lolth herself."

The chief demon looked at him with a supremely bored expression on his face. "Two minutes and fifty seconds remaining." Shoor continued to demand cooperation, but the demons ignored him, proceeding with the countdown. With each passing moment, the drow became more irate, transitioning from demands to threats and promises of absolute retribution for daring such insolence.

<sup>53</sup>Taking advantage of this, Fiovey gathered her companions together. "Listen. I have two ideas. Vlyn. Can you transform into a spider again - er... anything that could scale back up through one of the slide shafts?"

Seeing where she was going, the druid took a moment to consider. "Yes, but there's no way I could haul everyone up behind me fast enough using my webbing. The demons would surely catch us especially since there are no doors or gates to seal behind us. I could save a few of us, but that's it."

Fiovey nodded, still trying to work through her plan. "Smoke and mirrors. That's what this is. Don't you see? The Sharrans HAD to have had a way to get in here to take intruders out once they'd either been defeated or they surrendered. What's the most logical place for entrances or exits?"

Turvy answered, much to everyone's surprise. "Behind the portals. Prisoners will 'step through the portals' as if they are going to another plane of existence, but in truth they're just stepping through a doorway into another part of the fortress."

"Exactly," said Fiovey. "Most likely into another chamber that Sharrans would then brand them in, or whatever."

"Do you think the demons are even real?" asked Topsy. "Are they just illusions?"

"Hard to say," said Fiovey. "Either way, I'm ninety-nine point nine percent sure that the portals aren't real. They are produced by the glowing orbs above the shafts."

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<sup>53</sup> Investigation check, DC 15. Derivell 9. Fiovey 19. Vlynrifane 11. Topsy 12. Turvy 17. Ront 11. Prince Derendil 11. Jimjar 11.

“So what’s the plan?” asked Derivell, trying to get to the point. They only had just over two minutes at that point.

Fiovey’s mind was racing. “We layer the distractions,” she told them. “Best way to trick someone is to get them to focus their attention on multiple locations as if one of those locations is where we are doing our primary thing. Meanwhile, we’re ACTUALLY doing something else in another location.”

“You lost me,” said Derivell.

“Exactly,” said Fiovey.

“Just tell everyone what to do,” the aasimar replied, giving up on trying to help her work through it. “We now have less than two minutes.”

“Timing is everything,” said Fiovey. Then she told everyone what they needed to do.

<sup>54</sup>Afterwards, Fiovey strode towards Shoor, retaking her human appearance as effortlessly as stepping into a room. “Lieutenant,” she said in a loud voice, tearing the command of the situation away from the drow. The dark elf soldiers raised their weapons at her in response, warning her that they would attack if she got too close. She dared another couple steps just to show her lack of concern.

Shoor looked at her out of the corner of his eye. If looks could kill, Fiovey would have been a mutilated carcass on the floor. “How dare you address me, Slave Dog?” he spat in reply.

“Slave Dog! Hah! Good one,” laughed the young woman, and she turned into a kitsune before him. “See? I AM a dog - well, a kitsune to be exact, but most people consider foxes to be canines and thus dogs.” Then she waved that aside. “But that’s not important. We have less than a minute. There are eight shadow demons. Together, we make more than thirty.” She gestured behind her to her companions without looking. “Let us team up and slaughter them. Then we promise to surrender to you.”

A grin started to spread across Shoor’s face. “Really?” he said, now completely amused. “Best look behind you. Seems your companions aren’t of the same mind as you.”

Fiovey spun around and saw that she was standing alone in the center of the chamber. Her companions were slowly making their way towards the opposite end. They were standing before two of the portals, discussing in hushed tones what they were going to do.

Fiovey turned back towards the drow. She had a sheepish look on her face. “Well, isn’t that a kick in the pants.”

“Thirty seconds,” the demon announced.

“I guess, then, that you can... just go die in a hole,” said the rogue, her smile never faltering, and with that, she threw down two flasks of oil. They shattered all over the ground between her and the dark elves.

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<sup>54</sup> Deception check, DC 14. Fiovey rolled 19. Success.

As she did this, <sup>55</sup>Topsy and Turvy threw candles Fiovey had given them from her pack. Both had used the kitsune's tinder box to light them while she was distracting their enemies. The candles landed as intended, igniting the oil. It wasn't enough to create more than a half-foot high pool of flames, but it did what it was supposed to. The dark elves withdrew slightly, all eyes on the fire as if expecting it to attack.

Derivell then cast the Light spell, temporarily blinding the shadow demons nearest him. As he did this, <sup>56</sup>Prince Derendil and Ront shoved the two closest fiends away from their respective portals. Vlynrifane's blade extinguished as she transformed into a giant spider and climbed with Shreiken and Jimjar on her back. She made her way up to the closest slide shaft, webbing Zen in the process and dragging him with her. When Jimjar got close to the glowing sphere above the shaft, he shattered it with his pick.

Purple light flashed, creating more confusion, and the portal below the druid snuffed out. Sure enough, it revealed an exit that was wide open. A twenty foot long hall led into a chamber that was complete with torture devices, a stone table with straps, branding equipment, and other such implements. A portcullis that could be dropped barely protruded from the ceiling above the entranceway. There was a lever to operate it at the end of the hall.

Before anyone or anything could stop them, Prince Derendil, Topsy, Turvy and Ront fled with Derivell standing his ground at the opening. The paladin continued to hold his sword high. Over and over again, he continued to drop his Light spell and then recast it, doing everything in his power to blind his enemies and disorient them.

Meanwhile, Fiovey also retreated, taking a few steps and then leaping as she went. Then the dark elves pursued, Shoor leading the way. Suddenly, they screamed in agony and began to fall all over one another. <sup>57</sup>As the rogue had been distracting them, she had slipped open three bags of caltrops that she secretly scattered all over the floor. That was the whole reason why she had leapt on her way towards her friends. She didn't want to step on any herself.

The demons moved to intercept, one moving to attack Derivell while the other going after Vlynrifane. The druid, however, did the unexpected. Instead of going into the shaft, she climbed back down and walked on the ceiling inside the hall her companions were escaping into. Jimjar and Shreiken held on for dear life, and Zen dangled from her rear. <sup>58</sup>At the last second, before the druid was within the hall, Fiovey leapt again, landing on Zen and sticking to him like glue.

One of the shadow demons reached Derivell at that moment<sup>59</sup>, but the paladin's light threw off its aim. It attempted to claw at him, but he easily defended himself with his shield. Then Derendil, Topsy and Turvy reached the lever. A moment later, the portcullis slammed to the floor, sealing the drow out. Derivell darted inside moments before it fell into place.

"Get them! Get them!" Shoor roared, but it was too late. The party was out of sight while most of the demons were moving in to attack the dark elves.

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<sup>55</sup> Topsy 20. Turvy 16.

<sup>56</sup> Derendil 12. Shadow Demon 1 = 2. Ront 21. Shadow Demon 2 = 2.

<sup>57</sup> Sleight of Hand check, DC 14. With advantage, Fiovey rolled 15, 17 & 26 for all three checks.

<sup>58</sup> Athletics check, DC 10. Fiovey rolled 13. Success.

<sup>59</sup> Shadow Demon 5 & 16. Disadvantage in bright light. 5+5=10. Missed.

As Vlynrifane and company hurried towards the torture room, Topsy spotted a single door leading out, and she tried to open it. "Locked!" she called over her shoulder. "We need Fiovey. Quick!"

Two shadow demons flew through the portcullis, for they were incorporeal, and they came racing up the hall behind them. Derivell spun just inside the torture room to face them. "I'll hold off the demons. Fiovey. Get the door open."

<sup>60</sup>Fiovey wrestled with the webbing to get herself free. "I'm on it," she growled in frustration, but she was stuck fast.

Ront and Prince Derendil reached the door, and they attempted to bash it open, but it was made of thick iron. Their weapons did little damage to it, if any. Topsy and Turvy both joined in, but to no avail.

"I can't get free!" Fiovey called after several seconds. "Vlyn! Help!" Then Vlynrifane transformed back into herself, dropping her passengers to the floor just behind Ront and the others. She drew out her scimitar a moment later and hacked her companions free of the webbing. Fiovey ran to the door whipping out her lockpicks. <sup>61</sup>Within seconds, the lock clicked, and they were rushing into the next room.

As this was happening, Derivell stood alone against the shadow demons, his blade gleaming in defiance. As the first one came into range, <sup>62</sup>he stabbed at it. The creature, however, slid sideways, narrowly avoiding his attack. He followed up with a backswing, clipping it in the shoulder. Then, just to throw his enemies off, he switched his Light spell to his shield. This worked well, for the demon tried to rake him with its claws, but the blinding metal beamed in its face.

Then the second demon joined the fray. <sup>63</sup>Derivell stabbed at the first, but once again it weaved out of the way. Both fiends tried to tear him apart, but the light of Selune saved him once more. The paladin returned with another slash across the first demon's chest, leaving a trail of phantom blood, and again they clawed at him but failed to connect.

Then his mind registered that there was violent noise coming from the adjoining room where his friends had gone. Lots of metal was banging and clanging as if his companions were fighting for their lives. <sup>64</sup>He was holding his own quite well, but he knew he needed to fall back to join them.

Too late! "STOP!" a booming female voice commanded, immediately halting the fight. "In Shar's name, I command you to cease at once! I have already captured his companions. Leave him to me."

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<sup>60</sup> Strength check, DC 12. Fiovey rolled 6 & 8. After 2 rounds, Vlynrifane decided to help her.

<sup>61</sup> Thieves' Tools check, DC 15. Fiovey rolled 18.

<sup>62</sup> Derivell's Readied Action 8. Miss. Derivell's turn. He rolls 20 to hit. 4 damage due to resistance. Shadow Demon 1 rolled 15 & 7 with disadvantage. Miss.

<sup>63</sup> Derivell rolled 8. Miss. Shadow Demon 1 rolled 11 & 7. Miss. Shadow Demon 2 rolled 23 & 15. Miss. Derivell rolled 18. Hit. 4 damage. Shadow Demon 1 rolled 8 & 12. Miss. Shadow Demon 2 rolled 22 & 16. Miss.

<sup>64</sup> Derivell rolled 11. Miss. Shadow Demon 1 rolled 17 & 14. Miss. Shadow Demon 2 rolled 7 & 20. Miss.

Derivell fell back a pace, looking at the doorway to see a silver armored warrior with big onyx gemstones; one dead center on her breastplate and one on each pauldron. There were many swirling, circular patterns on the suit, and it was complete with gauntlets, boots, wide-brim helmet and ominous, grimacing face mask. The mask had no eyes, allowing the wearer's own to glare out at her foes.

<sup>65</sup>'Dark Justiciar,' he thought, his whole body going numb with fear. They were Shar's knightly order, highly honored and praised for their endless wicked deeds. They were Derivell's opposites, paladins of darkness instead of warriors of light.

Immediately, the shadow demons bowed and left, hurrying back to help their companions against the dark elves. Then the Dark Justiciar slowly approached, ominously slamming the butt of her rusty spear against the floor. Derivell steeled himself, preparing for the hardest fight of his life. He didn't think he could win, for he was nearly exhausted after everything they'd been through that day.

Then, all of a sudden, Topsy popped her head into the chamber from the adjoining room. "Did it work? By gods! It did! They're gone."

The Dark Justiciar giggled and removed her helmet and mask to reveal a full head of white hair and mischievous grin. <sup>66</sup>Fiovay's human face was radiant in the light of Derivell's shield. "Not bad, if I do say so myself," she said. Then she donned her evil voice once more. "Fiovay, Dark Justiciar Captain of Darkness and Evil, at your service." She gave a sweeping bow. "The mask really helped complete the ominousness of my voice. Don't you think?"

Derivell nearly collapsed, his knees threatening to buckle under him from the sheer relief he was feeling. "You scared the life out of me," he said, and he leaned on one of the tables near him for support. "How in Selune's name...?"

Fiovay pointed behind her to the room beyond. "The next chamber is a devastated, old guard room. The far wall is totally shattered, burying almost everything. There's skeletons littering the floor along with demon carcasses and long-ago-dried ichor splattered everywhere. There's nothing of value, for everything is rusted and falling apart..."

Then she patted the armor, "... except for this. It gave me another idea. I transformed back into a human, and everyone helped me slap it on. I figured it might just fool the demons, and MAYBE they'd obey me if they thought I was a Sharran."

Derivell recovered, shaking his head in disbelief. "I don't think I'll ever be able to trust you again, Fi," he told her, but his smile said it all. Then he joined her, and they entered the guard room together.

She stifled another laugh as they met back up with the others. Then she became playfully hurt. "Come on, Deri-Der. I'm YOUR 'knight-in-shining-armor' today. Surely, 'Oh Damsel-in-Distress'... Surely, NOW, at least, I deserve praise. Instead, you're telling me you can't ever TRUST me again? Uh! Huh! Tsk! Some people! There's just no pleasing them."

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<sup>65</sup> Religion check, DC 15. Derivell rolled with advantage 22 & 6. Success.

<sup>66</sup> Deception check, DC 16. Fiovay rolled 22. Success.



"I've already scanned the next hall," Vlynrifane reported, appearing through the shattered wall and intruding on their moment of comradery. "No enemies in sight. Finally, I think we're free - for now."

Derivell nodded. "Let's find a place to lie low, maybe - catch our breath. I don't know about all of you, but I don't think I can take much more." And with that, they hurried away from the Hivoriles, the Pit of Hopelessness; hope restored once again - for now...

Dark Justiciar Armor





Shadow Demon



## Chapter 4: The Inception of the Demon Hunters

<sup>67</sup>Eromani breathed a sigh of relief. Without incident, they escaped the dungeon that they'd dropped into. Rini had somehow guided them through the labyrinth of cell blocks as if she owned the place. The sorceress wasn't sure how she pulled it off, but it didn't matter. They were safe... for now.

To add to their good fortune - such as it was - the final door was ajar when they arrived. A few long-dead skeletons lay strewn about as if they'd been trying to escape from something by heading into the dungeon. The door led to a guard room that they were able to lock and barricade behind them. Only one other door led to a stairway leading to the next level up. This they also locked and barricaded which would buy them time to flee should enemies discover them.

<sup>68</sup>It was here that they rested. Finally, they began to tend to their injuries and mend their armor and equipment. They also emptied a canteen between them and finished off the remainder of their rations. It wasn't the greatest respite ever, but it was much needed.

During this time, Graiyla explored and looted the chamber of anything useful. Much to their surprise, she found a decent longsword, a warhammer, and best of all, she found two plain metal shields. "Finally," she commented to the others as she tested her new blade. "Decent gear."

That was when Arla nervously looked up at her and asked, "Do you... Do you think you can teach me? I... After everything today... After everything that's happened to us... I..." And with that, it seemed she made a decision about something. She even stood as if it gave her strength. There was a look of defiance on her face, and her green eyes blazed in the light of Rini's bow. "I'm sick of being afraid. I'm sick of feeling helpless. I'm sick of being useless to everyone. I nearly got us killed. The way I see it, we're extremely lucky to be alive right now, and... and I'm sick of it. I want to learn how to fight. Will you teach me?"

Graiyla smiled. "I'd be happy to." Then she handed her the warhammer and the second shield she'd found. Since she was wearing the scale mail she'd taken from Rini, she also handed Arla her old chain shirt. "Here. If you're more familiar with the shortsword and studded leather, keep using them in battle until you get more familiar with this new stuff. You should practice with these, though, as often as you can to get familiar with them. In actual combat, don't fool around. If you want to be a fighter, having the best equipment you can get is essential, but you definitely don't want to risk using it until you're ready to."

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<sup>67</sup> Survival check, DC 20. Rini rolled 20+4=24. Success.

<sup>68</sup> Awarded 1,850 XP to the party of PCs for escaping the drow and demons. Both parties find resting places to take a Short Rest after this. Graiyla finds a longsword and shield. She uses 2 Hit Dice, healing 17 HP, having 7 points of damage remaining. She gives Arla a Masterwork Warhammer, so although she isn't proficient in it, she gains +1 to hit. Graiyla also gives Arla a shield and her former chain shirt, but Arla does not use these in combat for now. Stool returns to consciousness, but since they Short Rested prior to him returning to consciousness, he has 0 HP. Rini chooses to not heal him, for she only has two more 2nd level spell slots and no 1st level. Stool remains in Eldeth's pack for safekeeping. He's virtually useless to the party, and they don't want to waste Rini's spell slots on healing him 7 HP. Rini uses 2 Hit Dice and heals 12 HP, having 2 points of damage remaining. Sarith heals 8, having 3 damage remaining.

She nodded. "Thanks." She seemed to feel better already as she took a few practice swings with the hammer. "I'll do whatever you tell me to. I'm serious. I don't think I'll ever stop being scared until I learn how to fight back."

Eromani chuckled. "I've got news for you. You'll still feel scared. The big difference is that you'll learn to overcome it and not let it control you as much."

"This is actually really commendable of you," said Rini with an encouraging smile. "It takes a lot of guts to stop living in fear and fight back."

"I can help too," said Eldeth with a nod. "Maybe if we're all helping, we can mold you into a versatile warrior. You know. Glean a little from all of us so you are well-rounded." Then she held out her hand. "Can I see that warhammer?"

Arla handed it to her, and Eldeth examined it more closely. "This is a good hammer; masterwork quality. Hmmm. I don't know. If I was you, I'd go ahead and use it. You're relatively untrained, so using a warhammer with both hands will help you deal more damage to your foes. You definitely shouldn't use the shield or heavier armor yet, so why not focus on the hammer even in real combat? I think you'll find it only a bit more awkward to wield than the shortsword, but it'll pack a bigger punch. You know what I mean?"

Arla looked at Graiyla to see if she approved, and the yuan-ti woman shrugged. "Sure. Fair point."

Arla took the hammer back and took a deep breath. "Okay. So, who wants to train me first?"

Eldeth laughed. "The warhammer is one of my favorite weapons. I'll work with her first."

Again, Graiyla shrugged. "Fine with me."

<sup>69</sup>While Eldeth and Graiyla were showing Arla a few tricks and fighting stances, Sarith sat off by himself near the exit, listening at the door. Rini was attending to Stool who finally returned to consciousness. And so, Eromani decided to focus on their newest party member. Havvah still lay under the blanket, hidden from everyone's view against a wall where Eromani had put her. Whether she was asleep or simply remaining quiet to avoid attention, the sorceress wasn't sure. Glancing over her shoulder at the others, she saw that no one was paying attention to her. And so, she slid towards the shattered woman and slowly lifted the blanket.

"Easy," she said when Havvah jerked in alarm. "Easy. I just want to try to tend to your injuries and clean you up a bit. I need to see how bad you really are." Eromani grimaced when she beheld the sight once more. "Gods! What did they do to you?"

Havvah's right eye was blue, and it looked at the half-elf weakly. The other was swollen shut. She had silver hair, like Derivell's, and it was moderately long and straight and presently wet

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<sup>69</sup>Arla officially becomes a Level 1 Fighter. After everything she's been through, she deserves it. However, due to the fact that she is a civilian becoming a Fighter, she doesn't gain all the benefits yet of a Level 1 Fighter, nor does she gain XP yet. I will slowly hand Fighter abilities out over time. She has 11 Str (half-elf), 11 Dex (half-elf), 10 Con, 10 Int, 10 Wis, and 12 Cha. She also does not gain Fighter Style or Second Wind yet. I've allowed her to have background skill proficiencies, but she does not gain her Fighter proficiencies at this time.

with semi-fresh blood and sweat. Thus, it was clinging to her. Her arms and legs were mangled, crooked, and twisted in wrong directions as if they'd been broken over and over and over again in various places. She had no wings, and the back of her tattered shirt was soaked in dried blood. It seemed pretty clear to Eromani that they'd been removed by force, torn off with incredible strength.

But the worst part was her skin. She was covered with pussy, oozing, festering black sores. Her lips were unnaturally fat and swollen, as was her nose, and it made her appear deformed. In a few places, the sores had grown to unusual sizes; like large fleshy tumors. Though she had once been a glorious, beautiful angel, now she was as hideous as a foul lesser demon of the Abyss.

"I don't think there's anything you can do for me," Havvah told her after a moment. "They've been... torturing me for so many years. I..." A tear streaked down her face from her good eye. "You've saved me. That's all I've been praying for - salvation from the pain. Now... I just need to find my son. I must warn him. I must tell him what all this is about - why I've never been there for him."

Eromani knew the answer to her next question, but she wanted to hear it from the woman. "And who is your son?"

"His name is Derivell," Havvah replied. "He is an aasimar. There is a small village..."

Eromani cut her off. "It's okay. I know who he is. He's here, somewhere in this fortress. I'll take you to him."

Havvah's look went from sadness to stark terror in a flash. "Please! You must get him out of here. Please! They're after him. They want to use him to get me to talk. I have something - er - I know where something is hidden that they want. In a moment of weakness, I revealed that he exists, and they've told me they're bringing him here to use him against me. They've been working at it for years. They'll torture him endlessly unless I tell them where it is. I... Please! You have to tell him to get out - get FAR from this place."

Eromani didn't know what to say, but she felt she should say something comforting. Thus, she replied, "The drow are what I'm more concerned about. They're here too. I think they're fighting the demons, so..."

"There are drow here too?" asked Havvah. This was something she did not know. "They must want the Esaldayon as well."

"The Esaldayon?" asked Eromani. "What is that?"

"A powerful sword," the angel explained. "It is a blade of opposites, fashioned to kill both celestials and fiends with great efficiency. The name means 'to make void, as if something never existed'. Another name for it is 'Oblivion'. It is a double-edged sword, literally and figuratively. In the hands of a fiend, it will slaughter celestials. In the hands of a celestial, it will slaughter fiends. In the hand of neither, it is a threat to both."

"But it doesn't just send them back to their realms if they die. It ends their existence completely - forever! I found it. I used it. I was a champion of good, servant of Selune whose light had

guided me to it. They called me the Demon Hunter, for I am also an oracle, able to see visions and use them to find my enemies.”

“But I made mistakes. I...” she tried to continue to explain, but her emotional pain choked her.

“What’s going on?” asked Rini, approaching gingerly. Graiyla was also with her, leaving Arla in Eldeth’s capable hands as Stool watched. “Is she okay? Is there anything I can do for her?”

<sup>70</sup>Eromani turned to face her companions. “Either she’s the best lying fiend in all of everything, or she’s actually Derivell’s mother. Her sincerity is truly convincing. I... She’s been through so much. I’m not sure we can do anything for her right now. We probably need to find some sort of powerful healer to fix what they’ve done to her.”

Graiyla looked at the broken angel, her face displaying barely contained excitement. Eromani was surprised by this, for the yuan-ti woman never seemed to get excited about anything. Besides, she had no idea what there was to get excited over. “YOU were THE Demon Hunter?” she asked. “I’ve heard of you, but I didn’t know your name. I’ve been looking into you; trying to learn what happened to you. I wanted to find you; wanted to learn your secrets. I... I need your help. That’s the whole reason I’m down here. I was hunting demons - demons who might know what happened to you.”

Havvah was unreadable. “Well, you’ve found me,” she said. “I doubt I’m in the condition you expected, and I doubt I can help you. Still, if I can, I will.”

Graiyla withdrew, for she realized that she had been just a bit too thrilled. “My apologies,” she said, subdued. “It can wait, of course. I’m just relieved to finally meet you. I, too, am a demon hunter.”

Havvah’s good eye then flashed with some sort of radiant light. It only lasted a moment, and Eromani considered the possibility that it was her imagination. But then, the angel said, “Blood hunter. You’re a blood hunter who has some dark entity stalking you. You’ve also made a pact with a shadar-kai - Ezrana, I believe. Your heart is actually in the right place, but your methods are questionable.”

Graiyla was not the slightest bit pleased with this, and her previous excitement was turned to white-hot anger. “I’ve had very little choice,” she snapped. “My parents and fellow villagers were butchered when I was a child. I’ve done what I’ve had to do to survive and fight back against the monsters that took everything from me.”

Havvah sighed and closed her good eye. “I’m sorry,” she said. “None of that was my secret to tell.” She opened her eye once more, holding Graiyla’s fuming stare. But the angel’s look was sorrow and regret. “I only meant to warn you. The road you walk is precarious at best. If you aren’t careful, you could become like the monsters you hunt.”

“So you seriously hunt demons?” asked Rini, looking at Graiyla in awe. “By all the trees in the High Forest, that’s insane. I’d never have the nerve. I mean, I’m still freaking out that we fought those manes and those two fake angels.”

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<sup>70</sup> Insight check, DC 10. Eromani rolled 10.



"You fought fake angels?" asked Havvah, once more concerned for them and her son. "Male and female?"

"One was pretending to be you," said Eromani, "but Selune warned Derivell in a dream last night. I believe they were a succubus and an incubus."

"Miralin and Habrax," Havvah said, her expression hardening. "She is a dark haired succubus of some considerable power. Habrax is sort of like a brother to her. She is after the Esaldayon. He is after the blood of the daughter of some black dragon named Evronar."

Eromani's heart stopped, her body involuntarily stiffened, and her blood went cold. She looked at Rini who stared at her in horror. "Black dragon? Evronar. Why... Why is he after the blood of Evronar's daughter?"

Havvah noticed the look on her face. That's when it dawned on her. "YOU are Evronar's daughter! By Tyr's hammer!"

"Why do they want her blood?" asked Rini, her expression also hardening. Now that the situation was about Eromani, the halfling was much more upset.

Havvah tried to shrug, but it wound up being more like a spasm. "I'm not totally sure," she replied. "I think it has something to do with Evronar himself. Maybe if they have some of his daughter's blood, they can control him somehow."

"Mielliki's bow, Nini!" said Rini.

Eromani's face was dark and foreboding. "Well, that sucks," she said bitterly, allowing some of her pent-up emotions to pour out of her. "I swear to all the good gods, that dragon is the bane of my existence. I feel like I'll never be free of him. As if everything else we're going through isn't bad enough, now I find out that Evronar's involved somehow. By the Nine! I guess I should expect him to suddenly show up down here too. Won't THAT be swell."

"So this Miralin is after some demon/angel blade," said Graiyla, "and the other is after her blood?" She pointed at Eromani.

Havvah nodded. "Yes. They have been mocking me, telling me that they've been slowly manipulating things in both of their lives to lure them into a trap they've been devising for years. I don't know the details, but they thought it was the most wonderful game. I also know that they said that in the end, their master would be truly pleased."

"Who's their master?" asked Rini. "Do you know?"

"A foul demon lord named Hojiro, the Mindbender," said Havvah. "Somehow he is free of the Abyss, here in the Underdark. He was the one I most wanted to kill with Esaldayon. But he is elusive. They call him the Mindbender because of his craftiness and his ability to play mind games with people."

The conversation then died for a few moments. Eromani sat there, pondering. Finally, she said, "Well, at least things are a bit more clear."

"They are?" asked Rini. "What's clear?"

"Somehow, these demons used others to manipulate us to go to Urmlaspyr; us and Derivell at least," Eromani explained. "Somehow, they manipulated us to meet in the marketplace so the slavers and then the drow could bring us here. Then, somehow, they've made it so we'd escape and come here to their lair. If they went through all this, that means that no matter where we go or what we do, they'll never leave us alone. We'll be hunted for the rest of our lives unless we kill them and send them back to the Abyss." She then looked at Rini with a cold and vicious expression. "So we need to hunt and kill them, or we'll never be free again."

Rini swallowed hard and nodded. "I'm with you. You know that."

"I know," said Eromani. "Even if I tried to force you to leave me, you wouldn't. Besides, they'd probably track you down and catch you and try to use you against me, like they are trying to do with Derivell and Havvah here. So, I know we have no choice." She turned to Graiyla and then to Havvah. "Time for us to take up your mantle, I guess. Time for us to become the Demon Hunters."

Graiyla smiled. "I'm with you too, then. I've got my own demons to kill. And who knows? This Hojiro might just be connected to me too."

"I'll do what I can to help you," said Havvah. "Anything except reveal where the sword is. It's too dangerous at this point."

"Fine by me," said Eromani. "I agree with that anyway. You keep that a secret to the grave if you must. I'd rather have no one wielding it than risk the drow or one of those demons using it."

"Do you think the others will help us?" asked Rini. "Do you think they'll agree to become Demon Hunters?"

"Derivell will, for sure," said Eromani. "After all, he's clearly involved." She gestured towards Havvah. "Besides, he's been looking for his destiny. As for Fiovay and Vlynrifane and the others, who knows?"

Just then, Sarith jumped to his feet. "Something's coming, and fast."

Everyone looked at Eromani as if she somehow had all the answers to life's problems. "How many?" she asked.

"Two or three at most," the drow replied.

"Unbar the doors," said the sorceress as she threw the blanket back over Havvah. She then grabbed her and hefted her. "Let's hide. If need be, we ambush."

Arla, Eldeth and Rini rushed to the door that led into the dungeon. Graiyla hurried to help Sarith at the door leading up. Within moments, both doors were unlocked and unbarricaded. Then everyone saw that Eromani had taken Havvah to a decent hiding place at the back of the chamber behind a tipped over table and some fallen shelving units. Just in time, they dropped next to her, and Rini doused her light.

The door leading out was thrown open, and in walked two bulezau; demons that resembled scrawny minotaurs. They were roughly eight feet tall with twin horns that curved outward on

each side. Their bodies were mostly pale gray, and they looked rather sickly and emaciated. They had long, wiry hair that covered their shoulders, chest, and upper back, and their feet ended in claws as opposed to hooves. They were covered in filth and stench and open boils with festering maggots, and their tails were long and serpentine with a tuft of tangled spines at the end. Their heads were goat-like with crusty eyes and needle fangs, and they foamed at the mouth like rabid dogs.

Behind them was a babau, a slightly shorter demon - slightly shorter than the bulezau, that is - of similar build with pointed ears, black, leathery skin and a head that looked like a skull with elongated and vicious jaws filled with jagged teeth. Extending from the back of its head was a tail that curled up and over the back of the skull like a scorpion's, and it had ridges and ended with a sharp point. It was, in fact, actually a horn. Like the bulezau, the babau emitted a foul odor which came from a thick, dark red goo that was secreted from its body. It was slick and acidic. Its long-fingered talons were coated in blood, filth, and rotten flesh. As it walked with a strange, mechanical gait, the fiend looked around with a menacing glare. Its eyes glowed with their own inner fire.

It spoke in Abyssal which Eromani didn't understand. The demons immediately passed through the other door, but the babau's grating voice could still be heard for several moments. As soon as they thought the coast was clear, they rose. "They're going after Havvah, I think," Graiyla explained. "The babau was scolding the bulezau, telling them to pick up the pace. They needed to get 'the angel' before she fell into the wrong hands. Sounds like the demons are fighting with the drow, and Miralin's pulling back to a more defensive position."

"That's good for us," said Eromani. "That means they're all distracted. Maybe we can find the others and get the frick out of here while our enemies are busy butchering each other."

"Seems like our cue to get moving," said Eldeth. "Shall we?" She gestured at the door leading out. Eromani nodded, and they immediately hastened out of the guard room.

<sup>71</sup>Meanwhile, Derivell and the others had found a library to rest in. Fiovey then stripped the Dark Justiciar armor off and gave it to the paladin who she figured could use it better than she could. While everyone tended to their injuries, mended their clothes and armor, sharpened their weapons and had a bite to eat, the kitsune raided the place. What she found was a treasure trove of potions and scrolls which they divvied out to those who could use them best.

"Seems the landlords were using this library as a storeroom of sorts," Fiovey said as she displayed them for everyone to see. She had a wide grin on her fox-like face. "No locks or nothing. Isn't that great? Finders keepers, losers weepers."

While everyone was pilfering the loot, Derivell modified the Sharran suit and shield. He removed as much evil symbolism as he could, and he even fastened his emblem of Selune to the shield, making it more like a divine spell focus. Over the armor, he wore his vestments to complete the look.

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<sup>71</sup> Derivell acquires the Dark Justiciar Plate Armor from Fiovey and dons it for added protection. He only has Strength 14, but I am saying that Dark Justiciar Plate Armor only requires Strength 14 and weighs 55 lbs. Thus, he can wear it. I mean, it's got to be special somehow. Right? Derivell uses 2 Hit Dice and heals 22 HP to full. Fiovey uses 2 Hit Dice and heals 14 HP to full. Vlynrifane also uses 2 Hit Dice, healing 16 HP to full. Jimjar healed 6, having 3 damage remaining. Prince Derendil healed 7, having 8 damage remaining.

He and Fiovey were just finishing up tending to their own wounds while scarfing their last mushroom spores when the library doors burst open. The party was on the partial second floor behind rows of bookshelves at the back of the chamber, so they remained out of sight. Curious, Derivell, Fiovey and Vlynrifane softly maneuvered to the edge of the second floor to observe. Derivell and Fiovey weren't even wearing armor, for they had been bandaging themselves.<sup>72</sup>

Miralin and Habrax entered, the succubus carrying a scepter that was shining ruby light around her. They were accompanied by an entourage of lesser demons. The evil woman and her counterpart were furious and beleaguered. Both were covered in blood and filth, and it was apparent that they'd not been particularly successful in defending their lair. As the last of their minions came in, they quickly slammed the doors shut and barred them.

"Bloody drow!" Miralin barked in Common, her fist clenched. Whether it was because of the light from her scepter or not, her somewhat revealing dress, the inside of her wings, her tail, her lips and her eyes were crimson. And yet, the backs of her wings, her twin devil horns, her claw-like nails, and her long hair were black. The remainder of her skin was pale, like a moon elf, and it was smooth and soft and inviting. Upon her brow, around her neck, and on her wrists and ankles, she wore silver. When she walked, it was with the grace of a cat. "They've ruined everything. We had them. There was no escape."

"I knew we should have taken them last night when we had the chance," said Habrax, "but you just HAD to play with them a bit more." The incubus was obviously beside himself with rage. He was quite different from her in many ways. While she went for a more sexy, seductive female appearance, he went for a rippling, muscular male who looked almost like a barbarian. He had no horns because they were broken near the scalp, so any remnant of them was hidden under his hair which was mostly silver with streaks of black. It was long and parted from left to right, trailing down to between his bare shoulder blades. His eyes were completely white and without pupils, and his eyebrows slanted upward. He had a thin beard that framed his jawline and chin. It arced around to meet with his mustache, encircling his mouth. Another thin line lanced upward in the center to touch his lower lip.

Habrax wore large, red, plated pauldrons that consumed his shoulders and most of his naked upper torso. These were connected by chains both in front and behind, and the skull of Baphomet was fastened to them, resting on his bulging chest. His lower half was covered by two matching red skirts hanging from a plated belt complete with human skull buckle. The back skirt wrapped around his hips and buttocks, flowing to his calves, while the front dangled straight down the middle as if the buckle was trailing a river of blood. Besides this, he also wore plated leg armor and boots, and in his left hand he carried a midnight bladed longsword complete with black hilt and shimmering green gemstone which was embedded into and protruded out of each side of the crossguard.

Miralin took a moment to turn her own anger on her companion. "Oh? You KNEW we should have taken them last night? Then why didn't you? You aren't my slave. If you REALLY thought it was best to take them last night, you would have. You would have gone behind my back."

"Admit it," she continued without a breath. "You liked the idea of toying with Eromani just a little longer before you revealed to her exactly why you want and need her. You were dreaming of

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<sup>72</sup> No Stealth check necessary. The library was sizable enough that the three were beyond the dark vision of the fiends. Also, the fiends made enough noise that the DM determined no roll was needed.

those deliciously intoxicating moments when she would surrender to you because deep down inside she knew she had no hope. She might as well become your love slave, for it would be the only pleasure she would ever know again.”

Then she became more cold and reserved. “Come now. There’s no way we could have known all this would happen. Everything was going according to plan. I appeared to Derivell as his mother YEARS AGO, convincing him to become a paladin of Selune, and he fell for it. We then spent years manipulating people on the surface to lure both Derivell and Eromani together in Urmlaspyr. We manipulated the slavers to attack the marketplace at just that moment. We manipulated the drow to take the prisoners to Velkynvelve. We manipulated Jorlan to help them escape while our demons distracted the priestess and most of the outpost. We even convinced Zuggtmoy to help us lure them to us through her infected drow minion. ALL of that went exactly as we planned.”

Derivell exchanged concerned glances with his two friends as Miralin kept going with her monologue. “The only thing that went wrong was Jorlan was SUPPOSED to delay Ilvara until we were able to secure our prizes. Instead, the drow showed up just as we were about to overwhelm them. One thing, Habrax. One thing, and now everything is in ruin.”

“Bloody Hells, Miralin!” the incubus replied, sick of her tirade. “It doesn’t matter what went wrong. Hojiro gave us an army of demons - several hundred demons, Miralin! - to secure the two swords, and we couldn’t even succeed with that. He’s going to torture us endlessly if we don’t bring them to him.”

“I know that,” she snapped. “I know. Why do you think I had us fall back? While the remainder of our forces keeps the drow from advancing, we need to heal, grab Derivell’s mother...” - Derivell’s heart skipped a beat - “... and use her to lure them to us. Then we need to get out of this place before it’s too late.”

“But do you have any clue as to where they are?” asked Habrax.

“The surviving shadow demons from the Hivoriles reported that they escaped from there roughly an hour ago,” she told him as she turned and made her way over to a chest Fioyay had recently pillaged. The kitsune saw where she was going, and she winced in regret. She could only hope that once Miralin realized she’d been robbed that she would assume the thieves had already escaped to somewhere else.

The succubus threw open the chest and froze. “Gods beneath!” she breathed.

“What is it?” Habrax asked, coming to look over her shoulder. He scowled. “Robbed.”

“They’ve been here,” said Miralin, her fiendish blood running cold. “They’ve raided my stores.”

“You kept everything unlocked,” Habrax scolded.

“Who would DARE to steal from me?” she asked, slapping him with a sharp look. “Not locking things makes it easy to access. Never in a million years would I have expected THEM to somehow get in HERE and take everything!”

She slammed the lid of the chest closed with severe force to gain the attention of every demon in the room. “Go in pairs! Fan out! Find them! Don’t engage. Find them and one return to

report to me while the other pursues in the shadows. Go! Swiftly! Now!” Then the demons scrambled as they threw the doors open and exited.

Miralin and Habrax paused before leaving. The incubus turned to her. “And where are WE going?”

“The dungeons,” said Miralin. “I’m now concerned that they have somehow rescued Havvah. We need her above all else. Only she knows where the Esaldayon is.” And with that, the fiends were gone, leaving the library doors wide open behind them.

Derivell, Fiovey and Vlynrifane waited for several moments before they dared to move. Finally, Fiovey asked, “Now what?”

Derivell blinked rapidly at her, trying to process everything. “We have to find Eromani and those with her. Doesn’t sound like they’ve been captured. That should be our top priority.”

<sup>73</sup>“What about your mother?” asked Vlynrifane. “Sounds like they have her locked up in the dungeons. They’re going to fetch her now. If we hurry, we might beat them to her.”

Derivell shook his head. “I don’t know what to believe, to be quite honest. That’s why I think our best move is to find the others first.”

Fiovey nodded. “I agree we should find the others. The mom is bait. ALL that was bait.” She waved her hand at the library’s main floor. “They knew we were here. They knew we were listening.”

“Really?” asked Vlynrifane. “How could you tell?”

Fiovey began to count off the reasons on her fingers. “First, me thinks she protested too much. She was too loud and too over the top. They both were. Second, she told us EVERYTHING. It was a bit too cut-and-dry to be natural. She KNEW we were up here, and they were saying all that on purpose so we would believe that everything that’s happened to us has been all according to their master plan. They were attempting to blow our minds and make us second guess ourselves and everything. They want us to feel weak and powerless to their schemes, and they want us to think this is all about Derivell and Eromani; like the rest of us don’t matter.”

“Third, they spoke in Common,” said the kitsune. “Don’t you think that’s odd? Why not Abyssal? They were all demons, so Abyssal would be the natural language they’d fall back on. They only spoke Common because they knew we were here. Fourth, they’re putting on the pressure. They’re trying to make us think that we have to hurry super fast to reach his mother before it’s too late. Simple sales tactic to convince a customer to buy. Make them think that they absolutely have to act now or they’ll miss out on an opportunity of a lifetime. Nuh uh. Not biting.”

“Gods!” said Vlynrifane. “So none of that was true?”

“Some of it was,” said Fiovey. “What, exactly, I don’t know, but some of what they were saying was true. The best lies are those that are hidden amidst truths. They’re twisting everything so it is too hard to tell what is right and what is wrong.”

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<sup>73</sup> Insight check, DC 15. Derivell rolled 10, Fiovey rolled 23 and Vlynrifane rolled 13.

“Isn’t that what demons do best?” asked Derivell. “Come on. Let’s grab our equipment and get moving. Decision’s made. We find the others first. Then we figure out what to do from there.”

“I’ll transform into a dire wolf again,” said Vlynrifane. “Me and Zen can track them easier that way.”

“Good idea,” said Derivell. “I only hope we find them before the demons or drow do.”

Habrax



Miralin





## Chapter 5: The Dark Angel

The Fortress of Despair was, without a doubt, the playground of demons. Everywhere they went, Graiyla saw chaos, bloodshed, gore, pain, suffering and misery. There were corpses of just about every kind imaginable; rented asunder, torn apart, sliced up, partially eaten, or - which was the most common type - they were long-dead and thoroughly rotted. All these were even in the hallways, smeared on walls and ceilings, and jammed into nooks and crannies as if psychotic artists were skillfully decorating their home.

And the stench was unbearable. From the moment they left the dungeons behind, they were forced to cover their faces just so they could breathe. It was like walking through a grossly unsanitary butcher's shop that had existed for eons, stretched on in random directions forever, and had literally never been cleaned.

Carefully and quietly the group made their way from room to room, listening at doors and peeking through keyholes whenever possible before entering. The place was like a tomb. There were no demons, for they had been called to fight against the drow. This was fortunate, for the most part, but it made everyone jump at even the slightest sound. Their own breathing was far too loud, and they could hear the pounding of their hearts.

Then, unexpectedly, they found life. One chamber they entered contained prisoners. These were strapped to the walls and stone tables. There were torture devices everywhere, some simply tossed to the floor after use. The victims were soaked in their own blood, wheezing and gasping as they fought to remain conscious.

Eromani exchanged looks with Rini, and the halfling immediately set to work. From one person to another, she began to stabilize them as the others cut them loose. She didn't have enough power in her to heal them all, but she could at least save their lives. Then Eldeth found a few empty vials that had once contained healing potions. Following a trail of them, the dwarf discovered a cabinet. It was full of the lowest grade healing potions, but they would certainly be enough to restore the survivors to health. Within a few minutes, seven additional people added to their numbers.

The first was Helyn (pronounced 'Hel-een') a human female with long, wavy, deep-dark brown hair and green eyes. She was roughly five foot eight, and she seemed fit and agile. From what Graiyla could see, underneath the grime covering her face, she had a myriad of freckles. These were her only visible blemishes, though visible was hardly accurate since they were hidden beneath layers of caked blood and filth. Helyn told them that she was an Eldritch Knight, and as soon as she was free, she asked for weapons and equipment as she tied her long bangs back so they were out of her face. Arla offered her the warhammer and chainmail, but Helyn refused, preferring studded leather and a shortsword.

The second was Drym, a half-orc who was roughly two to three inches taller than Helyn. He had black hair in dreadlocks pulled back into a ponytail. His skin was pale green, his eyes were brown, his brow was furrowed, and his jaw was firmly set. Protruding out from under his lower lip were twin fangs, like tusks. They were roughly an inch in length. He seemed more of a stealthy roguish type, and he took studded leather along with two shortswords; one in each hand.

The third was Elris, a pale wood elf with long, straight blonde hair and blue eyes. She was of similar height and build to Helyn without a flaw to be seen. When she moved, it was with grace

and elegance. Also like Helyn, she wore a stoic look on her face, refusing to betray her thoughts in any way. Her eyes were sharp and observant, and it seemed to Graiyla that she was always trying to assess everyone and everything. She was an arcane archer, she said, and the party gave her one of the spare drow hand crossbows. "I don't need a melee weapon," she told them when they offered her one. "I prefer the Shocking Grasp spell."

The fourth was Keema Battlehammer, a dwarf with curly red hair that was typically pinned up in a tight bun on top of her head. At present, it was a rat's nest, sticking out at numerous angles. She was stout and strong, and she was a cleric of Helm. As soon as she was free, she went in search of her holy symbol, for the demons had brought it with them. It didn't take her long to find it, but unfortunately it had been destroyed just for fun. They'd have to find her another one or make her one when they had time. She took studded leather and a crossbow.

The fifth was Fayra, a brown-skinned aasimar with short, golden hair and eyes. She looked like she was maybe sixteen or seventeen with an innocent face, but she was lean and moved like an expert dancer with many years of experience. It turned out that she was a monk from some monastery in the Silver Marches, and she was a follower of Lathander, God of the Dawn.

The sixth was Ellira, another human with shorter, wavy, dark brown hair. She was only five foot six, petite and looked to be roughly twenty at best. Interestingly, she was one of those faceless types; someone who would just blend in with any crowd on the surface. She was shy and liked to remain unnoticed, always hovering at the back of the group. As soon as she got the chance, she snatched up a crossbow and studded leather, preferring ranged combat to melee.

The last was Wilowir, a red-skinned tiefling with devil horns and a head of voluminous blonde hair. It cascaded down both her front and back to her waist. She was obviously a wizard, for she was not particularly strong or agile. Still, she carried herself with supreme authority and power, as if she owned everyone and everything. Her eyes blazed with an inner fire, and anyone who met her gaze felt the need to look away.

As soon as they were ready, Eromani gathered them near the room's only door. "Anyone know the way out?" she asked.

"I know the way back to the portal we came through to enter this place," Wilowir replied, a mischievous smirk on her face. In spite of everything they'd been through, she was enjoying herself. This unnerved Graiyla more than a little bit. There was something not-quite-right about the tiefling. "I have an idyllic memory, and I was awake as they carried us to this torture chamber. Thus, I remember the way back. Question is, though, 'Do we want to use it?'"

"The portal leads to a terrible, ancient Sharran city overrun by fiends," Helyn explained to her rescuers. "The place is a nightmare; as bad as this or worse. It's a long story. In short, we were just trying to escape from the Hells, and we found ourselves in that place. Then we were chased around there for what seemed like forever only to find the portal to here. We got here and these demons ambushed us and finally did us in. We've only been in THIS nightmare maybe a day; two at most."

"So, the answer is, 'No. None of you knows the way out.' Understood," said Eromani with a sigh. "Then let's get back to exploring the halls. At least you can tell us which ways to avoid."

They had not gone far when suddenly they heard a terrible shriek of rage. It came from somewhere close. As a result, everyone froze, not daring to move another inch for fear of being

heard. Then a litany of curse-words followed, streaming like a gushing river through a freshly broken dam. Intermingled within the flow were the following words: "How in the... can everyone be so... utterly useless that they can't even keep one... broken and crippled, bloody... angel locked in a... secure cell deep in a... dungeon under a... fortress full of... demons? And to make... matters worse, whoever... took her has... somehow disappeared somewhere in this... supposedly awesome and ancient... fortress once again full of... demons. And just to... add insult to... injury, THERE IS A... ARMY OF... DROW POURING INTO THIS... SUPPOSEDLY AWESOME AND ANCIENT... FORTRESS OF USELESSNESS ONCE AGAIN FULL OF... DEMONS WHO ARE AS USELESS AS...!!!! Someone PLEASE explain this to me!"

Eromani gestured for everyone to get moving once more as soon as whatever underling that was suffering from Miralin's wrath spoke. When it managed to stumble out a reply, it was quivering with terror even though it was a babau; a demon of roughly equal strength to a typical succubus. "W-w-w-well, you see... It was difficult to ascertain w-w-whether the drow a-a-acquired them or not. Y-y-you see... By the t-t-time we arrived there, the drow had escaped the cells that the water elemental had thrown them i-i-into. Th-th-they've managed to regroup after searching most of the cells down there. The angel's cell is... empty. W-w-we were just a bit too late."

"So, some of the escapees from Velkynvelve must have entered the dungeons by dropping into the trap floor from the Contemplation Chamber," Miralin snapped. Then she cursed a few more times for good measure. "That would be the only reason that the drow pursued them into an obvious trap. They were split into two groups, for some reason. Some of them went to the Hivoriles, so I THOUGHT they were all together down there. If I'd known some had escaped into the dungeons..." Another litany of curses echoed through the halls.

Finally, the succubus sorceress managed to collect herself a bit. "THIS was totally unforeseen. THIS could destroy everything. Gods, Habrax! They went straight to the dungeons! Who could have honestly anticipated that?"

"What's done is done, Miralin," Habrax replied, his deep voice booming. "Two possibilities exist. Either they were captured by the drow who followed them into the dungeons, or they somehow escaped onto this level. If the drow have them, they are still in the dungeons. There's literally only one way out from down there, and that's through this door. I say we shut the door here and post a guard while we bar the other exits from this level and search it. If we find no one here, we can then return and attack the drow."

"Sound plan," said Miralin. Then she turned to a few of her lesser minions. "Stand guard. No one enters or leaves the dungeons. If they do, flee and come warn me. Understand?" Then she turned to the rest of her entourage. "You guard the stairs to the next level. You. Guard the portal chamber. The rest of you fan out and search everything. GO!"

This exchange bought the escapees valuable time. Since the demons were being so loud, Eromani and Rini risked throwing open numerous doors on their way down multiple passageways. Each room they peered into, they hoped it would be the stairs leading up. Unfortunately, they found more of the same empty yet grotesque scenes and no way out.

Then they reached a four-way intersection and paused. "Left is towards that portal I told you about," Wilowir said.

“Go straight,” Havvah advised without warning, and Eromani looked back over her shoulder at the blanketed woman. Graiyla could see that there was some doubt on the sorceress’s face. She didn’t blame her. There was a foul stench coming from the passage leading dead ahead. It wasn’t the same as the nasty, nauseous aromas they were struggling to live with in the fortress. It was different. She couldn’t quite place it. Instead of rotting flesh and blood and gore, it smelled more like rotting vegetation.

Eromani wound up saying nothing. Instead, she decided to obey the angel and lead the party straight. No one argued. After all, they hadn’t a clue either where they were going. For all they knew, straight could lead out.

But it didn’t. Instead, they entered a shattered room. The back wall and most of the ceiling was totally collapsed from some sort of cave-in. It was impossible to determine what the chamber had been previously, for there was nothing left but piles of boulders and rubble. “Dead end,” said Rini, once again holding her glowing bow high as they searched for even the slightest crack for them to crawl through.

Eromani sighed in frustration. “Come on,” she said as she started to turn and head back.

“No wait,” said Graiyla, causing the others to pause. “If this area is, in fact, sealed off, then where is that foul stench coming from? There MUST be another way. This is one of the cleanest chambers we’ve encountered in the whole place, so it isn’t the source of the smell. It has to be coming from somewhere else.”

“Do we have time to search for it?” asked Elris, the elf arcane archer.

Graiyla could see the conflict on Eromani’s face. The more time they wasted, the less likely they’d escape via the stairs up to the next level. However, if there was another way out via the collapsed room they were standing in, the demons might not know about it. It COULD potentially lead out of the entire fortress, or it COULD be a safe place to rest and fully recover.

‘But what about the others?’ thought Graiyla. ‘We still don’t know where they are? We can’t just leave without them. She must be thinking the same thing.’

“There they are!” Just then, a hushed voice hit them from behind. Turning, everyone was alarmed but then relieved to see a dire wolf, Zen, and Shreiken leading the rest of their companions.<sup>74</sup> It was as if Graiyla’s thoughts had summoned them. The one who had spoken was Derivell, and he was so happy to see them that he took off running ahead. “Selune be praised! Are you all okay?”

Graiyla was then surprised to see Eromani’s reaction. Her usual unreadable mask was gone, replaced by what could only be described as sheer joy. She threw her arms around the paladin, hugging him tight. Rini did the same with Zen, ruffling the fur on his neck. “Gods, am I happy to see you,” said the half-elf sorceress. Then she pulled away. “How did you find us?”

The dire wolf became Vlynrifane, returning to her natural form, surprising a few of the newest members of the group. Also uncharacteristically, she was smiling. “The gods are with us, it seems,” she explained excitedly. “We were passing by this old, crumbling lift shaft several floors

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<sup>74</sup> Perception check, DC 20. Vlynrifane rolled 21 with advantage due to a dire wolf’s keen hearing and smell.

up, and I caught the sound of your faint voices. After that, I led everyone down the shaft. When we got to this level, I changed back into a dire wolf and continued to follow the sounds you were making.”<sup>75</sup>

“Can we discuss all this another time?” asked Sarith, his patience wearing thin. “Those demons are attempting to close off every escape route there is. We need to get out of here before it’s too late.”

<sup>76</sup>But Graiyla had already turned her attention back to the rubble, and she was rewarded for doing so. There, on the left side near the base of the heap, she spotted a gap. She then walked over to it and crouched. The foul odor was definitely coming from within, and as she examined it closely, she was pleased to see that it was wide enough for everyone to fit through. “Hey!” she called, drawing everyone’s attention to her. “Here it is. I think it could be a way out.”

No one remained at the entrance. Within a moment, they were hovering over the yuan-ti pureblood. But Fiovay wrinkled her canine nose in disgust. “THAT is where the foul smell is coming from? Foul smells usually lead to foul creatures. I’m not sure going down there is such a good idea. It’s like...” She sniffed again several times. “... like an amphibian’s water tank that hasn’t been cleaned in months. My little cousin had a turtle once... Gods! He didn’t clean the tank and it reeked to high heavens just like that.”

“And remaining in a demon and drow infested fortress of Shar IS a better idea?” asked Graiyla. “Wouldn’t you rather face one foul amphibian than all the hordes of monsters in here?”

“Depends on the creature,” Topsy piped in. “And who says it’s just one creature. Could be a whole nest of giant toads or something.”

“Bet it’s a dragon,” said Jimjar. “Hey, Fiovay. Come on. Whaddya say? Double or nothing. I say it’s a dragon. You in?”

Fiovay laughed and shook his hand. “Sure. Double or nothing. Say. What’re we up to anyway? How much do you owe me again?”

“Never you mind,” said Jimjar. “I’m sure of this one. It’ll be nothing soon enough.”

“Who are they?” Turvy cut in, jabbing a thumb at Helyn and her companions.

“Some additional prisoners we rescued from here,” said Rini. “We found them in a torture chamber.”

“Again,” said Sarith with a growl. “Can we discuss all this later? Make a decision. Are we going down through the gap or are we going to try to fight our way out of this place?”

Graiyla looked at Derivell and Eromani who exchanged glances with one another. “What do you think?” asked the sorceress.

“I feel like I don’t have time to really think this through,” said Derivell, “but it seems like the best option. Unless anyone is really objecting, I say ‘Let’s go.’ Graiyla. Please lead the way.”

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<sup>75</sup> Athletics check, DC 5. The party descended via knotted rope. Everyone, therefore, made the roll.

<sup>76</sup> Perception check, DC 15. Graiyla rolled 18+2=20. Success.

The yuan-ti pureblood smiled and slid down through the floor, carefully maneuvering her way along. It wasn't a difficult climb by anyone's standards. There were plenty of hand and foot holds, and the descent was sloped. Thus, at various times they simply slid their way along. The only thing that made their journey unpleasant was the ever increasing stench.

Finally, they reached the bottom, and from there they made their way through a natural cavern. It was twenty feet wide and the ceiling was so far above them that they couldn't see it. This didn't last for long, however, for it came to an end about two hundred feet from where they entered. The only way to continue was via a narrow crack barely large enough for everyone to fit through. Squeezing in, Graiyla led them to the other side and out into a vast cave that was so big they couldn't see most of it. In fact, it was as if they had stepped into a massive void.

But the smell was overwhelming at that point. Once again, they covered their faces, and they followed the wall on their right. This they did for only a brief few moments before, all of a sudden, Graiyla came to an abrupt halt. Her eyes beheld something she was not expecting. There, in front of her, was the massive mace-like tip of the tail of a dragon.

"Oh gods, no!" Eromani breathed in horror as she also beheld the sight. "Gods please. No."

The tail slid rapidly out of sight. From the back of the group, there came cries of terror, and many of them shoved their way towards the front. "There's something there!" Topsy screamed. "It's cutting off our way back."

"It's HUGE!" cried Fiovay.

"Hah!" cried Jimjar. "I win! I win! It's a dragon!"

Then Graiyla regretted leading them down there. 'This is all my fault,' she told herself. 'I trusted the angel. She told us to go this way. Was she wrong, or... No. Certainly she wouldn't lead us astray. Right?'

A ruby light illuminated the area coming from the crack they had recently entered through. Miralin and Habrax arrived with a handful of demons of various sizes. The succubus sorceress' scepter cast its eerie light upon the source of absolute dread everyone was experiencing. There, towering over them, was a huge black dragon, its horns lancing out in front of its maw on both sides of its face. Its light green right eye gleamed hungrily.

"Evronar," Eromani gasped, her knees nearly giving way beneath her. "It's him - my father." No one else could speak. They were simply too stunned to do anything but huddle together and shake.

Evronar stretched as if he'd just awakened from a deep sleep. The large frill that jutted up from his spine down half of his neck was like the fin of some massive sea monster. His body was slender and wiry compared to most chromatic dragons, but it was nonetheless larger than most blacks. He was easily over a hundred and sixty-five thousand pounds and roughly ninety feet in length. His wingspan was almost as great, and he stood close to twenty feet in height.

But there was something that made him stand out from all of his kin. Evronar was missing his left eye and one of his fangs on the upper left side. This made him appear to be like a scarred veteran from some war long ago. It only added to his already ominous visage. As the group

beheld him, they saw their lives flashing before their eyes. This was it. After everything they'd been through, there would certainly be no escape this time.

"And there you go, Habrax," Miralin said with a chuckle. "See how delicious this is? Hope was kindled within them. They thought they were actually going to escape. Then..." She gestured at the dragon.

Habrax smiled in true satisfaction, drinking up the fear. "Intoxicating, Miralin. Truly. I wasn't sure how you were going to pull it off, to be quite honest."

She laughed. "For a little while, I didn't think things were going to work out. But, fortunately, Havvah's mind is mine. Once they 'rescued' her, I knew I had them. Oracle indeed! Hah! She only sees what I WANT her to see, little Eromani."

The black dragon hissed. "Eromani?" he asked. His voice was like a bottomless pit. "I know that name. Don't I?"

"She's your daughter," Habrax answered. It was clear he did not like the dragon, for he spoke to him with a growl.

"No," the dragon spat, a small pool of acid splattering into existence at his feet. "I killed them all. I killed all my spawn."

"This one escaped your purge," Habrax said with a wicked grin. "You thought you were so clever and powerful, Wyrms, but in the end, you have failed."

'Fool,' a voice suddenly jumped into Graiyla's mind. It was a familiar entity. It was her guardian devil. 'He plans to use her to claim the dragon's sword's power - that's the sword he carries in his hand. Once he does that, he thinks he'll complete his control over the mighty Evronar. He wants to add him to his master's already impressive arsenal of minions.'

'Why do you call him a fool?' asked Graiyla, responding only with her thoughts. 'It looks like he's about to succeed.' She grit her teeth, tears threatening to stream down her face, but she fought them back.

'Relax, Child,' said the guardian devil. 'I am with you. I'm not about to let these pissants win. They are so arrogant that they don't realize just how close to death they truly are. Come. Let us show them. Summon your courage. Make your way towards them. I need you to get closer.'

<sup>77</sup>Graiyla did as she was told, trusting completely in the being who had saved her life more times than she could count. Taking in a deep breath, she let out her fears as she exhaled. Then she strode confidently away from her friends, walking alone towards the insane threats that could easily kill her.

Miralin and Habrax and their demon entourage regarded her curiously, unsure what she could possibly be thinking. 'See? Fools. They know I am with you, and yet because they have some

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<sup>77</sup> Wisdom save, DC 16. Graiyla rolled with advantage because of aid from her guardian devil. She rolled 15 & 17+4=21. Success.

control over the dragon, they believe they are invincible against me. They are trusting that if I attack them, he will protect them.'

'And, he won't?' asked Graiyla.

'Not if you take that sword away from him,' the guardian devil replied. 'That one weapon is all that stands between the dragon attacking us and them.'

"Ah," said Miralin with a look of triumph on her face. "At last, Ezrana's toy and Ky'jim's puppet. Come, Ky'jim. Why don't you come out of her and greet us in person? It's been far too long."

'Be ready,' the guardian devil instructed even as Miralin ranted. 'When he drops the sword, you MUST snatch it up. Get it to Eromani. Put it in her hands. It is IMPERATIVE that you get it into her hands.'

'What will happen to her?' Graiyla asked, momentarily doubting.

'No time,' said the entity known as Ky'jim. Then all at once, Graiyla felt intense pain shoot through her. <sup>78</sup>Out of her mouth, nose, ears and eyes, darkness poured and came together to form a catlike creature the size of a small horse. It was black and muscular with a bulkier upper body and thinner hind quarters. Its tail split about halfway along, ending in three whiplike tendrils. Its front claws were like a human's hands, and its back were like the paws of a lion.

As for its head, it was elongated, ending in a salivating, huge maw of yellow teeth. Four fangs were twice the size of all the others, like razor-sharp shortwords that could tear clear through a common person's chest. His jaw split his face in half, allowing him to open his mouth as wide as a giant snake, and his bite was like that of a crocodile.

But the most unnerving aspect of Ky'jim were his eyes. Two big, insane eyes were like round red circles dancing in black pools. An even larger eye was dead center on his forehead, looking like a swirling vortex of blood. Besides these, there were two more, smaller, slanted eyes above the first two, and two more where nostrils should be at the end of his snout.

As he formed just off to Graiyla's left, the yuan-ti pureblood gasped and doubled over. She did this partially to throw her enemies off. She knew that if they thought she was recovering from the event, they wouldn't be paying any attention to her. She stole a glance at them, daring to take a moment to evaluate their responses. Much to her relief, they were focused completely on Ky'jim.

"Ah Miralin," said the deep-voiced, then shrieking-voiced, then deep-voiced Ky'jim. "Is this to be our final confrontation, I wonder? How is your master? Does he still enjoy his garden? It's quite pretty, if I recall correctly."

"Silence!" Miralin snapped. "No games today, Traitor, and no more hiding." She gestured at Evronar. "Trobrantraxar is more than a match for you. At last, your game of Cat-And-Mouse is over, and we win. We get to be the ones to inform our master and Baphomet and all of the demon lords that WE ended you."

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<sup>78</sup> Constitution save, DC 15. Graiyla rolled 18+2=20. Success. No damage.



“Oh?” said Ky’jim, taunting her as if he had full control over the situation. “If you are so certain that your pet dragon will kill me, why are you hesitating? Hmmm?” His grin split his face even more.

Miralin’s face was strained. ‘She knows,’ thought Graiyla. ‘She knows how powerful he is. She’s scared.’

‘Draw their attention to you,’ Ky’jim’s voice suddenly commanded. ‘Do it. Now!’

Once again, Graiyla did what she was told. Straightening, she looked Miralin in the eye and forced out her words. “Today, Petty Sex-Witch. You will die, and all your minions with you.”<sup>79</sup>

‘It worked!’ she realized. ‘All eyes are on me.’

It only lasted a moment, but that was all Ky’jim needed. He pounced. Claws raked, jaws bit down on Habrax, snapping and tearing forearm from elbow. The black blade danced on the pavement. Graiyla dove and grabbed it, rolled back to her feet and ran as fast as she could towards her friends. The dragon roared. Miralin screamed and so did all of her demons. The dragon’s jaws snapped. Ky’jim shrieked in pain. Things were chasing Graiyla, but she did not dare look back.

Ahead, most of her companions were fleeing in the opposite direction, for now that their enemies were distracted, they were taking the opportunity to escape. Graiyla started to panic. She couldn’t see Eromani, and she remembered Ky’jim’s emphatic words. She HAD to get the sword into the sorceress’s hands.

“Eromani!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “Eromani! Help! Take the sword!”<sup>80</sup>

Suddenly, the sorceress appeared, falling back with Derivell, Rini and Zen as they waited for her to catch up. She must have handed off Havvah to someone else, for she was no longer burdened by her. Graiyla was beside herself with relief. Just a few more moments and...

Miralin came out of the Ethereal Plane above her and behind, swooping like a bird-of-prey. Instantly, she called out, her voice magically enticing Graiyla’s mind.<sup>81</sup> “Quick! Give me the sword! Now!” Graiyla stopped cold, spun and held the blade aloft, doing just as the succubus commanded. Miralin’s outstretched hand reached for it.

<sup>82</sup>Derivell slashed at Graiyla, hoping to snap her out of the spell, but he swung too early. Eromani, however, didn’t want to risk missing. <sup>83</sup>She cast Magic Missile and pounded her companion in the back. This snapped the yuan-ti out of it, and she fell forward at the last second, keeping the sword from the evil witch.

Eromani was at her side a moment later. Graiyla slapped the hilt into the sorceress’ hands, and all at once, the weapon came to life. The green gemstone flared, bathing the cavern in intense,

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<sup>79</sup> Deception check, DC 15. Graiyla rolled 14+1=15. Success.

<sup>80</sup> Persuasion check, DC 10. Graiyla rolled 19+1=20. Success.

<sup>81</sup> Charm Wisdom check, DC 15. Graiyla rolled 1+4=5. Failure.

<sup>82</sup> 8+4=12. Miss.

<sup>83</sup> 2+5+5=12 damage. Charm Wisdom check, DC 15. Roll 3 times, once for each missile. Graiyla rolled 13+4=17 on the first roll. She broke the charm.

sickly-green radiance. The demons recoiled. Miralin withdrew, screaming in rage. The dragon roared, releasing Ky'jim from its bite.

And Eromani's grip became like a vice as magic poured into her body. She arched her back violently, arms outstretched. Then she roared as terribly as her father. In that moment, her mind connected with his, binding their wills together - whether temporary or permanently, who could say? And all at once, the black dragon surged into the host of demons that had been accompanying the succubus and incubus. In moments, they were butchered. Not one escaped. He first dwindled their numbers with his acid breath. After that, he tore into the survivors with his powerful jaws and claws, wings and tail, finishing the last few with another gushing spray of toxic, flesh-melting goo.

As for Miralin, she vanished into the Ethereal Plane in a flash, as did Habrax. Ky'jim also disappeared, though whether it was into the Ethereal Plane or simply into the shadows, who could say. Then Evronar ceased in his killing spree and stood before his daughter like a statue. He was poised and ready for her next command.

He smiled. "You hardly have the strength to wield that blade, Child," he told her. "Not like your sister. Not properly, anyway. In mere moments, you will falter. You will break. Then you and your companions will die."<sup>84</sup>

Graiyla was shaking from the event, hardly controlling her fear. What had she done? Was it a good thing, or had she doomed her new friend to some sort of terrible fate; a fate where she might be chained to her father forever?

But Eromani seemed to be in her right mind as she replied, somewhat shakily. "I don't need to have the strength yet." Then she held the sword above her head, closed her eyes, and spoke a single magic word. The radiant light from the sword focused on her father, and in a flash, he was gone. The cavern went dark, and Eromani crumpled like a ragdoll.

Derivell and Rini rushed to her side, the halfling checking to see if she required any life-saving magic. She didn't, but she was shivering as if freezing to death. "She's burning up," Rini reported as she felt her head. Then she tried to cure her with the Lesser Restoration spell. "It didn't work."

Eromani forced herself to stand. "Forget about that right now," she said. "I'll be fine. We just need to get out of here before those fiends return."

"She's right," said Derivell. Then he grabbed her around the waist, putting her left arm around the back of his neck and shoulders. "Graiyla. Take the other side. We'll get out of here faster if we carry her."

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<sup>84</sup> Every round, at the end of her turn, Eromani had to roll a Wisdom save, DC 15. The blade took 1d4 psychic damage every time she failed the save as long as she was in control of her father. If her HP reached 0, she would be rendered unconscious and he would break free of her control completely. She rolled 9, 9, 12, 9, 7, 13, 18, 17, 11 and 6, taking 3+1+2+2+2+1+2 +1=14 damage. She had 17 HP. She has 3 HP remaining. She barely managed to control her father for 1 minute/10 rounds. Because she failed 8 times, she would receive disadvantage on all Attack rolls and Ability Checks for 8 days, basically the Poisoned condition - the price being steep for linking minds with and controlling a very powerful black dragon. This condition cannot be cured. It is only removed after the full duration.

The yuan-ti did as she was told, but when she attempted to remove the sword from Eromani's hand, she found that she couldn't. She was still gripping it tightly as if it was attached to her. Deciding they didn't have time to try to mess with it further, Graiyla carefully swung the woman's right arm, complete with blade, around her, and they took off as fast as they could. Zen, with Rini on his back, led the way.

Zen made it possible to find everyone else with his sense of smell.<sup>85</sup> Some were waiting for them at the far end of the massive cavern, standing by a small tunnel only five feet tall and three feet wide; a crack more than a passage. Fiovey, Vlynrifane and Eldeth remained while the rest took off ahead to investigate. Prince Derendil vowed that he would not let them abandon everyone unless it was absolutely necessary, and Arla and Helyn swore they'd keep everyone together.

At last, they were out of the "dragon's lair", racing through the crack at top speed. About a hundred feet in, they met Arla at a branch in the path, and she guided them to the left. "The others went this way," she told them. She was more than a little concerned. "Did everyone make it out alive?"

"We have everyone," said Derivell. "Eromani's just a bit unwell."

"I'm fine," the sorceress protested.

"You are not," said Rini, her fears threatening to overtake her. "You're running hot - REAL hot."

"It's not as bad as it seems," Eromani insisted. "I'll be fine. I just need to rest a little."

Arla guided them to another branch in the path with three ways to go. This time, Helyn left Drym, the half-orc, to guide them on the path straight ahead. "How do the others know which way to go?" asked Arla when they met him there.

Drym shrugged. "I don't think they're thinking too hard about it." Graiyla barely heard him say this, for his voice was a soft baritone and just a bit raspy.

Again and again they encountered members of the party, left at intersections so that those behind knew which way to go. This occurred more than six times until, at last, they entered another larger cavern that cut sharp both left and right. This was where the party stopped to regroup, and they were arguing about which way they should go.

<sup>86</sup>In the end, Fiovey pointed out that a faint damp air was coming from the path to the left, and so they followed her as she led them towards what she assumed was a water source. Before long, they found an underground river and followed it downstream. They were no longer sure that Darklake should be their destination - since their enemies might assume they would continue to head there - but they headed in what they thought was that direction anyway. After all, for the time being, they had escaped, and they were able to wash up, refresh their water supplies, and recover from the nightmare of Drathrinar.

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<sup>85</sup> Perception check, DC 15. Zen rolled with advantage a 3 and 19+3=22. Success.

<sup>86</sup> Survival check, DC 10. Derivell rolled 4+2-5 (due to moving at a Fast pace) = 1. Eromani didn't bother, too exhausted to care. Rini rolled 16+4-5=15. Fiovey rolled 19+2-5=16. Vlynrifane rolled 9+4-5=8.

Helyn



Drym



Elris



Keema Battlehammer



Fayra





Ellira



Wilowir



## Chapter 6: Crossroads

At last, they left the river and went down a random tunnel or six in order to find a good place to rest where they thought they could hide from demons and drow or whatever else might be chasing them at present. What they settled for was a flat ledge on the side of a larger cavern wall overlooking a vast shaft descending into who-knew-what. The ledge was roughly a hundred feet long and sixty feet wide; more than enough space for everyone to sprawl out and camp. The party, in general, wasn't thrilled with it, for they felt too exposed. However, they were too exhausted to care.

As soon as they stopped for the "night", Rini became like a mother hen, fretting over Eromani who laid flat on her back near the back wall, sweating and breathing heavily. Derivell and Zen sat nearby, one on either side of the pair, acting like bodyguards and protectors. Fiovey, Vlynrifane, and Shreiken were closer to Derivell, the druid tending to Havvah. Vlynrifane had been the one Eromani had handed the angel off to when she turned back to help Graiyla. On Zen's side, Arla and Graiyla sat with Helyn, Drym, Keema, Elris, Fayra, Ellira and Wilowir. On Derivell's side was Prince Derendil, Jimjar, Topsy, Turvy, Ront, Eldeth, Sarith and Stool.

Immediately, Derivell told his story of the events that had occurred in the Fortress of Despair, and Rini told hers. Then everyone sat in silence for a bit, lost in their own thoughts. A lot had happened that day, and there was quite a bit to mull over. In the end, it was Sarith who broke the silence. "Darklake is only a few more days from here. In spite of everything, I still think we should head there and go to Neverlight Grove. Especially because of what we just went through, we could use all the help we can get."

"Yes," said Stool, still weak from the battle with the manes but excited to once more hear the name of his home. "Please, Friends! My people will help. My sovereign will protect us. It is our safest path."

"Hmph!" snorted Turvy. "The demons and most likely the drow know we're going in that direction. At this point, it's stupid to continue that way."

"I agree," Topsy cut in. "I say we go our separate ways. That's our best bet."

"Nope," said Jimjar, the only happy person in the bunch. "MY best bet was double or nothing with Fiovey. We're even now. I told you it was a dragon."

Fiovey was in no mood. Coming face to face with an ancient black dragon had reminded her of her experience with death. "Fine," she replied. "We're even."

"Splitting up might be the best way to go," said Derivell solemnly. "Eromani and I are clearly the primary targets - possibly of both the drow and the demons." He gestured at Havvah who was still hidden beneath the blanket. "And there's the possibility that my mother's mind is not her own. It might be a lie that Miralin can connect with her, but it might also be true. That means that wherever we go, they may have a way of finding us. That puts anyone who stays with us in constant danger. It may be that we can lure all the enemies away from everyone else if we go our separate ways."

"My thoughts exactly," said Topsy. "Besides, it's harder to find smaller groups of individuals. Traveling in such a big group is making us a bigger target."



"This is a terrible idea," said Sarith. "The Underdark is an extremely terrible and dangerous place. A larger group scares off many enemies."

"But makes us a target for bigger ones," argued Topsy.

"Yeah," said Jimjar. "I don't know. I still think we should all go to Blingdenstone. It's north of Velkynvelve. The drow and demons would never expect us to backtrack and go there. And let me remind you, there is access to the surface from there."

"He's got a point," said Eldeth. "They think we're headed for Darklake, so if we head back towards Velkynvelve and then north to Blingdenstone, it may be the safest route. Did you see that drow army? Chances are, they left very few at the outpost. Shoot! We might even have a chance of saving more prisoners if we go back. Mistress Ilvara HAD to have cleared most of the place out leaving a skeleton crew to defend it."

Graiyla shook her head. "My choice remains. I am a Demon Hunter now. I'm with Derivell and Eromani. I'm going to continue to hunt down and kill the demons who are after us, even if it means I die in the process."

"I'm with them too," said Fiovay, but she offered up no reason as to why.

"Me too," said Vlynrifane, also not sharing.

Silence once again returned. They were at a crossroads. If ever there was a good time to split up, this was it. On the one hand, they had been relatively successful thus far by sticking together. On the other, it was obviously true that their enemies would continue after the Demon Hunters. Practically speaking, the bulk of the escapees had a MUCH better chance of surviving and returning to their normal lives if they parted.

Topsy finally spoke up. "We can't trust Sarith," she said bluntly. "He's been deceiving us."

Sarith scowled at her. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Remember what the demons said?" the deep gnome replied. "They said they convinced someone called 'Sucked Boy' to lure us to them through her infected DROW minion. Um..." She gestured at the red sores on his face.

"I don't think it was 'Sucked Boy'," said Jimjar. "I think it was 'Zuck' with a 'Z'. 'Zuck Toy', or something like that."

"Both just sound all wrong," said Arla, scrunching her face. "Could we stop saying that name right now?"

"Besides," said Topsy. "You're missing the point. He's bad. He was luring us into the demon trap."

"It was a lie, Fool!" snapped Sarith. "Demons lie. It's what they do."

"Call her a fool again and see what happens," said Turvy.

Sarith rolled his eyes. He was about to say something further, but Derivell stopped him with a raised hand. <sup>87</sup>“Please. Bickering isn’t going to get us anywhere, and neither is accusing each other. It’s really quite simple. We’re sticking together.” He pointed at himself, Eromani, Rini, Fiovay and Vlynrifane. “Everyone is more than welcome to stay with us. However, if you choose to leave, we totally understand. No hard feelings.”

“Well, then. We’re out of here,” said Topsy. “We’ll rest here with all of you, but then we’re gone. Agreed?” She looked at Turvy.

“You know it,” said her brother.

“Where will you be heading?” asked Eldeth.

“Wherever we feel like,” said Topsy.

“That’s fine by me,” said Jimjar. “Never trusted you anyway. Did you see her fighting that statue in the Contemplation Chamber? There’s something wrong with them.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Topsy defensively.

“That thing was bashing you around like you were a drum, but you hardly had a scratch on you,” Jimjar explained. “Someone else has some dirty, little secrets that she and her brother aren’t willing to share. Am I wrong? Bet me. Come on. Bet me. I’m right, aren’t I?”

Both Topsy and Turvy glared at him as if they wanted to tear him apart, but once again Derivell diffused things. “Fine. Like I said. Everyone has always been free to go whenever they feel like it. Can we at least not fight for the last few hours we’re together? Haven’t we all been through enough? Unless she protests, I’m keeping my mother with me, so it’s me, Eromani, Rini, Zen, Fiovay, Vlynrifane, Shreiken, my mother, Graiyla and... anyone else?”

Arla then made up her mind. “I’m with you,” she announced firmly. “I’m going to stay with the Demon Hunters.”

“I’ll also stay with the Demon Hunters and continue to guide you, if you’ll have me,” said Sarith.

Derivell didn’t even consult with the others. He just said, “Sorry. No. You can stick with us, but we can’t have you guiding us anymore. Unfortunately, you’ve been called into question, and although I’d like to trust you, it’d be stupid to do so.” Sarith’s mood darkened, but he said nothing in reply.

At last, Helyn spoke up. “My group and I would like to follow this guy’s plan,” she said, pointing at Jimjar. “If you don’t mind, can you guide us to this Bling-bling-stone place?”

“Sounds like there might be some people to save from this outpost too,” said Keema, the dwarf cleric of the group. “As long as the place isn’t crawling with enemies - if it really is like you said and this drow matron has mostly cleared it out - I wouldn’t mind making a pitstop to save some more people from their tyranny.”

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<sup>87</sup> Persuasion check, DC 14. Derivell rolled 20+4=24. Success.

“Could be fun,” said Wilowir with another of her characteristic, mischievous smiles and a single-shoulder shrug.

“So, at last, we have two groups for sure,” said Jimjar. “Yes. I will go with these people, especially now that Fi and I are even and I owe her nothing anymore.” He couldn’t stop gloating.

Then Ront said, “I go them,” he pointed at Helyn. “They go to surface.” No one seemed to care.

“What, exactly, is happening?” asked Prince Derendil at that point. After Vlynrifane explained everything to him in elvish, he then said, “Hmmm. I must say, I feel dreadfully sorry for saying this, but I am most eager to get to the surface world. The sooner I do, the sooner I might find a cure for my condition. Please convey my condolences to the others, will you?” Then the drow shared with the group that the quaggoth had decided to join Helyn’s party.

“I’m staying with you,” said Stool, sliding up next to Fiovay. “I’m still hoping you will bring me back to my grove.”

“We’ll see,” said Fi, resting her hand on his head. “We’ll try.”

“That’s pretty much everyone,” said Derivell, “except for you.” He looked at Eldeth. “Are you sticking with us or going with them?”

The dwarf was truly torn. “I feel awful if I don’t stay with you, but...”

“But they’re leaving the Underdark,” said Rini with a forced smile. “We aren’t. Go. It makes no sense for you to stay with us. You too, Arla.”

“What?” asked the half-elf merchant. She was just a bit shocked because she’d already worked herself up to stay. She was trying hard to be strong.

“She’s right,” said Vlynrifane. “You’re a glassblower. This is no place for you. It’s sweet that you even said you’d stay with us, but it’s probably best for you to go with them.”

Arla looked at her feet, unsure how to respond. The group meant a lot to her, especially Eromani, Eldeth, Rini and Graiyla. After everything they’d been through, she didn’t feel right about the whole situation. And yet, she couldn’t deny that leaving GREATLY appealed to her. “I... I’ll think about it, I guess,” she finally said, still not looking at any of them.

“Me too,” said Eldeth. “I’ll let you know after we get some rest. Best to sleep on it.”

And with that, the party spread out, spending the rest of their day in their respective groups. Topsy and Turvy kept to themselves, Helyn and her group to themselves, the Demon Hunters to themselves, and everyone else interspersed between the two main groups. Eldeth and Arla sat with the Demon Hunters, but they were quiet and brooding, pondering what course to take.

Finally, after Eromani drifted off, Derivell slid up next to his mother. He hadn’t been exactly eager to meet her, for he wasn’t sure just how painful the encounter would be. Was she really his mother? Could he trust her at all? Was her mind enslaved by the succubus? And to add to

all that, Rini had made it clear that Havvah was quite bad off physically. Would she want him to look upon her? Could he handle seeing her in her present state?

He shook himself and summoned his courage. For her sake, in case it really was his mother, he needed to suck it up and talk to her. He needed to show her that no matter what had happened, she was still his mother. He would still love her. He still wanted to try to have a relationship with her. He needed to take the risk and give her a chance.

Gently, he pulled the blanket aside just enough to look upon her face. He winced as she looked up at him with her good eye. She tried to say something, but words failed her. Then tears began to flow, melting Derivell's heart. <sup>88</sup>He didn't know whether she was faking it or not, but he didn't care. To him, she was a deeply hurting soul, wounded by years of torment - and she was his mother. Maybe she was a demon in disguise, but that also didn't matter. He would treat her with love and honor and respect unless she proved to be false.

And so, he removed his gauntlet and wiped the tears from her eye. Then he used what power he had left in him, doing all he could to heal her of her conditions. Her swollen eye opened. Many of her sores vanished, restoring a good deal of her former beauty. Some of her bones snapped back into place. She seemed more than a little surprised, but he smiled warmly at her. "Selune will heal you in full eventually," he told her confidently. "I may not have enough power yet, but I will keep healing you until you are fully restored."

"Me too," said Rini. "We'll get you back in fighting condition in no time. Then you can pay them back for everything they've done to you. 'Avenging Angel,' that's what we'll call you."

Havvah's lips were no longer swollen, and she rewarded them with her own look of joy. Still, words failed her. Then she reached up with a still shattered arm and gave Derivell the best hug that she could. He embraced her in return, assuring her without words that he would not leave her. He would stay by her side and help her get out of that hell, no matter what.

Later, while most were sleeping and Vlynrifane was keeping watch, Derivell, Rini and Fiovey were restless. Instead of drifting off, they gathered to one side to whisper amongst themselves with the druid. <sup>89</sup>Fiovey was the first to share her feelings about everything. She said, "Okay. Now that it's just us, can we talk? I mean. Can we REALLY talk?"

"What is it?" asked Vlynrifane.

Fiovey first tried to read their faces. Then she said, "Lots of crazy stuff happened today. Right? Have you been giving it any thought?"

"Lots," said Derivell. "I'm just not sure what to think."

"You seem to have some ideas," said Rini. "Care to share?"

Fiovey glanced around to make sure no one else was spying on them. Fairly certain they were finally alone, she continued. "Let's start with Havvah." She was back to her old self, her enthusiasm barely contained.

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<sup>88</sup> Insight check, DC 10. Derivell rolled an 8. Failure.

<sup>89</sup> Investigation check, DC 15. Fiovey rolled 16+2=18. Success. Derivell rolled 13. Failure.

“What about her?” asked Derivell.

“The demons said they used her mind to lure us into the dragon’s lair. Rini said that Havvah had said they should take the passage straight ahead, like she had a vision, and Miralin took credit for it, as if her mind was connected with Havvah’s.”

“And?” asked Vlynrifane.

“According to Havvah, the demons are after some sort of sword called ‘Oblivion’, or something like that. Right?” asked the rogue.

“Esaldayon,” said Rini. “Right. That was the name of it.”

“Esaldayon. Right,” said Fioyay. “She said that in front of us as well. ‘Only Havvah knows where the Esaldayon is.’ That’s what she said.”

“What are you getting at?” asked Vlynrifane.

“This,” said Fioyay. “Either it’s all a lie and the Esaldayon doesn’t actually exist or Miralin lied when she said she lured us into the dragon’s lair by connecting to Havvah. They can’t both be true.”

“Why?” asked Derivell.

“Because if Miralin could connect to Havvah’s mind,” said Fioyay, “she’d know where the sword is. No. Either Havvah’s mind is NOT hers, as she claimed, or the sword doesn’t exist.”

“So which is it?” asked Rini. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know what to believe anymore.”

“And that’s exactly what the demons want,” said Fioyay. “They don’t want us to know what the truth really is. But I think the truth is that the sword IS real and Havvah’s mind IS her own. Miralin was lying through her teeth that she lured us down there. I think us going into the dragon’s lair was one hundred percent NOT according to her plans. I also think that Eromani getting the sword was quite the opposite of what they were hoping.”

“Think about it,” the kitsune continued. “There’s absolutely no way they could have known we were going to go to the Contemplation Chamber. Right?”

“Right,” said Derivell.

“And there’s no way they could have known we were going to get accidentally split up. Even more unlikely is the possibility that they would have expected Arla would open the shaft into the pit which would, by sheer divine intervention, wind up being the only way they could escape from Ilvara and the drow. Right?”

“True,” said Rini.

“So, the chances of anyone getting to Havvah and freeing her were slim to none. Thus, I think that the truth is that Miralin never expected that anyone would find Havvah. In which case, your mother has been genuinely tortured and abused. Why? The only thing that makes sense to me

is that Havvah does indeed have something they want, and they have no way to get it out of her mind, as Miralin wanted us to believe.”

“So, if I’m understanding you right,” said Derivell, “you’re saying that you think my mother isn’t tainted or being controlled at all. You think we can trust her?”

Fiovey held up her finger. “Now, I didn’t say that exactly. I think she isn’t being controlled by Miralin, and I don’t think the demons can use her like they want us to think. Still, I wouldn’t necessarily trust everything she has to say. She may be really messed up in the head after everything she’s been through; not knowing truth from lies.”

“Ah,” said Derivell. “I get what you’re saying. She may not be evil, but her mind may be twisted so badly that she doesn’t even really know right from wrong.”

“Right,” said Fi. “Now, on to Topsy and Turvy. I’m glad they’re leaving. Like Jimjar said, they’re definitely not normal gnomes. Topsy was getting bashed around quite a bit, but Jimjar was right. She didn’t look like she suffered even a single injury. I don’t trust them even remotely. In fact, once they’re gone, I think we should discuss with Helyn that we should all go in different directions from what we discussed in front of them so those two can’t just run to Ilvara or Miralin and tell them where everyone else is headed.”

“Seems wise,” said Rini. “I’m all for switching up our plans especially since Nini isn’t doing so well.”

“How do you feel about Helyn and her party?” asked Derivell.

“They seem okay,” said Fi, “but I certainly don’t trust them. Two things told me to stay with you. One is that I’ve grown very fond of you. To leave you now would be quite sucky of me, and I’d feel guilty about it for the rest of my life. Two is that I don’t trust most of the people in the other group. I don’t know Helyn or her random group at all. For all we know, they could be working WITH Miralin. No thanks. We’ve been doing just fine together, so I’m going to stick with the people I trust most. There isn’t a single person in that group that I feel comfortable with unless maybe Eldeth and Arla go with them.”

“That said,” she continued. “I say we don’t switch up our plans until AFTER Helyn and company go their merry way.”

“That leaves only Graiyla and Sarith,” said Vlynrifane. “What do we do about them?”

“And,” said Fi, “unfortunately Eromani. What do we do about her?”

Rini was instantly on edge. “What about Nini?”

“That sword did something to her,” said Fi. “Like it or not, we need to be careful. She may be tainted. She may no longer be herself. Who knows what it did to her?”

“She’s right,” said Derivell. “It’s not like we’re going to kick her out of the group, Rini. Fi’s just saying that we need to be mindful about it. We need to watch for clues and signs that she’s not herself. We’ll need you in particular to tell us if she’s not acting right. You have to stay open minded about it. Okay?”

Rini nodded, worry plaguing her. "Okay," she replied unhappily.

"As for Graiyla," said Fi, "I don't know what to think. She's invited herself to come with us, and she seems like she's on our side. However, that THING came out of her. It helped us, I think, but it definitely does NOT seem good."

Derivell nodded. "I definitely did not get a good vibe from it."

"It has its own agenda for sure," said Vlynrifane. "It didn't go back into her, though. I saw it vanish into the darkness. It may be lurking - following us."

"To me," said Rini, "it's another demon we have to kill. I've been watching for it to try to sneak back into Graiyla. Problem is, half the time I can't see anything in this accursed darkness."

"Nevertheless," said Vlynrifane. "I would think that if it tried to go back into her that there'd be some sort of sound. She'd likely gasp for air or something."

"Maybe," said Derivell. "Regardless, I must say that I do welcome her help. I'm frankly a bit upset with everyone else deciding to leave us right now. I mean, I understand why they are, but it still sucks of them. Thus far, we've been able to survive only because we've stayed together. I'm afraid that now that we're separating, we're all going to get picked off. I'm trying to remain positive, but I'm having a hard time."

Vlynrifane nodded. "Me too. I was thinking the same thing as Fiovay, personally. I trust you more than them, and I view them leaving as cowardly. Together, we might be able to hunt down these demons who are chasing us and actually kill them. In fact, I think we almost took them out when we first met them. They only survived because they fled into the Ethereal Plane. Without the others, it's going to be a lot harder on us just to stay alive."

"And they're using us," said Rini. "That's the hardest part. Yeah, I'm also trying to stay positive, but let's face it. They're all thinking that we're bait luring the enemy away so they can all escape. Selfish... Selfish... jerks." It seemed like she wanted to call them something worse, but she forced herself to settle on 'jerks'.

"Who can blame them, though?" asked Derivell. "And, in some ways, I'm glad. Knowing that most of us who escaped from Velkynvelve might get out of the Underdark alive and well is comforting. If they really do return to the outpost and save even more slaves, that makes it better. Even if we die down here, it'll be for a good cause."

"Hmmm," said Fi. "I wish I could share that sentiment. I'm glad that makes you feel better, but not me. I view us as some pretty darn good people, and to throw our lives away for a group of people who are selfish... Yeah. I'm having a hard time with it. Still, what choice do we have?"

"Right," said Rini. "We don't. We just have to suck it up and deal with it."

"Like the good people we are," said Fi with a smile.

"So what about Sarith?" asked Vlynrifane. "What do we do about him? Sounded like he might be tainted or something."

“Right,” said Fi. “Zuck-zuck, or whatever the name was. Yeah. He’s OBVIOUSLY got something going on with him. He’s got red sores, and remember his story? He murdered one of his fellow drow. He, however, had no memory of it.”

“Right,” said Derivell. “I also learned that he was actually a soldier serving in Velkynvelve when it happened.”

“Oh,” said Vlynrifane. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah,” said Derivell. “He was sent from Menzo to Velkynvelve, and at some point while at the outpost, that’s when the murder occurred, not long before we arrived.”

“When did you find that out?” asked Rini.

“Maybe a few days ago,” said Derivell. “He actually opened up to me about it. He said that even if he could prove he didn’t murder the soldier, Ilvara would never believe him. She’ll never accept him back. His only course of action is to escape with us.”

“Interesting,” said Fiovey. “Have we tried to cure him of his disease yet?”

“Multiple times,” said Rini. “Derivell and I have both tried using our powers during our journey. Whatever he has, it isn’t a normal disease or ailment. It’s something more advanced.”

“Miralin said that Zuck-zuck used him to lure us,” said Fi. “Either that was a lie or whatever is infecting him can actually control him to some degree. If it can control him then maybe it isn’t a disease at all. Maybe it’s more like a symbiotic thing. You know, like a hive-mind.”

“Oh,” said Rini. “I get what you’re saying. Maybe the reason Lesser Restoration and such isn’t working to cure him is because it isn’t a disease but a parasite. Maybe he’s infected with creatures that are using him as a host.”

“Gods,” breathed Vlynrifane, weariness threatening to take her over. “This is too much. So, if what you just said is true, could WE get infected by whatever he has?”

“I’ve been fearful of that myself,” said Rini. “It’s hard to say.”

“Either way,” said Vlynrifane. “I don’t like him. Sounds like none of us do. Should we ditch him?”

“If he could infect us, I think he would have by now,” said Derivell. “We’ve known him for more than what... fifteen days, I think - if you include all our time at Velkynvelve. Yeah, I don’t trust him. However, it may be that if we can help find a cure for him, we might gain a valuable ally. I say we keep him with us, if he wants to stay, but we no longer follow his lead.”

They considered this, and Rini was the first to reply. “Okay. Sounds good to me. I mean, what else are we going to do with him? If we don’t take him with us, he might go with the others.”

“Or he might go his own way and ambush us in the dark,” said Vlynrifane. “He does know this area better than anyone. True. Keep your friends close and your enemies closer. I’d rather know where he is so we can keep an eye on him.”



“Agreed,” said Fi. “For now, we take him with us, and we watch him and hope to help find a cure.”

And, with that, the Demon Hunters adjourned their meeting. Leaving Vlynrifane to continue keeping watch, they forced themselves to try to get some rest. In the “morning”, Vlynrifane cast Goodberry three times and handed them out to provide everyone with at least one day’s sustenance. Then they said goodbye to Topsy and Turvy who were the first to leave. After about an hour, it was time for Helyn’s group to depart, and much to their surprise, Eldeth and Arla decided to stay.

Once those who were leaving were out of sight, Fiovey turned to the pair and asked, “So what made you decide to stay? It’s going to be dangerous, ya know. It’s probably not too late to catch up.”

Eldeth exchanged looks with Arla and said, “Going with them seems the wisest course, but we started thinking about it. Who in that group do we really trust? Helyn and her party? Jimjar? Prince Derendil? Ront?”

“Haha!” cried Fiovey with a laugh. “See? Women after my own heart. I just told them pretty much the same thing last night. Besides, we know you like us. So, we know the real reason you stayed. You couldn’t get enough of this.” Then she gestured at Derivell’s chest and face.

He turned bright red. “Don’t do that.”

Fiovey laughed all the more. “Well, I am certainly glad you stayed. We kept the best people with us.”

“I don’t know,” said Vlynrifane sadly. “I’ll miss Prince Derendil. He and I used to talk quietly sometimes. And, actually, I’ll miss Topsy and Turvy. They were kinda feisty. Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t really trust them too much, but I’ll miss having them here.”

“Same with Jimjar,” said Fiovey. “I am still reeling from the fact that he actually managed to win that last bet.”

“Don’t remind me,” said Eromani, speaking up for the first time that morning. She had slept the longest but looked the worst. Even Havvah was faring better that morning. The angel was now dressed in a spare outfit that Eromani had in her pack, and she was tied to Derivell’s back. She still couldn’t walk, and her arms and legs were quite crooked. She had been cured of many of her sores and so forth, but she had many more to go. All this and yet Eromani looked worse.

The sorceress was sickly pale. Her eyes were bloodshot. She was still sweating with a fever, and she looked a bit wobbly on her feet. She leaned heavily on her staff and more than a few times they caught her having a small shaking fit.

“How are you feeling?” asked Derivell.

She shrugged. “I’ll be fine.”

“Care to share with us what happened? Do you know?” asked Vlynrifane.

Eromani pondered how to respond. She even looked down at her left hip where the sword was now sheathed in a makeshift scabbard. After a moment, she said, "The sword is called 'Suth'e'vron', 'The Essence of Evronar'. Evronar is my father. The moment I touched it, I attuned with it. His mind and mine connected, but the magic in the sword gave me temporary control - for a price. While controlling him, he was constantly resisting, and that's why I'm sick. He had to do what I wanted, and I could give him commands mentally, but it took a lot out of me. I can also summon and de-summon him at will."

"Holy Halipers!" said Fiovay.

"Holy what?" asked Arla.

"Halipers," said Fiovay. "They're sweet little critters that live in the Feywild. I remember them as a kid. They have bat-like wings and fluffy white bodies and pointy ears like a cat. They love borinta fruit and love to tear into it with their needle-like teeth. Oh! And purple tongues. They have purple tongues."

"You've been to the Feywild?" asked Arla, even more curious now.

Fiovay laughed. "My family and I actually came from the Feywild. We used to live in Prismeer, a whimsical land once ruled by Zybilna. I actually don't remember her, but my father said it used to be a great place to live because of her. She sounded like a great person. My parents think she's still alive, but she's been taken prisoner by the three hags who took over. They call themselves the Hourglass Coven. Terrible women! That's actually why we left. My parents tried to tough it out for a long time, but my father finally found us a way out. He didn't want me to continue to grow up in that environment, so we escaped."

"This is all great," said Sarith. "But can we get moving? It's still a few days to Darklake, and I think it behooves us to stay ahead of both demons and drow. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I do," said Derivell, "but I'm not entirely sure we're going to continue to Darklake. We haven't decided where we're going."

"Did anyone warn Helyn about Topsy and Turvy before they left?" asked Rini.

"I did," said Fi. "I whispered it to Drym, the half-orc. I don't know. He seemed like one of the most trustworthy people in the bunch."

"I also spoke with Helyn," said Derivell. "She said she'd consider changing their plans as well."

"And why are we changing our plans?" asked Sarith, more than a little irritated.

"Because those who left know we were going to Darklake," said Derivell. "If they get captured or one of them betrays us and runs off to Ilvara, when we get to Darklake, they'll be waiting for us."

"And obviously the demons know we were going to Darklake," added Fiovay. "They were waiting for us to show up in this area like they knew we were coming. So continuing in that direction seems silly. Don't you think?"

Sarith's expression was like ice. He seemed about to say something when Stool unexpectedly spoke up. "But... what about taking me to my grove?" he asked forlornly, tugging especially at Fiovey's heartstrings. "Are we not going to Neverlight? Will I never see my home again?"

"And where would you like to go?" asked Sarith. "Blingdenstone? Isn't that where the others are headed, provided they are still headed there? Why did we not just stay together? Or shall we go to Gracklstugh? Buppido turned out to be a great companion. Why not visit some of his kin? I'm sure they're friendlier. We could just go to Menzoberranzan and give up. I'm sure Ilvara would appreciate that. By the way, all three of those options will be roughly twenty to twenty-five days from here. Darklake is closer, and it provides us with a MUCH better avenue of escape from this area of the Underdark. Like it or not, it's our best option."

The party fell silent. Each was thinking the same thing. Sarith had guided them to begin with right to the demons. He seemed pretty insistent on going to Darklake. What new trap awaited them there?

And yet, they had not thought it through as well as they believed. Their other options weren't all that great. It was true, to go to Blingdenstone was probably their best hope of survival, but then they'd lead the demons and drow potentially into the others. Blingdenstone was only a good choice if the Demon Hunters continued to lure their enemies away from it.

As for Gracklstugh and Menzoberranzan, they were obviously not options at all. Of course no one would expect them to head towards either, but that was because it was stupid to do so.

Derivell gritted his teeth. "He's right. In the end, what choice do we have?"

"Knowing it is probably a trap or that our enemies will be waiting for us to arrive," said Eromani, "we can approach with more caution."

Sarith and Stool both seemed content. "Wonderful," said the drow. "Then follow me. I know the way best."

The Demon Hunters exchanged worried glances as Sarith started on his way. Stool hopped along at his feet. "Well," said Arla as she hefted her warhammer onto her shoulder. "Better focus more on my training. Looks like I'm about to gain a WHOLE lot more experience in just a VERY short period of time." Though she was acting brave, the others noted that she was trembling.

"You still might catch up to Helyn," said Rini.

Arla gave a derisive snort. "Yeah. Sure. Frankly, they've got just about as much chance of escaping the Underdark as we do. The trek here was nasty, and most of our losses weren't because of the drow chasing us. I'll take my chances with you. At this point, I've resigned myself to this fate. I'm psyching myself up for the very real possibility that I may never see the light of day again."

Eromani then put her hand on her shoulder and gave it a squeeze. She truly admired her for the decision she'd made. Of everyone from Velkynvelve, Arla was considered the most likely to die. And yet, there she was, still alive and suited up like a fighter, willing to remain with a group of doomed individuals who were being targeted by untold evils. She was truly an inspiration.

“You will,” she assured her. “We all will. I have to believe that.” And with those words, the party continued on toward Darklake.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Party gained Inspiration and 1,000 XP. Also, they were able to long rest twice more without incident, finally arriving at Darklake.