

Chapter 19 - The Tomb

It wasn't even technically dawn by the time the party woke and started on their way. After a decent breakfast, they sent Zriek, Shpri and Will-o'-wisp down the stairs to do some preliminary exploring. Before long, they had some basic intel.

It wasn't the most complex layout. There was a somewhat grand hall with a high ceiling. A few ornate chests were set not too far within the doorway; one on either side. There was a good deal of debris on the far side of the hall and another ornate chest. To the left, there was a locked door with a keyhole. The lock looked quite complex to those looking through the eyes of their familiars; namely Gale and Lae'zel. To the right was another door, almost identical, except that there was no lock on it.

Gale did a brief mapping out of the entire structure before they joined the animals. "I'll wager that door to the right leads to a hallway or chamber that then leads to the same door that leads out onto the beach," he observed.

"Convenient," said Shadowheart. "Now if we can just get it open, we'll have a way back to our original camp."

"That would be nice," remarked Ryth-Shan. "I liked that spot, actually. It was cozy and provided a good source of freshwater and fishing. Besides, another night without bedrolls and pillows and I'm certain we'll all need a chiropractor."

"We'll see what we can do," said Gale. "Either way, there's got to be a key either in the hall or that door to the right. Well, hopefully there is a key, anyway."

And, with that, the party set out down the stairs to explore. They threw open the chests and looted them. One contained a non-magical ring and the other two in the hall contained magic scrolls; Guiding Bolt, Silence, and Protection from Evil and Good. As they went, they grabbed anything that seemed of any value, and they put them in their magic pockets. Only Lae'zel did not have a magic pocket, but she didn't seem to care. She traveled light anyway, and so it was no big deal to her to let them be the pack mules.

At last, they entered the door off to the right. It led into what looked like a tomb. A central sarcophagus was surrounded by four pillars on each side. Beyond the pillars, both on the left and right, were more sarcophaguses; some opened and empty while others were still closed. Still others were shattered, as if someone had destroyed them. Gargoyle heads were set into the walls on either side of the room; eight in all. At the far end of the chamber, there was another door that appeared to be locked, and there were many candelabras around along with jars, vases, rotted crates and bones. There were lots of humanoid skeletons as well. Most were shattered to pieces.

"There's the door I mentioned," said Gale with a look of triumph on his face. He did so love to be right. "That should be the one that leads to the beach, as predicted."

"There's a plaque on the central sarcophagus," observed Vexir.

Gale then stooped down to see if he could read it. "Let's see." He then dusted it off and held a candle up to it to bathe it in light. "Hmmm. A dead language. Something ancient must have been worshipped here. I can't make it out, unfortunately." One by one, they all tried, but it was impossible. The language was too ancient.

Slowly, they made their way around, lighting old candles as they went. Kaedyn found some sort of odd vent near the central sarcophagus covered in layers upon layers of dust. Then Vexir found another between two pillars on the left. Gale found another between two pillars on the right, and after he did, he said, "I'm sensing a theme here. I'll bet you a bottle of wine that we'll find more just like these there, there and there also."

Sure enough, they found identical vents in matching places; six in total. Then Astarion noticed a tripping mechanism on the central sarcophagus, but there were no such traps on the others. Shadowheart found a button under the dust and cobwebs and behind a secret panel on the first pillar to the left. Astarion also found a Soul Coin in the rubble near one of the sarcophaguses. Looking around and seeing no one was watching him, he pocketed it. He did not put it in his magic pocket but in one of his normal pockets. After all, it seemed far too valuable to share.

Then Kaedyn noticed traces of oil on the vents and in various places on the floor. He noticed scorch marks as well, all over the room, as if a fire had once burned up everything within. The skeletons were also charred and blackened. One was near the door that they came through. It looked as if he or she had tried to run but couldn't get through. The gargoyle heads had scorch marks on them near the mouths, and he noticed what looked like a nozzle at the back of the throat of each one.

"As soon as we shift the lid off the central sarcophagus," he explained, "oil is going to spew up out of the floor vents all over. This will create a slipping hazard which will thus make it difficult to grab what's in the sarcophagus and run. The doors will pull shut and lock as well, trapping us inside. The gargoyles will then launch flames out which will set the oil on fire, turning the entire room into an instant furnace. They didn't care who looted the other sarcophaguses. They only cared about the central one. The button on the pillar will deactivate the trap, I presume, once we shift the lid off. Chances are, two people always removed the lid if it needed removing at all."

One opened the lid, and the other hit the button to deactivate the trap right away. So, I'd say we'll probably have about three seconds at best to deactivate it before the gargoyles launch the flames and the oil is spewed all over the floor."

"Ah yes," said Gale with a sideways grin. "Makes sense. Bravo! Indeed, most traps have a deactivation switch. Otherwise, how could the caretakers of this fine establishment get at whatever it is they hid in the sarcophagus?"

"Why would caretakers even need to get at what was hidden in a sarcophagus?" asked Shadowheart. "Isn't the whole point that whatever you bury with someone, it is supposed to stay with that person's corpse?"

"True enough," said Gale. "But the deactivation of the trap is for two reasons. One is that if a caretaker accidentally triggers the trap, they have a way to deactivate it before they die. The second is the more important reason. If something unexpected happens, and they need to move the body and all of its possessions, it would be truly detrimental to not have a deactivation switch. Earthquakes, enemy raiders, floods, you name it. Caretakers of tombs and crypts need to have a way to remove the body and items in order to preserve the dead; just in case."

"Let's loot the others first," suggested Shadowheart. "Then we throw the lid open, hit the button, and we're all set. Yes?"

"Tell me why we're robbing graves again," said Lae'zel, arms folded across her chest defiantly.

Ryth-Shan replied, "We might find something to give us clues as to what's going on with us. Who knows? Could be a connection of some kind."

"I'm really struggling to see any connection whatsoever," said Lae'zel. "Seems more like you are all looking for excuses to rob graves."

"What do the dead need with valuables?" said Shadowheart with an attitude. "Seems like the living would benefit more from them than a bunch of dusty, old bones."

"Here! Here!" said Astarion. "Unless you're undead, what do you need with weapons, armor, and magical jewelry?"

"And if something IS undead, we wouldn't want them to have weapons, armor and magical jewelry anyway," added Kaedyn. "They would just be a bigger threat to us."

They then looted the other sarcophaguses and found a rapier, a suit of ring mail, a couple more magic scrolls; Guiding Bolt and Silence, and a trident. Finally, they tried the door at the far end, but they discovered it was locked with another rather complex locking mechanism in place. "Apparently, the caretakers didn't want anyone to loot the tomb here," said Astarion in his typical smart-butt fashion. "How unwelcoming! It's actually rather rude."

"Maybe the door will open once we deactivate the trap," said Kaedyn.

"Let's at least cover the vents," suggested Gale. "Put crates and vases over them. That should help stem the flow of oil should the button not work."

"Great idea," said Kaedyn. They quickly broke up the task, went around, and put crates and large vases over the six vents.

And with that, they decided to get it over with. Vexir shoved the lid of the central sarcophagus to the side. There was a click. Immediately, oil bubbled up out of the vents on all sides. Even with the crates and vases covering them, the oil still burst up and out. Vases tipped over and broke as oil began to spew across the floor. Astarion was in position by the button. He hit it as fast as he could. There was another click, and the oil receded. It was quick enough to prevent it from spreading across the entire room, but there were still remnants around the vents.

"Wow!" said Ryth-Shan. "They meant serious business."

"Indeed," said Astarion. "If I hadn't been ready at the button... Like Kaedyn said, I doubt we could have made it to the door without slipping and falling all over."

As they were speaking, Kaedyn and Vexir were already searching the sarcophagus. The dead person within held a spear clutched in both hands. Around his neck, on a chain, was an engraved key. Vexir took the spear and Kaedyn carefully undid the clasp on the chain so that he could remove the key. "I think we found the key to the other door," he replied.

"Most excellent!" said Gale. "I figured it had to be around here somewhere - either that or a lever or other mechanism release."

"It has an engraving on it," said Kaedyn. "Can you read this?"

Gale took it and turned it over a few times. "Same language, I'm afraid," he replied. "Nothing I know."

"So, it still could be a trap?" said Astarion. "I'll stand by the door leading upstairs while you all use the key on the other door. How does that sound?"

"It could just be the key to the door right there," said Shadowheart pointing at the door to the beach.

"Could be both," said Gale, "like a master key."

"What does this spear do?" said Vexir, handing it to Gale. "It seems magical."

Gale took it as he handed the key back to Kaedyn. Then he said, "Ah yes. It most certainly is. I know the Identify spell. This'll take a few minutes. I'll perform the ritual in the hall." He then left the tomb chamber while the others tried the key on the beachfront door. Sure enough, the key clicked in the lock and it opened. Kaedyn threw the door open to reveal the early morning sunlight. Vexir instantly faded into the shadows of the tomb to avoid it. She noticed that Astarion did the same, almost out of instinct.

Everyone but Gale, Astarion and Vexir stepped out of the crypt and into the glorious light of dawn. It felt good to get out of the cold tomb that had the stench of death mingled with a musty stink. They stretched their legs and breathed in the morning air. Zriek flew about, immediately scoping out the area. He returned without uttering a sound. Ryth-Shan took that to mean there were no enemies in the immediate area and that they were safe. He assured the others of this, and they made their way to the camp.

Once there, they enjoyed freshening up a bit. They washed their faces and cleaned their gear. It felt good to wash all the blood and grime off from the battle with the mercenaries. They then tidied up the place, just in case they decided to come back later after they finished exploring the crypt.

Finally, Gale joined them. Only Astarion and Vexir did not. When he approached, he held the spear up and said, "It is called 'The Watcher's Guide.' It assists the person who wields it. If they ever miss when attacking an opponent, the magic within gives them an advantage on their next attack against that same target. Vexir has already rejected it. Anyone else interested?"

Shadowheart decided to take it after she saw that no one else was wanting it. She hefted it a bit to get a feel for it. "Not bad," she thought. "I could get used to it, I think."

Chapter 20 - The Vampire Spawn

Meanwhile, as soon as Gale had left the Dank Crypt, Vexir and Astarion began to prowl about in the shadows. They propped the door open with a rock just in case, and then they retreated into the hall. There was some light streaming down through a crack in the west wall near the ceiling, but as long as they avoided the direct sunlight, they both seemed content.

It was then that Vexir decided to confront him. They were alone, and she figured it was the best opportunity to get him to confess. "Where did you go last night and what are you up to?" she asked suddenly.

Astarion's countenance fell. "So, you caught me leaving. How annoying!" He then faced her and saw the hard expression on her face. "Please. We really don't want to go here."

Vexir decided to use intimidation to get answers. "This is a problem for me," she replied. "I am done with this. I don't trust you. Who knows what you are up to? For all I know, you could be working for the mind flayers. Talk now, or we're done." She made it clear what she meant by that. She already had her greataxe at the ready.

"Okay! Okay!" he hissed, gritting his teeth in frustration. "I'll tell you, but you have to promise to keep an open mind. I really don't want trouble. Like you, I'm just hoping to survive this whole mess, and maybe, just maybe, come out on top."

Vexir just stared at him with hostility in her eyes. It was clear that she would not relent. She also made it apparent that she would not promise anything. He would talk, or she WOULD give him trouble. There was no in-between.

"Fine," he said with disdain. "Have it your way. If we have a problem, we have a problem." He took in a deep breath. "But I will warn you, if we have a problem, you won't like it when I bare my fangs."

Vexir just rolled her eyes at this. She thought he was being a drama queen. But then, Astarion withdrew a pace, pressing his back against the wall. He couldn't look at her when he spoke the next words. "I'm a vampire spawn," he admitted in a voice that she barely heard.

This took Vexir completely by surprise. The hard expression she'd been wearing was gone in a flash. Her eyebrows lifted and her mouth fell open. She was aghast. Astarion looked up at her to try to gauge her reaction, and he winced. "I know. Hard to believe. Right?" But then he bared his fangs in a non-threatening manner.

It was Vexir's turn to drop back a pace. She could not wipe the shock off. "But... how? You... The sun... You're not burning up."

"What? Really?" said Astarion, his witty personality returning. "I hadn't noticed." He then walked around her to stand within the beams of light from the sun as he looked up at it while shielding his eyes. Then he looked back at her and spread his arms out. "Well. Would you look at that! I think you're right. I can somehow walk about in the sun. And yet, here we are." He then left the light to join her again. "So..." He then paused. It seemed he was now waiting for a typical response.

"So what?" asked Vexir, still completely off balance.

"Isn't this where we get into an altercation; where you try to jam a stake through my heart?" he replied.

Vexir recovered at last. She looked back at the doorway to ensure no one else was listening. Then, she said, "I have no intention of trying to kill you."

Now it was Astarion's turn to be shocked. "Is that... concern I see in your eyes? Do you... actually care?"

Vexir hardened her expression immediately. What he had seen was now gone, shoved behind her usual wall. "No. This is simply unexpected. That's all. Why do you think you can walk about by day?"

Astarion shrugged. "I can only guess it has something to do with the tadpole. Someone, or some-THING, has changed the rules. Sunlight no longer kills me, and I can enter places uninvited now. Poison hurts me, and I can... BLEED to death. I don't regenerate. Radiant damage, holy water, etc. have no additional effect on me. I'm not resistant to necrotic, bludgeoning, piercing or slashing injuries. I can't spider climb, and I have no claws. It's like I'm alive again and not a vampire spawn at all."

"But then," he continued, "running water still stings like an imp's stinger, and more importantly... I still require blood. That's where I went last night. That's what I was doing. I was hunting an animal to drink its blood so I wouldn't feed on any of you."

"That explains why you were almost like a wild animal yesterday when fighting the mercenaries. When you slit their leader's throat, you couldn't stop staring at her."

He closed his eyes. It seemed as if he was fighting back the anguish of that memory. "I've never actually feasted on a person," he told her. "My vampire master, Cazador of the Baldurian Szarr family, enjoyed cruel games. He forced me to sustain myself on mere rats from the sewers. He liked to toy with people just for his amusement, and I was one of his favorites."

"I was once a High Elf from a wealthy, noble family," he continued. "I had everything... until he took it all away."

"How long have you been a vampire spawn?" Vexir asked.

"Since the 13th century," he replied. That was roughly two hundred years in the past. "Cazador thought it was great fun indeed to take someone who had once been the master of others and make him into a sewer-dwelling, rat-blood sucking thief and murderer. I was allowed to kill others. I just wasn't allowed to enjoy the spoils of my labor afterwards."

"But now, I've become conveniently lost." He said this with such hope and excitement that Vexir couldn't help but feel his enthusiasm. It hit her all at once that for him, the tadpole was not a curse. It was a blessing. It was his freedom. No wonder he had said that he wanted to learn how to control it. He didn't want to get it removed. He wanted to keep it and become his own master.

"This new change started when I was seducing a young fellow noble," he told her. She could see that he was being totally honest with her. There wasn't even a hint of lying. "Cazador wanted me to lure the man to him. All of a sudden, I was taken by a mind flayer. It just popped up on me out of nowhere, it seemed. Then, just like you, I was infected with that tadpole. Now I am free, Vexir. I am free from him and from the darkness. I can't go back to that. Never again! Never again!"

He then looked up at her with pleading eyes. "Can we keep this between us? Please don't tell the others. Please don't make this into a big deal. I've never feasted on anyone, and I promise I won't. I'll keep feasting on animals. There are plenty around here. I know the gith ranger won't like it, but it's better than feasting on people. Right? I mean, as long as I keep feasting on animals, I won't crave people. That's what I was thinking, anyway, and..."

She stopped him with a raised hand. She'd made her decision already. Something inside her felt pity for him. She couldn't help but have a strong desire to help him. "Relax," she said, her expression soft. "I'll help you."

Astarion was beside himself with relief. "You will? I mean... really? You will? I..."

She cut him off again. "I think we should tell the others, but I will stand by you and help protect you from them." Astarion no longer had words. She had struck him so deeply to the core that he could no longer comprehend what she was even saying. It took him a few more moments to recover, so she continued. "I think it's stupid to hinder you. It benefits us more if you can use all of your weapons. I say, use your fangs, if that helps strengthen you, but use them on enemies we encounter."

Astarion finally found his voice. "But what if Kaedyn, or whoever, refuses to go along with it? I have serious doubts that he'll agree to continuing on with a vampire spawn, and though I haven't tested it, I'm fairly certain a stake through the heart will still kill me. I expect he, at the very least, will WANT to test that."

Vexir rolled her eyes. "Kaedyn can be such a prude. However, I think if we appeal to his soft-hearted nature, we can convince him that you are his next mission from Tyr. It will be his holy quest to help find you a cure both for the tadpole and your quasi-vampirism. You have been given a second chance at life, it seems. Surely, isn't that a noble crusade?"

Astarion was elated. "You, my dear, have become my new best friend."

"I had better not regret this," she warned him. "Try to bite me, even once, and I swear it'll be the end of you."

"Hah! Darling, I'm not sure if I even CAN die right now," he laughed.

"Would you like to test that out?" she asked.

He laughed again. "Of course not, My Dear," he replied. "At this point, I am willing to do just about anything you think is best. Of everyone here, you are probably the most desired companion. My chances of surviving with you are far greater than with anyone else. So, if you think we can convince the others to travel with me even if they know I'm a spawn, I'm right behind you. Lead the way."

"We'll wait for them here," she told him. "I'm not going out in that cursed sun."

"Irony, isn't it?" he said. "Who would ever have thought that a drow would be more adverse to the sun than a vampire spawn?"

She chuckled at this a bit. "Why don't I get the advantage of not having issues with the sun? You're free from it. So, why not me?"

"But you are free," a voice hissed in her mind. She spun around, fully expecting to see someone standing there behind her. There was no one.

"Are you all right, My Dear?" asked Astarion. Her sudden reaction caught him off guard. He had not heard the voice.

She continued to look around. "You didn't hear that?"

"Hear what?" asked Astarion. He was truly mystified.

"I could have sworn I heard a voice whispering from behind me. It said, 'But you are free.'"

Astarion now looked about as well, expecting to see some trace of a ghost. Nothing. "Perhaps you were imagining things."

An idea suddenly compelled her to do something she never dreamed she would have done in the past. She ran into the beam of sunlight and let it engulf her. As she did, she felt the sun's warmth on her skin, and her eyes adjusted to it. It wasn't unpleasant. It felt... good. "Wha...? I... Why?"

"What?" asked Astarion, puzzled.

"The sun," she said in disbelief. "It's no longer causing me issues, like it should. Why is it... What is happening? This wasn't like this yesterday."

Astarion approached her. His eyes were narrowed as he also tried to reason through it. "Perhaps the tadpole isn't as dormant as we were hoping. Perhaps it is merely transforming us in different ways. Maybe running water won't hurt me in the future. Maybe it is taking away our disadvantages one by one. You started out with sun aversion, just like any drow, but now..."

She nodded as she stepped back out of the sun. "You might be right. If I didn't know any better, I'd say that it was as if the tadpoles were refining us; making us stronger."

Astarion's voice became foreboding. "Maybe they are. Maybe, they are." Just then, the others returned.

Chapter 21 - The Book of Dead Gods

"Vampire spawn?" asked Kaedyn in surprise. "Are you serious?" Vexir and Astarion had just informed everyone of Astarion's secret. Most were stunned into silence.

"Utterly fascinating," Gale remarked, deep in thought. He didn't seem angry or concerned. He just seemed intrigued.

Vexir glared at Kaedyn threateningly. "Do you have a problem with my decision?"

Kaedyn's expression became unreadable as their eyes met. Then, much to both Astarion's and Vexir's surprise, he said, "No. In fact, I'm glad to know the truth. I knew something wasn't quite right, and the more he kept that from us, the harder it was for me to trust him. I WAS trusting him, mind you. After all, until someone has done something wrong, how will I know whether he or she can be trusted unless I first trust them? If he has done nothing wrong to us, should we cast him out of the party just because he is a vampire spawn?"

Then he added, "And, it's important to know your predicament. Now we know there's an even greater complication. I'd rather know you are stuck in a terrible situation, and try to help you get out of it, then to have you attempt to handle it yourself because you are afraid you'll be back under Cazador's power. It's better to plan these things out together than to have us messing each other over in the end."

Lae'zel's response was also a surprise. "As long as he doesn't attempt to bite me, I see no reason to reject him. But if you so much as look at me the wrong way, Astarion, I will end your miserable existence without hesitation."

Astarion grinned mischievously, and he remarked, "Ooo! Hsss! I do so love spicy food."

This got a chuckle out of more than one person in the room. Ryth-Shan then added, "I agree with Kaedyn, actually. Astarion makes a fine addition to the party, and I'd rather know his situation now than find out later. This way, we can all keep our eyes peeled for something that might somehow fix his problem."

"Well," said Shadowheart. "Why not? I mean, it's not like the craziest thing we've encountered so far. Nothing about this little adventure is normal, so why shouldn't we travel with a vampire spawn who can travel about by day?"

Gale then concluded the conversation by saying, "Well, that's settled. Perhaps we should get moving then. I don't know about all of you, but I'm dying to find out what's beyond Door Number Two over there." He pointed to the locked door opposite the tomb with the oil and fire trap. And with that, the party unlocked it and made their way inside. The musty smell became more prevalent, and they could hear the sounds of rushing water echoing about the chamber. It wasn't obnoxious. In fact, it was quite peaceful.

This chamber had not been disturbed for a very long time. As the party looked around, they saw that there was a thick layer of dust on everything and cobwebs upon cobwebs. It was a rather large chamber. At the center was a statue that stood about thirty feet tall bathed in the light of the sun. The only way to get to this central courtyard was by descending one of two staircases on the right and left. Straight ahead was a five foot diameter brazier. Near it was a corpse; all bones wearing a dark robe of some kind.

The raised walkway they were standing on went right and left, framing the central courtyard. There were three more of the robed corpses. Each was armed with a quarterstaff or knife. The party confiscated these items and looted other ornate chests in the chamber. None produced items of true value.

There were two other ways out of the chamber. From both of these, the party could see mists and hear running water. Light was coming from one of them, but the other was completely dark. They sent Zriek to the tunnel with light and Shpri went to the passage that was totally dark. As Zriek returned, Ryth-Shan used Speak with Animals.

"Looks like there's another way out from over there," the gith reported to his companions. "The river runs out through that passage very swiftly. No one could swim or row against that current. There is a lever and a ladder. It seems pretty obvious that if we pull the lever, the ladder will drop and let us up to a hatch above. He's not sure where the hatch leads, but I'm guessing it's up to the cliffs overlooking the camp."

"Makes sense," said Gale as he checked his map and made additions to it. "Hah! I'll wager the cliffs above the camp were likely some sort of hidden lookout station which then had some sort of ladder or spiral staircase leading down. Our camp was probably a dock or something once upon a time."

Then Lae'zel reported, "There are sarcophaguses in the other chamber. It opens up to a massive underground network of caves. However, the river runs so fast, there is no way you could go beyond the chamber in that direction. Looks like there's a heavy chest and some sort of book as well."

"All this seems almost... anti-climactic," remarked Astarion. "I thought we'd at least have some sort of fight here."

"Why would you say that?" asked Ryth-Shan. He was joking; just giving Astarion a hard time. "Don't you know anything? You can't say things like that. You've just doomed us all. Everyone! Expect a giant dracolich to come out of some secret passage and devour us now. Thanks, Astarion!"

The vampire spawn gave him a look as if to say, "How cute!" but he said nothing.

"Shall we check out the statue in the center or the room with the book?" asked Shadowheart.

"I opt for the room with the book," said Gale. No one argued, and so they did. Once again, they found a few non-special items in the heavy chest and sarcophaguses. Then they made their way to the book.

Kaedyn was the first to arrive with Gale and Shadowheart right behind. In fact, the others remained at a reasonable, safe distance. They didn't need to speak. Each communicated to the others the same thought. If something was going to happen, they wanted to be far enough away to not be caught in the wake.

Kaedyn picked up the book. "The Book of Dead Gods," he said, reading the cover. "It's locked. Odd. The book seems light for such a large lock on it."

"Should we try the master key?" asked Shadowheart.

Gale shook his head. "It's not a standard lock. It requires a bit of either arcane magic or divine energy. Either that, or I suppose you could always just break it or pick it."

Kaedyn shrugged. "I guess I'll try." Then he took his holy symbol and placed it on the massive lock as he prayed to Tyr for a spark of the divine. Nothing happened.

Shadowheart took it. "Let me try." She then did the same with her own holy symbol. They did not notice that she was purposely positioning herself to block their view of her holy symbol. There was a spark of energy, and the lock clicked open. Shadowheart then flipped the book open and noticed a loose page that was being used as a bookmark. It was an unrolled scroll of some sort. Gale would need to identify it later.

As she opened it up to the bookmarked page, all they could see, at first, was that the page contained a list of names. What was once script was now an obliterated scrawl. It was clear that it was a list of names, but of what?

Gale had a eureka moment. "Well! Would you look at that."

"What is it?" asked Shadowheart.

"The names of gods," said Gale. "Once lost, but now restored after the Second Sundering. Most of them are unfamiliar. I can't even pronounce many of them. However, I recognize this one and this one too. There are entire pantheons from all over the realms listed here; entire pantheons that have dwindled and been reborn, silently recorded by this book"

He then took the book from Kaedyn and flipped to the last page of writing, for there were many blank pages afterwards. He pointed to the last three entries. Now it was Kaedyn's turn to look over his shoulder. "Look at this. It is as if someone has been updating it; even presently. Several entries on the last page have been stricken through, the final three thoroughly enough to be completely illegible."

"Three gods?" asked Kaedyn with raised brow. "Here we go again. Another coincidence? We were just talking about the Dead Three yesterday. Now we have three gods from this book completely obliterated on the page."

"I don't get it," said Shadowheart. "What are you trying to say?"

Kaedyn replied, "This is a book of gods who died. So, if it lists gods who are dead, and those last three are so obliterated on the page that we can't make them out, is it possible that those three are no longer dead? Maybe, just maybe, they are very much alive. If so, and we found a shield with a symbol that is like the combination of the Dead Three, Myrkul, Bhaal and Bane, then could it be that the Dead Three have somehow been resurrected by the Second Sundering?"

A heavy atmosphere fell upon the chamber. Even Lae'zel, who normally didn't care what they were looking at, seemed to be paying attention now. "And you, somehow, think this has to do with us?" she asked. "I admit that there are a number of things pointing to these Dead Three, but how does this form a connection between them and us?"

The three looking at the book turned to face the others. Kaedyn shrugged. "I'm not sure," he said. "Maybe it doesn't. I guess it just seems somehow important."

Gale considered her question carefully. "Oftentimes, things are not just coincidences but divine intervention. Although I admit that I can't see a connection between the Dead Three and us right now, I can't help but think that we've stumbled onto something here. Did we crash on some random beach, or was it by divine design? I'm beginning to wonder if our meeting up with one another was also something that was meant to happen. I wonder if we've all been brought together on purpose."

"Yes, but what is that purpose?" wondered Ryth-Shan. "And who is giving it to us? Are we being manipulated by good gods or evil?"

"THAT is the million gold coins question, My Friend," said Gale. "THAT is why it is important to keep looking into it. You serve Vlaakith, yes?" he asked Lae'zel.

"Of course," she replied.

"What would Vlaakith say if she learned you were hypothetically doing the will of the Dead Three?" he asked.

She sneered. "I would rather die a thousand torturous deaths than serve anyone but my queen."

"Exactly," said Gale. "So, we need to be sure who it is that is guiding us here - assuming we are being guided by someone."

Another silence fell between them. Kaedyn closed the book and stowed it in their gear. "Okay," he said after a few moments. "Why don't we go explore the statue now. We can always ponder this whole thing about the dead gods later." Everyone agreed, and they were off to the central courtyard of the Dank Crypt.

Chapter 22 - The Entombed Scribes

The area around the statue was filled with plantlife; grass, bushes, moss and vines. As the party spread out and searched the area, several discovered another corpse. It was the skeletal remains of some guardian. He had a helmet and a great club. They confiscated these immediately and then joined Gale, Shadowheart and Kaedyn as they studied the statue and the plaque at its feet.

"Jergal," said Gale after a moment. "Well, now. Doesn't that just put the icing on the cake."

"Jergal?" said Shadowheart. "Isn't he the one who transferred his power to the Dead Three?"

"Correct," said Gale. "Caring for little besides an orderly accounting of the fate of the world as it slowly sank into death, the Final Scribe was the one who kept the records of the ultimate fate of all the dead. 'The throne is yours. I have grown weary of this empty power. Take it if you wish - I promise to serve and guide you as your seneschal until you grow comfortable with the position. Who among you shall rule?' - Jergal conceding his divinity and throne to the Dead Three."

"What kind of race was he?" asked Vexir. She was looking up at the statue's bust, and it did not look like a race she was familiar with.

"He was often depicted as a member of an ancient alien race," said Gale. "He was sort of a cross between a humanoid and praying mantis. He liked to look wizened and mummy-like with gray, tightly taut skin. More often than not, he had an elongated skull with bulbous, yellow eyes devoid of life and insect-like mandibles. His nose and ears were barely distinguishable from the rest of his head. He typically had claw-like hands, and his forearms were covered by a pair of white gloves. Most of his form was also covered by a cloak that seemed to absorb everything around it. He was known as the Scribe of the Dead, and he was often seen with a quill with fresh ink and a thick scroll covered in an intricate and incomprehensible script. When Jergal spoke, it was said to chill to the bone; no pun intended. It was seemingly disembodied, echoing with the dry whisper of a tomb that had long been forgotten."

"That explains the writings we couldn't understand previously," said Kaedyn. "If he often wrote in intricate and incomprehensible scripts, it's no wonder we couldn't figure it out."

"Indeed," said Gale.

"Anything else of interest?" asked Ryth-Shan, trying to move past the eerie moment.

They glanced at each other and shook their heads. "I guess not, really," said Kaedyn. "Maybe we should look around a little more and just get out of here."

But Astarion was already doing that. "Well. I may have found something," he reported. "Looks like another button. It's like the one we found in the tomb chamber." It was hidden behind a panel in an alcove to the right of the statue along the inner wall.

Everyone moved to join him. They looked at the button and then at one another. "Well," said Ryth-Shan. "Do you wanna push it, or should we just leave it and go?"

"Once again," said Astarion, "if you're going to push it, I'll just wait a reasonable safe distance..."

"Let's all wait a reasonable safe distance away," said Kaedyn. "Everyone in the hallway, and we'll let either the cat or spider hit the button."

"The button looks too hard to press," said Gale. "I doubt the familiars or the bird could do it."

"I'll use Mage Hand," said Ryth-Shan. "I can be up to thirty feet away from the button. Everyone else can be even further from me, outside the room, just in case a trap goes off."

"You sure about this?" asked Kaedyn, putting his hand on Ryth-Shan's shoulder.

Ryth-Shan nodded. "I'll be fine."

"It makes the most sense," said Vexir. "If we're outside the room, and a trap goes off within, we might be able to figure out how best to disarm the trap and get him out."

"I say some of us remain within and some without," said Kaedyn. "I'll stay with him, just in case."

"Then Shadowheart remains without," said Gale. "She's our only other cleric. If we need someone to use a Revivify scroll, we at least have one of you."

"Makes sense," said Lae'zel. "So can we end this debate and be done with this?"

And so, the majority of the party remained outside the room, in the hall beyond. Kaedyn and Ryth-Shan remained in the room, approximately thirty feet from the button. They were hiding in the shadows, crouching behind a pillar just in case. Ryth-Shan cast the spell and the spectral, floating hand appeared and moved up to the button. Then it pressed it, and all at once, the entire room began to shake. Dust billowed up into the air everywhere, clouding everything.

"Holy... he was right!" cried Astarion over the noise. "A giant dracolich IS coming out of some secret passage to devour us now."

A secret door did, in fact, begin to open. Just to the left of where the button was, at the back of the alcove. The inner wall began to slide open to reveal a small chamber within. As it did, glowing, sickly, green light began to glow around the room. The five skeletons rose and stood on their feet. Each was facing towards the direction of the button. They emanated angry, other-worldly cries.

"Hells!" said Kaedyn. "Something just woke up down here." Then, without warning, the door slammed shut, locking the others without. Only Kaedyn and Ryth-Shan were in the chamber with the five undead.

Ryth-Shan was in hiding, and one of the scribes was not far from him. If he cast Hunter's Mark on it, it required a verbal command. That would reveal his location and remove his stealth advantage. However, Hunter's Mark gave him better accuracy. Since he was pretty good with a bow, he chose to reveal himself and use Hunter's Mark. He muttered the words of the spell and cast it upon the reanimated scribe. Then, he fired. He should have gone with the stealth advantage, for he missed. "Tsk'va!" he cursed. Then he darted behind a sarcophagus near him to make it harder for enemies to hit.

Vexir produced the master key, and she shoved it in the lock. Sure enough, it clicked and the door reopened. She shoved it and dashed to reach the nearest scribe. This drew the attention of yet another scribe who saw her movement and cast Hold Person. Glowing runes appeared inside a shimmering square on the floor just below Vexir's feet. She became like a statue, paralyzed by the spell's effects.

As this happened, Gale rushed into the room and cast Witch Bolt at the nearest scribe. A beam of crackling, blue energy lanced out toward it, forming a sustained arc of lightning between him and the skeleton. A surge of extra power blasted from his fingertips, electrocuting the creature, but it did not fall. This scribe then saw him as a huge threat. It cast Magic Missile on him, and four bolts sped through the air and struck him.

One of the scribes was fully aware of Ryth-Shan, but it couldn't see him behind the sarcophagus. Therefore, it cast Misty Step and teleported closer to him. Then it ran and cast Magic Missile. Three bolts blasted the gith, but he managed to maintain his concentration to keep Hunter's Mark active.

The skeletal guardian ran towards the stairs as this was happening. It was intent on reaching those at the door. A scribe nearer to the door had the same idea and ran at top speed. Astarion saw them coming and commented, "Well, at least it's not a dracolich," and then he shot like lightning up to the scribe his companions had already injured. His rapier slashed so fast they didn't even see a blur, and the undead construct fell to the ground in a crumpled heap of bones and dust.

Kaedyn came to Ryth-Shan's rescue. He was still in hiding. The scribe who had attacked him did not see the half-drow. Therefore, he cast Guiding Bolt without the thing even noticing him. The holy ball of light struck the skeleton, and it staggered but remained standing. He then used Healing Word to try to help Ryth-Shan recover a bit.

Shadowheart charged into the room right behind Astarion, and she hurled a Guiding Bolt also. The flash of light streaked toward a scribe further away, but it smashed into the pillar next to it and vanished in a cloud of dust and debris.

Lae'zel was the last into the room. She saw the scribe Shadowheart was aiming for, and she cast Magic Missile at it. This was the same scribe that cast the Hold Spell on Vexir, and when the energy bolts pounded into the bony chest, it tried to hold its concentration of the Hold Spell but failed. Vexir was free.

Ryth-Shan drew his shortwords and attacked the scribe near Kaedyn and him. Thanks to the mystical dim light glittering around the undead monster, he connected. The scribe was struck hard by Ryth-Shan's slash across the waist. It splintered apart, and bones flew everywhere.

As it fell, Vexir charged with her greataxe in a rage. She cast Faerie Fire, a spell she had because she was a drow. Both the scribe who used Hold on her and one furthest from the party were within twenty feet of one another, so they both were outlined in bright, neon green light along with every object within a twenty-foot cube.

The scribe who cast Hold retaliated by hurling Magic Missile at her. She tried to bat them away with her bracers, and she somewhat succeeded. Holes were burned into the armor, sizzling her flesh on her forearms a little. Still, she managed to maintain her concentration of her Faerie Fire spell. Seeing she did not fall, the scribe then retreated a bit to keep away from the charging dark elf.

Gale ran towards the two scribes to help Vexir. He cast Witch Bolt on the same scribe. Since it was highlighted and easier to see, the wizard locked on to the target and hit. The bones rattled as the lightning coursed through it. Nevertheless, it didn't die.

At the same time, the skeletal guardian reached the top of the stairs and rushed Shadowheart. The party was wise to remove its weapons. Without them, it was substantially weaker. It attacked with its fists, pounding on her shield with one and backhanding her with the other across the face. It wasn't lethal by far, but it would have been if it had been a great club.

Then the furthest scribe from them launched Magic Missile at Vexir. She staggered as three holes burned into her chest. "I need healing!" she gasped to her companions. Then the undead creature retreated as well, keeping its distance from her. Still, she maintained her concentration so the skeletons continued to glow.

Astarion sheathed his rapier and drew out his bow. As he did, he ran closer. Then, he aimed for the weaker scribe and fired. Thanks to Vexir's Faerie Fire, he found a weak point in the neck joints. His arrow hit the target so hard and precisely that its head snapped off. The whole body then shattered to the ground in pieces; the magic that sustained it severed.

Kaedyn then raced to get into range of the remaining scribe. He could hit up to a hundred and twenty feet away with his Guiding Bolt. In order to retreat from Vexir, the creature had inadvertently moved into range of the half-drow cleric. And so, he hurled the flaming light of radiance at it. He hit it hard, and its ribcage exploded. It staggered, but didn't fall. He then looked over at Vexir, wanting to use Healing Word on her, but she was just a bit too far away.

Meanwhile, Shadowheart attacked the skeletal guardian with her mace. She would have used her new spear, but bludgeoning weapons were more effective against skeletons. She hit it in the shoulder, chipping off fragments in all directions, but the hardy undead showed no signs of being defeated.

That's when Lae'zel showed up. She saw that the last scribe was now as good as destroyed, so she focused on aiding Shadowheart. She rushed up and struck the skeleton with her longsword with both hands. The skeleton tried to defend itself by throwing up its left forearm, but Lae'zel took it right off. Then she followed up with another powerful swing that tore the entire left side off. With that, the skeleton was staggering. It looked like a calm breeze could blow it down.

Ryth-Shan sheathed his swords and had his bow out in moments. He ran towards the last scribe and fired. The arrow hit the skeleton's spine and stuck fast, but it didn't finish the thing off. As he did this, Vexir finally reached it and took a powerful swing. The scribe ducked just in time, and her blade whizzed by without effect. "Son of a...!" she cursed.

Gale maneuvered into position. He could hit both the scribe and the skeletal guardian with Magic Missile. He saw the scribe as the bigger threat and fired two missiles at the scribe and one at the guardian. Finally, he blasted the scribe so it scattered across the floor, and the skeletal guardian took the final missile in the face, also shattering it to pieces. And with that, the battle was over, the dust began to settle, all became still, and the party took a few moments to catch their breaths.

"Well," said Gale with a charming smile. "That was exciting."

"All this for some dusty old baubles," remarked Shadowheart with contempt. "What do the dead need with them anyway?"

"Agreed," said Ryth-Shan with a snort. "Seems a waste to bury them in places like this. Better to be put to good use by the living."

"Or, if nothing else, they might be worth some coin," Shadowheart concluded.

Kaedyn hurried up to Vexir as she came to meet him. "Some protector you are," she commented, but there wasn't the usual sting in her voice this time. She was joking with him.

He smiled as he laid his hand on her shoulder and held his holy symbol. "Next time, stay closer to me."

"In your dreams," she replied with a short laugh. She glowed warmly from his healing spells, and she felt the pain subside. "I guess that'll do for now. Maybe we can take a short rest after we finish searching this place."

"Sounds like a plan," Kaedyn replied. "Let's just hope we don't run into anything worse than what we've already encountered."

"Like a dracolich?" asked Astarion with a mischievous look on his face. They all shot him dirty looks.

To Kaedyn, Vexir said, "If we do, then I guess you had best stop slacking and try harder, Male." Though her words sounded harsh and superior, once again, her tone suggested she was being playful. It was quite encouraging to Kaedyn. He felt that, at last, maybe the party was starting to bond.

"At your command, Matron," he replied with a slight bow. She didn't even give him another look or say another word. With an air of superiority, she strode off towards the secret door they'd opened by pressing the button. Although she didn't allow him to see it, she smiled. It wasn't a sinister grin as if she was manipulating him. It was a genuinely happy expression, as if for the first time in her life, she was enjoying herself.

Then Kaedyn followed her and gestured to the others to do the same. Finally, they made their way to the last little corner of the Dank Crypt.

Chapter 23 - The Guardian of Tombs

The party made their way into the small, hidden chamber behind the statue of Jergal. As they did, they decided to light the candles on the candelabras and the torches within. There was a single sarcophagus with candles at the base of it as if someone would light those candles in honor of the one buried within. Shelves held pottery and other items that the party figured they could steal and sell for at least a few coins, and there were vases and such on the floor that they took. All went into the magic pockets.

Besides these things, there was a heavy chest that was locked. Astarion immediately set to work to pick it. The lock clicked, and the chest opened. Within, they found an expensive looking amulet amongst a plethora of ceremonial items; robes, incense, candles, etc. The vampire spawn held up the expensive looking jewelry for everyone to see.

"I can always use the Identify spell later," said Gale, for no one seemed to know what the amulet did, including him. "Let's see what's in the sarcophagus first."

Astarion shrugged and shut the chest. Then Gale stooped down to read the text on the sarcophagus. This was in the Common language, along with several others, so he could read it easily enough. "Here lies the Guardian of Tombs," he said. "Through knowledge comes atonement." He then stood up and took a few steps away. "Well. Shall we?" He gestured to the lid.

Kaedyon took the initiative and stepped up to it. He then shoved on the lid several times until he managed to throw the entire lid onto the floor behind the sarcophagus. As he peered down inside, he saw a mummified figure, though it was mostly bones. It wore a tunic with leather shoulder pads and some sort of golden metal mesh cap on its head.

The cap was like golden vines criss-crossing and intertwining; all connecting to a single ring that encircled his forehead. Another ring circled under each eye, and they connected across the bridge of its nose to the center ring. From each eye-ring, another band framed the mummified cheekbones. Another band of metal rested under the jawline and came up across the center of the chin, forming a "T". Bandages were wrapped around its bones as if providing it with a skin, but it had no flesh underneath. Only its head had preserved flesh on it, though it had no nose. It had eyelids that were closed as well as lips. All the flesh was gray, and the whole corpse reeked of the chemicals used to preserve it.

Then, to Kaedyon's horror, the eyelids opened without warning. Eyeballs, living eyeballs, looked right at him, meeting his terrified stare. Kaedyon backed away, a feeling of total dread gripping his stomach forcefully and twisting it like a pretzel. Everyone raised their weapons, prepared to fight as the Guardian of Tombs slowly rose out of its stone box. Not a single member of the party could bring themselves to attack. The chill that filled the air, even though it was bathed in the warm light of the candles and torches, froze them in place.

The Guardian of Tombs set both of its bony feet upon the floor and stood facing them. It looked tired and bleary-eyed. As it looked about the room at each of them, it spoke in a male voice that was almost like two people speaking together; one voice low and the other even lower, in dissonance, "So he has spoken, and so thou standest before me. Right as always. What a curious way to awaken."

He then paused as he looked around him as if taking in the chamber for the first time in ages. He seemed utterly bored. "Now, I have a question for thee." He looked at Kaedyon when he said this. "What is the worth of a single mortal's life?"

Kaedyon looked around at the others as if searching their faces for the answer. No one said anything. They were all too focused on the apparition before them. He looked back at the Guardian of Tombs and replied, "So he has spoken? What 'he' are you talking about?"

"An arbiter of certain matters, but that is not important now," he replied.

"Well, that is quite the question. What's the reason for it?" Kaedyon then asked.

"Curiosity. Nothing more," said the Guardian of Tombs. Though he said he was curious, his expression didn't show it. He still seemed to be completely uninterested in everything. "Wilt thou answer my question?"

Kaedyon considered it carefully. "Yes," he said confidently, though he was feeling anything but. "Ask away." He had already forgotten the question due to his nerves being on edge. He could feel the pressure. Everyone in the group, for some reason, was leaving him to handle this alone. This was an undead construct of untold power. Who knew what its intentions were? And if it attacked them, would they be able to defeat it? If he said or did the wrong thing, would he bring death upon them all?

"So I ask again. What is the worth of a single mortal's life?" asked the Guardian of Tombs.

Kaedyon considered the question even more carefully this time. It seemed like a simple question, but as he pondered it, he found himself unsure of every response that came to mind. Finally, he settled on, "That depends on the person's deeds." Again, he responded with confidence, though he did not feel it.

The Guardian of Tombs hesitated before answering. The silence was deafening, and each moment the talkative skeleton took, it gnawed on the party's nerves. Each was thinking the same thing. Had Kaedyn answered correctly? Would they all escape without a fight? Or would the Guardian of Tombs attack them because he answered incorrectly?

Then, he spoke. "I am sure thou believest as such. Very well. I am satisfied." Several sighed and relief flooded through the party. "We have met, and I know thy face. We will see each other again at the proper time and place. Farewell." Then the Guardian of Tombs turned and left the chamber. He began to wander around the Dank Crypt, muttering to himself about how things had changed throughout the centuries, and so forth.

"Well done," said Ryth-Shan with a pat on Kaedyn's shoulder.

"Agreed," said Vexir, nodding in approval. She then hurried to the door to stand watch. She observed the Guardian of Tombs as he made his way about. He showed no signs that he even knew they were there anymore.

"Sooooo... Do we loot the sarcophagus?" asked Astarion.

"Do we dare?" asked Gale. "He's right out there."

Astarion peeked inside. There was a glittering necklace, a gemstone, and a book. "If we snatch it and hurry out of here, maybe he won't even notice until we're long gone."

"He didn't seem to care about the other items we took," said Shadowheart. "He didn't even notice."

Ryth-Shan shrugged. "The book could contain more clues," he said, thinking out loud.

"True," said Kaedyn, though he didn't really like stealing from the creature. It was one thing to take items from a tomb with nothing moving and no signs of life or intelligence. It was something else when there was an animated, sentient something milling about who might get upset with them.

"Just grab the stuff, and let's get out of here," said Vexir. Though the undead made no hostile move in any way, she was unnerved by it. She just wanted to be done with the stupid place as quickly as possible.

Astarion needed no one else's opinion. He grabbed the items and stuffed them into the magic pocket.

"Done," he said. "Now let's get out of here."

The party wasted no more time. They made their way together out of the Guardian's "bedroom." They passed through the chamber with weapons ready, watching the creature intently until they were completely out into the lighted tunnel that led to the lever with the ladder that would drop down. Once the Guardian of Tombs was out of sight, they jogged the rest of the way to the end of the path, pulled the lever, the ladder dropped, and they scrambled up and out. There was a metal hatch that only unlocked when the lever was pulled. And so, they were able to simply throw it open and climb out onto the ridge above.

The sun's rays welcomed them, and immediately the peaceful sounds of the river washed away the crypt's atmosphere from their souls. When the last person ascended, they slammed the hatch shut. It virtually disappeared beneath the bushes that had grown over it. They didn't say a word but instead ran along the ridge until they returned to the upper entrance courtyard where they had met Gimblebock and his crew.

Chapter 24 - A Short Rest

The path actually led them to a flat shelf of land just outside the main entrance. There was a peaceful overlook that even had benches for people to sit and relax as they viewed the southern and eastern horizon. From there, they could see the wreckage of the nautiloid; a terrible reminder of what they had been through. They also saw the beach below where they had met Shadowheart at the door into the Dank Crypt. On the left of the overlook, there was their camp, hidden away and nestled below the trees. They knew it was down there, but they were relieved to see that it could not be observed very well from where they stood.

Shadowheart was the first to notice something. "Look! There's a ridge that runs along there. We could get to it from up here. It looks like part of the nautiloid smashed open there. I think I see one of the mind flayer chests there. We should check it out."

Gale sat on one of the benches. "Be my guest. I'm going to take a moment to calm my nerves and do the Identify spell on the amulet we found in the crypt. I also want to see what the book is about that we found in the sarcophagus."

"I'll go with you," said Ryth-Shan. Astarion also wanted to tag along. "Zriek. Check it out. Make sure no enemies are lurking about that might see us." Then the raven did just that. Before the three even came close to finding the path, the bird returned and gave him a sign that the way was clear. They had to do some climbing and jumping, but they made it without much difficulty.

They discovered the chest was locked, so Astarion went to work on it. He failed the first attempt, and his lockpicks broke. "Blast!" he cried as he tossed the broken tools to the side. They were useless. He looked up at Ryth-Shan. "I know you had another set. May I?"

Ryth-Shan handed them to him. "You're the expert."

Astarion smiled in reply. Then he set to work. First, he had to dig the broken pieces of his previous lockpicks out. Then, he more carefully finessed the lock. He could feel it. He almost had it. SNAP! The second set of lockpicks broke. He cursed again. He was not having any luck with the chest. He tossed the broken picks to the ground. "Well. Perhaps you shouldn't have trusted me after all," he said in disgust. "Apparently, this chest is a bit more complicated than I anticipated. I don't suppose we found any additional kits?"

Both shook their heads. "We'll just have to bring it with us, I guess," suggested Ryth-Shan.

"What?" said Shadowheart. "Do you plan on stuffing it into your magic pocket?"

Ryth-Shan shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" They then lifted the heavy, ornate chest and slowly attempted to stuff one end of it into Ryth-Shan's magic pocket. It was awkward, but interestingly enough, as one leg of it touched the pocket, the whole thing began to shrink in size to fit inside. They continued to stuff it into the pocket until it vanished within.

It was only then that Ryth-Shan noticed the weight. "Oh! Apparently we don't share the weight, unless this load is particularly heavy." He groaned. "Wow! It's going to be difficult to get to the top of the cliff again to rejoin the others."

"We'll help you along," said Shadowheart. She seemed to be warming up to him. And so, the three returned along the ridge and back up to the overlook where the others rested.

While they were doing that, Gale cast the Identify spell on the amulet. He divined that it was called the "Amulet of Lost Voices." With it, the wearer could cast Speak with Dead once a day. It was apparently created by some necromancer named Horen, a scribe of Jergal from ancient times. He was sick and tired of having to cast the spell himself, so he imbued the magic upon the amulet which allowed him to cast and recast it on any number of corpses, all day long, as long as he maintained his concentration. Since he was a caretaker of the dead in the surrounding lands in those days, he was able to learn many details about those who passed away. Then he would catalog the information in the books found in the crypt's library.

"Who should wear it?" the wizard asked as he held it aloft for all to see.

"I don't particularly care for necromancy," said Kaedyn as Ryth-Shan, Shadowheart and Astarion returned.

Vexir shrugged, "I don't want it. I don't care for magic. You know that. The only magic I like is imbued in weapons and armor. You can keep the rest."

Ryth-Shan heard the description of the amulet's powers, and he also declined. "I am also not keen on necromancy."

"Well," said Gale. "If no one else wants it, I..."

"I'll take it," said Astarion. "I AM undead, after all. Yes? So, why not? Seems appropriate. Doesn't it?" No one else argued. As far as they were concerned, he could have it.

And so, they rested for about an hour. The party enjoyed some food and drink as they relaxed in the overlook area. Then Gale opened the book they'd found in the sarcophagus, and he read the title. "'Metatext:

Rebound, by Iosefa Elgin, a scholar excommunicated from the Church of Deneir for her heretical efforts to reconstruct the Metatext, her god's annal of lost and hidden knowledge.'"

Vexir and Astarion, surprisingly, were the only two who had heard of Deneir. Everyone else had a blank look on their faces. Shadowheart even said, "Okay. I give up. Who is Deneir? Any connection to the Dead Three?"

Vexir replied. "I remember hearing about him. He was a neutral good lesser deity of art, cartography, images, knowledge, scholars, etc. He was often called the Scribe of Oghma. I think he was Oghma's younger brother, or something like that." This was not entirely true. Oghma, the God of Knowledge, was Deneir's brother god only in the sense that they were similar in nature and connected by similar portfolios. However, Vexir didn't realize that some of the information she thought she knew wasn't entirely accurate. "The teachings of Deneir dictated that his followers avoid designing weapons of war and death."

"During the Spellplague, I think Deneir tried to reestablish the stability of Mystra's Weave," Astarion added. "He wrote the Metatext and seemed to completely disappear. Some say he became a part of the Weave, granting his remaining Chosen more arcane abilities."

"Hmmm. The only connection, then, seems to have to do with the Spellplague," said Ryth-Shan. "That's not much. The Spellplague affected everyone."

"Well, what does it say?" asked Lae'zel.

Gale found an excerpt that he thought was the most important, and he read, "'Of what value a life?'"

"Well," said Vexir. "I wonder where the talkative skeleton got his 'One Question' from?" A few chuckled at this.

Gale continued. "'Far too esoteric a topic to warrant any serious critical consideration between these pages, surely - or so it would seem at first glance. But once we push aside the mysticism and dewy-eyed sentiment so often clouding our assessment, it is clear that across all the spinning planes, each and every life does indeed have a quantifiable value. It is simply that not all are equally valuable.'"

"Looks like you may have answered correctly," Shadowheart commented in Kaedyn's direction. "At least you didn't say everyone was created equally. I wonder what he would have done if you had?"

Gale continued once more. "'Consider: we already know that the destruction of our material form is not the end. If anything, our souls are more free after death, transcending planar barriers in search of a resting place that best befits our deeds, beliefs, and station in life. But even this assessment is subject to market forces: Lord Kelemvor weighing our souls against how thoroughly we have given them over to other gods, empowering them in turn.'"

"'There is, of course, an alternate route; not the end of the path, but the chance to retread it. Clerics across the Realms wield the power to return to life to any soul deemed worthy or willing enough. It is strange, then, that these so frequently intersect with those deemed wealthy enough, for the components for such a spell are beyond the means of most mortals.'"

"I have interviewed those who have made such a return, and in truth have found them to be of the most dull and unimaginative sort that I cannot possibly imagine what it is they were so eager to return to. If a true assessment of the journey is to be made, then there is simply no replacement for embarking upon it oneself. Perhaps, one day, this great volume of learning will make me worthy enough to walk that path - and wealthy enough to return.'"

He closed the book. "In other words," he concluded, summing it all up, "it seems Kaedyn only answered the question in part."

"How do you figure?" asked Shadowheart.

"If the Guardian of Tombs was taking these words to heart," explained Gale, "then it seems the point of the text is that the worth of a single mortal's life is relative. The writer, Elgin, seems to view the wealthy as not being really worthy to be resurrected. Meanwhile, those who are worthy are those who can't afford resurrection. Priests charge an obscene amount of gold, usually, to cast resurrection spells and bring people back to life, if you can even find one who is powerful enough and knowledgeable enough to do it. So, only the wealthy can afford it, and Elgin seems to view all such people as dull and unworthy of continued life on the Material Plane. Meanwhile, the truly valuable souls, those who are most interesting and precious, are those who die and are forgotten."

"So, of what worth is a single mortal's life?" asked Gale. "Answer 1: It depends on the person's deeds, as our friend here told the Guardian. If their deeds are interesting, then their life was worth a good deal to Elgin. If they were boring and dull, their life was worth very little to Elgin."

"But then there's Answer 2: People like clerics put a price tag on mortal lives. Therefore, from the viewpoint of mortals, the worth of a single mortal's life depends on how much money a person has. Rich people, therefore, are more valuable than poor people, according to the ways of most mortals. And so, if you are poor, you are truly worth nothing. The value and worth, therefore, is material from that perspective."

"But then," said Astarion, "wouldn't that mean his answer was completely correct?"

Shadowheart was lost. "Philosophy was never my strong suit," she said, shaking her head.

Astarion continued. "If a person's deeds allowed them to accumulate lots of wealth, then they could afford to pay for resurrection and live longer. Thus, from the mortal perspective, deeds are still the measure of value. However, from the eyes of Elgin and many others, if a person's deeds are interesting, that makes them more valuable. Therefore, deeds determine a person's value from the perspective of gods as well. So, it seems Kaedyn answered correctly regardless of the point of view. Whether you are mortal or deity, a person's deeds determine their value. The only difference is the value that you put on this deed versus that deed."

"Well," said Lae'zel. "This still has nothing to do with the Dead Three or the parasites or anything. Let's stop wasting time. I think we've rested enough." Then she turned to Ryth-Shan. "Did you find anything on the ridge?"

"A chest," he said. "It's in the group inventory, believe it or not. We couldn't get the lock open, and we've run out of lockpicks."

"We could crack it open with Vexir's axe," she replied.

"Could damage what's inside," said Kaedyn. "I say we keep it until we find more lockpicks or a key."

"It's heavy," said Ryth-Shan. "Apparently, though we sort of share an inventory, the person who puts the object in their magic pocket is the only one who carries the load."

"We could leave it at the camp below," suggested Shadowheart.

After a bit more debate, the group agreed. "I'll use the Netherese portal to go from where we met Gale down to the camp area," said Ryth-Shan. "Then we'll meet back here. It shouldn't take too long. I'll be back shortly. Come on, Zriek." Then, before anyone could say another word, Ryth-Shan ran off alone.

It took Lae'zel only a moment before she rolled her eyes and sighed. "Bah! We shouldn't go off alone. Intellect devourers like to prey on lone travelers. He could get ambushed and we'd never know." Then she ran off after him.

Astarion waited until they were beyond sight and earshot before he made his comment to the others. "Excuses. Excuses," he said with a smirk. "'He could get ambushed and we'd never know.'" He said this in his best Lae'zel impersonation. "Please. She just wanted to be alone with him. She acts all 'I'm a nasty, vicious, githyanki fighter,' but deep down she's a dog in heat. Wouldn't you agree?"

Shadowheart laughed. "I certainly wouldn't say that to her, or you might find out just how much of a nasty, vicious, githyanki fighter she really is."

Vexir chuckled lightly at this. "In my opinion, we'd all probably benefit if he helped loosen her up."

"Oh my!" said Astarion, feigning embarrassment. "Darling! You truly are a devil."

Meanwhile, Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel made their way down to the Netherese Rune, ported to the beach and wound their way around to the camp. There, she helped him take the chest out of the magic pocket inventory and place it next to some of the crates they were using as storage. Then, he turned to face her. "Thanks for the help."

She shrugged. "Expressing appreciation is not necessary. I am simply doing what I think is necessary to aid in our survival. It is nothing personal."

"You sure are relentless," he told her. "Can't you ever relax?"

"To relax is to lower your guard," she replied. "Lowering your guard leaves you exposed to attack. Being exposed to attack may mean a debilitating wound or death. Therefore, no. I cannot ever relax. All my objectives and my very purpose in life demands that I stay ever vigilant."

"That's a rough way to live," he told her. "Relaxing allows you to enjoy life."

"Too many 'enjoy life' to their own destruction," said Lae'zel. "No. I will not allow myself to be destroyed. I will prove myself over and over again, if I must."

Ryth-Shan raised an eyebrow at this. "Prove yourself? Why? To whom?"

"Vlaakith, of course," she said. "As for my reasons, I wish to be a kith'rak, of course. One day, I will ride atop a red dragon and wield a silver sword and hold that great honor. THAT is a purpose worth fighting for. Pleasure and entertainment are not."

Ryth-Shan shook his head. "I admire your determination and dedication," he told her, "but in the end, will it be worth it?"

She couldn't help but smile. "When I am kith'rak, oh yes! It will be WELL worth it. Perhaps if you had grown up with our people, you would not question such things. Vlaakith would inspire you also, if you were given the true honor and pleasure of actually witnessing her prowess and presence."

"Perhaps you're right," said Ryth-Shan sadly. "When we are cured and all this is over, maybe you can take me to our people so I can experience it all for myself."

She nodded in approval. “To redeem a lost kin, that would be a great honor indeed. I shall look forward to it.”

“So shall I,” said Ryth-Shan. “So shall I.”

Then the two set out to return to the others. As they went, Lae’zel allowed Ryth-Shan to lead. She did so because she was watching him carefully, considering their exchange. Their relationship, as short as it was at that point, was uncomfortable and strange. On the one hand, there was so much of the material plane in him. She could see that he was not wholly devoted to Vlaakith or their ways. On the other hand, he seemed open and teachable. He seemed to want to be accepted by them and welcomed into the fold. He was, in many ways, like a child to her; requiring a good deal of learning and experience.

And yet, he was not a child. She had seen the fire in his soul; the spirit of her people. He was confident, strong, and bold, and he was skilled and cunning. He had a great deal of potential. In fact, if he adapted to the githyanki ways, he could even win Vlaakith’s favor. Then he could become a kith’rak; a dragon knight. Who knew? Perhaps one day the two of them would be flying side-by-side into battle against the ghaik. Yes. She rather liked that idea.

She shook the thought from her mind. Silly fantasies and daydreams left one vulnerable. She had no use for such things. She needed to remain hyper focused. She vowed to herself that she would never trust another person like that again. She would maintain her vigil. She would shut out all others. She was alone, and she would remain alone forever. Even when she finally became a kith’rak, she would never expose herself like that... never again...

Chapter 25 - The No-Longer-Hidden Grove

After their short rest, the party once more set out to explore the region. As they went, Zriek flew overhead to provide reconnaissance. It wasn't long before he came swooping down, making it obvious to Ryth-Shan that something was happening. Ryth-Shan cast Speak with Animals, and he said to Zriek, "What is it? Should we be concerned?"

"A group of people is fleeing from a pack of goblins," Zriek reported. "They're headed towards the druids' grove, I think." He gestured with his beak to the north. "They look like they're in big trouble. The goblins aren't super close to them, but they are close enough."

"If those people lure the goblins towards us..." He then turned to his companions. "We've got trouble," he told them. "Goblins chasing people. According to Zriek, they're making their way towards the druids' grove to the north. Even if they lose them, it could spell trouble for us."

"Best to find a good hiding place, then," said Shadowheart. "We could always duck back into the crypt and lock the doors. I doubt a bunch of goblins could figure out how to get in."

"You wanna go back into the crypt with that Guardian of Tombs?" asked Vexir. "I'd almost rather hide in the nautiloid."

Everyone considered that for a moment. They really didn't have a lot of choices. Hiding in the Dank Crypt or the nautiloid was not appealing in the slightest. "Well, what would you suggest?" asked Shadowheart. She was obviously not sure what else to say.

Vexir took a moment to ponder. "We could set up an ambush. Maybe. How many enemies are we talking about?"

Ryth-Shan briefly checked with Zriek and then shrugged. "Like most animals, Zriek doesn't know how to count, and he doesn't know how to differentiate between two different types of goblins. The most I could get from him was that it sounds like maybe a couple of bugbears, hobgoblins or orcs - something bigger - a worg, and maybe a dozen or so goblins. It's hard to say, exactly."

"If we get to a good, high position and focus on any shamans, then bugbears or whatever, then goblins, and then the worg, that would significantly increase our chances of success," she told them. "Does Zriek know of a place where we could perch where it would be difficult or impossible for the worg to climb up?"

He spoke with Zriek again and replied, "Sounds like the closest thing would be a hill. They could still get up to us, but it would be more difficult. The hill is opposite the hidden gate, so if the people are heading for the grove, it might be the perfect spot to set an ambush."

"How much time do we have?" asked Vexir. "Can we make it to the hill without them spotting us?"

Again, he spoke with Zriek and replied, "Maybe. He's a bird. He doesn't tell time. I think if we hurry, we might just make it."

"Sounds like our best option," said Vexir. "If things start going poorly, we fall back to the crypt. Agreed?"

Lae'zel shrugged as if indifferent, but everyone else seemed to be ready to follow her lead. Thus, the group followed Zriek to the hill and crested it as they crouched into position to avoid detection. There were only a few bushes on the hilltop. Nothing substantial. Nevertheless, no one spotted them.

They arrived just as the people, a party of adventurers, reached what they could only assume was the main gate of the grove. All eyes were focused on the adventurers. The goblins, they could see, were not far behind. They would be there in moments.

The druids' grove was surrounded by ridges and almost unscalable cliffs on three sides. The river was the fourth barrier that prevented invasion. This was on the grove's east side. The grove was well hidden by nature. Even on the east side, there was a buffer of hills and ridges that obscured the place from view. One could traverse those hills and ridges to get in, but the refuge couldn't be seen from that direction. If one did wander onto the shores on the east side, the animals were ever vigilant. Long before someone would enter nature's sanctuary, the beasts of the land would alert one of the druids to ensure that the matter was attended to.

And flying overhead was of no use either. The grove was obscured from view by treetops and mountainsides, for the most part. After all, many portions of the place were carved into the stone itself. So, while there were open areas, many chambers existed inside tunnels and caves. The only area that could be potentially spotted from the sky was the central altar to Silvanus. No trees or cliffs barred the main sanctuary from the open skies. The idol of Silvanus was set on a raised circular platform surrounded by pillars; all open and free to be bathed in nature. But what very few realized was that Silvanus' power shielded any outsiders from being able to see the entire area even from directly above. No matter who flew overhead, they could only see more trees and cliffs. Silvanus' power there was strong, and he ensured that an illusion was upheld at all times; shielding against any outsiders so they could not detect its location.

This was true of the main gate as well. It was set into a recess. A pulley mechanism was built at the top of the ridge to raise and lower the gate at will. Vines and brambles and moss completely obscured the wooden doorway from view. A stone lip ran along the top of the cliff. This acted like natural battlements, shielding the pulley mechanism from view from the ground below, and those who kept watch could also remain hidden.

But the divine magic of Silvanus aided the grove even there. If any creature that was not welcome in the grove flew up above the ridge, all they would see was more nature beyond. They would not be able to spot any mechanisms or people or anything unless they drew close enough to be shot down by the guardians on the wall.

And so, though hosts of goblins had recently been prowling the area, none had found it. They had passed by the gates more times than anyone could count, but they didn't even remotely detect it. The druids even mocked them periodically within the safety of their own sanctuary, laughing about how the goblins had set up their main base not too far away, and they were still unable to find them.

All that was about to change. The adventurers that the goblins were chasing ran right up to the main gate. As they approached, their leader cried, "Open the bloody gate!"

Without warning, a tiefling male appeared just to the left of the gate on top of the ridge. He had stepped just outside the magical illusion barrier. He had white hair, yellowish skin tone, twin horns, and he wore a wizard's robe. "Nobody gets in, Aradin. Zevlor's orders," the tiefling called back. "You were warned when you left."

The man called Aradin, a curly, brown-haired human male in his early twenties, was desperate. "That pack of goblins will be on us any second!"

"What's going on!" came another voice. A second tiefling appeared. This one wore magical scale mail armor. He had red skin and wore what looked like maybe a two-handed sword on his back. He was an older tiefling with straight, graying blonde hair combed back between two horns that curved up and out. His yellow eyes blazed brightly. He looked battle hardened and strong, as if he'd been through many tragic battles.

Aradin called up to him as he pulled an arrow out of his companion's shield. "Goblins are on our tail. Open the gate, Zevlor. Now!" He brandished the arrow as proof of his claims.

"You led goblins here? Where is the druid?" said Zevlor, clearly distraught.

"Please! There's no time!" Aradin fired back.

Zevlor then spotted the first of the goblins coming around the bend. "By the Nine Hells. Kanon. Open the gate!"

The mage tiefling, Kanon, responded by turning and grabbing the wooden pulley mechanism. He started to hoist it with all his strength. The camouflaged gate began to lift into the air, creating a small opening beneath amidst all the vines and thorns. The adventurers rushed up to it and tried as hard as they could to get under it and help it up, but it was obviously too heavy.

Then, goblin archers came within range. Before anyone could respond, they fired at Zevlor, who was still beyond the illusion barrier up on the wall. He ducked behind the lip of stone, but several arrows struck Kanon instead. Kanon gurgled in pain and staggered away from the mechanism, bloody arrows sticking out of his chest. Because he released it, the gate dropped, nearly pinning the adventurers beneath.

"Kanon! No!" Zevlor cried with intense grief. Kanon was a close friend of his.

Aradin swore and turned away from the gate. He drew out his great club. "Form a line!" he told his two companions; a blonde male, possibly elf or half-elf with sword and shield, and a human female with short brown hair who carried a bow. And with that, the goblins charged, surging right into Vexir's ambush zone.

"We're missing some," observed Zriek in hushed tones. Ryth-Shan's Speak with Animals spell was still enabled.

Ryth-Shan nodded. "I only count six goblins, the worg, and one bugbear."

"The rest branched off. I just spotted them chasing a little guy into some bushes to the west," Zriek explained.

"No time to worry about that now," said Ryth-Shan. "Just keep your eyes peeled for reinforcements." And with that, the battle began.

Chapter 26 - The Slaughter at the Gate

Sazza was a busty female goblin with her head shaved all around except for straight down the center of her scalp. This plume of long, brown hair was straight, coarse, and haphazardly combed to the left. Many strands fell across her face, creating a veil for her left eye. She wasn't armed with much; only a goblin scimitar and shortbow. She wore mostly tattered clothes with leather shoulder pads and boots. On her left shoulder was an adornment of black feathers.

She wasn't anyone special by goblin standards. In fact, most regarded her with contempt. She was considered an almost useless grunt and an annoyance, even if SHE thought she was someone important. Indeed, Sazza believed that she was close friends with one of the goblin leaders, a dark elf named Minthara, and she was determined to prove to everyone else that she was a person of importance.

As the battle began, Sazza was on the west side of the goblin pack. Much to everyone's surprise, she suddenly transformed into a spider and climbed the rock wall to the top. Little did anyone know, but she had been practicing wild magic in secret. She had been focusing, in particular, on transmutation spells. Since she hung around with Minthara as often as possible, she was quite familiar with the drow's spider pets, and so she naturally chose to take one of their forms.

Much to her surprise, however, a tiefling, named Elegis, who had arrived with Zevlor, pounced on her just as she climbed to the top of the ridge. Sazza screamed in surprise as Elegis brought a warhammer down on her skull. The goblin-turned-giant-spider staggered and collapsed from the fierce blow, and just like that, her moment in the spotlight was over before she even got a chance to take the stage.

And yet, that was not the end for poor Sazza. Oh no! She had quite the part to play in the events that were to come. Indeed, Sazza WAS a person of destiny, and guided by that fate, Elegis didn't kill her. Instead, as Sazza turned back into her true form and fell unconscious, Elegis left her, thinking she was dead, to pursue other targets. And so, this single moment set in motion many things that were to come.

Meanwhile, the goblin pack's only bugbear rushed the adventurer named Aradin. It then threw its javelin at him and grazed his shoulder, slicing through his armor and producing a fine cut. "Argh!" he cried, but he shrugged it off.

Just as this happened, a darker-skinned man appeared atop the wall of the grove near where Kanon had fallen. He had a hairstyle similar to Ryth-Shan's except that his hair was dark brown. He was mostly clean shaven with a hint of a beard and mustache framing his mouth. He had a nasty scar across the right side of his face, from his eye almost to his ear. Several scars, almost like claw-marks, ran from his cheek down his neck. He had the same, claw-like scars on the left side of his face as well, even coming down to his chin. His right eye was replaced by some sort of white, eye-shaped stone. It was even engraved to look almost like an eye.

He immediately announced his arrival with a boisterous shout. "Make way for the Blade of Frontiers!" he cried, and he blew a massive horn that was near the gate pulley mechanism hidden behind the lip of the ridge. The horn made a blast that resounded throughout the entire region, striking fear into the hearts of the enemies of the grove and inspiring its allies.

Shortly after this, a goblin booyahg, a wild magic user, cast Guiding Bolt and hurled it at Aradin's blonde companion. The energy missile hit him in the left leg, tearing through his plated leg armor and sending it flying to the earth. He didn't fall, but the injury was slowing him a bit.

And so, the blonde adventurer drank a potion and fell back a pace. Then Aradin rushed the bugbear and took a swing. The bugbear deflected it just in time as he drew out his club. Aradin pushed himself, and he took another swing. Club to club, the bugbear blocked his attack a second time. Aradin was beyond frustrated. No matter what, he couldn't seem to connect with the bugbear.

As for Aradin's other companion, the woman with the bow, she shot at the bugbear as she ran to the right of the gate to a boulder to gain a bit of height over the battlefield. As a result, her arrow came nowhere near the monster. Then a female goblin near her withdrew to a boulder not far away. There, she perched and fired at the human woman. The arrow pierced her in the right shoulder, but it didn't go far. A moment later, she tore it out and threw it to the ground.

As this was happening, Astarion slipped up to the edge of the hill, and he fired at the booyahg. The goblin shaman had an arrow sticking out of her back when he was finished. It hadn't penetrated deeply enough to kill her, but it was enough to get her attention. Astarion dove into hiding. Then the booyahg spun around, and much to her surprise, a drow was standing there.

The booyahg died before she even knew what had hit her. She had three crossbow bolts sticking out of her. She had one in the back from Astarion and two in the chest from Vexir who had popped up almost immediately after Astarion struck. Vexir had pushed herself to fire, reload and fire again in rapid succession. She hit both times. The

booyahg fell to the ground with a gurgle of agony, and Vexir was spotted by the remaining goblins just as she retreated further back on the hill. Astarion, however, avoided all detection.

As for Kaedyn, he was right behind Vexir. When he saw the booyahg fall, he adjusted his sights at the last second. He immediately fired at the worg, which was closer than the bugbear. The bolt only grazed the worg's left flank, drawing its attention. Then, like Vexir, he was immediately spotted as he retreated back away from the edge of the hill.

Ryth-Shan acted at pretty much the same time as the other two. He fired at the worg also and completely missed just as all the enemies turned to see them. In his haste, he misfired, and the arrow went flying past the monster's head without coming close. But Shadowheart was more successful. She shot the worg, and her bolt stabbed into the rump of the beast. It wasn't deep enough to hinder its movement and abilities, though, for it had a thick skin. Then, like the others, both fell back to take cover.

Then one of the goblins on the outskirts spotted the party on the hill and cried, "The booyahg's dead! We're being flanked!" Then he moved up onto some stony lip that gave him a bit of height. It was just enough to have line of sight of the heroes on the hill. He then fired at Kaedyn who had positioned himself between the enemies and Vexir. He missed completely. He was firing at long range, and the blasting of the horn had disoriented him. And so, his shot bounced off the hillside and vanished in the weeds.

Gale rushed to the edge of the hill a moment later and cast Magic Missile, launching three energy bolts at the worg. They pounded into the creature's side, back and left rear leg. It roared in agony, intent on killing them all. Gale then withdrew to position himself behind his companions.

The goblin captain was now beside himself with fear. He had been pursuing the adventurers with absolute confidence. In a matter of seconds, everything had gone to pot. "Fall back! Get to the high ground!" he cried in desperation as he gestured towards the party on the hill. "For the ABSOLUTE!" Then he hurled his javelin at Aradin and withdrew from the gate. Aradin batted the javelin aside as if it was a pesky insect, and it skittered across the dirt harmlessly.

While this was happening, the worg bounded towards the party on the hill. It leapt up stones that made an excellent stairway, and it landed close enough to get into range of Astarion. Unfortunately for him, he was now in line of sight and instantly spotted. However, only the worg saw him. No other enemies could target him. Spotting him, the worg snarled and hissed threateningly, and Astarion bared his fangs and snarled right back, causing it to hesitate.

Just then, Lae'zel drew out her spear and charged the worg. The monster dove sideways and then swiped her spear to the side. Furious, she attacked again. This time, her spear pierced the creature's left shoulder, gushing blood out as she yanked it free. Spotting her, yet another goblin fired, but its arrow went flying past her.

As this was happening, Zevlor hurled 4 magic missiles at the bugbear. They hit it so hard that the creature tumbled backwards, caught itself with its left hand, and it rolled away from all enemies. Then it ran as fast as it could, scrambling to escape. It was severely hurt, and it knew it wouldn't last much longer.

Wyll, the Blade of Frontiers, saw them retreating and decided that a goblin at the base of the wall was the closest prey. Taking out his rapier, he cast Misty Step which teleported him from the wall to within melee range of his target. He took a swing, and soundly lobbed the creature's head right off its shoulders as it tried to flee. It had not expected him to appear on top of it so suddenly.

Meanwhile, Astarion dropped his bow and pulled out his daggers. He attacked the worg. With daggers held downward, he sprang upon the beast and drove one of the blades into the creature's eye right into its brain. As it let out a final moan and died, he dropped away, rolled down the rocky stairs and came right at the nearest goblin's face. The goblin ducked to the side at the last second. Astarion's blade was inches from its face.

As he did this, the blonde adventurer pulled out a bow and fired at the retreating bugbear. The arrow zinged past it, missing it. Aradin chased it and also attacked a split second later, but once again he missed. "Nasty piece of..." he cried in bitter rage. "I'm gonna bash your skull in if it's the last thing I do."

Then Vexir ran to the edge of the hill once more and quickly spotted the bugbear retreating. She fired. The bolt struck the bugbear right in the chest, piercing its heart. It snorted, stumbled and fell, shoving the bolt through its back as it landed on it.

Kaedyn joined her on the edge of the hill. He spotted the goblin captain and decided he was the next big target. He cast Guiding Bolt and hurled it. The goblin captain looked up as he retreated from the battlefield, and just as he locked eyes with the half-drow, the blazing bolt from Tyr consumed his face. In a moment, he was dead as his head exploded.

Ryth-Shan only hesitated a moment when he came up next to Kaedyn and was about to fire at the captain. When he saw the shot aimed right for the monster's head, he deviated his own attack to a different goblin. This

goblin was about a hundred and forty feet away, still within Ryth-Shan's range. He fired, and the goblin fell dead, an arrow to the throat.

Now the female adventurer with the bow was free to shoot. She fired her bow and killed a goblin with a shot in the stomach. As the creature fell, Shadowheart raced up to the edge to fire her crossbow bolt at the last remaining goblin. In the end, it had a bolt between the eyes and fell off the stony steps even as it dodged Astarion's swing.

With the battle over, Zevlor cried. "That was the last of them. Inside. All of you. More may follow. Open the gate!" Other tieflings, by that point, had arrived to help, and before too long, the gate was all the way up revealing a clear pathway inside. Aradin and his team quickly retreated within, deciding to obey Zevlor's order and ignore the bodies. Elegis then discovered that Sazza was unconscious, not dead, and she hefted the goblin over her shoulder as she headed off north into the grove.

Ryth-Shan, however, said, "I'm going to recover our arrows and bolts and search the bodies. Who knows what kind of gear they might be carrying?"

"Good idea," said Kaedyn. "Hopefully they'll keep the gate open for a few minutes. Let's spread out and search the bodies quickly."

"Did you hear what their captain called out?" asked Gale as they scrambled down the stone stair to the field of battle. "He called out, 'For the Absolute.' I wonder who or what the Absolute is."

"Let's ponder that once we are inside," said Vexir. Then they quickly tore the gear off of the fallen and stuffed it into their magic pockets. Within only a few minutes, the party was through the gate and into the druids' grove. The tieflings on the wall waited the entire time, keeping it open to welcome them. As soon as they were through, however, it slid shut behind with a loud boom.

Chapter 27 - The Plight of the Refugees

"There are children here, you fool!" Zevlor shouted in Aradin's face as the party approached. He had obviously rushed down off the wall to confront the adventurers before they could retreat too far into the grove.

Aradin was equally outraged. "We was runnin' for our lives."

"You led them straight to us. And you let them take the druid, too. Unbelievable!" Zevlor was about to tear Aradin apart with his hands.

Kaedyn quickly rushed forward to try to defuse the situation. "One fight just ended, and now you're picking another? Relax," he said, wedging himself between the two.

Zevlor did seem to calm when Kaedyn stepped in, but he said, "Tell that to the dead at the gate." It was clear that Kanon's loss weighed heavily upon him.

Aradin, however, was callous. "Shut it, horns. I'd be lying dead next to the goblins if you'd stalled any longer. Fortunately, this group of adventurers arrived when they did."

Zevlor's anger rose again, but it was at least restrained. "My duty is to this camp." He emphasized every word.

Aradin continued his vicious tirade. "Oh! God forbid you risk your precious tail. But I shouldn't be surprised. Foulbloods ain't known for courage."

Kaedyn positioned himself so that his back was to Aradin as he looked Zevlor in the eyes. "More violence won't bring back the dead. Stop and think."

At last, Zevlor's anger drained away, replaced by grief. "You're right. There's too much at stake."

"Worried about your precious hides, the both of you," Aradin quipped.

Kaedyn turned on him, expression hard. "Enough! Squabbling is pointless. Why don't you and your companions move on? Go cool off somewhere."

"Besides, what's done is done," said Zevlor. "The goblins have found us. We need to focus now on getting out of here."

Aradin spat on the ground. "At least we agree on that." Then he led his companions away deeper into the grove.

Ryth-Shan then approached. "What a prick!" he said, aiming his words at Aradin's back. Part of him wanted the man to turn around and start something. The gith would have certainly finished it. But the adventurers continued on without so much as a glance behind them.

At the same time, Gale approached and said to Zevlor. "Excuse me, but I couldn't help but overhear. Did you say that the goblins found you here? We killed them all, I believe. What makes you think you have to leave?"

Zevlor sighed. "You couldn't see from where you were below, but I saw a few goblins heading back west towards their main camp at the old temple ruins. It was pretty clear. They found the grove. They've been looking for it for who knows how long now; even before we got here about two months ago, I think. Not sure why they want to destroy it. Perhaps they feel it is a threat to their presence in the area. Who knows?"

"Anyway. Forgive that display," Zevlor continued. "Aradin's a blowhard, but that's no cause for me to join him. I wouldn't have looked to a drow for help, but I'm grateful all the same. I'm Zevlor."

"Do you have something against drow?" asked Vexir, brandishing her greataxe now. She eyed Zevlor with a cold and harsh expression.

"I meant no insult," said Zevlor quickly. "It's simply that yours are a people at war with themselves. I've never known them to care for outsiders. Whatever your business, I'd see to it quickly. The druids are forcing everyone out. This attack will only strengthen their resolve."

"Why are they forcing you out?" asked Kaedyn.

"There have been several attacks on people in the area by different monsters. The druids blame us 'outsiders' for drawing them here, and they fear those monsters will eventually find the grove. Nobody's welcome anymore."

"Several attacks by different monsters? What other monsters?" asked Ryth-Shan.

Zevlor shrugged. "Not sure about all of the troubles, to be quite honest. I know there is a village to the west. It has been gutted. No one survived. I'm not sure how long ago it was destroyed, but we passed through it to get here. It looked as if it had been destroyed quite some time ago. Lots of spider webs and collapsed walls and so forth. Wood looked totally rotted out. I'm surprised there are even structures still standing."

"We really haven't had much of a chance to explore," he continued. "We just got here, like I said, about two months ago." He paused to recall the date. "The tenth of Eleint, I believe, was when we came along by the toll house north of here. That was when it happened. There are gnolls on the road to the north. They ambushed us on our way through the passes. We came here to escape them. Between the goblins and the gnolls, we knew we'd

never survive if we tried to keep going. We were saved by one of the druids here; their leader. He was, much to our great fortune, investigating the road when we showed up. If he hadn't, I'm sure we'd all be dead right now."

"Eleint," said Kaedyn in thought. "The Fading." The Fading was the more common name for the ninth month of the year. Kaedyn seemed to recall that it was Uktar, the eleventh month, when he had been taken by the mind flayers. "Is it still Uktar? We're not entirely sure of the exact date. We were captured and knocked unconscious, so we're not entirely sure how long we were held prisoner."

"Yes," said Zevlor. "It is still Uktar. Today would be the twentieth."

Ryth-Shan then cut in. "Are there any other troubles we should be aware of?" he asked.

"Besides all this, there's a bog to the south that has the druids concerned as well," Zevlor told them. "I'm not sure what's going on there, but it sounds bad. Something dark and sinister is at work, it seems, though no one will give us a straight answer about it."

"In any regards, they've started a ritual to cut the grove off from the world outside," he added. "We can't stay, but we'll be slaughtered if we leave. We're no fighters. We have a few who can defend themselves and others, but that's it."

"This ritual," said Ryth-Shan, "is there no way to convince the druids to stop it?"

Zevlor shook his head again. "I've tried. Kagha, their new First Druid, won't even see me. Bah! She's a terrible person. She's recently taken the position after that strange ship crashed a few days ago. Since then, goblins and other things have been roaming way too close to the grove. It's making them all nervous. Bloody cowards! They should have been in Elturel while we were defending it in Avernus against undead, devils and demons. We were battling for our lives constantly."

"Where's the former First Druid?" asked Ryth-Shan.

"He's been gone for about a month. He went with Aradin and his crew to explore the ruins where the goblins are set up. He thought, perhaps, all the troubles in the area were connected somehow to it. We didn't expect them to be gone this long. The temple isn't that far from here. They must have run into some serious trouble there, and the First Druid didn't come back with them. Sounds like he was either captured or killed or both. This is a nightmare."

Then he paused as a thought struck him. "You know. You... I mean. I know it's none of your business, but Kagha now owes you for helping to save this place. If you hadn't shown up, there's a good chance they would have, at the very least, smashed through the gate or climbed up the vines to get to the wall here. They could have caused a lot of trouble for the entire grove, and who knows how many would have died. Most of the people beyond this point are not fighters. As it stands now, the goblins may take some time to reorganize before they send an assault here. You bought Kagha time for her ritual. Maybe she'll listen to you. Perhaps you could persuade her for more time to prepare, if nothing else."

"I'll see what I can do," said Kaedyn.

Ryth-Shan and Gale were both pleased with Kaedyn's decision to help. The gith ranger had a bad feeling that something was not quite right in the grove; especially since Zriek had warned him about it ahead of time. He wanted to see if they could figure out what it was and see if they could fix it. Speaking with Kagha was something he wanted to do anyway. Gale approved because he felt it was the right thing to do and it would be most beneficial to them to have a sanctuary to fall back to.

However, Vexir and Lae'zel did not approve. Vexir didn't like Zevlor and considered him a fool. She didn't care two copper pennies for the tieflings or their issues with the druids. Lae'zel thought it was a monumental waste of time, and they had more important things to take care of; namely, the TADPOLE! Vexir was silent in her disapproval, but Lae'zel let everyone know. "Bah! We've no time to offer aid to every whimpering pup."

"We'd owe you a great debt," said Zevlor, as if that was somehow worth something to the gith. "If we're forced to leave now, we won't make it to the city."

"City? What city?" asked Vexir. Now THAT was something that interested everyone.

"Baldur's Gate," said Zevlor. "It's days away from here, along the Risen Road to the west. Do you... Do you not know where you are?"

"It's been a rough couple of days," explained Kaedyn. "So we're days east of Baldur's Gate. That is great news indeed."

"You'll find the druids at the heart of the grove," said Zevlor, returning to the matter that concerned him most. "Please, make them see sense. Oh, and if it's of any concern... You're brave to walk around without hiding your heritage. I'll make sure everyone knows that you helped us at the gate. That way, everyone will welcome you. Well, I hope anyway."

"Thanks," said Kaedyn. "That would be very much appreciated. If you don't mind, I'll head up to the wall first to give you time to spread the word. Maybe I can do something for your friend, Kanon. It might not be too late to revivify him. It's a long shot, but I figure it's worth trying."

Zevlor was truly touched by this. "I seriously doubt it. I checked him shortly after the battle ended. It's been longer than a minute, I'm sure, since he died. The Revivify spell only works if you can cast it within a minute after death. His soul has probably already moved on to the afterlife."

Kaedyn nodded. "Like I said. I'll see if there's anything I can do. You never know."

"Thank you," said Zevlor, and with that, he bid them farewell and left.

Chapter 28 - The Tieflings at the Wall

Vexir sneered at Zevlor as he walked away. "Why do you care about these fool tieflings?" she asked Kaedyn as she leaned on her greataxe.

Kaedyn shrugged. "I care about every soul," he replied, "even those people consider evil." Then he smiled at her, clearly indicating that she was normally considered evil and he still cared about her. And with that, he made his way at a jogging pace towards the path that led up onto the wall.

Vexir snickered at him. "Fool," she muttered. Then she and the others followed but only because they didn't want to stand around doing nothing while they waited for him to return. They also wanted to make sure they gave Zevlor time to spread the word.

So they went up onto the wall. Sure enough, Kanon was dead beyond any hope. Kaedyn bowed his head and said a prayer. As he did, one of the tieflings nearby, a female with dark hair named Kaldani, curvy horns and almost light purple colored skin, said to him, "Aradin's back with his tail between his legs. I'm glad for your help, but I'd hoped you were Halsin."

"And Halsin is?" asked Ryth-Shan.

"The REAL First Druid," said Kaldani.

"Sounds like you've crossed paths with Aradin before," said Kaedyn.

"Yeah, when he ran off with the druid, we all tried to stop them. They wouldn't have it. Aradin is a bull-headed idiot, but what surprised us was that even Halsin was Hells-bent on going. It seemed super important to him, for some reason."

"Halsin saved our hides on Risen Road to the north of here a few months back," she explained. "He led us here to safety. However, when we got here, the rest of the grove clearly didn't want us. They treated us well enough on the surface, but you could see a lot of the looks we were getting. They were unwelcoming at best. Without Halsin... this grove's not so friendly. I'll tell you that."

"So Halsin is the one who saved you," said Kaedyn. "Zevlor mentioned something about it."

"Yep. We are refugees from Elturel," she explained. "It was recently brought back to the material plane, and we were some of the survivors in the city at the time. Most of us were regular citizens before the Descent, and we were just trying to escape Avernus. Others, like Zevlor, were Hellriders, fighting the enemies back."

"But when we returned to Faerun," she continued, "most of the people blamed us for what happened, on account of our devil heritage. When they discovered us hiding in ruined buildings and such, they assumed we were evil. Most of us, though, are just trying to create new lives for ourselves. We are a people who were oppressed, and we just want to try to scratch out SOMETHING better than what we had."

"So, we left Elturel because they were persecuting us. We were setting out for Baldur's Gate with the hope that maybe they would be more accepting. But we were ambushed. Zevlor and those who were teaching some of the rest of us how to fight, rushed to fight them off. But the gnolls were too strong and too numerous."

"They would have torn us all to bits if Halsin hadn't shown up. He transformed into a massive bear and ripped them apart. Then the gnolls started wearing him down, so he transformed back into himself and turned nature against them. Then he transformed into a bear again and ripped them apart a few more times. Back and forth he did this until he sent the gnolls fleeing into the hills, all by himself while Zevlor and Elegis led everyone away to safety. He was amazing."

Just then, a young female tiefling with yellowish skin and straight, white hair came racing past them. She carried a crossbow and wore ring mail armor over a red shirt. She dropped down next to Kanon and cradled him in her arms. It was clear. She looked too much like him. She had to be his sister. "He's not breathing. Go find a healer!" she snapped at another tiefling who came running up with her.

He was a male with a mostly bald head and a single braid of brown hair down the center. He wore padded armor and carried a longsword. Like her, he had yellow skin, but he looked like he was probably a cousin rather than a brother. The female had pupil-less eyes, but the male had fiery red ones.

Lae'zel decided to chime in. "Do not embarrass yourself. He is gone."

The tiefling woman looked up at her with venom in her eyes. "No!" she screamed in Lae'zel's face defiantly. The githyanki warrior instinctively fell back into a defensive stance, spear in hand. Everyone nearby tensed.

"I'll say a blessing to guide his soul," Kaedyn offered, trying to smooth the situation over. He patted the air at Lae'zel, trying to get her to stand down.

"We'd like that," said the male. "I'm Mennos. This is Arka."

Arka then threw Kanon's body to the ground in a rage. "No! We WOULDN'T like that. It's pointless. Someone's going to pay for this." Then she fled the scene.

Mennos chased after her. "Arka! No wait! What are you doing?" And with that, they were gone.

"Should we go after them?" asked Gale as he watched them go.

Kaedyn shook his head. "Best to leave them be." He gestured with his eyes at Lae'zel, and Gale took the hint.

Feeling guilty for Arka's behavior, another tiefling female approached. This was Elegis. She had returned just recently from putting Sazza in a cell. Elegis had short, black hair and wore ring mail over a blue shirt with a bow on her back. In her right hand was a warhammer, which she had used to crack Sazza over the head. She had bronzed skin and yellow eyes with rune tattoos on her brow. Her horns were shorter and jutted up towards the sky with only a slight curve to them.

"Sorry about that," she said kindly. "You didn't deserve such hostility."

Kaedyn gave her a warm smile and a slight bow in reply. "Think nothing of it. We have thicker skin than that," he told her.

She was pleased with this. "Glad you made it inside. Doubt we'll be safe here for long, though. There'll be more coming. Goblins hunt in packs."

"You could hold off a horde of goblins from this position," said Vexir.

"Ah, maybe," said Elegis. "But we're not fighters. If they broke through, it'd be a massacre. The sooner we leave for Baldur's Gate, the better. If the road was clear, it would be about a tenday's walk, maybe. But while the goblins are out there, it might as well be the other side of the world."

Kaedyn nodded. "Well, we'll see what we can do to help."

"Thank you," she replied. Then it seemed she remembered something. "Oh. Could you do me a favor?"

"What's that?" asked Kaedyn.

"There's another tiefling girl up on the hilltop there," she said, pointing to the east where the grove's natural wall rose to form a shelf of grassy land some fifty feet above them. "She's got long, straight, pink hair. Her name is Nadira. She's our stargazer and lookout. Could you tell her that I need to chat with her about something? My name is Elegis. I can't leave my post here, at this point. I need to keep watch for more trouble."

Kaedyn looked up to the hilltop. "Wouldn't take us much to do that," he replied.

"So, now we're messengers?" said Astarion, clearly displaying his contempt. "Are we going to run errands for everyone here?"

"What else have you got to do right now," said Kaedyn. "We need to wait for Zevlor to spread the word anyway so people don't just outright attack us." Then, without another word, he made for the cliff, jogging along the wall as he went until he reached a path that led up to the hilltop. The others reluctantly followed along. Only Gale seemed to be content with Kaedyn's decision.

When they reached the crest of the hill, however, they were quite surprised by what awaited them. Nadira was busy staring through her telescope at the surrounding countryside, and so she was oblivious to the reality that a bugbear was creeping up on her from behind. Somehow, the monster had gotten into the grove, and he was about to attack her. Kaedyn and the others had arrived just in time to stop it. The bugbear spotted them as they spotted him.

Without hesitation, Lae'zel threw her spear. It came at the bugbear's chest, but he knocked it to the side with his morningstar. Then Lae'zel summoned it back to her hand using her Weapon Bond ability. As it flew through the air, Vexir dashed towards the bugbear, moving to melee range so that her very presence threatened him. Gale cast Ray of Frost, but it struck the ground at the creature's feet. He basically completed his spell with poor timing. Before he lined up the shot, the beam of ice launched from his hands. Ryth-Shan also fired his longbow. His arrow grazed the bugbear's leg. Nothing more.

Then, as Vexir came into range of him, the bugbear chief took a swing at her. She deflected with her greataxe, but he took another swing. His first attack tipped her off balance and left her exposed. His second swing came in with a blow to the head! Fortunately for her, the leather cap she wore helped to keep one of the spikes from driving a huge hole in her temple. Though the bugbear hit her hard, it was not a skull-cracking blow. Still, she was dazed and terribly bruised. Her head was throbbing for some time to come.

Kaedyn saw her get hit as he rushed into the fray. "Vexir! Blast it!" was all he had time to say. He wanted to chew her out for once again rushing into battle before him. Instead, he cast Healing Word and fired a crossbow bolt. It hit the bugbear solidly in the upper left shoulder and stuck fast.

A moment later, Astarion took a shot with his bow. His arrow jabbed into the bugbear's leg armor, barely penetrating. Shadowheart used Guiding Bolt, and though the bugbear had been mostly dodging and avoiding the attacks of her companions, he failed to see Shadowheart's Guiding Bolt until it was too late. The missile blasted into the bugbear chief's armor, searing into its chest.

Then Lae'zel threw her spear again. It grazed the bugbear, and returned to her hand. At the same time, Vexir swung her greataxe and embedded it into the bugbear's skull. As she tore it out, blood spewed everywhere. The bugbear chief fell to his knees and then face-first to the earth.

"You have good timing," said Nadira after the bugbear fell dead before her. "Never been much of a fighter, so wrestling a bugbear would have gone poorly. I wonder how that thing got in here. Curious. I didn't see it with the others, but it must have come with them. How did it slip past everyone?"

"Not sure," Ryth-Shan replied. He was wondering the same thing.

"The bugbear must have somehow sneaked up here while everyone was focused on the dead tiefling and that idiot Aradin," suggested Vexir.

"Zevlor saw a few goblins retreating," said Ryth-Shan. "Could've been with them. We should still remain vigilant. Could be one or two more lurking around."

Vexir nodded. "I suppose you're right."

Then Nadira gave them all an odd look. She went from being totally friendly to suddenly defensive in moments. She was scared. "Hells! You're not here for heroics, are you? Avernus' stench is all over your skin. Let me guess. Your devil mistress sent you to get her soul coin back. Well, too bad! I earned it fair and square."

"Wow! You can sense that?" said Kaedyn. "It's been days, but yes. The truth is that we've been to Avernus, but we're no devil's servant."

"Care to explain why you reek of the Hells?" asked Nadira with heavy skepticism. She was not at all convinced.

"A mind flayer abducted us, and its ship went straight to Avernus," Kaedyn explained. As he said this, he pointed over the countryside at the ruined vessel. "Please, try to calm down. Do we really look like the servants of a devil? I swear by Tyr, my god, that we are not your enemies unless you are evil or have something to do with what the mind flayer did to us."

"Well," she replied, relaxing a bit as she looked out at the downed vessel. "That's quite the story." Then, she laughed at herself. "And I thought I was doomed. I feel like an idiot. You saved my life, and I repaid you by interrogating you and accusing you. Now, I feel sorry for you."

She pulled out the soul coin she had mentioned and looked at it thoughtfully. With a heavy sigh, she said, "So, you're a real cleric of Tyr?" Kaedyn nodded in response. "You know, I used to think this would buy me a fortune, but a fortune's not worth much if you're dead, is it? I've had nothing but misfortune since I acquired it, and I can't rest. I'm constantly looking over my shoulder, expecting someone to ambush me and steal it from me. Look how I nearly bit your head off about it, and just AFTER you saved my life. I guess... I guess it's probably better if I just..."

She sighed again and held it out to him. "Here. Take this. Maybe you can find a good use for this; free the soul somehow, or something. Consider it payment for saving my life just now."

Kaedyn took it, somewhat stunned. "Thank you," he said genuinely. "I will, indeed, do what I can to free the soul within. This is a great gift. I truly appreciate it."

Nadira smiled, and it seemed a huge weight had lifted from her shoulders. "You're welcome," she said sweetly.

Then Kaedyn remembered his reason for coming up there as he pocketed the coin. "Oh, by the way, Elegis wanted to see you. She had something she wanted to discuss with you."

Nadira's eyes lit up. "Oh! Thank you so much! I'd better go see what she wants. It probably has something to do with the soul coin, actually." She laughed lightly. "She's been a bit worried about me. Thanks again!" And with that, she was off down the slope towards where Elegis stood by the gate mechanism.

The moment she was beyond earshot, Astarion approached Kaedyn and put his hand on his shoulder. "Bravo!" he said with a greedy smile. "I must say. I thought we were wasting our time, but I guess there are benefits, sometimes, to performing meaningless tasks for people. She said she thought she could earn a fortune with that. How much of a fortune are we talking about?"

"A soul coin is rather valuable indeed," said Shadowheart. "They are made from a special type of iron called infernal iron. Both sides of the coin have infernal script etched onto its surface. Each soul coin is infused with the soul of a single creature. The soul is tormented and filled with despair. As a result, any creature of a non-evil alignment is only able to carry a few coins at a time. A creature of an evil alignment is able to carry as many coins as they wish."

"So we could use them to determine who is evil and who isn't," said Kaedyn with a grin. "We'll just start collecting these and passing them around to see which of us is truly evil." He said this in jest.

"A creature in possession of a soul coin could use its innate powers," Ryth-Shan added. "The coin can be used to drain the life of a target creature. Another ability is that the soul inside the coin can be communicated with

telepathically. It will typically answer questions, but the soul often gives vague answers. Devils and demons will pay handsomely for one of these."

"But it is possible to release the soul within a soul coin," said Kaedyn. "This can be achieved by casting an anti-curse spell, such as Remove Curse. Once a soul is freed, the coin will start rusting and will eventually be destroyed. If the soul is of a good alignment, they are transported to the realm of their deity. If the soul is of an evil alignment, they are transformed into a lemure."

"Why would we want to release the soul?" asked Astarion. "Sounds like it's worth more in the coin. Who knows how that might benefit us?" The others also pondered this and most agreed.

Kaedyn had a feeling that he was the only one thinking about freeing the trapped soul within the coin, but he said nothing more about his intentions. He figured it was best to keep that to himself. No sense in getting into a fight with them about it. He would cross that bridge when the time came. He then pretended to put the coin into his magic pocket, but he slipped it into a different pocket instead when no one was looking. He didn't want one of the others stealing it and thus attempting to use it for their own gain.

"Hey," said Gale, suddenly, as he stared down at the bugbear. "You know. I just thought of this. Why not use the Amulet of Lost Voices. We could ask the bugbear ourselves how it got in and how many more could be in the grove."

"Not a bad idea," said Astarion. "Any objections?" There were none, so he chanted the words of the spell. These were etched into the back of the amulet. His eyes glowed as magical energy surged around him. Then the bugbear's body lifted into the air, floating above the ground as its eyes and mouth glowed and emanated an eerie, neon green light.

"How did you get into the grove?" asked Astarion.

The bugbear's voice was devoid of life and it sounded like a wheezing, dying creature. "During fight. Snuck around. Climbed up from south cliffs, near big rune."

"Big rune?" said Gale. "I wonder if there's another Netherese portal rune around here."

"Anyone have any other questions?" asked Astarion.

"Are there any others?" asked Kaedyn.

The bugbear didn't respond. "It must only respond to me," said Astarion, then he repeated the question.

"Gresh, other goblin captain. Chased druid. Secret entrance," the monster replied.

"Secret entrance?" asked Astarion. "Where is that?"

"Cliff wall. West of gate. Just off path. Hidden in bushes."

"We should probably report that," said Kaedyn.

"We don't even really know where that is," said Vexir.

"Plus, we haven't even met the druids yet," said Ryth-Shan. "Who knows, but they may want to keep that a secret from the tieflings and others who are visiting. We should be careful about who we mention that to."

"I agree," said Shadowheart. "Let's not be too hasty about giving up what information we know. If they don't want anyone to know about that secret entrance, they might try to kill us to protect that knowledge."

"Good point," said Vexir. "I agree with Shadowheart."

"We should be quick," said Astarion. "I think I can feel the spell waning. Any other questions?"

"You can ask up to five questions," said Gale. Though he didn't actually know the spell, he knew how it worked. He'd cast it... not all that long ago... "You have up to ten minutes to ask them. We're fine. We've only asked three so far. Still, make the last two count."

"Why do you want to destroy the druids' grove so badly?" asked Ryth-Shan, and Astarion repeated it to the bugbear.

"Minthara's command. Drow cleric. Absolute. Kill tieflings. Kill druids. Find True Souls."

"Last question," Gale commented.

"True Souls?" asked Kaedyn. "What are True Souls?"

Astarion looked around at everyone else. They seemed to approve of the question. Astarion repeated it. The bugbear replied, "Absolute's Chosen. Special. Powers. Priestess Gut." Then the spell's power waned and ended. The bugbear's body floated back to the ground and became lifeless once more.

The party looked at one another, bewildered. A strange silence fell between them for a few moments. Only the sound of the wind could be heard. All at once, it was as if they were being watched. It was like some all-seeing eye was viewing them from above. They felt exposed and vulnerable. It was as if the world had gone silent and everything was staring at them from every corner of Faerun.

Kaedyn shifted uncomfortably. "Well," he said to break the ice. "I think I'm done here now. Let's search him and get out of here."

No one argued. As quickly as they could, they looted the bugbear chief, and within moments they were racing back down the hill as fast as they could. To each one of them, it was as if they were being chased by a psychopath in a dark wood. They simply could not escape fast enough.