

As Eru took a breath, the rest of the stone crumbled away from her body. She looked around at her friends, the stranger, and the cemetery.

“Spin around,” Morgana cheered seeing her friend no longer stoned.

Mew helped spin Eru around as they inspected her. Nope, no signs of any physical changes. The last thing Eru remembered was firing the Wand of Magic Missile at the medusa before waking up there.

“What happened? Where’s the medusa? Where ARE we? How did we get here? Tell me EVERYTHING!” Eru implored one question after the next without waiting for any answers.

They caught her up on the battle with the medusa, their inability get the javelin, Eru’s long trek back to Neverwinter as a statue, and the fact that she appeared alive and well.

Cellin clapped his hands together, “My work here is done.” He turned and headed back toward the city.

Mew turned to follow him. And Eru moved to follow Mew.

“Eru,” Morgana grabbed her arm, “Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“I’m parched,” Eru said.

“Here, have some water,” she said as she turned Eru toward her and handed her a flask of water.

Mew snuck after Cellin. “Cellin, I have a question.”

“Yes?”

“Are you able to identify this?” and Mew pulled out the javelin.

“I can...for 20 gold pieces.”

Mew handed him the javelin. He muttered a few words and concentrated on the piece. After a few moments, he handed it back.

“That’s a javelin of lightning. It generally sells for 2,000 gold pieces.”

“Javelin of...” Mew murmured, and looked at Cellin, “For that I’ll give you 10 gold pieces and your life.”

“Sold,” he said, sticking out his hand. Mew paid the 10 gold pieces, from the kitty, and Cellin disappeared into the night. Mew rejoined Morgana and Eru.

Heading back to the Inn, Eru’s eye caught her wrist as it was bathed in moonlight and she saw a glimmering shape on the inside of her left wrist that wasn’t there before. It resembled a cat-o-nine tails, fanned out across the width of the inside of her left wrist. Pulling away from the moonlight, the mark disappeared. It reappeared when she once more stuck her hand in the moonlight. She tried to wipe it away. It remained.

“What d’you got there, Eru?” Morgana asked as she caught sight of the glimmer.

“Nothing,” she said, as she quickly placed her left hand behind her back.

“Show me your wrist,” Morgana demanded. Eru showed her right wrist.

“No, the other one.” Eru showed her the unmarked side of her left wrist.

Narrowing her eyes and lowering her voice Morgana whispered “Eru...”.

“What? Let’s just go back to the Inn. I’m so tired,” she insisted, pulling the sleeve of her robe down further.

Mew and Morgana exchanged concerned glances about their glimpses of the mark and Eru’s uncharacteristically secretive behavior. But they dropped the subject.

Bartholomew and Aria were at the Inn when everyone arrived. Morgana and Mew explained the job they took from Krim, how they killed a medusa--but not before Eru was turned to stone, and that they couldn’t retrieve the javelin because they had to get stone-Eru out of there as soon as possible and return to Neverwinter. During their discussions, Eru summoned Hùbon and was once more reunited with her familiar. Eru offered to write her parents for gold to pay back the expenses of her restoration, but her friends refused. Everyone fell into a well-deserved slumber.

The next morning Morgana and Mew went to find a laundress to clean and mend the medusa’s gown. On their way out, Mew mentioned something about teaching Donut to thief, but wasn’t sure anyone heard. Aria took Donut out for a walk (it turned out Donut was really good at catch...damn blink Corgi). Bartholomew ate the remains of breakfast and read his ecology book. And Eru went to the library.

Pouring through multiple tomes, scrolls, and whatever writings she could find, Eru learned that the mark on her wrist is the symbol of Loviatar, the Maiden of Pain. This mark is the symbol of cat-o-nine whip in a circle. Those with such a mark have been targeted by Her. As she read further, sweet Eru, innocent, naive Eruaistaniel of the House of Highguard knew that she

was royally

fucked.

Hoping to find a cure, she opened up a new tome and learned that each time the target is wounded, the mark grows stronger and acts as a beacon for Loviatar's minions, who hunt down all those who are marked. In addition to pain, Loviatar is known for hurt, torture and agony. Was it physical torture? Or would the Maiden reach into the depths of her mind and cause her unbearable mental agony?

"Could I handle any sort of pain? I'm only 150 years old! I know nothing!"

Remembering back to the loss of her limb, Eru slid her hand down her reformed left calf wondering...

"What if I chop off my hand at the wrist? Will I still be marked? How do I explain this to the group? I can't lie to Mew!"

She continued to read and found there were no references of anyone who successfully removed their marks, except by their deaths.

As she stood half pondering half talking out loud to herself about her predicament her pale skin flushed red then turned a shade of pale green and she began to sway, her vision tunneled and just as she was about to faint, the passing librarian caught her.

"Are you ok? Let me help you sit down"

Eru quickly came to her senses. Rolled up the scrolls, piled the tomes and writings and rushed out of the library mumbling something about no breakfast and a new fad diet.

Still panicked, she quickly sought out a tailor, purchased a pair of long gloves for a few copper pieces, pulled them on and covered the invisible mark.

Mew and Morgana's dress-mending mission was a bit of a ruse. While out, they asked around Neverwinter for a person who could discreetly purchase a magical item. They were directed to a well-known buyer of such things and a meeting was set up. They met Cassius, a rotund older man and Mew immediately got the sense he was into resale. He took the offered javelin, mumbled a few words, and confirmed it to be a Javelin of Lightning.

"I'll give you 1,000 gold pieces," he said.

"What?" Mew countered. "We had this item previously appraised for--"

"3,000 gold pieces!" Morgana interrupted.

"Well you obviously had it appraised by a novice. It isn't worth more than 1,400 gold pieces. I'll tell you what. I can give you 1,200 gold pieces."

Morgana leaned into Mew's ear, "He's low-balling."

"I know," Mew whispered back.

"I think we can find a better offer elsewhere," Morgana haggled.

"Now Morgana," Mew interrupted, as they looked at Cassius, "I can go as low as 2,200."

"You drive a hard bargain. How about 1,800 gold pieces and I can offer you a discount anytime you're buying wares in my shop," Cassius stated.

"What percent?" Morgana blurted out.

"A friendly 10%," he cooed.

Far away at the Inn, Bartholomew suddenly looked up from his book. "That's TERRIBLE!" he shouted to no one, looking around for what caused the outburst. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he resumed reading. At that same moment, Donut barked a few times at Aria as they walked down a random street in Neverwinter.

"What? What's wrong boy?" she asked.

"*Woof Woof Woof*," he replied. (Something shady was going on somewhere....)

"How about we split the difference," Mew offered, "and you give us 2,000 gold. This javelin was ripped from the hands of a medusa. That tale alone should up the resale value."

"A medusa you say? I can go up to 1,900 gold pieces," Cassius replied.

"How about 1,900 and a healing potion," Morgana piped in.

"A greater healing potion," Mew elaborated.

"Hmmm," he said, "I can go 1,800 gold plus a greater healing potion."

"Let me confer with my associate," and Mew and Morgana put their heads together and whispered. "Okay, how about 1,900 gold and a regular healing potion? We'd prefer two healing potions--I know you can make them for cheaper than they sell."

"Two regular healing potions and 1,900 gold pieces it is."

"Sold!!" Mew nearly shouted as they shook hands. Cassius handed them a large coin purse and they found somewhere private to split the gold and healing potions between the two of

them. Then Morgana and Mew set out to find a local laundress and paid a few gold pieces (out of the Kitty) to have Eru's new gown cleaned and the holes mended.

Upon their return to the Inn, Eru immediately changed into the white gown, spinning 'round. Morgana eyed Eru's gloved hands and wrists suspiciously. Mew pretended not to notice.

They all decided to head back to Krim Breakhandle to inform him of their findings in the Mere of Dead Men. Before they left, they decided Mew would do all the talking so Morgana cast Enhance Ability of Eagle's Splendor and boosted Mew's silver charisma tongue. They met up with Krim in a small deserted alley. He was a beautiful High Elf, dressed in ruffled white shirt and dark purple jacket. He had a large guard with him, the strong silent type, who wore a large metal helmet that blocked 99% of his face.

"So, you've returned. Any news?" Krim asked.

Mew responded, "Unfortunately, all we have is news. And it's not the best."

"I see. Continue," Krim pressed.

"We located what we believe to be the party that you originally sent out two weeks ago," and Mew consulted Morgana's notes. "Two dwarf clerics, one half-elf wielding a greatsword, and a human with just a regular sword. It appears they ran into the medusa."

"She was there? WONDERFUL!!," he exclaimed in wonder, with no misgivings voiced for the lost party. "Was the javelin there?"

"I don't know," Mew stated flatly. "I was a little distracted trying to save Eru. You know, she was turned to stone."

"And there were snakes and centipedes," Morgana added.

"And do you know how costly it was to restore Eru to the flesh? Not to mention she's been rendered mute in the process." Mew chimed in, looking at Eru.

"Your friend is not my concern. You, and she, knew the risks of the Mere. As did the other four before you."

"Would you be willing to pay us more to cover the costs of the restoration?" Mew inquired. "It would go a long way toward solidifying future business arrangements."

"More? Why would I pay more? The risks of the job. So, what news of the javelin?" He looked around at each of their hands and packs, "Did you find it?"

“Again, I was a little distracted. I didn’t see a javelin,” Mew replied.

“I was busy fighting a medusa,” Morgana chimed in.

Krim pointed at Eru, “Did she see it?”

“Eru,” Mew, now hoping that news of the javelin might net them more gold, turned to Eru and asked, “did you see a javelin?”

Eru grabbed a piece of parchment from her scholar’s pack and hastily scribbled a note, flashing it to Mew. “Held stone hand” is all it read.

“Eru says it was held in the hands of one of the statues,” Mew informed Krim, tucking the note away. “Now, you owe us 500 gold pieces. Information or the javelin. And we brought you what we knew.”

“You’re right,” Krim told Mew. “However...I’d be willing to pay the 500, plus an additional 1,000 gold pieces if you capture the medusa and bring it to me.”

Aria scoffed, “I don’t think that’s worth the risk. We all saw what happened to Eru.”

“Well, your friend should have been more careful,” Krim chided.

“What would you pay for just the head of the medusa?” interjected Mew, remembering that the head was safely stowed waiting for them to get to Barry’s butcher friend.

“Nothing!” scoffed Krim. “Alive or no deal.”

“No deal, Krim, we’ll take our payment now. You can send another group to pursue the medusa and the javelin.” Mew stated.

Krim pulled out a coin purse and handed it to Mew. Before they turned away, Aria checked out the mysterious guard more closely. She spoke to him in Infernal, “Hello there.” There was no response, but his face twitched. It was obvious Aria caught his attention.

“Maybe we should just kill them. I mean we’re in an alley,” Aria whispered to Mew.

Mew bristled as the guard flinched at Aria’s suggestion. Morgana caught the shift in Mew’s demeanor and panicked, sensing something coming. Mumbling a few arcane words beneath her breath and using a specific hand gesture, Morgana cast Charm Person on the guard. Nothing happened...well, nothing except the air in the alleyway became still and tense. Not only Mew bristled now, but the guard too. And Krim grew wary. Sensing the tension, and seeing the large axe the guard wielded, Aria cast Blade Ward on herself and backed up.

Mew ran up with the Spider Staff and swung at Krim, arcing in a circle. Krim danced around the staff and Mew missed completely; finishing off the spin by disengaging and backing into the alley further. Eru cast Suggestion on Krim, "You'll pay us the full 1,000 GP price and be about your merry day"

Krim's eyes hazed over with an arcane aura. He stood slightly straighter, withdrew a second coin purse with another 5 platinum pieces and handed it to Mew, "Here. Reparations for your friend." He nudged the guard and they turned and walked down the alley.

Eru leaned over to Mew and whispered, "We only have about 8 hours before the spell fades. We need to get out of here...now." Mew looked at her and handed Eru the two coin purses.

"Why don't you head back to the Inn and divvy up the money. We'll join you shortly," Mew told her.

Eru summoned Monte, plopped the bags within his hollow body, and walked back to the Minstrel's Waterfall and began counting the funds. It didn't take long to divvy up 10 platinum pieces among five people, and she spent some time reading her books and talking to Hùbon.

Meanwhile, everyone else followed Krim and the guard. Catching up to Krim, Morgana offered to buy them drinks. "To continue the merry day," Mew added, standing close enough to the guard to realize he emitted a steady heat.

"Aw, to continue with the merry day," Krim smiled, wide.

"What about a private pub? Do you know of one that, you know, mixes in exotic powders that may...well...alter states?" Morgana asked.

Krim thought for a moment, "Aw, yes. Follow me!" and he marched off with his guard in tow. He led them down a few backstreets and to a long brick wall in the richer district of Neverwinter. He rapped on the wall and a secret door slid open. They stepped into a torchlit room filled with a light purple haze. There were lounge chairs throughout and a long bar at the far end. And, much to the party's delight, nobody else around except a female bartender at the bar.

"Tammy!!!" Krim exclaimed as he walked across the empty floor and rapped the bar. "Give me and my friends here your finest," and he winked as he tossed a platinum piece on the bar.

She brought everyone a round of drinks. Morgana pretended to sip hers.

Mew followed Tammy back to the bar. "So, what do you know about Krim and his friend?"

“Oh, he comes here often enough. He’s a good customer. I know that he collects exotic creatures.”

“Really?” Mew asked, interested as they tucked that fun fact away. “Hey, do you know what race that guard is?”

“Nope. I’ve never seen under that helm.”

“Krim is an incredibly generous man,” Mew cooed. “We are so grateful. Did you know he paid us back for having to unpetrify our friend? And he even offered us another job. AND he bought us these fabulous drinks tonight. He’s just so...wonderful.”

Tammy sighed, not buying the thick bullshit Mew was selling, “I’m sure he was great, but it’s none of my business.” And she began wiping the bar clean. Mew took a hint and wandered back toward the group.

Aria walked right up to the guard and offered him a drink. He didn’t respond. While so close to his face, she spied a bit under the helmet. He had blood red skin and pitch black eyes. She walked away with the offered tankard. She petted Donut and whispered in his ear, “Go teleport right in front of that guy,” pointing to the guard.

Blink and Donut disappeared and reappeared right in front of the guard. Again, no reaction.

Bartholomew walked up to him. “Excuse me, sir. Would you like some cheese?” And he pulled a few cubes out of his pockets. Still no response from the guard.

“So, what’s up with him,” Aria asked an intoxicated Krim, pointing to the guard.

“Kriz’Ak is like,” Krim slurred, “a fiend or something. I hired him a long, long time ago.”

“What do you pay him,” Mew asked.

“Pay? Oh, no. I don’t pay. He’s bound to work for me.”

“How do you manage that,” Morgana asked.

“Well, I paid for someone to go to the Nine Hells and find me a Succubus for my collection. Instead, they came home with,” Krim points, “him. Kriz’Ak works for me. He’s not fun, though.”

“What does he like,” Aria asked.

“Like? He likes...he likes...hey Kriz’Ak, what do you like?” Krim asked his guard.

No response.

“He likes to hurt people.” Krim answered on his behalf.

Morgana gingerly switched tankards with Krim’s that was resting on the table beside him. He absent-mindedly picked it up and continued drinking. He continued to slip into a more and more relaxed and drunken state.

“So,” Mew pried, “How does one go about binding someone?”

“Aaaaanciiient magic,” he whispered mysteriously. “Soul Stones, you know, stuff like that.” He explained the premise of soul stones in his inebriated state: they capture the essence of a creature and the poor creature is bound to the owner of the stone. “I don’t really know how it works.”

“Where’s your soul stone now,” Bartholomew asked. “Is it, like, in your pocket?”

“Not my pocket. It’s hidden away, Little One.”

“I’m not little,” Bartholomew mumbled.

Mew nestled up beside the guard and pulled the alabaster mask out. Morgana noticed the uncharacteristic advance and cast Control Flame on the torches, making small figurines dancing within the purple torchlight to distract the others from Mew’s actions.

“Tammy! You have done wonders here lately!!” he praised the barmaid, completely distracted by the dancing flames and oblivious of Mew’s actions.

Engraved inside the mask were a list of names that only Mew knew about, and they flashed the interior list to the guard. Mew whispered, “I would like to try to free you. See?” There was, of course, no response.

“Krim,” Mew stood aside and asked the finely-dressed elf, “can we go somewhere...private? Like, I’d love to see some of those exotic animals I’ve heard so much about.”

Krim’s eyes lit up, even in their drunken stupor, “YES! Oh yes! Do follow me!! Kriz’Ak, we’re going!” And he leads everyone outside and into the night.

Eru had finished counting the funds two hours ago and busied herself with reading. However, she grew increasingly worried about the whereabouts of her friends. She grabbed Monte and Hübön and left the Inn.

After about twenty minutes of following Krim, Donut began barking while peering from within Mew's satchel. He whined and sort of Corgi-pointed down the street. A vaguely Eru-shaped silhouette approached from afar. "Go get her, Donut," Morgana yelled. *Blink* Donut phased out of the satchel and appeared about 15 feet away. Everyone watched as he blinked in and out of existence as he steadily got closer to Eru. Eru noticed from her perspective as a little speck began to grow increasingly nearer, until she saw (and heard) a very excited Donut. *woof woof* and he blinked his way back to the party with Eru following behind. Follow the Bouncing Corgi.

They were led through the streets of Neverwinter until they eventually came upon a great gated mansion. Guards intermittently walked the perimeter and the interior. Mew, Eru, and Aria all sensed a magical aura throughout the complex. And down they went, descending two flights of stairs into the belly of the mansion, through halls and into a large chamber. Krim looked in need of more drink, so Morgana offered him some ale and Eru had it poured in Monte. She handed it to Krim who lit up.

"This! I want THIS!" he said, referring to the squirming mug.

"Oh, no. He's not for sale. He's my friend," she said.

"But...I want him! I'll give you 200 gold pieces."

"What? Never!" Eru said, offended.

"Fine. I must have him. 300 gold pieces," Krim countered.

Eru thought for a moment and realized she could make more Montes..."If you must have him, I'll take 500 gold pieces."

"Mine!" he squealed, passing Eru five platinum pieces, which she stuck into her coin purse. Morgana had to shut her gaping mouth.

Krim emptied the tankard and slipped Monte into his pant's pocket. And the lump of a tankard quickly vanished and the pocket appeared empty once more. Eru could no longer feel the link she shared with her tankard-friend.

"Hey," Bartholomew wandered up, "Where does that pocket go?"

"Yes," Mew chimed in, "does it go to another dimension or is it just bigger on the inside?"

"I dunno," he hiccuped.

"I can reach in there and find out," Bartholomew offered.

“Um, no thank you, sir,” and he batted Bartholomew’s approaching hand away.

“Well, how do you pull things out of your pocket,” the Halfling monk asked Krim.

“Like this,” and Krim reached into his pocket and pulled out Monte. Monte was simply a pewter ale tankard, no arms or legs dangling. He shook the mug at Eru, “What’s wrong?”

She winced on the inside before quickly responding, “Oh? He’s just sleeping.”

Krim shook it further, “How do I wake him?”

“You don’t. He needs to sleep. Maybe he’ll wake up in an hour,” she suggested.

“Okay,” and Krim put the tankard back into his magical pocket.

Krim was then barraged with questions about the pocket and let slip that anything he put in there alive came out dead, and in order to get something out of it, all he had to do was think about the thing he wanted. When the questions got a little... inappropriate, Mew interceded.

“So...about those animals,” Mew prodded.

“YES!” Krim yelled, and led them further down a hallway. They came to a large door, barred with an iron beam. “Kriz’Ak, if you would,” he motioned to the guard.

Kriz’Ak stepped forward and lifted the heavy iron beam, and even he appeared to struggle with the weight. A mighty thud clanged as the beam landed on the floor. Kriz’Ak pushed the door open and stood aside. They entered a well-lit room separated by blue shimmering walls - magical barriers. Each walled segment contained one magical creature: a coeurl, two or three goblins, and a weird unknown humanoid with tan skin. While nobody else knew what the tan-skinned being was, Mew silently recognized it from the Underdark...a sort of Brain Bear: it had four limbs and was a massive brain and was nothing to be trifled with. Each of the creatures appeared to be alone and in some form of frozen stasis.

While walking, Aria bumped into Krim, spilling her ale on his pants.

“Oh, I’m so sorry. I can clean those for you,” she says, patting the wet pants.

“No, no, that’s alright,” Krim says, “I have someone who does that for me.”

“Hey Krim, if you need more creatures, we know where a bunch of goblins live,” Eru suggested.

“I have no interest in more goblins,” he said with a bit of disgust.

“Well, how about a unicorn,” Aria suggested. Krim’s eyes once more lit up.

“Well, it’s like a unicorn-pegasus,” Mew corrected. Further interest gleamed behind Krim’s eyes.

“Tell me more,” he said.

“It would be a long and difficult journey,” Aria started, “and we could capture it and bring it to you in about two years. For good coin,” she finished.

“Two years? Well, I can just have someone else find it for me,” he replied.

“You can’t,” Aria said. “Only we know the location of the beast.”

“You’d be surprised what people can learn with a lot of money,” he arrogantly cut the conversation off.

“Krim?” Morgana asked, “Do you have any more exotic ones? Like, what’s your favorite one?”

“My favorite!” and he hurriedly moved to another magical barrier, “is THIS ONE!” A fire elemental burned inside the magical barrier. “This one was captured down south. And not by anyone...I DID THIS!” He beamed with pride. “I didn’t have to pay anyone else to do it for me!”

“What does it do,” Mew asked.

“It...it just sits there,” he babbled.

“Where did you find it,” Morgana asked.

“South, in Zakhara,” he beamed.

“Where is that?”

“It’s south of us. A dangerous place. It was once an ancient civilization, but it’s now overrun with elementals.” Krim began to sway and he looked at Kriz’Ak. “Well,” he said, “I should get to bed. Kriz’Ak - ” And he quickly jumped up and into the arms of his guard and they began to walk out.

“Excuse me,” Mew interrupted their exit, “What are we supposed to do?”

Krim yawned, “I’ll have someone escort you out.” And they continued walking out.

“Um, do you have a bathroom,” Aria and Bartholomew both asked. Krim pointed toward a doorway as they walked past, then he promptly passed out in Kriz’Ak’s arms. Bartholomew and Aria headed into the bathroom.

Mew attempted to pick Krim’s pockets as they walked by. Kriz’Ak’s large gauntleted hand stopped the attempt by seizing Mew’s wrist. It burned.

“Do. Not. Touch. Him.” he said, blocking Mew’s attempt.

“I knew you could speak!!” Mew responded, moving themselves away due to the intense heat Kriz’Ak emitted. “We’re trying to help you, Kriz’Ak. We’d like to free you from Krim’s control. If we can find the soul stone, we can set you free of him. You can be free! Let us help you!!”

Eru saw the ongoing exchange of Mew’s babbling to Kirz’Ak’s apathy and immediately cast Charm Person on Kriz’Ak, but it fizzled out and failed. He turned, dropped the unconscious Krim to the ground, and growled, “Enough of this! Let’s have some fun...”

Mew smiled and yelled, “You know Gub!!”

Kriz’Ak turned his gaze toward Mew, spun a spear in his hand while the tip glowed with embers before a bolt of fire blasted out. “That’s beautif - “ Mew began to say, before the bolt blasted them to the ground in pain. “Get the soul stone from his pants,” they squeaked out between breaths. Kriz’Ak fired another bolt at Mew, which struck...hard.

Bartholomew stepped out from the bathroom, a piece of toilet parchment trailing from the bottom of his boot. He ran up to the unconscious Krim and began rummaging through his pants pockets. They were empty, but his arm disappeared up to the shoulder. He thought hard about the Soul Stone and reached into the pocket once more, nothing. Then he thought about Monte and reached in again...nothing. He bent down and peered into the open pocket. It appeared to be a normal, empty pocket.

“Rip his pants off!!!” Morgana yelled from down the hallway. Bartholomew began to undo Krim’s boots and belt.

Mew stood and swung Talon, hit Kriz’Ak, and backed away down the hallway. The guard simply laughed and shrugged off the strike.

Morgana muttered a few words and eight badgers came running down the hallway. Seven of them surrounded Kriz’Ak and one ambled near Krim. Kriz’Ak’s armor suddenly emitted flames from the bottom, singeing three of the badgers. He then turned to look at Bartholomew struggling with the pants.

“You,” he said to Bartholomew, “help me.”

“No, I’m pulling off pants,” Bartholomew said as the charm spell faltered.

Kriz’Ak swung his spear and shoved it into one of the singed badgers, but it survived the blow.

Peering from behind the bathroom door, Aria cast Eldritch Blast toward Kriz’Ak. One beam was a direct hit, but the other flew wide. Eru followed by blasting six charges from her Wand of Magic Missile. Each pierced his armor and the holes they left began to fill with dripping, molten blood.

Aria chuckled, “Too bad we don’t have any marshmallows.”

Kriz’Aks’ armor once more flamed up, toasting a badger, which poofed away into oblivion. The tip of his spear once more began to glow and he pointed it at Eru, both bolts hitting her hard.

Finally able to tear off Krim’s pants and reveal Krim’s matching dark purple boxers, Bartholomew pulled the stolen pants over his clothes. The pants were massive for his Halfling form and he cinched the belt tight and rolled up the hems. He reached into the pocket and thought of the Soul Stone; he came up empty-handed. He tried once more for Monte, but again, nothing. He thought of ANYTHING that might be in the magical pocket, but came up once more with nothing. He checked the other pocket, but it was just a regular pocket. Frustrated, he took off the pants and flung them over his shoulder and ran out up the stairs.

Mew pulled Delores, the crossbow, off her back, loaded a bolt, and fired. It struck Kriz’Ak, but he wiped the bolt aside and laughed. Mew ran toward him.

Morgana cast Thunderwave and also turned into a large brown bear. The wave managed to do some damage to Kriz’Ak, as did the three badgers that bit his legs. Unfortunately, his armor once more flashed in flames and the three badgers disappeared in puffs of smoke.

He pointed toward bear-Morgana, “Join me,” he commanded and her eyes flared up with a red fury as she growled.

Eru cast Unseen Servant and asked it to pry the spear from Kriz’Ak’s hands. He stood there as the spear feebly moved back and forth, but didn’t budge from his grasp. Eru ran through the doorway into the room with the creatures and hid behind the corner.

Kriz’Ak killed two more badgers and focused his spear tip on Bartholomew’s retreating form, striking him in the back. “Ooooooh,” Bartholomew called back as he continued to run. The sounds of the fight echoed along the halls around Bartholomew and he could hear the crashing boots of guards running toward them. He drew his sword and waited.

A bolt flew from Delores once more as Mew fired at Kriz'Ak, but it bounced off of his plate armor. Mew ran toward the bathroom, but Aria blocked the door. Mew pushed her aside and stepped deeper into the latrine.

Bear-Morgana loped toward Krim and bit down on the badger that stood next to him. It hissed in its jaws. The squirming badger dodged the subsequent claw attack from the bear.

A badger bit Kriz'Ak, but was once more struck by the spear and disappeared in a magical swirl of smoke. The angry guard stomped toward the barely-open bathroom door.

Spying him coming, Aria shouted, "Stop. We are on a special quest from the Dark One. You must not interfere."

"Then step outside," Kriz'Ak responded.

"No!" she shouted. Looking toward Mew behind her, "Mew, do you have any ideas?"

"Fucking attack him," Mew hissed. "Remind him the Soul Stone will set him free."

Aria unleashed another Eldritch Blast. "Tell us where the Soul Stone is," she called as the beam singed his shoulder.

"You will never be able to find it," he growled.

"Convince him to let us help him find it," Mew whispered.

Instead, Aria fired another Eldritch Blast directly into Kriz'Ak's face. The helmet flew off and revealed two horns. Eru fired a Firebolt from around her hiding place, but it missed. Kriz'Ak forced open the bathroom door and fired the spear at Aria. One of the two bolts struck.

"Sick 'em, Bear," he commanded.

At this point, Bartholomew managed to run up the stairs to meet the 12 approaching guards. "You have to get in there. Kriz'Ak's is going crazy!!"

One guard grumbled, "I figured this would happen. C'mon!" and they rallied and charged toward the room downstairs. Bartholomew ran behind them, the pants flapping like a banner behind him.

Mew fired Delores, but missed again. Bear-Morgana peered into the bathroom and snapped and clawed at Aria. "HEY!!!" she yelled.

Satisfied with the bathroom scenario, Kriz'Ak turned his focus once more toward Eru. He ran down the hall and through the doorway where she hid. Swinging at her with his spear, he smacked her upside the head and she fell unconscious.

Aria fired Eldritch Blast at Bear-Morgana and the red madness faded from her eyes. "Are you back?" Aria asked.

"Rawr," was the bear's response. Aria scratched her behind her bear-ears.

Kriz'Ak turned and suddenly his plate armor shattered. Large wings unfurled around him and he flew across the hall to Krim's side and scooped him up. A slit appeared in the air before them, which emitted an intense, shimmering heat. Kriz'Ak flew through, with Krim in his arms, and the air shimmered shut behind them. They had vanished.

Behind the guards that had just arrived, Bartholomew shouted, "Oh My Gods, where'd he go?"

Arriving just in time to witness the "kidnapping," the lead guard shouted "I don't know!? He's never done this!" The guard noticed the bear in the hall, and Bear-Morgana raised her big paw and waved.

"Who are you people?" he asked as he looked at Bear-Morgana, Aria, and finally Bartholomew. Mew, now disguised as the Earl of Duque, stepped out of the bathroom.

"We came here to look at Krim's exotic animals," Mew said, feigning distress. "Now we just want to leave."

"No. No one can leave until we sort this out," the guard said. "You will stay here, in comfort. Come with us until we figure this out. Let us go upstairs." Morgana reverted to her human form and the 12 guards ushered Bartholomew, Morgana, Aria, and the Earl of Duque upstairs. They were escorted into a large bedroom, decent quarters but with no windows. Guards were posted outside the locked doors.

Eru remained unconscious and forgotten, tucked around the corner of the doorway in the chamber which housed the creatures frozen in magical stasis.

****PAUSE****

Mirtul 30

