Chapter 34 - Unexpected Traitors and THE Harper

Omeluum followed Greymon into the area where Brithvar and Kur were still chatting. He didn't dare direct his scrying eye to move any closer to Tav and the others; not with the other eye moving about. To his great surprise, the black, glassy orb from Moonrise was just at the top of the stairs heading down when Greymon caught up to it. Without warning, the duergar corsair whipped out his great club, and he took one solid swing.

It smashed into a million pieces all over the steps, not even catching a glimpse of what caused its demise. The sound of its destruction was swallowed up by the noise of Grymforge, and only Brithvar and Kur saw what happened - besides Omeluum, that is.

Brithvar was the first to speak. He came running up behind Greymon. "Well, I'll be $#@$ to the Hells," he said, patting his mate on the shoulder. "The eye's clobbered. Good work. I must say, I'm surprised. I thought you were on Nere's side." He gestured at the symbol of the Absolute around Greymon's neck.

Greymon snickered. "As I stared into the eye, my reflection stared back," he told the elder dramatically. "The longer I stared, the more uneasy I felt. There was a presence. I felt it. I was seen." His expression became dark and ominous. "It had to go."

"Yeah?" said Brithvar. "So, you still with Nere then? Cause if you are, he's gonna be super pissed when he finds out you smashed that thing."

Greymon looked at him. "I'm not with Nere," he told him. "I'm with Flameshade."

Brithvar nodded proudly and patted him again on the shoulder. "Glad to hear it, Son. It won't be long now. I can feel it. The outsiders are going after the smokepowder. Then, it'll be time to bust Nere out and shred him."

Greymon smiled. "That's where I'm going. They got the gnomes to talk," he informed them. "I'm going to make sure they obtain the explosive powder. If not, I will."

"Good," said Brithvar. "Then you just have to drop it near the rubble when it's time. Flaming arrow or some such'll set it off."

"Right," said Greymon. "And hopefully, it'll kill Nere for us. Then all we have to do is loot his corpse. Question is, when do we kill the outsiders - before or after we kill Nere?"

Brithvar laughed. "Who cares? As long as we get paid."

This was when Omeluum left the scene and caught up to Tav, Rina, Pona and Izar'la. By that time, the party returned to the dock area. On the landing where the rune was, they took the stairway to the east as opposed to heading north back towards the boat. As they came to the base of the stairs, a torch illuminated an open prisoner cage off to the left. It was near the shattered remains of a male warrior statue that had once been like a pillar at the edge of the dock. A dead drow female was lying within the cell. There was a semi-fresh pool of blood oozing out the open door. Tav stooped down to inspect the corpse. It was hardly recognizable. "Stone cold," she reported.

"Displaying a drow corpse in the Underdark?" said Izar'la. "Someone's trying to make a statement…"

"Hey!" a duergar male roared, drawing their attention. They looked off further south. There was a prisoner area there with more cages and many chains dangling down with hooks on them. Beyond was a stairway that led to a dark, rubble-strewn recess. They couldn't be sure, but it looked like there were a number of three-foot long spiders gathered there. In the cells and on the hooks, there were dead humanoids. Based on the size and color of skin and hair, the party assumed they were also drow. They couldn't be sure, though, for most were covered in blood and quite grotesque. They'd been tortured to death.

The duergar who spoke came from this area, and he looked quite perturbed. He had a trimmed white beard, pale gray skin, a red headband which covered his left eye, purple padded armor, a red sash around his waist, and metal bracers. His head was shaved all around with a cropping on top that was pulled back into a nub of a ponytail. He had a whip and a heavy crossbow. Around his neck was the symbol of the Absolute.

When he came within about five feet of the party, he stopped. "Oh," he said, a bit surprised. "It's you. Been told about you. Don't like strangers here, but… Absolute must'a took you in."

"Who hung these drow out to dry?" asked Rina as she gestured to the drow hanging behind the duergar.

"Me. Who else?" said the duergar. "Name's Murmath. My spiders sussed 'em out of hiding. Then Nere taught 'em a thing or two, and I let 'em fly." He stuck his thumb behind him in the direction of the recess, verifying that there were, in fact, spiders there.

"Where did the drow come from?" asked Tav, glancing back down at the one at their feet.

"Caught 'em sniffin' around," said Murmath. "Easy marks. Had the stench of the top-lands. Hung them here as a warning. Ain't no one drughs with Clan Flameshade." Then, it seemed he thought of something additional. He pulled a piece of paper out of his back pocket. "Here. Maybe you can make sense of this." He handed the paper to Tav. "You have the surface smell on you too. Found it on the one behind you. Seems to be mission instructions. Spy stuff."

Tav unfolded the paper and read it aloud. "'Jhaam. Like a phoenix from the ashes, Grymforge has risen from the dead. I've word of a drow cultist gathering duergar in the old city's halls. That the Absolute means to recruit them, I've no doubt. Yet it's what they might seek amidst the ruins that most troubles me. You've not failed me yet. Go to Grymforge, cling to shadow - and bring word of the cult's intentions to Last Light. I will be waiting.' It is signed simply 'J.'" She folded the paper and stowed it in a pocket in her backpack.

"Well?" said Murmath. "Make sense to you?"

Blank stares were returned to him. "Bah," he said, frustrated. "I guess it doesn't really matter. Either way, if'n they send more, we'll kill them too." Then he turned back towards the prison area and began popping open crates. There was gear within, most likely once belonging to the drow. He started picking through the spoils and searching for valuables. "Mind your step as you go," he warned, and he gestured to the pools of blood running into cracks and crevasses.

They withdrew and whispered quietly to one another near the stairway. The eye spotted Greymon creeping up on them on the landing near the rune. He was also eavesdropping. "Any thoughts?" asked Tav. "Anyone have any idea who they were?"

Izar'la was surprisingly outraged and barely containing it. "Can I see the letter?" she asked. Tav quickly pulled it out and handed it to her. The gith examined it briefly. Then, she pocketed it. "Harpers," she told them. "I don't know for sure, but I think that's who they were. The piece of $#@$ killed my people."

"I'm so sorry," said Tav sincerely.

"Did you know them?" asked Pona, also sympathetic.

Izar'la shook her head. "But several things tell me they were likely Harpers. First, the duergar said they 'had the stench of the top-lands.' So they weren't Underdark drow. Second, they and their leader 'J' are investigating the Cult of the Absolute, just like I am. 'J' is worried about what they are trying to unearth here. A typical drow wouldn't be worried. Intrigued? Yes. Worried? No. Only someone like a Harper would be worried about it. Thus, their mission was the same as mine."

Then she seemed a bit reluctant to continue. After a moment, she decided to trust them, and she said, "Finally, 'J' most likely stands for one of the leaders of the Harpers; the person who also gave me my assignment. I think it's her handwriting. It's written hastily, so it's difficult to be sure, but I'm pretty familiar with her. Her name is Jaheira."

"Jaheira?" said Tav, a bit stunned. "I've heard of her. She was someone of some importance many years ago or something, wasn't she? I thought she was dead."

"Does anyone 'special' ever truly die in Faerun?" asked Rina, but she was just being a smart butt. "Nah. The gods always find ways to bring them back it seems. Don't they?"

Pona snorted derisively. "Like the Dead Three. I've heard they're back after the Second Sundering. Their cult had been murdering people in Baldur's Gate, if I remember correctly. They were using the Descent, and the fear it caused, as a cloak for their movements. Flaming Fist were too busy dealing with refugees and crap. They couldn't do much about it."

"Jaheira is a half-elf druid," Izar'la explained, answering Tav's question. "She and her husband used to travel the Sword Coast to investigate issues in the region. She was involved with the Iron Crisis of 1368, and she traveled with someone named Gorion's Ward at one point. Her husband was killed during an incident in Athkatla, and she was instrumental in affairs regarding the dreaded Bhaalspawn. That's probably how you've heard of her."

"She's been a member of the Harpers since before all that, though," Izar'la continued, "and she's more of an inactive leader now. Her age has caught up with her, so she doesn't go out into the field so much - even though she still looks amazingly young. That's probably why you thought she was dead. She doesn't exactly advertise that she's still alive."

"$#@$!" said Pona. "How old is she? By the gods! She was an active Harper in 1368? So, if you think about it, she was probably, maybe, in her twenties in 1368. Right? So, she'd probably been born around 1340, or something. That means that she'd be, what, a hundred and fifty-ish years old?"

"For a half-elf, that's not as old as you think," said Tav. "I mean, she'd be considered old, but she's probably got a good thirty or so years left before she passes of old age."

Pona shook her head. "Still, that's crazy. No wonder she's not going out so much."

"She tries to whenever she can find an excuse," said Izar'la. "Frustrates the crap out of us. I think she hates being old, and she loves destroying nature's enemies as well as enemies of the Balance. She's a bit difficult to deal with - a rather harsh and strict woman on the surface - but she's actually very kind and loving - almost like a mother to me. She's… been good to me."

And they sensed, in that moment, the truth. Jaheira was the one who had taken Izar'la in. She had been her mentor and had raised her. "Oh, I see," said Tav. "No wonder you hesitated in telling us about her."

"So, what I don't get," said Rina, "is if they are Harpers, and your mother-figure knew the drow, how come you don't?"

Izar'la looked down at the drow sadly. "I don't know everyone she knows, by far. My guess is, she knew this whole thing involved the Underdark, and she called upon some of her allies. Drow certainly blend in a lot more than other races down here, so she asked this Jhaam person to lead the mission. Sounds like this is the first time Jhaam has failed her."

"But she already sent you," said Pona.

"And like one of you said previously, I'm all alone - not to mention young and somewhat inexperienced," said Izar'la. "I've also been missing for awhile now. I'd like to think she's worried about me and was maybe sending me some backup. This whole Cult of the Absolute thing seems way bigger than we'd first thought."

"Jaheira," said Tav in thought. "Gorion's Ward." She clapped her gauntleted hands together. "I remember. It was a love story. This guy I met in Neverwinter told me. Tall guy. Lots of muscles. A ranger, I think. He had a hamster as a pet. I think his name was... Minsc. Yeah! That's right. 'Minsc and Boo stand ready,' he used to say. He was a bit - eccentric. He said they used to travel together back during the Bhaalspawn thing."

"As the story went, based on what he told me, after her husband died, Gorion's Ward consoled her. He became her lover and later her second husband. They forsook being gods, or something crazy like that, and traveled together doing good and making things right throughout the whole region. Later, Gorion's Ward became the Marshall of Baldur's Gate, and he led the people for a time. I think he was the Grand Duke, too, before Ravengard."

Izar'la smiled. "It never ceases to amaze me how many stories exist about Jaheira and those she traveled with," she replied. "SO many stories. It's hard to tell which are true anymore. She's told me some of them - though she doesn't actually like to talk about it much - and even I have a hard time remembering which are true and which aren't."

Then, it seemed, the gith was delighting herself in keeping the truth a secret. "Some stories say Gorion's Ward was a half-elf male sorcerer with dragon lineage. Some say he was a warrior of some skill and renown. Some say SHE was an incredibly charismatic bard, and still others say SHE was a half-orc rogue who infiltrated the Thieves' Guild in Athkatla and took it over. Some say he married Jaheira, and some say she jilted her and/or mistreated her - that they fought a lot and even tried to kill one another."

"So what's the truth?" asked Tav.

Izar'la's expression became even more devious. "Not my secrets to tell," she replied. "As for Minsc and Boo, I wouldn't put much stock into whatever that guy told you in Neverwinter. He's probably some crazy fan/pretender. Minsc was a human. He couldn't possibly be alive today. Boo was a miniature giant space hamster, and they only live to be eighteen at the most, I think."

"Like I said…" said Rina with a shrug. "The gods always seem to find a way."

"But enough about them," Izar'la concluded, ignoring her. "We should get moving. We've still got a lot to do."

"So true," said Pona. "Still, it's nice to know that we might have someone so famous on our side. At the end of the day, having a powerful druid Harper leader helping us gives me a lot of hope. Maybe she can help us find a cure for the tadpoles in our heads."

"Provided she doesn't get it in her head that the best cure is to simply crush our skulls open," said Rina.

And with that, they continued on around the southern edge of the dock and came to a flight of stairs leading to a gate. Beyond, they saw… "The lift!" breathed Rina excitedly.

"Later," said Tav, but she was also quite happy to see it. "Like Izar'la said, we still have so much to do before that. Besides, it looks like there are two duergar guarding it. We'll have to deal with Nere before they'll likely let us use it." And so, they continued on around to the east side of the dock, for that was the only other way to go.

At that point, Omeluum decided to check back on Greymon. He was curious to know just what the duergar was up to. His behavior was certainly odd. Greymon made his way into the prison area. Murmath grunted and nodded in greeting to him, but the corsair continued on to where the spiders were. Murmath didn't even question him. He had no reason to. He just continued searching the drow equipment for valuables. Therefore, he had no idea what Greymon was doing until it was too late.

Greymon drank a Speak with Animals potion, and he started out by eavesdropping on the arachnids' conversation. He stood at the top of the stairs and observed without them or anyone being the wiser.

"I speak true, brothers!" one was saying. In the darkness of the crumbled recess, Greymon could not really make out their coloring, so it was difficult to determine which was which. "You know it in your hearts! You know it in your souls!" He got the impression that the one speaking was a female, and she was rather enthusiastic about what she was saying. She seemed almost like a zealot.

"We need no 'Lolth,' Lur Xanta," replied one of the others, sounding like another female. "No spider queen! Father Murmath is the head of Clan Lur. He hatched us, raised us, feeds us!"

Lur Xanta was even more vehement. "Lur Jox, listen to me! What care we for his business here? He keeps us small - keeps us contained. We should be with the Spider Queen - revered, adored!"

Greymon recalled his learnings about the Spider Queen, Lolth. He'd read that harming spiders was illegal among Lolth's faithful - and often punishable by death. Still, he kept silent a bit longer. He let Lur Xanta continue. "Father Murmath is our past. Lolth is our future!" She was like an evangelist, and several of the others seemed persuaded already.

"Interesting," he finally spoke up. Every spider looked at him. They were more than a little surprised that he was able to speak to them. He ignored this. It was intentional anyway. It put them off guard. "You spiders are loyal to Murmath. In the event of a fight, I truly believe you'd join the fray against anyone who dared fight against him - with slavering enthusiasm." He said this last part in disgust, making fun of them for their undying devotion. "Murmath? Hmph! You mean the guy who keeps telling everyone about his useless, hideous spiders?" He chuckled at this.

The spiders were outraged. "Useless?" said Lur Jox.

"Hideous?" said another named Lur Fu.

"Xanta… is it so?" asked yet another named Lur Otan.

"You see?" said Lur Xanta. "Father Murmath's time has passed. Come, brothers - follow me into Lolth's hairy embrace!"

"Her… embrace," said Lur Jox, still pondering whether it was a good idea.

"We're ready," said Lur Fu.

"We follow," said Lur Otan.

"HAHA! Yes! Now, brothers - our new dawn awaits!"

"Jox still seems a bit uncertain," said Greymon, his lips spreading into a mischievous grin. "Perhaps I can persuade her further."

"Him," said Lur Jox. "I am male."

"Oh," said Greymon. "My apologies." He was being sarcastic, which did not please the spider. "Allow me to prove that I'm not making it up. Slip into hiding. Watch carefully and listen." Then he turned and strode back down the stairs towards Murmath. As he went, he glanced back to make sure the spiders were, in fact, out of sight.

Murmath looked up at him as he approached. "Quit distractin' me," he snapped. "I'm busy."

"Did you notice your spiders ran off?" asked Greymon.

"Eh?" said Murmath. This got his attention. He stood up and looked towards the top of the stairs. Not seeing them, he spat. "Oh, those worthless bugs. Always were the stupidest ones I ever raised. Hope the minotaurs get 'em."

Greymon shook his head and then translated for the spiders, repeating everything their master just said. He even made it sound like Murmath, to the best of his abilities.

Murmath was taken aback. "What the devil? Are you talkin' beast speech? I didn't know you could do that. I…"

Enraged, the spiders suddenly swarmed out of hiding. Murmath spun. "Hey! There they are. They didn't run off. They… What? What are they doing? They look like they're in attack mode. I…" Realization dawned on him too late. The spiders pounced. He tried to draw his weapon and attack, but they were all over him.

Greymon merely stepped back and watched with a harsh, cold look on his face as Murmath died amidst horrible screams. "That worked out a bit better than I could have hoped," he said to himself in his own language. "The timing was perfect, I guess. They did all the work for me. I just had to nudge them a little in the right direction." And with that, he turned and strode away towards the east side of the dock. "Another one down," he said softly.

Chapter 35 - Disposing Of The Dead

While Greymon and Murmath had their little encounter, Tav, Rina, Pona and Izar'la explored a portion of the fortress. North of the stairs leading to the lift, there was a wide, half-moon shaped entranceway along the east wall. It was about fifteen feet in radius. It once had an iron gate, but that now lay rusting on the rubble-strewn floor. As they peered within, they saw that beyond was some sort of ancient prison. Murmath had set up the area south of the dock with cages and hooks, but that hadn't been Grymforge's home for enemies of Shar once upon a time.

Without much need for discussion, the group decided to take a little detour and see what the prison held. As they made their way within, they soon realized why it was no longer being used as it was originally intended. Most of the detention center was collapsed. Only two cells were accessible. The back of the main corridor, and all the cells beyond, were buried under tons and tons of stone. Of those that remained, they were broken open. The party could easily walk in and out. Each was relatively the same. There was ankle-high water in various places, shattered ceilings, webs everywhere, broken down portions of the walls, and skeletons from past inmates.

And so, the duergar were using it as a small storage area. Crates and barrels were piled together closer to the entranceway, allowing for easy access. There was nothing else of value or interest within - except that as they approached the back, Tav discovered a small button hidden amongst the cobwebs on the wall on their right. She cast Light on her sword, and they examined it together to see if they could determine its purpose. Unable to figure it out, they decided to risk pressing it.

A secret door opened to reveal another cell similar to the others except that it was totally enclosed. It had no bars, and the ceiling was intact, as were three of the four walls. It had survived the cave-in; well, to some degree. The back wall was collapsed, spilling huge boulders into the chamber. The floor was totally uneven, as if something had heaved it up in various places, and there were even some mushrooms growing up in a few places.

None of these things interested them. What caught their attention was that there was a heavy chest filled with sixty-four gold pieces and two bottles of aged wine. Also in the room, there were two sacks resting on some stones in the back corner, and when they opened them, they saw that they were filled with smokepowder. "Hello!" said Rina excitedly. "Looks like we just found the jackpot."

"I thought Philomeen was supposed to have the smokepowder," said Izar'la. "This is unattended."

"This isn't nearly the amount that Philomeen was supposedly carrying," said Pona. "Remember? They were saying she was carrying something like a barrel under her arm."

"Yeah. You're right. The gnomes must have stashed the extra in here," said Tav. "I bet they discovered this little secret chamber and figured that it would make a good hiding place for their reserves."

"And a little something else," said Rina with a grin as she held one of the bottles of wine. And so, they took the wine, the gold, and the smokepowder. Then they returned to the dock.

On the east side, closer to the main gate of Grymforge, and just outside the old kitchen, a gruesome sight and smell assailed the party. About a dozen bloody, battered and broken gnomes lay strewn about. Two male duergar were walking around the bodies, dragging them closer to the edge. They both wore face masks to try to stifle the stench, so it was impossible to determine any distinguishing characteristics.

Then, much to the outsiders' displeasure, one of the duergar unceremoniously kicked a corpse into the black waters. That was when he noticed them. "'Less you're here to kick some stiffs lake-side, I suggest you bugger off," he snapped. It was obvious that he was not enjoying his assigned task. The other, as if the scene wasn't already unpleasant enough, decided to slip his mask off momentarily so he could spit a nasty wad onto the floor near him. He then returned the mask to its place.

The party grimaced in unison. Then Rina took the lead. "Grim work," she replied. "Did you kill them?"

"Nah," said the first one. "Rockfall smashed 'em. Can't have them stinking up the place." The spitter just grunted at this. He obviously wasn't much of a talker. The first continued. "The half that weren't crushed are digging the True Soul outta the wreckage."

"I've heard of many burial rites and last wishes in my time," said Pona. "Being tossed into fetid water is not one of them."

The more talkative duergar replied, "This ain't no funeral. This is taking out the rubbish. They served their purpose, and now they're fish food. That's about the best end you can expect, if you don't turn to the Absolute."

"Deep gnomes," said Tav sadly and only loud enough for Izar'la to hear her. "Killed under the yoke of slavers." She bowed her head out of respect.

"Kill or be killed - so it goes down in the Underdark," the gith replied.

Rina then stooped down to examine one of the gnomes. The two duergar watched her carefully. She spotted a shiny trinket on one of the corpses. "We can finish up here," she said to the dark dwarves. "You're wanted with the others."

The two needed no persuading. "Thank the Absolute," said the talkative one. "They're all yours. Come on Viss."

The one called Viss gave a snort. "Right, Brathwen." Then he saluted the party. "Absolute." And with that, the two headed off towards the south side of the dock.

Rina only waited until their backs were turned. Then she pocketed a small, green gemstone, dulled by decades of handling by nervous fingers. A small rune was scrupulously carved into its tip. "Probably worth about twenty-five gold, but likely more valuable to someone who knew him," the dwarf ranger said to Pona who was standing the closest. "Looks like a keepsake. Should probably give it to one of the surviving gnomes and see if they know who it belongs to."

Pona nodded solemnly. She had no joke or tease for the dwarf this time. The atmosphere was too heavy. Rina and Pona both then continued to search the bodies, but not so they could pocket their goods. It was to collect anything else of value to hopefully give to the surviving gnomes as items to remember them by. Unfortunately, only one other gnome had anything of value. This was a ring with a smooth, six-pointed star on it. It was beset with small Underdark gemstones, as befit a talisman of the god of mining and patron of deep gnomes. It was clearly magical, but they had no idea what it did.

They handed it to Izar'la. After a quick examination, she said, "I think this is the Fetish of Callarduran Smoothhands."

"The what?" asked Pona, a bit shocked by the name. "That's an odd thing to call it."

Izar'la shrugged. "People like to give things weird names. What can I say?"

"What does it do?" asked Rina.

"Invisibility," said Izar'la. "Once a day."

"Nice," said Rina. "Could come in handy until we find someone to give it to who knew him - er - her. Can't tell by looking at 'em, and I don't plan on inspecting closer." She held the ring up to them. "Who should wear it?"

"Tav's not great at stealth," said Pona. "Having the ability to turn invisible would sure help her with that."

"That's true," said Izar'la. "With that armor, she's easier to detect. The ring might give her at least a chance to sneak around. I also have a scroll to turn myself invisible, so it makes sense." Rina then handed it to Tav who took off her left gauntlet, slipped it on her ring finger, and then put the gauntlet back on. It was a bit uncomfortable, but it fit.

"Thank you," she said. Then she looked down at the bloody corpses. "So, are you done searching them? I'd like to pray over them and at least give them a proper send-off."

"Proper send-off?" asked Izar'la. "How so? Dumping them into the lake like the duergar were seems terrible, but burying them doesn't seem feasible here. We could set them on fire, I suppose."

Tav nodded. "That's what I was thinking. We could always put them in some sort of room and shut the door, but they could be turned into undead by a necromancer. I'd rather give them a cremation ceremony so their bodies can't ever be messed with again."

The others agreed to this, and so they gathered the corpses into a pile just inside the prison area they'd recently explored. They figured that within the secret cell they'd found, no one would see the bodies burning and question it. Therefore, they broke down some crates and barrels that were empty near the entranceway, and they used the dry wood for kindling. Then they set them on fire, stepped outside the chamber, and Tav said a small prayer. With that, they left and returned to the door leading into the old kitchen.

Meanwhile, just after Brathwen and Viss left the party, Greymon encountered them. He was making his way towards the kitchen from where the spiders were still wrapping Murmath in a cocoon to feast on later. Seeing them, Greymon quietly called out, "$#@$ perfect timing. Quick! Murmath's spiders. I need backup. They've gone rogue."

"What the $#@$?" said Brathwen. "Seriously?"

"Hurry!" said Greymon. "We've got no time. They're already trying to drag 'im off." Then he pointed in the direction of the makeshift prison. The spiders were, in fact, just starting to drag Murmath off towards their dark recess further south.

"$#@$!" Brathwen cried. Then he pulled out a war pick. Viss did the same. The two charged with Greymon right behind. They rushed at the spiders and started hacking at them. There were screeches and squeals, and the battle was joined.

Then, much to Viss' surprise, Greymon's club cracked Brathwen's skull from behind. It wasn't enough to kill him, but it definitely rendered him unconscious. Viss turned in shock and horror. The spiders swarmed. Greymon slammed Viss in the stomach, forcing him to double over. He then followed up with a smack to the back of the head. Viss and Brathwen joined Murmath as the spiders wrapped them up to feast on later.

Greymon still had Speak with Animals enabled, and Lur Jox asked, “Why are you doing this to your own? Why are you helping us?”

Greymon gave her a pleasant look. “Because I like you, and because I HATE slavery. Murmath has done nothing but enslave you. You should be SO much bigger than you are. I want to help you by bringing you duergar cultists to feast on. This is only the beginning. From here, you can go out into the Underdark and find more duergar and creatures to make you fatter and fatter.”

Lur Xanta then squealed. “He is from Lolth! See? She is already aiding us. Quick now. We need to drag these bodies off into our nest so we can feed on them later. You will bring us even more?”

Greymon chuckled, stooped down, and patted her on the head. “I will bring you SO much more, Soon-To-Be-Not-So-Little One. I guarantee, before this day is over, you will be feasting on a heap of your former masters.”

The spiders danced about him with glee. “Thank you! Thank you!” cried several, and they went back to work, binding up the two new victims.

“Quick! Quick now!” said Greymon. He was talking to them like they were small children. “Drag them off before you’re spotted and alarms are sounded. It’s important that you dispose of all the bodies for me. Yes. Quick as can be. Mustn’t leave ANY evidence behind. Mustn’t raise suspicions now.”

And, just like that, he quickly hustled off, leaving them to wrestle with their latest victims. He knew he had to hurry if he wanted to provide the spiders with more bodies to dispose of. Yes! If his plan was to work, he needed to clear the dock area. Up the stairs, he went, right up to the lift. Two duergar were there; one male and one female. The male was Magmar. The female was Pistle. They were harassing a beleaguered, bald, middle-aged, male gnome slave who was bringing them a tray full of food and drinks.

Ward Magmar was a mean-looking dwarf with dark gray, almost black skin, a bushy, white beard and eyebrows, orange eyes, and no hair on his head. He had a few scars on his face, and a perpetual, mocking smile. He wore padded armor with leather shoulder guards and bracers, and he had a war pick on his back. In his right hand, he held a jug of some sort of alcoholic beverage.

Ward Pistle was a petite female with leather armor and a light crossbow on her back. A quiver of bolts was at her left hip. She looked young with short, feathered white hair. She was quite pretty; probably the best looking duergar in the clan. Her light gray skin was without blemish, and she had a natural beauty that made it so she didn’t even have to wear makeup.

As Greymon approached, Magmar was saying, “Another round, Stick$#@$.”

“The name’s Skickpit, Pisspot,” said the gnome.

“You flirt,” said Magmar, and he roared with laughter. Pistle, who obviously liked him, giggled like a schoolgirl. “Now jump to it, or it’s up the lift and straight to the shadows.”

Greymon considered the fastest way to lure his next victims into his trap. They were intoxicated, at least to some degree. Therefore, calling on them to try to save Murmath, Brathwen and Viss might not work. There was a good possibility that they’d just laugh about it. And so, he decided it was best to tick them off. “A waste of a slave,” he said, coming to a halt just a few feet from them. “He should be digging or scavenging, not… serving drinks.”

“Ah! Come on, Greymon,” said Magmar. “Don’t be such a $#@$. We’re just having a bit of fun. Now, why don’t you run along? Tell the sergeant we won’t move a pebble.”

“The True Soul’s trapped,” said Greymon, angrily. “Shouldn’t you two be helping?”

“Hold out your hands,” said Magmar.

“You heard the man,” said Pistle. “Let’s see ‘em.”

Greymon’s eyes narrowed to slits. “You want to see my hands? What for?”

Magmar laughed. “Less asking. More showing.” Greymon’s look became even more lethal. It wasn’t working. If anything, Magmar was ticking HIM off. He kept his hands to himself. Magmar only laughed some more. “Scowl all you want. You got five workin’ fingers, perfect for digging. You want Nere? You claw him out. My drinking hand’s busy.” Then he brandished his jug.

“I don’t like your attitude, $#@$,” said Greymon.

“And I don’t like pig$#@$,” said Magmar, “but $#@$ if your mouth ain’t spewing it. You want respect? Let your Absolute pay for it. Till then, bugger off.” Then he turned to the gnome. “Hey Stick$#@$? Where’s my drink?”

“Coming right up, Pisspot,” said Skickpit, and he set his tray down nearby so he could hand Magmar the fresh jug of alcohol.

Magmar took it and laughed. “Stick$#@$ talks like Smug when he wrecked that ‘shroom village…”

“... and then $#@$ed it!” added Pistle, and they both laughed hilariously.

"Here's to Smug," said Magmar, raising his new jug and handing Pistle his old one. "Nasty prick." The two drank heartily.

Greymon didn't budge. Finally, Magmar became a bit irate at this. "Hey. Shove off. I'm not sharing."

Greymon's eyes narrowed on the jug, and he sniffed the air. The alcohol. The particular kind he was drinking was an odd vice for duergar. It was prone to triggering ancestral memories of brutal illithid enslavement. Maybe if he just gave it a little help… "Nothing like ale to surface old memories, wouldn't you say?" he asked, allowing a smug grin to creep across his face.

Magmar's usual, perpetual smile vanished. "For $#@$'s sake. I drink to forget the past, not relive it… Ugh!" Through the duergar's ears, Greymon could hear the sizzle of burning flesh and the screams of tortured young - old pain felt anew - memories Greymon was dredging up with the help of the alcohol. As he'd hoped, it didn't take much.

"Interesting," he said to Magmar. "Has Skickpit given you the wrong drink? Has he poisoned you to try to secretly disable you?"

Skickpit was alarmed. "I did no such thing!" but the guilt was evident on his face. He hadn't expected it to take effect so quickly. He had no idea that Greymon had done something to stir up the memories more quickly. Skickpit cowered before them, but Magmar wasn't looking at him.

Magmar was no longer happy. "Sh… $#@$. Did you… Did you do that to me? How? You ain't… Are you…? You $#@$! Beat it, before I start beating you, you drugnin' worm." Pistle had her crossbow out. She wasn't sure what was happening, but she was ready to back him up.

Greymon laughed as if at a party. All at once, his club was out and swinging. Magmar's jug was shattered right out of his hand spraying Pistle with the vile toxin and shattered fragments of pottery. Pistle fired but because of the fact that she instinctively braced herself against the swing, her aim was off. The shot vanished into the darkness of the shattered fortress. Greymon took off running down the stairs. Pistle reloaded and fired again, missing a second time. Magmar pursued on foot. "Piece of $#@$! I'll kill you for that."

And they fell into Greymon's trap. Into the prison area they went. Greymon ran right past the spiders who jumped to attention. They were confused but ready to fight. Magmar rounded the corner and around the first cell, then stopped short. "The $#@$?" he said, looking down at the spiders and the mummified bodies. Pistle came up behind him, crossbow once more ready.

"Quick!" cried Greymon using Speak with Animals. "Attack! Attack!"

The spiders swarmed. By that point, Magmar already had his war pick out. He fell into a defensive stance and prepared for the first of the spiders. Pistle fired at the closest one and clipped it in the side. Then she fell back, crying out for help as she reloaded. Fortunately for Greymon, Grymforge was a loud place, and Pistle's cries were drowned out, for the most part. Only Morghal and her companion, Stone Guard Orgarth, near Gekh's boat, heard something. Immediately, they set out to see what was happening. "Perfect," said Greymon to himself. "Now I just need to keep them from sounding an alarm."

While Pistle and Magmar focused on the spiders, Greymon drank an Invisibility potion. Then he raced as fast as he could to slip past the combatants. Morghal and Orgarth raced down the stairs. "Pistle! What's going on?" she asked as the spiders swarmed Magmar, who had enlarged himself to become an even bigger brute.

"I don't know," Pistle screamed. She was coming unglued as she wrestled to reload her crossbow. She was inexperienced and intoxicated. Not a good combination. "Greymon's being a $#@$, and suddenly the spiders are attacking us."

"Calm the $#@$ down!" said Morghal. "You ain't makin' no sense." She turned to her companion. "Go get help. I…" Orgarth fell at her feet, his skull bashed wide open. Greymon was standing there, a few stairs up, blood all over him.

Morghal couldn't comprehend what was happening. Why would Greymon attack them? Why would he attack Orgarth? But then, she had no time to really ponder these things, for Greymon came at her with a vengeance. She dove to the side and whipped out her mace. As she did, her eyes narrowed to slits. She was a cleric of Laduguer, one of the primary gods of the duergar, and she cast Healing Word on Orgarth. Immediately, his skull mended. He was weak and dazed, but he was alive and able to fight back. If she could keep Greymon off of him long enough, they'd team up on him and take him down.

Greymon recognized this and brought his club down with both hands on Orgarth. Once again, he was down and bleeding out. Morghal lashed out at Greymon in return, but he blocked the blow. She then cast Healing Word again on her partner, reviving him a second time. Greymon spun and smashed him in the head a third time. "I can keep this up all day," he mocked her.

She cast Healing Word yet again and shoved him down the stairs. "$#@$ you!" she snapped. Then she positioned herself between Greymon and Orgarth.

Greymon rolled to his feet at the bottom of the stairs. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the situation was looking good. Magmar and Pistle had killed a few spiders, but since they were intoxicated, they were not faring well. Magmar looked about to collapse, and the spiders were swarming Pistle too. She was attempting to beat them off by flailing her crossbow at them. He just needed to focus, therefore, on Morghal and Orgarth.

Up the stairs he went, lashing out at his enemy. She blocked and swung in reply. He dodged around her and positioned himself between her and her companion. Orgarth was on his feet, and she cast Healing Word yet again to give him another boost of energy and to seal his wounds further. “Fool!” Morghal cried. “You purposely let us flank you?” She could not fathom why he would do this.

Greymon took another crack at her. She deflected with her mace and swung at him. He blocked and dove to the side as Orgarth came at him with his war pick. He clipped Greymon in the shoulder. Then Greymon caught Morghal in the side. She got the wind knocked out of her but swung back, clocking him in the chin. Blood splattered all over the stairs.

In the prison area, Magmar finally fell. The spiders, therefore, focused all of their attention on Pistle. She pulled out a vial of alchemist fire and threw it into their midst. The spiders screamed and withdrew a short distance. Then she took the opportunity to dive into the water to swim away.

Meanwhile, Greymon was not looking good, but he did not stop his violent assault. He swung his club again, leaving himself exposed. As a result, both Morghal and Orgarth managed to land solid blows on him. Greymon, at the same time, was able to smack Morghal in the side, cracking ribs.

And so, both fell to their knees. Greymon's life was draining out of him. Morghal had smashed him in the side of the head, and Orgarth had run him through with his pick.

"Why?" she asked him as the light was fading from his eyes. "Why did you do this?" Greymon only coughed up blood. Then, he died.

There was a flurry of motion that followed, and all at once, Orgarth screamed in agony. He fell to the ground and lay in a comatose heap. Standing on his body was an intellect devourer. As Greymon had died, the creature had magically teleported out of his skull and had attacked Morghal's partner.

Morghal panicked and tried to attack, but her mace bounced off the rubbery hide of the four-legged brain creature with squiggling tentacles. It jumped on her and raked her with its claws. Then it used its psychic abilities to devour her intellect right out of her skull. Like Orgarth before her, she screamed. A moment later, the intellect devourer was gone, and Morghal was standing on the stairs looking down at Orgarth. Without a care, she left him for the spiders to clean up.

The spiders had witnessed what had happened, and they were terrified. They had never met an intellect devourer before, but they knew well enough. She was the deadliest thing in Grymforge. She was not to be trifled with.

Pistle reached Gekh's boat and pulled herself out. She was breathing heavily and trying desperately to calm her nerves. She'd made it. She was safe.

Suddenly, a hand reached down to help her up. She looked with relief to see Morghal standing there. "Praise Laduguer!" she breathed. "I thought I was dead."

Morghal smiled evilly in reply. "You are, Sweetheart," she said. Then she raised her mace and brought it down on Pistle over and over again until she was no longer moving. When she was done, she kicked the girl's body into the lake, brushed herself off nonchalantly, and walked away.

Chapter 36 - A Glimmer Of Hope After Nightfall

Tav was the one who usually led the way. For some reason, the party just naturally set up this formation. They didn't really discuss it. Tav was in front with Rina on her right and Pona on her left. Izar'la always followed behind Tav and in between the other two. That was why Omeluum kept thinking of them as Tav and the others. It wasn't that Tav was the designated captain, nor was she always the one to speak. In fact, Rina seemed to have the biggest mouth of the group.

But, in a way, Tav was their leader. Omeluum could feel it. There was an unspoken synergy. The group had, without thought, locked themselves into their various roles. Tav was the boss. Omeluum was fairly certain that they would listen to her, at that point, no matter what. She was the most trusted, for it was clear that she cared the most about them. They knew that she would never consciously make a decision to hurt them. If the Elder Brain theory was correct, Tav was the most likely to be one.

Rina was the right hand, always speaking out on behalf of Tav and the others. She was the "in-your-face" one who was fearless and always willing to fight for her team, now that she accepted them as a team. It was fairly clear to Omeluum that Rina would die for them. She would throw herself in the way if push came to shove. Ah yes! He could feel it. Rina loved them, even Izar'la, and she was fiercely loyal to them. If any of them betrayed her like Zrathentil did, it would hurt SO much worse. For them, she had let her emotional guard down.

Pona was the scout, lock-picker, and rogue, even though she wasn't really a rogue. She was feisty and tough, nimble and quick. If Tav was the head, Rina was the body and Pona was the hands and feet. She was a delight to be around with a warm spirit and comforting soul. Her very presence made them all feel better, as if the mood was always a bit brighter thanks to her.

As for Izar'la, she was the wild card. She was the unexpected one. Omeluum supposed that was obvious. She was, after all, a wild mage. But, it was more than that. Izar'la wasn't mysterious or shifty, like Zrathentil had been, but there was just something about her. She was unpredictable and spontaneous. He was pretty sure she still hadn't revealed all the things that she could do. He found himself always expecting that she was going to do something new and interesting.

Tav was the first to reach the kitchen doors. Near it was a pole with a torch at the end stuck into the pavement. Oddly enough, it was almost smack-dab in the middle of the walkway near where the duergar had been kicking bodies into the lake. The torch illuminated the right side of the entrance where there was a plaque bolted into the stone wall. "Eat and drink freely," said Tav as she read it aloud, "for the Lady doth come."

"How you holding up?" asked Pona after she read the words. "It must be hard for you to even be in this place."

Tav sighed. "It is. I honestly feel like a soldier behind enemy lines. I keep thinking Sharrans are going to jump out at me at any moment, swarming me and hauling me off to torture me. I know, in my head, that it's not possible, but it's almost like I can feel the ghosts of dead Sharrans stalking me. It's like they're all around, gazing at me with their disapproving eyes."

"Let's hope they don't manifest," said Rina, a chill running down her spine. She checked the fifty-foot tall double doors as she said this, and sure enough, they were locked.

Pona slid up to the keyhole and fiddled with her pack. A moment later, she had her lockpicks out, and she was working it. "Have you ever run into Sharrans before?" she asked. "I mean, have you actually encountered any?"

Tav's expression was grim. "Yes," she said hauntedly. "It was a rather unpleasant experience."

The lock clicked. "I'm so sorry I asked," said Pona as she put her picks away.

Tav shook her head. "Don't worry about it." She forced herself to brighten. "It was years ago. Suffice to say, Sharrans like to kill Selunite priests and priestesses. They… They strapped me down to an altar. They were going to sacrifice me to Shar. It was… the most frightening experience in my life. I'll never forget it. Only by the grace of Selune am I still here. Just in time, I was saved. I was a lot more powerful then, but it wasn't enough - a truly humbling experience. It made me realize that even if you are as bright as you can be, darkness can still be thicker and swallow you up. There's ALWAYS someone more powerful."

"Gods," said Pona in awe. "I can't even imagine what that must have been like."

Tav shoved the doors open, ending the conversation. The message was fully received. Pona had unwittingly touched on a nerve, and Tav didn't want to discuss it further. There was something else she wasn't telling them. Somehow, they knew it. She had done something that day. She had become someone she was not proud of. Whatever had happened while she was on that altar, it haunted her, and Grymforge was a constant reminder of it.

The kitchen was a mess. It looked as if a tornado had blown through it. Rubble was everywhere as were cobwebs. An inch of water covered the floor. There was a musty smell in the air that was mingled with rancid, rotten decay. A dining table was off to the right with chairs set about it. They looked to be made of stone. The table was tilted to the left because it rested atop debris, but strangely enough, the chairs were set about as if someone had come later and purposely put them there. Platters, plates, utensils and other dining ware were still set upon it as if it was currently in use; except that everything was disheveled and toppled over. There were even ancient, rotted scraps of food littered about. It gave the appearance that, just recently, a group of individuals was enjoying a meal together only to quickly jump up and run out - and yet, it was obvious that it hadn't been used in a very long time.

"Ugh," said Tav in disgust. "The scraps of a Nightfall feast."

"What's that?" asked Rina.

"To break bread in Shar's name, then spill blood in her name," said Tav, and they saw that she was shaking. She was not speaking simply from book-learning. She was INTIMATELY familiar with it. "A sacred rite."

Near the table, and in various other places in the chamber, there were rotting crates. A quick search revealed nothing of interest. In one was a jar, and Rina picked it up and examined it. "Yck!" she said, grimacing.

"What is it?" asked Pona.

"Jelly," said Rina. "I HATE jelly, and this stuff's turned into an interesting rainbow of colors. It's so old, I'm sure it's alive."

"Pop it open," said Pona with a chuckle. "See if it eats you." Then she decided to tease her some more. "And who hates jelly, anyway?"

"I do," said Rina as she put it back and shut the lid of the crate. "I don't know why. I just never liked it. It's all jiggly and squishy." She shuttered.

Then Tav found something of interest. Resting atop one of the crates towards the back of the room, there was a small book. Tav picked it up. It was discolored with time. The pages detailed vast troop numbers moving through the Grymforge, along with the inventory required to support them. A cramped annotation marred the orderly columns.

Tav read, "'The dormitories in the temple below are already full. New arrivals shall have to content themselves with a patch of ground in the Grymforge. May the Lady of Loss send us against Her enemies soon - else Her legions will have naught but rats to feed on.'"

"Geez," said Rina. "How in all the Realms is the surface above NOT under Shar's control? If they had that many…"

"They had dormitories in the temple below," said Pona in awe. "We've only just tipped the iceberg here. That's insane. This place is already huge, but it sounds like we've got SO much more to go."

"Grymforge is only the name of the area where we are currently, it seems," Izar'la pointed out. "The author differentiated between the two. There's 'the Grymforge' and then there's 'the dormitories and temple.' Pona's right. We've only just started to explore the whole of this place. This was a major Sharran settlement."

"Unheard of," said Tav distantly. "This whole place is unheard of. It's terrifying. Sharrans are secretive and silent. They don't DO things like this. To think that they were here, building an army of untold size… What stopped them, I wonder?"

"Like you said," Pona replied with a smile. "'There's ALWAYS someone more powerful.' I know this place is old, but it has all the signs that something BIG thundered through it, smashing things down and trashing it. Grymforge was sacked. Don't you think?"

"Not a bad observation, My Dear Pona," said Rina using her best 'wise-scholar' persona. Then she returned to herself. "I hadn't really thought about it, to be quite honest. We've been going from one crazy thing to another. It didn't really hit me, but now that you mention it, I think you're right. Even this room looks like something plowed through it."

She stepped over to the table. "Yeah. Here's what I think happened here. Maybe half a dozen Sharrans sitting at the table having their whatever feast. Suddenly, the doors are thrown open and several other Sharrans run in. 'We're under attack! They're coming this way!' They shut the doors and lock them. Then they clear the center of the room so they have room to fight. That's why they pushed the table over to where it is now, and they pushed the chairs around it. If they'd just been flung by a monster, or something, they'd be overturned. No. They are set in place because the residents were clearing the center to have room to defend themselves."

"But, the door is locked," said Rina, and she became puzzled by this. "There's no other way out. Hmmm. Interesting. It's a locked room mystery."

"A what?" asked Pona.

"A locked room mystery," said Rina. "It means we are standing in a situation where something happened, like a murder, but the room is locked and there's no way to explain why the scene looks like it does. If the door is

locked, how did everyone die? If the murderer got in, why is the door locked? Surely, the murderer didn't come in, kill everyone, turn around, shut the door, lock it, and walk away."

"Also," said Izar'la, "there aren't that many bodies in here. You're right. The scene doesn't make sense. It's almost as if they cleared the center of the room to fight whatever was coming, but then they decided to leave and lock the doors on their way out, as if they were protecting something in here."

"And why is the floor upheaved in various places?" asked Rina. "I mean, I doubt the rubble under the table was there prior to the table being put there. No. It looks as if something caused an earthquake in here which buckled the flooring. But where are all the bodies?"

Tav was the one to solve the mystery. "Here!" she said. She was in the northeast corner of the room, and she found a button hidden in a recess. As they looked closer, with Tav's sword raised high so her Light spell could chase away the shadows, they saw decorative stones about five feet wide and seven feet tall. They were black with golden half-moons, and they formed the frame of a doorway. In the darkness, they hadn't seen them, especially with so many cobwebs around, but because Tav was casting light upon them, it made everything quite apparent. Tav pushed the button, and the stones within the frame slid into the floor. The secret door was opened.

She turned to them. "I'd say they exited through here. For whatever reason, they decided that this wasn't where they were going to die. So, they fled through the secret door and… looks like stairs beyond. Well." She stepped through cautiously and looked around. "Hmmm. This area's pretty devastated too. Yeah. Whatever invaded Grymforge, it must have been powerful. It must have caused quakes. The passage to the right is buried beneath stones. I mean, it looks like there was a way to go in that direction, anyway. There are stairs directly ahead and a way to the left. There are some pillars still standing that look like they were once supports for the upper level. There were likely walls here, but they are SO gone now. I can hear a waterfall not far away, and I can see the cavern walls just at the edge of my vision."

She looked back at them. "Makes me nervous. What if whatever-it-was is still alive in here? We could be dealing with a dragon, or something similar that lives a long time."

Everyone imagined a dragon's head suddenly looming up out of the darkness behind Tav as she spoke. There were numerous variations of it between the three of them - one of which being a massive behir - but each was thinking something similar. "Don't speak such things," said Rina nervously. "It's like you're trying to summon it. And, the darkness plays tricks on you. You start seeing things looming just beyond sight."

Tav turned back towards the stairs. "Sorry," she said, a chill running down her own spine. "I guess I shouldn't share my anxieties. Fear breeds fear. I need to keep it to myself."

"Nah," said Pona. "Don't listen to Rina. She's just being a baby."

"Shut your face-hole, Munchkin," Rina retorted. "You're just as scared as I am right now."

Pona punched her somewhat hard in the shoulder. It caught Rina by surprise. "Call me Munchkin again, and I'll make you eat your own teeth," Pona snapped.

"Hey!" hissed Rina. "Whoa! Dang! Sorry. Didn't know it'd hurt your feelings."

Pona subsided a little. "I just don't like that term," she told the dwarf. "It's belittling. People think it's funny, but it's not."

Rina gave her a sincere look. "Hey. Sorry. Really. I had no idea."

Then they noticed that Tav was already creeping back out into the area beyond the secret door. She was making her way off to the left and not up the stairs. And so, they hurried to catch up with Izar'la behind them. The path had once led to another chamber, but it looked like a rockfall had completely buried it. The floor was grated, and it ended abruptly.

Tav peered around the pillar on her right. "The rockfall has created a makeshift stairway," she reported quietly. "Looks like it leads back up to the stairs on the right. On the left, I think it drops down into the lake beyond the main gate."

"So," said Rina. "We could just take the stairs. Right?"

Tav glanced back at her. "Yeah. I suppose we could. Still..." Something didn't feel right to her. She continued to look around, and she even started maneuvering her way along the rockslide. As she peered up, it dawned on her. "The stairs are exposed to the upper level. I don't like it. Perfect spot for an ambush. I say we keep going along this way."

Then Pona stopped them. "Hey wait. What's that?" And she stooped down and dug under some of the loose stones near the southwest corner of the nonexistent room. There was an unexpected find. It was a stash of items, as if someone had hidden them there for safe keeping. Pona dragged out the first item. "A money pouch." She opened it. "Seventeen gold, I think." She handed it to Tav. "You gave that duergar your money, so you deserve it. Consider the additional seven interest on your loan."

"Isn't that how giving is supposed to work?" said Rina with a chuckle. "You give ten, and you get seventeen back. Exponential giving. That's what that is."

Tav felt a bit better. It was nice of them to try to cheer her up. "Give, and ye shall receive," she replied with a smile. "But it is always better to give than to receive."

"Whatever you say," said Rina. "You give. I'll receive. I like the sound of that. What else we got?" She rubbed her hands greedily, and Tav smiled all the more.

"This is even better," said Pona as she dug out the next item. "A healing potion, I think. Looks like a higher quality one."

"You keep it," said Tav. "I can heal myself, and you're always getting up close."

"You're also easier to hit," said Rina. "That's cause you're stupid and don't like to wear armor like a smart person does. You know? Armor? Stuff you wear over your soft and weak flesh so it is harder to injure you?"

Pona laughed. "As if to illustrate your point," she replied, and she pulled a suit of hide armor out from under the debris.

Rina slapped her on the shoulder. "See? The gods are on my side. You should put on some armor and stop trying to prance around your enemies."

"Looks like a rather plain armor," said Izar'la. "Not worth carrying around, I'd say."

Pona had already pocketed the potion and chucked the armor to the side. "I think there's a couple more things down here." She struggled a bit. Then, at last, she pulled out a torch, which Pona slid into her own pack, a scroll, and a diamond. She whistled. "Am I really holding this? Do you think it's real?"

Rina snatched it from her and examined it more closely. "I think it is. This puppy's gotta be worth at least a few hundred gold, if not a thousand."

Pona then unrolled the scroll and held it up in the light of Tav's sword. "Raise Dead!" said Tav in awe. "By all that is good and holy! A Raise Dead scroll! It's a Raise Dead Scroll!" She was so excited that she snatched it right out of Pona's hands. "Pona! Rina! Don't you realize what this means?"

Rina was blinking rapidly, for she was not making the same connection Tav was. "We can - raise someone from the dead? I mean, don't get me wrong. That's pretty awesome, but I feel as though I'm missing something."

Pona was just as lost. "I'm with her. What are you thinking?"

"Kethryn!" said Tav excitedly. "We could bring him back to life!"

"What?" asked Rina. She was stunned by this revelation. "How?"

"He's in the spider lair," said Pona. "We'd have to risk going up there and finding him and fighting the big spider mama and so on and so forth. And isn't there like a statute of limitations to raising someone from the dead? How long do we have to bring him back?"

"Ten days," said Tav. "You can return someone you touch to life if it hasn't been more than ten days. The person's soul has to be both willing and at liberty to rejoin the body. They are weak but alive. The spell neutralizes all poisons and cures non-magical diseases that affected him at the time he died. I mean, it doesn't remove magical diseases, curses, or similar effects. You have to remove those first. THEN you can return the person to life without them taking effect. Otherwise, they take effect when the creature returns to life. The spell can't return an undead creature to life, either, so hopefully no one cast any necromancy on him. I doubt the spider would do that, though."

"Wait," said Pona. "So, if we could cure him of his curse of the Winter Guardian, and then we return him to life, he wouldn't ever be a Winter Guardian again?"

"Exactly," said Tav. "I'm assuming we could maybe do that with the tadpole too. Maybe."

Rina shook her head. "Holy Hells! That's insane. I mean, I knew the spell existed, but it's as expensive as $#@$ to purchase, and that's only IF you can find a cleric who can actually cast it."

"What if the injury is REALLY bad?" asked Pona.

"It closes all mortal wounds," said Tav. "I mean, it doesn't restore missing body parts, but even if he had a massive, gaping wound, it'd mend it. As long as the body parts remain attached, and he has all the vital organs still in his body, he can be restored."

"So if his head got chopped off or his heart removed, it wouldn't work," said Izar'la. "But he was left charred, or something. Wasn't he?"

"Right," said Tav. "So it should work. We just have to find him." Then she took the diamond from Rina.

"Hey!" said Rina. "I wasn't done with that."

"The diamond is essential for raising someone from the dead," she explained. "It is the catalyst for the spell. We need to save it." She slid it into her armor, finding a good, safe place for it.

"Well," said Rina, a bit put out, "we should at least save it until AFTER we've finished up here. We might need it for ourselves."

Then Izar'la patted Tav on the shoulder. "Tav here has become our most valuable member," said the gith. "We must protect her at all costs - even more than before."

"Why?" asked Pona.

"Because she's the only one among us who can cast the Raise Dead spell, and only with that scroll. If she dies, we can't bring her back, but if any of us dies, she can use it and bring us back."

"It's a more complicated spell than I'm used to," said Tav, looking a bit nervous as she tucked it away as well. "I mean, I used to be able to cast it, but since we were infected with the tadpoles, I can't remember how to do it. I'll have to carefully follow the instructions on the scroll and take my time. So, there's no guarantee that I'll get it right. That said, it's better than NOT having it, and it gives me hope that we might be able to find Kethryn and bring him back."

"AFTER we take off that $#@$ ring," said Pona.

"Amen to that," said Rina. "I don't care if I have to chop off his finger first, he's not wearing that ring anymore."

"Hopefully, he won't immediately turn into a mind flayer," said Tav. "But, even if he does - worst case scenario - we've wasted a Raise Dead scroll trying to bring a friend back to life, AND being raised from the dead is a huge ordeal for the dead person. The person is usually rather out of it afterwards. It usually takes about four days to be completely back to normal."

"So, worst case scenario," said Rina, "even if he turns into a mind flayer, we could kill him before he hurts anyone."

Tav nodded. She didn't like the idea, but she couldn't deny that it was the best solution should things turn out poorly. "So, are we all agreed? We're going to try to save it for Kethryn?"

Rina shrugged. "Why the $#@$ not? I mean, I have to say, if we come out of this without needing it ourselves, I will feel better if we can bring him back. Poor guy. He's been through so much."

"And," said Pona, "if his girlfriend is still alive, and they both ARE really from 1360-something, they can be together. As it stands, the person I feel the worst for is her. If he's dead, and we don't bring him back, she doesn't even have him. She'll be totally alone in a strange world."

"1360-something?" asked Izar'la. "Did I miss something? Did you tell me about this? This Kethryn guy, and his girlfriend, are from 1360-something?"

"Yeah," said Rina. "It's a bit confusing, but somehow they've been teleported through time. The last thing he remembers is being in 1355 or 6 or… what year was that whole thing in Icewind Dale with the Crystal Shard? I can't remember."

"Whatever," said Pona. "The point is, everyone they ever knew was from then. They woke up with the mind flayers putting tadpoles in their heads, and they're all alone in our time without anyone but each other. He connected with her, so he knows she's alive. That's who he, as a Winter Guardian, has been trying to get back to. If we can bring him back to life, they can be together and at least have one another to help get through all this."

"How romantic!" said Izar'la sarcastically with a playful grin. Then she made a quirky face as if the story was hard to stomach. "Almost makes me want to puke. Sounds like something Volothamp Geddarm would write. MAN! I can't stand that guy."

Rina laughed. "You know him?"

Izar'la nodded. "Met him, once, on the road. Well, at least, he SAID he was Volothamp Geddarm. He was as annoying as all get out. He kept demanding I answer his questions, and he kept pestering me about life in the Astral Plane, have I ever been there, and what's it like being a gith in the Material Plane. I only got away by waiting until he had to pee. Then I cast Disguise Self and slipped away. He caught up to me, saw I was a human, and asked if I'd seen where I'd gone. I sent him in the wrong direction, and as soon as he was out of sight, I ran. Bloody leech."

"Well," said Tav. "I don't know about you, but I'm so excited now. I can't wait to finish up here and go back to see if we can find Kethryn. It's totally doable, you know. They killed so many spiders. I bet you we can sneak up there and find him, sneak his body out, and bring him back. They probably didn't eat him since he was charred. I doubt they'd have bothered to string him up and try to suck his blood." Then she started up the rockslide. "Come on."

Rina shook her head in disbelief. "And just like that, she's forgotten we're in a nightmare."

And so, they went, carefully picking their way towards the landing at the top of the first flight of stairs. On their left, sure enough, the wall had collapsed. They looked out beyond the edge to see the canal before the looming gate. Tav had a spring in her step, and Rina and Pona had to admit, they were feeling a lot better. In fact, all fear had vanished, and they were just starting to think everything was looking up.

If only they had been looking up.

Chapter 37 - I HATE Jelly

It was a good thing the party hadn't taken the stairs, for waiting on the upper level above, there were three creatures that were just eager to pounce. As it was, while the party was enjoying a bright moment in their dark and dismal present lives, the monsters slowly crept up on them. They wound around to the landing at the top of the first flight of stairs, and that was when the first of them sprang out of the dark right at Tav. The cleric of Selune didn't even know what hit her at first. It slammed into her so hard that the wind was knocked out of her. She stumbled backward, barely keeping her footing and gasping for air.

A second one dropped down with a plop right next to Izar'la, and it belted her in the left hip. She also staggered and fought to breathe, for it had clubbed her good. Thankfully, the third was not as ready to ambush its victim. It fell from above, lashed out at Pona, and completely missed as the halfling dove sideways just in time.

Rina was the first to retaliate. She cast Hunter's Mark on the creature attacking Izar'la. Then she dropped her Exterminator's Greataxe, whipped out her bow, and fired a shot with lightning fast reflexes. The arrow plunked into the monster and vanished within its gelatinous form. "Son of a $#@$!" she cried. "Ochre Jellies! It's like you summoned them, Pona!"

"Me?" said Pona, fighting back against the one who attacked her. She lashed out with her fists and feet. "I'm not the one who picked up the jar and said I hated jelly."

Izar'la was too busy trying to not die to make a comment. Instead, she cast Icingdeath's Frost after sidestepping and dropping to one knee so she could aim it up and hit not only the one near her, but the one attacking Tav as well. The one that attacked her was coated in ice. The one fighting Tav fared much better.

As for Tav, she had no choice. She forced the words of a prayer out of her lips as she touched her holy symbol with her sword hand and threw up her shield to defend herself. Immediately, Selune's healing power flowed through her, forcing air back into her lungs and reducing the pain.

But the giant amoeba-like blob threw its thick, golden sludge self at her. It was a good fifteen feet in diameter and about six feet thick. It jabbed a portion of its more than five thousand pounds at her a second time, and fortunately, she managed to deflect it with her shield. The ooze's body left a yellow-orange acid stain on her shield, but at least she kept it from connecting with her face. If it had, she knew it was capable of dissolving any organic material over time.

The jelly fighting Izar'la broke free of the ice, but Izar'la was already gone. She'd maneuvered across the broken terrain to position herself nearer to the jelly fighting Pona. And so, the jelly only slid slowly across the rubble towards her. One good thing about jellies, they weren't very fast.

Pona then took a hit in the left shoulder. She tumbled, rolled and came to her feet on the right side of the monster she was facing, jabbing it with fast fists. Rina fired another shot at the same time at the jelly slowly approaching Izar'la, and she was rewarded as the creature pulsed violently. The shot hurt it good. Izar'la then finished it off by casting Fire Bolt. The jelly lit up in flames. Then it melted into a puddle and oozed into the stones.

Tav had never faced jellies before. As a result, she made a rather common mistake. She slashed the one near her with her longsword, and instead of harming it in any way, she effectively cut it in two - creating two jellies in the place of one. They were smaller than the original had been, but now she was faced with two assailants of equal strength. And both lashed out at her in return. The first missed her completely, but the second bashed her in the left leg. Tav gasped, slid on some stones, and fell to her knees. Quickly, she forced herself to stand, for she knew that even a moment's hesitation could be the end of her.

Rina saw her struggling and switched her Hunter's Mark to the jelly on Tav's right. "Don't use slashing weapons!" she cried. "They're immune, and it just splits them." As she said this, she fired another arrow. Like the jelly fighting Izar'la, it jiggled violently. She'd hit close to its core. And, just like the now-dead jelly, that shot had created a cavity straight to the monster's center. Izar'la cast Fire Bolt, the missile struck, and the flames exploded within.

Tav was just about to swing her sword when her brain registered what Rina had said. Changing her tactics, she cast Word of Radiance instead. A burning radiance erupted from her like a shockwave. The jelly felt the sting, but it did little to slow it. In anger, it tried to lash out at her in reply, but she once again defended with her shield.

Meanwhile, Pona continued to kick and punch at the jelly she was facing off with. "I'm sure getting a good workout," she commented. "I feel like I'm fighting an evil punching bag." As she said this, the jelly tried to engulf her with its body to smother her. But, it was having a hard time recovering due to the barrage of the halfling's unarmed strikes. The already slow monstrosity reacted even more sluggishly, and Pona was nowhere near the location it oozed into.

Rina switched Hunter's Mark to the last jelly fighting Tav. Unfortunately, Izar'la's aim was not as on point this time. She cast Ray of Frost using her new Mourning Frost staff, but she slipped on some loose stones just as she completed the spell. The shot struck the stones near the monster, coating them with frost. Tav then cast Word of Radiance again, but the jelly managed to resist it. It also managed to slip around her shield, batting it to the side. Then a part of it jabbed out at her, punching her full on in the ribs. The strike was like a maul, and if it wasn't for her armor, she'd have suffered more than a few cracked ribs.

Just then, Pona punched twice, jumped into the air, flipped, and came down with both feet right at the core of the ochre jelly she was beating. She'd softened it up, so when she landed, her heels penetrated right to the core. The monster came unglued. There was an almost satisfying squishing sound, accompanied by a splattering of goo which rained down on everyone, and the ooze died. Like the others before it, the blob melted into the stones.

Rina fired again. The arrow sunk in. Izar'la followed up with another Ray of Frost, and the last jelly was frozen solid. For several moments afterward, they remained poised and ready for more, but the blob was dead. No additional oozes appeared.

They gathered around Tav. "You okay?" asked Pona.

Tav nodded as she fought to breathe. "Battered - a bit. I'll be fine. Just give me a moment."

"Take all the time you need," said Rina.

"I'll need a breather too," said Izar'la. "The initial attack caught me off guard." She rubbed her injury. "That's gonna leave a nasty bruise."

"Let's at least find a decent spot to rest," suggested Pona. "Maybe a spot where WE have the high ground and can see enemies approaching."

And so, they completed their ascent up the stairs to the upper level - if one could call it a level. The stairs to the first landing went from south to north. From the landing, the next flight went from north to south to a second landing. This had an arrow that was magically enhanced with ice magic, some rope and some thieves' tools amidst cobwebs and some shattered pottery. Rina handed the thieves' tools to Pona and took the rest. The last flight was on the east side, and there were only about ten stairs. There was a walkway of sorts. It was about thirty feet in length and about ten feet in width. At one time, it looked like walls existed to close in the entire stairwell, but now only those on the south and east sides stood.

On the south side of the upper floor, just at the top of the stairs, there was a bookshelf with books tumbled out of it and scattered at its feet along with broken pottery and a plethora of cobwebs and torn up floor plates. A single, unlit, torch on a four foot pole stuck out of the ground near the bookshelf. On the north side, there was a sheer drop, but just before it, there was a heavy chest just to the left of an archway leading further east.

Izar'la lit the torch with a Fire Bolt. "Why don't we take a breather here?" she said, gesturing to the bookshelf. "From here, we can see the entire stairway, so we'll know if anything is coming from that direction. If anything comes out of the eastern archway, we should still have plenty of time to respond."

"I can also keep watch there," said Rina.

"No complaints here," said Tav. She was still nursing her ribs.

"I'll take a look at the chest," said Pona. Then she took out the torch she'd just gotten from the stash at the base of the rockslide, and she lit it. "You coming?" she asked Rina, and together they went to the chest. It was locked, but Pona easily picked it. Then, the two threw the lid open and found within a hundred and fifteen gold, two more bottles of aged alcohol, and a glittering silver necklace.

Rina snatched up the bottles and tucked them within her pack. "We are going to party tonight," she said with a grin.

"We need it after all this," said Pona. "If we can actually pull all this off, we'll deserve it, too." Then she took the gold and necklace.

At last, they took a breather, resting for a good hour. Tav and Izar'la did what they could to numb the pain from their wounds. To help, they decided to not wait. They popped the cork on one of the bottles of alcohol they'd acquired, and the party shared it, being careful not to consume too much. The last thing they needed was to become intoxicated.

Meanwhile, Omeluum's eye spotted Morghal making her way out of the kitchen and into the shadows at the base of the stairs. She did not dare to come any closer, but she eavesdropped on the party. Just as she arrived, Pona was asking, "So, Rina. Just curious. Have your tastes changed?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Rina.

"Jelly," said Pona with a chuckle. "How do you feel about it now?"

"You're an idiot," said the dwarf. "I'm still blaming you for summoning them."

"I can tell you that my tastes have changed," said Tav. "I think I pretty much hate jelly now also."

"Me too," said Izar'la. "I think I'll settle for bread and butter in the future."

"Oh," said Pona, still smiling. "That's too bad. None for you, I guess." Then she pulled out the jar of jelly that Rina had discovered in the kitchen.

"You saved it?" said Rina, stunned.

Pona held it up to her, putting it in her face. "I snatched it after you turned your back. I thought I'd keep it around. Never know when such toxic goo might come in handy. Apparently, it's a good dwarf-repellant."

Rina recoiled and grimaced but wound up not being able to keep a straight face. She batted the jar away, and Pona lost her grip. It hit the floor, rolled off the edge and smashed open down on the stairs below. "Oh $#@$! Now look what you've done." They both ran to the edge and looked over. "$#@$, Pona! I think it's pulsating and growing."

Pona held her nose. "By the gods! The stench. It's not just dwarf-repellant. It's ANYTHING-repellant. Fall back! Fall back! It's worse than all the others combined."

"Are you serious?" asked Izar'la, jumping to her feet. "Did you two just unleash toxic fumes in the air?"

"Rina's always unleashing toxic fumes in the air, but this is on a whole new level," said Pona, backing away even further.

Rina now held her nose. "We kill jellies only to die from the stench of a century old jar of the plain, ordinary variety."

"Well," said Tav as they moved through the archway to completely escape the putrid aroma. "Now you've done it. Moonmaiden protect us! If vinegar could die, be raised from the dead, and die again, that would still not describe how awful that smell is. All of Grymforge'll be smelling it soon."

"Hah!" said Pona. "Maybe, if we're lucky, it'll clear out the remaining duergar and leave Nere to us." And they withdrew even further.

"One thing's for sure, Tav," said Izar'la, "we shouldn't have to worry about anything coming up the stairs now. That way's pretty much sealed off."

They reached a reasonable safe distance. This brought them fully into another totally devastated room. Only the south wall was standing, and even it had huge gaps in it. Another pole with an unlit torch jutted out of the broken up stone floor. Izar'la lit it as she had the previous one. The entire north side was gone, dropping into a deep, dark chasm. Further east, the path was also shattered. It used to obviously lead to another section of the fortress, but there was a ten foot gap now. Beyond, even further east, the cavern's wall could be seen just at the edge of the torch's light. A waterfall emptied into the chasm below and flowed through the gap.

Pona went to the edge of the path and peered down. As the light of her torch illuminated the far side, she paused. "Hey," she said. "Look. They were carving another one of those massive statues out of the wall there. Looks like one of the male statues with the two-handed sword pointed down with the tip resting near the statue's toes. Right hand over left, he's holding that hilt."

"There were a few of those near the docks and such," said Tav. "Looks like they were venerating some paladin of Shar, most likely. This one looks bigger. Maybe the section beyond was dedicated to him."

"Makes sense," said Izar'la. "Seems like we're still on the right track, regardless. According to the gnomes, Philomeen's supposed to be that way, right? How do you suppose she made that jump?"

"How do you suppose she got past those oozes?" asked Rina.

Pona snickered. "She wasn't a magnet for vicious jellies like some people."

Rina punched her in the shoulder. "Every time you bring up jellies from now on, I'm going to hit you again."

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" asked Pona.

Izar'la then answered her own question. "No signs of rope or plank. I bet she's a mage. If she knows Misty Step, she'd have come to the edge here and simply teleported across."

"That might explain the ability to get past the jellies as well," said Tav. "If she's a mage who can cast Misty Step, she might also know Invisibility."

"Right," said Izar'la. "But, that means she's a bit more dangerous than we'd initially expected. We may need to watch for magical traps, and maybe be ready with your Silence spell."

"Well," said Rina as she started to rummage around in her pack. "I just picked up a rope back there. WE can get across the good, ol' fashioned way."

"Maybe after we finish resting a bit longer," said Tav. "I don't know about all of you, but taking a bit more time to recover seems like a good idea. We're not in any hurry, as far as I know. Are we?"

Rina shrugged. "The longer we take, the more likely Nere won't make it. Thrinn mentioned something about poisonous geysers. If we take our time, we might not even have to worry about killing him ourselves."

"You know," said Izar'la. "I hadn't really thought about that." Then she found a spot against the south wall to sit down near where the torch was that she lit. Leaning back and kicking her feet out, she began to pull some rations out of her pack. "Whatda ya say? Lunch anyone?" And they happily joined her.

Chapter 38 - The Sign Of A Good Person

During their rest, Tav seemed to be constantly distracted. She would joke with her companions, but then they'd catch her staring off towards the waterfall. They tried to ignore it, for they knew their friend was going through things they couldn't imagine. To them, Grymforge was like another dungeon to explore. It was a cave system like all the others they'd been in. To Tav, however, it was Hell.

Finally, her internal battle came to an end. All at once, she'd made a decision. A silence had fallen between them. They were each thinking of getting started again, but that's when Tav took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and said, "I'm sorry, all of you." Then she looked from one to the other with a strong look of determination on her face.

"For what?" asked Rina. "Listen, Tav, you don't have to tell us anything. It's fine. We understand."

Tav shook her head. "No. I do. I think I owe it to you. Besides, I need to get it off my chest, and there's never a good time for confession. Whenever you ponder it, you always make excuses for not doing it. That's what I've been doing all along, and I can't take it anymore. I think the kitchen did me in, actually. I know it sounds stupid, but it made me remember. Funny. Shar, Goddess of Forgetfulness, made me remember. Ironic, don't you think?"

"So, I feel the need to tell you so that you know who I really was - who I really am," she continued. "I don't want there to be any secrets between us. I don't want someone to use it later to destroy us. I think it's important that you know what I'm capable of. I don't think I'm the person that you think I am. This whole time, you all keep saying how soft and good you think I am and such, but - well, I'm only that because by being that I fight against who I really am, deep down inside."

"I'm violent and deadly, or at least I used to be." She did not stop except to take a quick breath. She was not being dramatic. In fact, the seriousness with which she spoke silenced the others. "I've made compromises and I've gone down dark roads." And with that, she could no longer look at them. Still, she did not stop.

"I was a Chosen," she said, forcing the words out of her mouth. "During the Second Sundering, I was…" She choked. "No. Let me back up. I was born in the High Forest. I didn't always serve Selune. I was impetuous and headstrong. I wanted to prove myself. I was so proud. I thought I was someone great."

"It all started with a stupid challenge. This rival of mine was a wood elf. She said I was a pampered high elf snobby brat who couldn't do anything. She acted like she was better than me. We were both so petty. I went out and almost got myself killed just to try to show her up."

"I was saved by a cleric of Selune who served in Silverymoon. Long story short, I learned things while there, and I determined that I'd prove myself by spreading Selune's light. It was still all about me. I just turned my attention towards some 'holy cause' that I had in my head. I'd prove myself as being better than her by being holier than her. Again, still so petty."

"I was sent to Neverwinter when Valindra started her campaign against the city, but I kinda stretched the truth a bit about it. I wasn't some champion at that point - not even remotely. It was just easier to say that I was. No. I was ONE of the initiates sent to help, nothing more. We were all talked into believing we would be champions of the light; champions of righteousness against evil."

"Things happened. Lots of bad things happened. So many died. I… I'm still haunted by events of that time. People who were twisted by the spellplague, the Many-Arrows Orcs, the Cult of the Dragon… I learned real fast what it really meant to be a good person. Sacrifices were made. The old person that I was had died - or so I thought. I firmly believed that I was a gleaming example of good."

"Then the Second Sundering happened. Selune picked me - ME - to be one of her Chosen. I had dreams and visions. My pride returned. I started to view myself as a goddess. I thought I was invincible. Quest after quest, I was sent to bring down Shar's followers, pursuing many to their strongholds and hiding places." She stopped suddenly, obviously coming to the part she was forcing herself to share.

Finally, it was as if she pushed herself over the edge so she could complete her confession. "I… I was put to the ultimate test, and I failed. At the end of the day, I fell. Chosen of Selune? HAH! Fool of Selune, is more like it. Sharrans led me into a trap, and another Chosen, a Chosen of Shar, ambushed me." She faltered again. Then she set her jaw and clenched her fists.

"It was her. It was Anarae, my rival from childhood. I no longer cared about anything. This was the moment I'd been waiting for my whole life. That childish pettiness came back full force, and I felt vindicated. Anarae had become evil, as I always knew she was, and she was before me. She was truly my nemesis now. I had every excuse to fight her and kill her and prove to her and to everyone and even myself that I was better and stronger. I didn't care about what was around me. I didn't care who died during the battle. I would destroy her if it was the last thing I did, and I would take down every last Sharran cultist in the process."

"They…" Tears flowed down her cheeks against her will. She clenched her fists even tighter and fought back against her emotions. "They used children as shields. They'd abducted children, and they…" She shook her head. "I pursued Anarae with everything I had. I thought I was winning as she retreated deeper and deeper into the catacombs of the ruined fortress they were hiding in. They didn't kill the children. I did. I…"

"They were wearing masks. I thought they were cultists. I cut them down left and right. I knew something was wrong, but I threw caution to the wind. They screamed in terror and begged for mercy even as they fled before me and I cut them to pieces. But I - kept going."

"In the innermost sanctum, near the altar to Shar, that was when I learned the truth. One of the masks fell off in the light of a radiant, purple sphere that hung from above. I saw the little girl's face, covered in blood, but there was no saving her. The cultists had weakened me already up until that point. I'd cast all my most powerful spells. I had nothing left to save them - ANY of them."

"And she appeared. We had a final fight, but I didn't know that the sphere increased Anarae's strength. In the end, I did kill her, but only because she made me. She said she wanted to die on HER terms, not mine. She would not let ME defeat her. She would, in the end, prove once and for all that I am wrong and always have been wrong. I was weaker than her. I was pathetic. I was, in the end, nobody; 'just a pampered high elf snobby brat who couldn't do anything,' just like she always said."

"And I was defeated. I was on my knees before her. She strode up and laughed at me. Then she told me why she'd become a Sharran. When I was trying to prove myself in Neverwinter, she had been captured by orcs of the Many-Arrows tribe. She hadn't been with them long before I came rushing in on my own personal quest. She'd been screaming for help. She'd been calling me to save her. I remember hearing her and a bunch of other prisoners. I remember it vividly. But I'd abandoned her and them because of the quest I was on. To prove myself, I'd chosen the quest over the immediate needs of the people who were right in front of me. I made a choice, and she'd suffered because of it."

"As a result, they abused her terribly - so much so that she sought Shar to forget. 'Shar was the ONLY way,' she said. She was pregnant, you see, when the orcs had captured her, and the child died during labor. Shar gave her not only the means to forget, she gave her the ability to get revenge. She told me that she didn't care about life anymore - BECAUSE OF ME. My pettiness created her and made her what she was."

"Then, with tears streaming down her face, she took my sword hand and forced me to plunge my blade into her stomach to 'put her out of her misery - the misery I caused her.' She was satisfied in knowing that for the rest of my days, I would be haunted by her and by what I had done to her and to…" She broke off again, fighting once more for the strength to continue. "She told me all this so I'd be haunted forever by my sins. She laughed and said, 'Ironic, don't you think? The only way to NOT be haunted forever by your sins is if you give yourself over to Shar so she can help you forget.' But she knew I'd never do that, and she said she hoped that even after I died, my guilt would go with me to whatever hell I wound up in. Then the remaining cultists surrounded me and easily captured me because I was utterly defeated."

"That was when they prepared to sacrifice me to Shar," she concluded, collecting herself a bit. "It was going to be their greatest achievement. But, do you know what? Do you know the part that still shames me to this day? I was petrified. I was scared for myself. I'd never been so scared in my whole life. Why? Why was I so scared? How could I even think about my own welfare at that point? After everything I'd done, and after all the sins I'd committed, I should have accepted my death gladly. It would have only been right to have put myself on that altar for them and let them kill me. But I didn't. Instead, I fought back with everything I had, struggling with my very last ounce of strength to try to get free."

Then silence momentarily fell between them as she wiped her face and tried to collect herself. When she was finally able to, she looked from one to the other. "Selunites arrived at that moment. They saved me from the altar. They finished off the cultists. They said that Selune wasn't finished with me yet, and she wasn't. She appeared to me still, trying to comfort me, even as my brothers and sisters tried to. They all wanted to help me get past my ordeal."

"Selune said she had another, greater mission for me that might help me 'feel redeemed.' She said I didn't need redemption, for I hadn't done anything wrong. Shar's lies were manipulating me, and she said I shouldn't believe them. But, since the lies made me feel like I needed redemption, she told me to go to Baldur's Gate. She said that the Sharrans were up to something truly terrible there, and they were after some sort of weapon. She showed me visions of it. It was a polyhedric device about the size of a fist. Then she showed me this place."

"You've… SEEN Grymforge before?" said Izar'la, a bit stunned by this.

"Wait," said Rina. "I remember when we shared memories. Yes. That's right. We saw visions of a dark temple and a fiery forge. I remember the lava lake place. Holy Hells! I totally forgot." Her eyes lit up as she put things together. "You knew we were going to come here."

Tav shrugged. "I had a feeling. Did I 'know?' No. I didn't know. Did I have faith we were coming here? Yes. Did I doubt at times? Yes. But she showed me this place. The more I'm here, the more it is sinking in. She essentially sent me here. She sent me here to deal with all this. She sent me here to face it and to overcome it. She sent me here to destroy it."

"But, now that I'm here, I'm finding it hard to even care about what Selune wants me to do here," Tav admitted. "You see? I'm not the person you think I am. I'm not the person SHE thinks I am. I'm a selfish, self-centered, proud and nasty individual. Even now, I'm fighting with everything I have in me to not think about my own predicament. All I really want to do, deep down inside, is to kill every last one of these cultists of the Absolute unless they tell me how to get this thing out of my head. I don't care if they're good or bad or anything. When I face myself, when I look deep enough, all I see is a terrified person who has no faith at all. I'm afraid of myself. I'm afraid of what I'll do when push comes to shove. Will I betray you, in the end, like Zrathentil? If it comes to saving myself or you, will I sacrifice myself for you, or will I abandon you like Zrathentil abandoned Kethryn? Is the whole reason I hated him so much because I saw myself in him? I…"

Rina cut her off, grabbing her hand and squeezing it tightly. "Tav. Stop. Just stop. Listen to me and look at me." She maneuvered herself, and she refused to continue, until Tav looked at her. "You're being too hard on yourself. Gods! No wonder you're so troubled by all this. It's worse than I thought." Then she felt tears drip down on her hand. In response, she held it up for Tav to see. "What is this?"

Tav could not comprehend why Rina was asking such an obvious question. "Tears," she replied.

"Why are they on my hand?" asked Rina.

"This is dumb," said Tav. "You know why?"

"Answer me, $#@$ it."

"I'm crying," said Tav, growing a bit annoyed. "I'm trying not to, but I can't help it. Thanks for pointing that out."

"No. $#@$ it. You're missing my point," Rina retaliated. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm upset," Tav answered, and she was growing exasperated.

"Exactly," said Rina. "Tav, you ARE the person we think you are. Pull yourself together and accept that you aren't the person YOU think you are. You wouldn't be crying, and you wouldn't be this upset, if you weren't the person we think you are. You are a good person."

"Everybody thinks selfish thoughts, no matter how good they are," Rina explained. "Especially when scared, it's hard to think about anyone else. It's easy to only think about saving your own skin. Gods! How many times during this trip alone have I thought about abandoning you guys and running? The spectator? Oh $#@$ yes! I seriously thought, 'Screw this. I'm gonna die if I don't get the heck out of here."

"Wow. Nice," commented Pona jokingly, and this brought a smile to Tav especially when both Rina and Izar'la smacked her.

"The point is, your love for us and others has kept you with us even in the midst of the most terrible situations," said Rina. "You have risked your life again and again for us. The sign of a good person isn't that you never think bad thoughts. It's that you CHOOSE to not do bad things or entertain bad thoughts. AND - I've got more so let me finish - even if you do screw up and do something bad, the sign of a good person is that you own your mistakes, and you try to not make them again. You fight against that base, selfish nature, and you do what you can to kick it in the face."

"And what did you just tell us?" asked Rina. "I think it was something about how you ARE purposely soft-hearted and crap so you can do what? Oh. Right. Kick your selfish nature in the face." Then she smacked Tav in the side of the head. "Stop being stupid. Didn't they teach you anything in cleric school? You don't always feel like doing good, but that doesn't mean you're not good. You choose to be good, Tav, even when you don't feel it. The feeling comes later. MAKE your emotions and desires obey you. Don't just obey your emotions and desires."

"It's a matter of the heart. If your heart is good, then you will desire to do good. Even if you mess up along the way, and even if your mistakes and sins have long-lasting consequences while here on the Material Plane, because your heart is good, YOU are good. And a good person fights to do good. Even when it hurts, they still fight to do what is right."

"But if your heart is bad, then even if you do good, it is only so you can eventually do bad. What's the sign of a bad person? No remorse. They don't care. They don't fight against their base, selfish nature. They revel in it. They delight in it. They use it to their advantage and manipulate it, just like Zrathentil - just like your rival. There is no sign of repentance. There is no genuine thought of changing their ways."

"Everyone sins. Everyone makes mistakes. Everyone does wrong. However, a good person is willing to accept guilt and desires to change their ways. A bad person makes excuses and continues doing the same bad things over and over again without a care."

"Ah! Blast it all anyway!" Rina concluded. "Now you got me needing to bloody, blinking confess things - another bloody, blinking sign of a good person. Gods bless it all! So, fine. I admit it. I screwed up. I was racist and stupid. I was in Elturel, like I said, when the Descent happened. So many horrible things happened in Avernus. I can't even begin to tell you. So, when we got back to Faerun, I was one of the prejudiced fools who started viewing all the tieflings as responsible. I jumped all over that bandwagon because I needed someone to blame, and we didn't have no one. We had no clue why it happened."

"So, because of that stupid tiefling who murdered my father, I found it easy to blame all tieflings," Rina said, nearly growling it out. "It didn't matter to me whether they were good or bad. My heart was bad. It was so full of hate that I didn't care. I 'brought them to justice.' I was praised for it by many. Men, women and children even, it didn't matter. All tieflings were devils."

"Then IT happened - my 'greatest moment.' I captured a dozen of them and had them all locked up. They were later beheaded. 'Murderers,' we called them. But were they really? You see, there'd been a tiefling protest that went bad. A riot broke out and people died; non-tieflings and tieflings alike. The tieflings were tired of being mistreated and blamed, and they had gathered. But I was there. I remember it well. They didn't start the fight. WE showed up. WE started picking fights with the tieflings, but when the tiefling leader, Zevlor, helped to keep his people from fighting back - GAH! Now I'M crying. Son of a bullywug!" She wiped tears away with the back of her hands.

"I started it," she told them. "I was so full of hate that I attacked Zevlor. He and his were only defending themselves. Me and mine just kept pressing the attack. They only fought us off until most of them could escape. Then they all fled. But I wouldn't let it go. I went after them, and I captured a dozen of them; men and women and even a few young adults. I dragged them to cells and locked them up until authorities could arrive. They pleaded with me and begged me to let them go. They pleaded their innocence, and one of them - I'll never forget her - told me about all the things she'd suffered in Avernus while she was there too."

"That's what did me in. Elegis, her name was. Nicest $#@$ $#@$ tiefling I'd ever met. Stupid piece of $#@$. Do you know how guilty I feel now because of her? I can't $#@$ look myself in the mirror after they took them all away - after they took her away. Before they came, she told me she forgave me. She said she understood why I was so filled with hate. 'It's easy to take one look at us and think we're the same as the demons and devils in Avernus,' she said. 'But please at least let the mothers and fathers go. Don't make it so their children grow up without their parents.' Then she pointed them out, the mothers and fathers. But I did nothing. I just let them all get dragged off to die."

"I couldn't even watch. Like a coward, I just ran. I ran away from Elturel and the whole $#@$ scene. I can't look at tieflings anymore without thinking about it; without questioning whether they are good or bad, or without questioning whether I did the right thing or not. But the worst part is, I know what I did was wrong. I know it. That's when I realized that I'd become far worse than any devil I'd fought in Avernus. I'd let my hate destroy me."

"And $#@$ $#@$ it!" she snapped. "I continued to let it destroy me. That's why I was so pissed about Pona. Instead of changing my ways and only hunting people I knew were bad, I shut myself off completely to whether people were good or bad or not. I made myself not care. It wasn't MY problem. In order to appease my guilt, I made myself believe it wasn't MY responsibility to care. It was MY job simply to bring them in. It was the government's job to determine if they were good or not."

"But $#@$ $#@$ it! You changed that, $#@$ it!" Rina said to Tav. "I didn't listen to Pona. I convinced myself she was just a lying, scheming piece of trash. I fought tooth and nail against your arguments and hers because I didn't want to believe I was making the same bloody mistake again. Then YOU taught me everything that I've been preaching to you just now. YOU made me realize that it's about the $#@$ $#@$ heart, Tav, so don't you go questioning whether you're a good person or not - because so help me, if you turn evil, I'm going to kick your butt across the whole of Faerun and the Realms until you turn good again - because if YOU'RE evil, what hope do I bloody have?"

Then a brief silence fell between them, and Tav's pain melted away. It was replaced by empathy. Much to Rina's displeasure, Tav threw her arms around her. "Thank you," she said.

Seeing that Tav was starting to feel better, and finally getting a word in edgewise, Pona added, "And all jokes aside, I don't think you've considered the possibility that Shar's people were messing with you, Tav."

Tav pulled away from Rina and looked at her quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"You were a Chosen of Selune," said Pona. "You were a BIG target for Shar and her followers. Don't you think they'd have looked into you? Don't you think they'd have found out about your rival and how much she affected you? I'm just saying, 'What IF she wasn't ACTUALLY your rival? What if she was just some other cultist person with an illusion to make you THINK you were fighting your rival? What if the children you supposedly

butchered were illusions? They may have been actual cultists as you initially believed they were. Then, when the mask fell off, your supposed rival cast some sort of illusion spell to make the face look like a child's face."

"I mean, think really hard. Were those people you killed all small? Were some large and some small? Think of the details. I mean, REALLY think about the details. Could they have, in fact, been adults? And even IF that really was your rival, isn't it possible that she was totally lying to you just to make you feel guilty? She didn't seem like a good person to begin with, so she could have totally decided to follow Shar for reasons not related to you."

"It is true," added Izar'la. "Sharrans are known for trickery. What is the worst thing a Sharran can convince a Selunite of? Mass murder of children has got to be at the top of the list. Causing someone to become a Chosen of Shar has got to be another. She'd obviously been studying you for some time."

"You both sound like Selune and the other clerics," Tav told them, but she was smiling. "You all do, actually. They pretty much said the same things - I mean, about the cultists tricking me and such. I think I couldn't accept that. I was too afraid it wasn't true. But then, that's how evil works, isn't it? Evil gets you to operate in fear and doubt. It gets you to ask, 'What if?' 'What if I DID kill children?' 'What if I DID cause her to suffer and lose her baby and become a Chosen of Shar?' 'What if I really AM as bad as I think I am?' 'What if I betray those I care about?'"

"You won't," said Pona, patting her on the knee reassuringly. "And now, I will enact my own cure for all this." She stood to her feet and took another swig of the alcohol they were consuming. She didn't even know the type, but it tasted something like firewine. "I was always told that the best cure for selfishness is to stop thinking about yourself. Hah! So, now it's my turn to steer both of you away from your own self-deprecations. You both bared your souls to us, so maybe I should too. Like Tav said, we shouldn't have any secrets."

"Ah," said Rina with a snicker. "At last. We get to hear how she's guilty. Finally, you admit it."

Pona kicked her lightly in the shin. "Don't be stupid." Then she summoned up her own courage. "I mean, let's face it, we've all been hiding something in our pasts, haven't we? You can feel it, can't you? It's this dang thing in our heads. It's sharing things unconsciously with everyone else we're connected with. As you were both sharing your stories, all I could think about was how you were sharing THAT deep, dark thing that you've been harboring. And then, all I could think was about my own deep, dark thing that I've been harboring. So, maybe I'll just get it out too. I've always been told, 'Confession is good for the soul.' Right?"

None of them said a word in reply, and so she continued. "The guy who was murdered was my lover, Paven."

"Holy What Now?" said Rina. "Come again? Are you serious?"

"Wasn't he human?" said Tav, also stunned. "I remember the memory. There was a human man on the floor of a rather fancy looking room. I assumed that was your memory. I…"

Pona shook her head. "Typical," she said, a bit disappointed by the responses. "Yes, he was human, and yes I am serious that he was my lover. People always have issues with halflings getting together period, let alone with members of other races. It's because people tend to view us all as children, or something, instead of as adults. I should be used to it by now, but…"

Tav was immediately sorry. "Forgive me," she said. "You're right. It's terrible."

"I'm not," said Rina. "It has nothing to do with that. You just don't hear much of humans and halflings getting together. It's like dwarves and humans or dwarves and elves. It's just not as common. Elves and humans seem to just breed all over the place, producing half-elves all the time, but you hardly ever hear of a half-dwarf or half-halfling, now do you? Therefore, it's surprising. I don't view you as a kid. Trust me. You've nearly killed me a number of times. I know you ain't no child."

Pona felt better about that. "I suppose you're right. I can sometimes be a bit overly sensitive about those things, I guess. Well, anyway, back to me." She summoned her courage once more. "His wife was a nasty witch - not literally of course. It wasn't just him telling me this. It wasn't like he was lying to me just to get me to sleep with him."

"It all started when I saved him on the road from trolls," Pona said, finally launching into the tale. "I saved him but wound up pretty bad off. There were a lot of them, for some reason. I always kinda wondered if it was a planned encounter - as if someone had purposely planted them to try to kill him. Since someone later DID actually kill him, it makes me wonder even more."

"But, anyway, he brought me back to his manor," she continued. "He was a noble, of course. His wife immediately threw a fit. She didn't want a 'dirty, nasty halfling wench' in her home. She didn't care that I'd saved his life and took out more trolls than I can count - Literally, I can't count how many because I struggled to keep them down. I didn't have a lot of fire to work with, and I had no acid at all. So, it was hard to tell how many I actually killed before we were finally able to get out of there."

"He fought with her to allow me to stay, and he called a cleric to help heal me. He was nice to me, but she continued to be a nasty…" She stopped herself. "Sorry. I'm obviously still bitter. The long and short of it is that he and I got closer even after I left. Before we got together officially, I kept asking him why he didn't leave his wife. He absolutely hated her. He only got together with her because it was arranged. He kept saying that he was trapped due to his status and position."

"So, I convinced him to throw it all away because he loved me and wanted to be with me. I refused to be with him until he left her. So, he did. He left her a note, took some money so that we could start a new life together, and we ran away to his summer home in Baldur's Gate. It was the most wonderful time of my life."

Then the shadows cloaked her expression. "I went out that night. I was lured out. I heard someone screaming for help. I told him I'd be right back. I was attacked. I don't even know how many guys. They just swarmed me. I beat the crap out of them, but took a good amount of beating myself. They fled, taking everyone with them. When I returned, there he was on the floor. It was…" She was unable to finish. The pain was evident on her face.

Rina stood and squeezed her shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said, and she meant it. "That sucks."

Pona looked at her, and Rina felt the woman's sorrow. It shook her to the core. "I don't even know who killed him," she said through gritted teeth. "I can only assume it was HER, but I can't be sure. We'd only been there a couple of days. We weren't going to stay long. We were just looking for a better place to go, and we were staying there in the meantime."

"They slashed him in the legs to make it seem like he'd been forced to his knees. Then they slit his throat and stabbed him in the heart. Whoever it was, probably a hitman, they wanted to make it look like I'd done it. Soldiers arrived just after I entered the room, and like an idiot, I had grabbed the dagger and pulled it out just before they showed up. I was somehow hoping I could stem the bleeding or something. I wasn't thinking clearly because… because it was HIM. He had become everything to me, and there he was…"

"The Flaming Fist were standing there, looking at me with bloody dagger in hand. I'd fallen right into the whole trap. A bag of money and jewels were set not far from his body, making it look like a robbery gone wrong. The Fist came at me, and I went berserk."

"THAT, actually, was my crime. I lost it, and I fought back. I can say I was just defending myself all I want, but the truth is, I was grieved and beyond sanity and reason. I killed some and ran. I got away. They pursued me. I killed more. I went after Hilla, his wife. I was convinced she did it. I was sure she sent a hitman to kill him. I hurt others to get to her, but the Fist caught me first. They took me back to Baldur's Gate to pay for my crimes. They threw me in a dungeon. There wasn't even a trial. Within a few days, they sent me off to a slave camp where I was to 'work off my crimes.'"

"I spent two years in that hellhole." Her face was truly frightening. There was still a good deal of bitterness. "Every day for a year and a half, I thought about getting out and finding Hilla. I wanted her to first confess to me that she'd killed him. Then I wanted to torture her to death. In the end, I planned to take my own life. I didn't want to live anymore."

"But I met an inmate named Zem," her face softened. "He was a half-orc monk of Tyr who was also falsely accused. He helped me to realize that my hate and desire for revenge was only destroying the person Paven had fallen in love with. He reminded me that there is a life after death, and if I truly love Paven, I should make sure that I am going to spend the rest of eternity with him. After all, if I become an evil, vicious murderer and thief and such, I won't be allowed into Mount Celestia, now will I? For my own sake, and Paven's, I needed to let my pain and hatred go."

"So, I've been trying to live, now, for the afterlife. Forgiveness is hard, and when it comes to forgiving some people, it's the hardest thing you will ever have to do. It takes one step at a time; one day at a time. Every time hatred pops up in my mind, I have to say to myself, 'I forgive whoever killed Paven. Not for that person, but for me and Paven.' Because bitterness and hatred destroys, but forgiveness heals. As long as I harbor hatred and bitterness, it doesn't hurt the person who I hate. It only hurts me."

"So, like Rina said, I have to choose to be good," Pona concluded. "I have decided that I'm going to be a good person, even if I don't feel like it. I'm going to NOT let hatred and anger and bitterness destroy me, no matter how much it wells up within me. I will fight it to the end, for my own integrity and personality."

Another silence fell between them. Tav and Rina smiled at Pona, showing they approved of her. They were feeling better. The weight of their past sins was gone. Then, Izar'la closed her eyes and sighed. "My turn, I guess." She took in a deep breath and held it. She looked from one to the other.

"I have nothing," she replied, and let out her breath in one gust. "Honestly, you guys make me seem like I'm a baby. I feel like I haven't experienced anything in my lifetime. You've all got these huge stories with massive depth and emotion and heartache, and I'm thinking, 'Flaming fireballs! I've literally got nothing.' I mean, I've

pretty much told you everything there is to know about me. I've even shared with you that my mother figure is Jaheira. That's probably my biggest secret. I've got no major enemies. I've got no huge secrets. I'm Izar'la, the githzerai wild mage Harper. That's about the extent of it. Sorry."

The others grinned. "Well, you're obviously still young," said Tav. "How old are you, anyway? Eighteen?"

"Twenty-one, thank you very much," said Izar'la. "Give me at least SOME credit. I do have SOME experience."

"Twenty-one!" cried Rina. "By Dumathoin's Jewels! You ARE a young pup. Ain't ya?"

"By what now?" asked Pona, a bit taken aback by her outcry. "I'm sorry, but who's whats?"

Rina smacked her in the arm. "Don't be stupid. Dumathoin is the dwarven god of mining. Jewels as in stones mined up from caves and stuff. Don't be pervy."

"I'm just saying," said Pona. "Sounded a bit like YOU were being the pervy one - talking about some dwarf god's stones."

"Watch your tongue, Halfling!" Rina barked with a laugh as they all prepared to leave. "I'll bury YOU beneath some stones."

"Big ones?" asked Pona with a laugh.

"Huge!" said Rina.

Chapter 39 - An Explosive Encounter

They made their way across the gap by first having Pona vault across. She was the most athletic among them, and she used an old, random metal pole they found lying around in the debris to give her the extra boost she needed. She took one end of Rina's rope with her, and she secured it on the far side to the pole which she jammed into the rubble-strewn path. Each person decided to try to make the jump with the rope tethered around their waist rather than try to tight-rope across. It was faster, and the rope was there just in case they failed and fell through the gap.

Everyone got to the other side just fine, and Rina took her rope back. Pona pulled the pole out and set it aside. Then they made their way up the slight slope towards the massive double doors set in a brick wall some fifty feet high. The doors themselves were thirty-ish feet tall and formed yet another artistic design. Poles with torch holders and old torches were set on either side, and next to them were banners with Shar's symbol on them - the black circle amidst a purple background. There were a few old crates and barrels nearby nestled in the corner on the far side, but they were empty.

Izar'la lit the torches which bathed the whole area in a soft glow. Immediately, Tav spotted a plaque just off to the left of the doorway. "'Contemplation Chamber,'" she read. "'Let feast the eyes of the faithful. Know your Goddess. Know Her command.'"

"I thought Shar was the Goddess of Forgetfulness," said Pona. Everyone could tell she was about to make another snide comment. "So how are they ever expected to 'know' their Goddess?" She laughed. "Picture this: Shar Cleric School." Then she slipped into her best wise-teacher persona. "'Class. Today, we're going to review the tenets of the faith. Can anyone remember the tenets of the faith? Who would like to recite them?' No one raises their hands. 'Perfect. Beautiful. A's for everyone. Tomorrow, we'll go over the… um… hmmm. I seem to have forgotten. Oh well.'"

Rina shook her head. "You're an idiot."

The double doors were made of iron, and they formed a single, symmetrical image. Each half contained the same detail and design, and when the doors were closed, a statue of a heavily armored Shar was towering over them standing upon a semi-circular pedestal. She was similar in design to the other statues of Shar in Grymforge, but her eyes were uncovered and silver. They almost seemed to glow in the torchlight. Her mouth was covered by a mask. She wore a long, regal cape down to her feet, and she held a scepter in both hands against her chest. The scepter extended down from her chin to her thighs.

As for the background, it was as if she was standing in front of a portal or sun made of iron with sharp spikes for rays and curved wings jutting up on each side. There was an inner and outer circle that looked as if they were made mostly of metal branches. The outer was thinner, and the inner was also intertwined with what looked like bent spikes or blades. Two round spheres were set into the inner, one on each side, at about the same level as Shar's feet.

Tav tried the door. "Locked," she announced.

Pona examined it. "I think there's a keyhole here. I might be able to pick it." Then she pulled out her lockpicks and set to work. The keyhole appeared to be at about the level of the average human door's keyhole. It was a small hole shrouded in darkness between Shar's legs near where her ankles might be.

Snap! The lock clicked. "Easy," said the halfling, and she twirled one of her picks before sliding them back into their kit which she put back in her pack. Then they all pushed, and the doors split Shar right down the middle as they swung loudly and grindingly open.

Beyond was a large chamber lit by torches on the far side. Dead ahead after about sixty feet, there was what looked like an altar area set on a raised platform. To access it, one must head either to the right or left where there were identical wide stairs, seven or eight on each side. It was difficult to tell how many there really were, for parts of the walls were destroyed, and boulders and debris littered the way. A large obsidian table rested at the base of the platform directly center between the stairways. Someone had recently put a few sacks on it, and there were a few clusters of crates and barrels at the top of the stairs to the right and in a corner off to the left.

Towards the front of the raised platform, there was an area that looked like it had been arranged to be a campsite. Stone benches on either side were facing one another. They looked like they were bolted to the floor, but it was difficult to tell. In between them was a brightly burning bonfire with a collection of broken chairs and tables being used as firewood nearby. A single pack rested near the bench on the left. On the far side of the fire, there was a bedroll, a backpack, and a rolled up blanket.

As one went up the stairs on the left, there was a recess cloaked in darkness further off on that side. A torch on a pole lit part of the recess revealing an altar with a skeleton collapsed on it. It looked as if whoever it was had died there while throwing themselves upon it. Rubble was everywhere along with many cobwebs.

As one went up the right side, most of it was buried beneath boulders and debris, or it wrapped around portions of the cave walls themselves. Besides some broken wooden benches and bookshelves, there was little of interest. Another lit torch on a pole illuminated that way.

Directly behind the campsite area was the main altar. There was another massive statue of Shar which was the focus. At her feet upon the altar was a black moon with gold trim. This was similar in design to the altar in the chamber where the party had met Thrinn and the gnomes. A tablecloth of the symbol of Shar complete with black circle and purple border was draped over the front under the standing black moon. Three stone tablets also rested upon the altar. In front of it lay the skeletal remains of some devotee. The corpse's back rested against it and a book with a red cover lay upon its right leg. Besides all this, there were numerous black ceremonial vases and pots, cobwebs, more bookshelves...

… Oh. And a gnome female standing upon the altar with some sort of cylindrical, metal canister just to the left of the altar that was about as big as she was. The canister looked like it had a big sun on the front of it, though the center of the sun was dark as was the container itself. The lid was off, revealing black powder inside, and the gnome's right hand hovered over it. She was holding a small, magical ball of fire in her palm.

The deep gnome had long, white hair pulled back in a braid down her back. She had pointed ears that jutted out on each side and a youthful face that was etched with anger and fear. Her pale, gray skin was relatively clean, indicating that she'd had plenty of time to wash herself since escaping from the duergar, and even her clothes were fairly unsoiled. She wore a purple, long-sleeved top, leather pants and boots, and she didn't appear to be armed with anything but the flame in her hand.

"Why, hello there," said Rina as the party climbed the stairs on the left. She was trying to be positive and pleasant, hoping to disarm any hostilities from the gnome.

It did no good. "Hold it," said Philomeen. "I swear to Ironhand, one more step and I blow us to chunks!" Her voice was hard and cold, full of fear and determination. It was clear, she would do it. She'd rather die in a fiery explosion than return to the duergar.

An ashen scent filled the air as they stopped. The barrel was filled with smokepowder for sure. "Careful," said Izar'la. "I'd rather not have to pick bits of gnome from my hair." She meant it as a joke to create some levity, but Philomeen wasn't having it.

"Shut your mouth, hoon, or I'll shut you down," growled the gnome.

"Philomeen, I presume?" said Pona. "What's going on here?"

"Drugh," said Philomeen, twitching nervously. "Dropping my name like your cultist $#@$ knows me - like we're friends. I know what you are - one of Nere's cult-goons. Sailed right in. I can see the gate from up here, and I saw you on that duergar boat. Better to die in this $#@$-hole than rot in Moonrise. You want me? Come get me." She waved her flaming hand over the container.

Tav held her hand up. "Wait. Please don't do this. Listen. We're friends. I swear it on Selune." She held up her symbol. "We originally ran into Thulla on the far side of the lake, and she asked us to come here and save her people. She's been stabbed and poisoned, so she couldn't return herself. Laridda also sent us. The gnomes need our help. There aren't many left now. Nere and Thrinn had them unearth the Temple of Shar, but when they tried to enter, a trap was sprung. Many were buried, crushed and killed. There are only a handful free, and there are some trapped within the temple entrance with Nere. Laridda is one of them who is trying to dig the others out, and she's terribly worried about you."

"Laridda?" said Philomeen, and she sounded bitter. "Ruddy mind games. I… I know all about your tricks, True Soul." Her hand waved over the smokepowder again as if she was thinking of doing it and blowing them all to Mount Celestia. For several gut-wrenching moments, they all watched, gritting their teeth anxiously.

But then Philomeen wavered and put out the flame. "$#@$! I can't do it." Then she flopped down on the edge of the altar so that her feet were dangling off of it. She looked utterly defeated. "Go on. Drag me to Moonrise. I'll make you cult-nutters suffer."

Rina sighed in relief and was the first to speak. "Calm down," she snapped. "Like Tav said, you've got several of your clan trapped in a cave-in, and we need the smokepowder to get them out."

Philomeen was stunned. "You want to waste runepowder on…" She broke off, realizing that she'd said too much. She hadn't meant to give out the name of THAT particular batch of smokepowder. "Look. You have no idea what you're dealing with. Any true Ironhand would trade their life for a grain of this stuff. It's the whole $#@$ reason we're here, and I'm not leaving without it. But, let me go and take that boat of yours… and maybe I'll spare you a vial. That should be enough to blow open a rockpile."

"Ironhand. Runepowder," said Rina. A sudden memory was triggered. "Where have I heard that term before?" Then she snapped her fingers. It was all coming together. "You're not here for the adamantine. By Clanggedin's twin axes! Your clan is here for the runepowder! We had it all wrong. We thought you were here for

Grymforge and to make adamantine, but the whole time you were here to find runepowder? RUNEpowder? By the Nine! They had runepowder here also? What IS this place for real?"

"What in all of Faerun is runepowder?" asked Izar'la.

"Runepowder," said Rina, "is a gnomish folklore - an explosive of awesome power, handed down to the gnomes by their war-god Gaerdal Ironhand. It's a formula so dangerous that it was stricken from history - if it ever existed to begin with. Honest to Amn. I thought it was a children's story."

"We've heard the same ones, I bet," said Philomeen. "A fistful of fire that can turn cities to dust. Well, it's real, and I need to bring it back to Baldur's Gate. I'd rather my clan were with me, but…" She paused as she considered what she was really saying. "Sounds like they're mostly dead anyway, and the mission comes first. A vial's what I can spare you." Then she took out a smaller canister and filled it with the black substance. She tossed it to Rina who caught it easily.

Izar'la then, surprisingly, took over the conversation. "We're going to need to know a little more about your so-called 'mission' before we let you go," she said. It was then that the others realized that they might have a problem. Izar'la was a Harper, and as a Harper, it was her mission to protect people from those who were extremists. Philomeen was obviously an extremist. Who knew what she might do with that canister? A lot of innocent lives could be devastated if they let the gnome leave with a powder keg that big of a substance that could level cities. A fight might yet be in their future, and it could kill them all. And yet, they realized that Izar'la would likely gladly give her life if it meant that the runepowder destroyed Grymforge because it would spare the world above from seeing it put to evil use.

Philomeen seemed to realize Izar'la's resolve as well. She was a bit more willing to talk. "Look," she said. "We're freedom fighters. We need this powder to prove a point to people who really need a point proven to them. Let me go, and you'll be on the right side of history - that's all I can say."

Izar'la shook her head. "Can't do that," she replied, setting her jaw firmly. "If what you both said is true, that keg could level more than Baldur's Gate. It could devastate the surrounding farmlands and everything. It's too dangerous, and it needs to be buried or destroyed safely - if there even is a way to destroy it safely."

Philomeen was back on her feet, tense and fearful. "I can't just leave it here," she told them, tears welling up in her eyes. "You don't understand what it's like. You don't understand anything. I HAVE to bring it back to Baldur's Gate. EVERYTHING for us hinges upon it. We MUST turn the tide."

Izar'la shook her head. "All I hear is a lot of extremist words coming out of your mouth. Being extreme is incredibly dangerous to yourself and others. Listen to yourself. You've talked yourself into believing that you HAVE to do this or EVERYTHING is doomed. That's not how things typically work. Give things time, and they usually work out fine. Whenever you find yourself feeling trapped in a situation where you think you HAVE to do something or EVERYTHING is doomed, that is almost always just your own fears and anxieties ruling over you."

"It's an illusion," Izar'la continued. "Let that thing go. Return home. You'll see. There will be other ways to win this fight of yours - whatever it is. You don't need to blow the world up to win. There are thousands of men, women and children in Baldur's Gate - innocents who are just trying to scratch out a living. If you take that, you could wind up killing them all. I can't let you do that. I can't."

Seeing that things were escalating again, Tav stepped between them. "Wait. Hold up. Let's really think about this." She looked at the gnome. "Philomeen. She's right. That stuff is incredibly dangerous. Right?" Philomeen nodded. "So Izar'la's right. You return to Baldur's with it, and lots of people, including the remainder of your clan, could also die. All it takes is one wrong move and BOOM! There goes Baldur's Gate, your entire clan, and everyone else who lives in the city. Don't you think that's too risky?"

Philomeen's expression hardened. "Not for us," she said bitterly. "Enough is enough. I'd rather us all die in a fiery explosion than continue to live as we've had to live. We DEMAND respect for once in our $#@$ $#@$ lives."

Izar'la was about to speak, but Tav cut her off. "Okay. So, you're pretty zealous about this. I understand. Maybe we can help you and your clan. We're on our way to Baldur's Gate as well. Maybe we can help rally people to your cause. I've got connections with the Church of Selune. I've got friends and such in Neverwinter, Waterdeep, Silverymoon, and Baldur's Gate. What do you say? Leave that runepowder here and go to the myconid grotto on the far side of the lake. Join Thulla and help her recover. Trust me when I say that Izar'la here will NOT allow that runepowder to fall into the wrong hands. We'll free your remaining people, dispose of that stuff, destroy Grymforge, and join you." She turned and looked at Izar'la. "Will that work for you?" Izar'la nodded.

Then Philomeen sighed. "Fine," she said. "But listen. Can you at least do me this favor? You see Laridda at the dig, tell her I'm dead. Would ya? Impaled, half-eaten… I don't care. Make up a story."

"Whaaa?" said Rina. "Why? Are you serious? That girl obviously cares about you a lot." Then, sarcastically, she said, "Ah, nothing says 'true love' like faking your own death to avoid someone. I mean, is she your sister? Is she your best friend? Either way, you'd abandon her? That's mighty cruel of you."

"'Beloved,'" said Philomeen. "She viewed me as her beloved. I might have been hers, but she sure as hells wasn't mine. I'm just done with her. I can't take it anymore. She's a leech. So, I'm getting the runepowder back to Baldur's Gate. Alone!"

"What?" Tav cried, but Philomeen moved faster than anyone expected. They'd believed that she was giving up. They'd believed she was peacefully going to walk away from the runepowder. But it was a ruse. She was just buying herself time and distracting them so that she could make good her escape. She had secretly grabbed another, smaller, canister from a pack behind her on the altar, and now she filled it, threw it in the air above their heads, cast Fire Bolt at it, and effectively detonated it into the ceiling.

There was a cave-in. Tav and her companions threw themselves to the floor, shielding themselves the best they could as heavy stones dropped on and around them. Philomeen used the moment to drink a Potion of Hill Giant Strength, close and seal the keg, grab it, and Misty Step to the stairs on the left. Then she bolted from the chamber as fast as her legs could carry her with the runepowder on her back.

The dust settled. Tav choked and gasped for air. Fortunately, the canister the gnome had lobbed had only been partially filled, and only some of the ceiling came down on them. They were not buried, but they were in serious pain. Some of the stones that had dropped were like cement bricks. Izar'la was hit the hardest, and she wasn't moving. Rina and Pona both struggled to get to their feet. They were shaking from the trauma.

Tav fared the best, for she'd managed to throw her shield up over her just in time. Therefore, she ran to Izar'la's aid, casting Cure Wounds on her. The gith slowly returned to consciousness, but she was still rather bad off. "You okay?" asked Tav.

Izar'la sat up and dusted herself off. Like Rina and Pona, she was shaking a lot. "No," she replied. "Ah. My head." She held the right side of her skull where a stone had bashed her. "Nasty, little, wretched…" She fell short. "Gods! I thought the gnomes here were the good guys. Turns out they're just as bad as the cultists and the bloody duergar. We - we can't let her get away with our boat and the runepowder." She tried to force herself to rise, but she was too weak.

"Don't," said Tav. "You're not up for it." She looked at Rina and Pona. "You two okay?"

"Not particularly," said Rina.

"I don't think anything's broken, surprisingly," said Pona. "But I'm not exactly doing great. No."

Tav gestured to Pona's boots. "Okay. You three stay here. I'm going after Philomeen. Give me the boots. I'll catch her, take the keg, and if I have to…"

"Kill the wench," said Rina, finishing for her. "She basically tried to kill us, Tav, and Izar'la's right. That keg could kill countless lives."

Tav nodded. "I'm on it." Then Pona handed her the boots. Tav put them on and shot out of the chamber like a missile.

Philomeen was nowhere in sight, so she ran to the gap and jumped across to the other side, slipped on something and fell flat on her back. She was disoriented, but she thankfully hadn't fallen off the ledge. She wasted no time. She got to her feet and was about to head for the stairs back down towards the kitchen when she realized something wasn't quite right. There was a torch lying on the ground not far from her. It hadn't been there before. She then remembered that the torch just outside the Contemplation Chamber had no longer been there, leaving the doorway darker than they'd left it. In her haste, she hadn't noticed. And what had she slipped on?

She grabbed the torch and held it high. There was blood, and there was a partial hand-smear streaking through it nearer to the very edge. The hand was too small to be her own. Tav's eyes bugged out as her mind processed what must have happened. Philomeen had grabbed the torch just outside the Contemplation Chamber as she fled. She reached the gap, and with runepowder keg still on her back, she tried to make the jump. She must have misjudged the distance, smacked into the edge, cracked her head on the pavement and slid over the side. The hand-smear was probably from her making a final attempt to grab a hold of anything to keep herself from falling.

Carefully, Tav went to the edge. She peered over. There was no sign of Philomeen or the runepowder keg. She could only barely make out the dark river that flowed from the waterfall through the gap. She then looked around a few more times, just to make sure. She even ran down the stairs, through the kitchen and out to the area where the gnome corpses had been. The entire dock area was devoid of life. There was no one and certainly no sign of Philomeen. There was only one conclusion to be made. Philomeen was dead, and the runepowder was gone with her, washed away into Ebonlake somewhere. Should they go looking for it? Had it sunk to the bottom? Not knowing what else to do, she headed back up to where she'd left her friends.

But Omeluum knew what had happened, and it wasn't exactly as Tav had deduced. As Philomeen dashed out of the Contemplation Chamber, a mace smashed her hard in the stomach, knocking the air out of her lungs. The gnome and runepowder keg fell hard to the ground, but no one within the room heard a sound. With the explosion ringing in their ears and boulders falling on them, Philomeen's wounding went unnoticed.

Morghal stood over the incapacitated gnome. Philomeen struggled against the pain. She couldn't breathe. She fought to understand what had even happened to her. Morghal had enlarged herself, and she had struck hard, aiming for the belly so that there would be little to no blood on the ground and so that the gnome spellcaster wouldn't have the ability to cast spells.

Morghal had only a few moments before Philomeen recovered. Thus, she grabbed the runepowder keg and set it in a dark corner on the far side of the doorway amidst other decrepit crates and barrels. Then she ran up to the gnome and kicked her while she was down, just to keep her from retaliating. After that, she grabbed her by the hair from behind and dragged her swiftly to the torch holder on the right side of the door. Taking it, she continued on to the gap with Philomeen in tow.

Once there, Morghal threw the gnome to the ground at the edge. Then she tossed the torch to the other side. Next, she picked Philomeen up and threw her across. A moment later, she took the metal pole Pona had used to vault across, and she bounded over as well.

When she landed, Philomeen tried to retaliate by kicking at her. She hoped to send Morghal tumbling backward into the gap. Morghal, however, dodged to the side. She threw the pole down, took her mace out, and brought it down hard on the gnome's right shoulder. There was a bone-snapping crunch, and Philomeen turned several shades of purple. She tried to scream, but the lack of air in her lungs prevented her. She only gurgled instead.

Morghal hopped over the gnome and kicked her in the kidneys. Then she grabbed her hair again, lifted her up, and smashed her in the face. When Philomeen threw her arms up to protect her head, Morghal clubbed her in the chest, shattering her ribcage and puncturing her lungs. When Philomeen started coughing up fountains of blood, Morghal threw her to the ground and kicked her towards the edge. Philomeen raked the path, trying to scramble to a safer place, but the stone was too slick.

Morghal dropped into a crouch, put her mace away, and took up the metal pole as she looked at Philomeen with a calm, sadistic grin. "Well, now," she said as the gnome squirmed. "Doesn't this just seem right? I mean, wouldn't want to make a liar out of Tav when she tells poor, 'beloved' Laridda that you're dead, now, would we? Best if we make it true, I think. Besides, the world is much better off without you." Then she took the pole and rammed it into Philomeen's shoulder, shoving her towards the edge. Philomeen tried again and again to find purchase, but her own blood made that impossible. She clawed at the path even as Morghal shoved her off. She couldn't even scream as she died.

The duergar cleric then heard Tav coming, and she fled to the stairs and down them to take cover in the darkness of the rockslide. Tav eventually ran by her, not even noticing she was there. Morghal could sense it. Tav was oblivious to the truth. She firmly believed the runepowder keg was down in the lake with Philomeen. Perfect! Now, all she had to do was wait. Tav would return to her companions, and they would eventually leave to either continue what they were doing or to go in search of the keg elsewhere. They would not likely think twice about searching anymore in the immediate area. After all, why would they? They'd already checked those crates and barrels outside the Contemplation Chamber. There was no need to look again.

When they were gone, Morghal would return and retrieve the runepowder. She had big plans for it, now that she knew of its existence - plans that involved the total destruction of the abomination known as Grymforge. It was only a matter of time before the ancient fortress, temple and city were no more.