

Baldur's Gate 3

Book 4

Ascension of the Mastermind

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Fan fiction story written by GM4Him



Prologue - Kelemvor's Hall

Wynari had just arrived, but she was unsure exactly where she was. 'How much time has passed?' she wondered. 'I haven't seen Kethryn or the others in forever. What happened to me? Did Myrkul send me into another plane of existence? If so, I'd like to go back now please. This place sucks.'

She looked around her. Everything was flat, bland, and empty. Even the sky was a sheet of gray. There was nothing of interest no matter which way she went. It was as if she was in some sort of endless desert. But ahead, she finally came upon SOMETHING. At first, it was like a tiny speck on the horizon. As she drew nearer, it enlarged and transformed into a city with a crystal spire that rose up out of the center.

Though she was happy to have at last arrived somewhere, she was rather disappointed as she continued towards the gates. Like the landscape around it, the city was gray and cold and lifeless. It was as if someone had simply sucked all color out of her reality, leaving her in a world of dismal loneliness. She also got the distinct impression that it was as if the city didn't care who came or went. There seemed to be no true defenses.

And then, she began to hear something. Moaning. Wailing. The distant cries of suffering. She froze. 'Where is it coming from?' she wondered. Shivers ran down her spine. She continued once again towards the gates. The suffering grew louder. She found herself trembling from fear. 'Is it coming from the city itself? What is this place? Is it a realm of suffering?

"Welcome to the City of Judgment," a chilling voice said off to her left and up on the battlement above the gates. Wynari froze. She was weaponless, but she knew the Flame Blade spell. Didn't she? Why weren't the words coming to her?

A half-orc-like apparition hovered there, and she swallowed hard. 'I am GROSSLY unprepared for this. I don't know what's happened to my weapons and equipment, but I am entirely inappropriately dressed for this occasion. Silvanus protect me!'

"There is no need to fear, Petitioner. I am not here to harm you. Lord Kelemvor resides over this place now, and he is not one who enjoys the suffering of souls." He gestured around him with a thick-fingered, ghostly hand.

"What is that moaning and wailing, then?" she asked, still fighting to stop trembling. She only hoped her voice didn't portray her fear.

"Alas! The Wall of the Faithless has once again been erected," said the phantom soldier. "The Faithless were freed at one point from the wall, but this created a great deal of trouble. Lord Kelemvor was forced to return the Faithless to the wall to end such strife and preserve the order of things. They once again form the bricks which are held in place by the sickly greenish mold. Their souls then slowly dissolve away to nothingness - unless the wall is attacked and raided, that is."

Wynari was struggling to grasp the situation. She instinctively reached up and began to play with her short, curly, medium brown hair. It only came down to about her jawline. She stopped at once. Something wasn't right. She couldn't really feel her hair. It was there, it seemed, but... "Wait. Wait. I'm sorry. Where am I?"

"The City of Judgment. The City of the Dead. The Fugue Plane. Lord Kelemvor's domain. Ah. You have yet to realize that you are dead. This is common."

"Dead? Dead?!" Wynari was appalled by such a notion. "I'm not dead. I... I feel fine. I feel great, in fact. No pain at all."

"That is because you have no body with which to feel the typical pains of the flesh," said the half-orc ghost. "Nevertheless, trust me. You were once a human female. Now you are quite dead."

"No," said Wynari. "This isn't right. I'm supposed to go to Silvanus when I die. I'm supposed to go to the House of Nature."

"I see. You are one who has not been taught much about the journey to the afterlife," said the guard. "There are many like you also. Come within. There will be a guide assigned to you to explain." He then gestured behind her. "My duty, you see, is to guard the gate, and there are numerous souls that approach constantly."

Wynari turned to see a brass-scaled dragonborn female sauntering towards the gate. Like the half-orc, she was ethereal. Her twin horns jutted straight back and to either side near the tips. She had slender features, and she wore a grim look on her face. She continued on to the gate, walking right along beside Wynari, without even giving her a moment's notice.

Panic began to set in. This caused her to notice that she wasn't breathing. This made her panic even more. 'Gods no! I... I really AM dead. I... Kethryn! All my friends... Myrkul killed me. I'm dead. I'm gone. No! I need to get back. I need to help them against the Absolute; against the Dead Three. Everyone I truly love and care about is back there. I don't want to leave them. I...'

A druidic woman approached. She was human with blonde hair and blue eyes. Her hair fell lazily down her back. She walked with grace and elegance. "Greetings, Wynari. Welcome to the City of Judgment. I'm Kitrina. I will be your guide here. They sent me out here to get you, for you seem to be reluctant to enter." She took her by the hand. Wynari gasped. It wasn't like the touch of a flesh and blood hand. It was as if her mind registered that she was being touched but there was no true sensation.

"This can't be," said Wynari. She wanted to cry, but tears weren't coming. "I can't be dead. I don't want to be dead."

"No one does," said Kitrina, and she began to lead her towards the gates. "That's the point. Death is to be feared and not loved. If everyone loved death, they would gladly end their own sufferings in life so that they could hasten to the afterlife. This would bring an end to the entire system that Ao and the other gods have established. No living beings means no worshipers. No worshipers means death to all. We can't have that, now, can we?"

They neared the gates. Wynari tried to pull away, but Kitrina held her fast. "Who are you? What are you?" Wynari asked.

"I am what they call a False," said Kitrina with as warm a smile as she could muster. "We are the souls of those who chose unwisely in life. We are the ones who either failed to serve our chosen patrons or who betrayed our faith. Lord Kelemvor fairly judges us, and for those of us who he deems good, he assigns us to various tasks all throughout the city. We dwell here forever. For those who he deems wicked and truly unfaithful, he punishes severely. Most of the individuals you see within the City of Judgment are either Petitioners like you who are waiting for their deities to send someone to claim them and take them to their domain, or they are the False like me who dwell and work here for all eternity."

"As for the most wicked," she continued, "they are transformed into larva and cast out. They are utterly rejected, and most end up in the Hells to become devils or demons."

"And the Faithless on the wall?" asked Wynari. They were now well and truly within the city.

"They are those who refused to choose a deity," Kitrina told her. "At one point, Kelemvor had mercy on them. Now, no longer. If a soul can get away with not serving any deity at all, then many will choose this path to obtain absolute freedom in life. They would answer to no one, and they could live however they pleased. Again, the more who did such things, the more detrimental it would be to the entire system. The gods would be weakened or even die out entirely, and all life and afterlife would end."

"So the Faithless suffer as bricks of the Wall of the Faithless. It is a testimony to all that it is vitally important to choose a deity to devote yourself to in life. Failure to do so will mean eternal suffering and eventual annihilation. Oblivion. You truly are uneducated in the afterlife. Aren't you?"

"I was a girl of the wilderness," said Wynari. "I was taught to venerate Silvanus and to be one with nature. I had very little contact with people, and we hardly ever talked about the afterlife."

"Well," said Kitrina. "This is also common, believe it or not. Usually only priests concern themselves with the details of what happens after a person dies. I'll keep it brief, as most I've met truly don't care that much when all is said and done."

"When you die, your soul passes to the Fugue Plane, where we are. Before it gets here, however, it takes a journey through the Shadowfell. This is usually where souls can become lost, imprisoned, etc. It is certainly a dangerous journey, but few remember it at all. This usually takes roughly three to ten days according to time on the Material Plane. This is why if a person is going to cast Raise Dead, they have roughly ten days to do so."

"Wait," said Wynari. "Does that mean I am no longer eligible for being raised from the dead by that spell?"

Kitrina gave her a comforting look. "There is still time, but it is fleeting. Once you are claimed by your deity, resurrection becomes much more difficult. This is why it requires a more potent resurrection spell. The soul has passed on to its final resting place in the realm of their deity, so calling that soul back to the Material Plane is a much greater feat."

"So I haven't been claimed yet. That means I can still have Raise Dead cast on me," said Wynari, feeling a bit more relieved.

"This is true, but know this," said Kitrina. "Your deity Silvanus has already sent someone here to claim you. They await you in Kelemvor's Hall in the Crystal Spire. This is where you must go. They are awaiting your arrival."

"Is it normal for souls to be claimed in Kelemvor's Hall?" Wynari wondered.

Kitrina shook her head. "No. Truth be told, this is highly irregular. In fact, more than one deity is attempting to claim you, and their messengers are both in Kelemvor's Hall awaiting your arrival. I believe they are both arguing over you. Both are pleading their cases to Lord Kelemvor to claim you."

"Two?" said Wynari. She didn't like the sound of that. "Who is the other?"

"Auril, The Frostmaiden."

“Auril!” said Wynari. “No! She can’t have me. She doesn’t have a right to me. I didn’t serve her willingly. I serve Silvanus. I want to go to Silvanus’ domain.”

“You will have to take that up with them in Kelemvor’s Hall,” said Kitrina with a somber expression. “I am in no way qualified to assist you in this. But be blessed with the knowledge that at least you are being fought over. There is not just one deity who wants you. There are two. At least you won’t dwell here forever.”

“Please. Take me there at once,” said Wynari, and Kitrina nodded in reply.

“Follow me.”

The City of Judgment was nothing like what Wynari would have expected. Gray homes. Gray buildings. All appeared to be made of cement blocks roughly six to eight inches wide, maybe eighteen inches long, and roughly a foot high. Everything was uniform. There were no deviations. It was as if each structure had been manufactured on an assembly line. The whole city was without art and without variation. The streets were perfectly straight, forming a precise grid.

But the worst part was that there was no sound. It was worse than walking through a library. Even her own movement was silent. She had no heartbeat. There was no breathing. Other spirits flitted about doing chores, but every single action could be seen but not heard. No music. No laughter. No voices at all. Nothing. It was unnatural. It was unnerving. It was, to Wynari, a living nightmare. To someone who was used to living in forests where every little thing made noise, she felt as though the afterlife was an extreme form of punishment.

She tried to focus on something else. ‘There are SO many different races here; races I’ve never even seen.’ An elephant-like person walked by. He only gave her a cursory glance. There was a cat person sweeping steps, for no apparent reason. It wasn’t like there was any wind or dust or... ANYTHING! There was no mess. Everything was sterile. Additional movement caught her attention. She glanced to her left to see a weird, horned frog thing. There was a turtle humanoid, a serpent thing, an insect humanoid, a minotaur, a werewolf, a fiery fish that floated in midair, a plant person - ‘Oh! A couple of humans!’ - a satyr, some lizardfolk, a ‘What the heck is that? I can’t even describe that,’ and so much more. This helped her stay sane. It was the only life in an otherwise completely lifeless domain.

‘This sucks,’ she thought unhappily. ‘Who developed this system anyway? Was it Ao? Did the gods come up with this? I was a good person, wasn’t I? Why should I have to endure something like this? You know what would be better? I died. Silvanus loved me enough to send his messenger to claim my soul immediately. So I’d go straight from death to the House of Nature. No tendar journey through the Shadowfell where I could potentially get lost or kidnapped or imprisoned. No arrival at some incredibly nightmarish dead city place where there is no color or life. Just death and then a paradise that awaits me, instantly.’

‘Gods! What if I really ticked Shar off and she somehow snagged my soul before I managed to get to the Fugue Plane? Wait. Didn’t I tick off Shar? I mean, I was with the Afflicted. We helped Shadowheart betray Shar. We desecrated her temple and even went to the Shadowfell to free the Nightsong. I mean, did I? Was I there? Why can’t I remember things?’

‘And didn’t I help Halsin save that boy - what was his name? My memories are fuzzy. Why can’t I remember things so well? Either way, we lifted Shar’s curse upon the land. We raided the Shadowfell twice. And then, my soul traveled through the same place to get here. My soul was at serious risk.’

‘Do the gods not love us? Do they not appreciate us at all? Are we so invaluable to them that the only thing they care about in regards to us is that we worship them? Are we nothing to them but a source of everlasting life? They only care about us because we feed them via our devotion? If they loved us, if they truly valued us, why would they let us go through this?’

She shook herself to clear her thoughts. ‘It is what it is, Wynari. Be careful. You don’t want to be judged a Faithless. You’ll wind up on that wall, dissolving away to nothingness over who knows how many lifetimes.’

‘But if only there was one supreme deity who loved us so much that he would not allow such things. No one could contest his will. If only there was a Supreme God who we could all believe in who would be perfectly just and righteous and fair and good. He would ensure that those who were good were immediately taken to be in His domain forever without fear that we might get captured and abused, trapped in soul coins and burned in infernal engines, used in perverted, magical experiments, and the like. Because He loved us, He would protect our souls and ensure we would have a wonderful future.’

‘But we have no assurances in this system. Even those who have mercy are reprimanded for it. There is no supreme deity. Even Ao is not omnipotent, and Ao doesn’t care. Right? And Kelemvor was so nice and caring and considerate of the souls here, but his goodness was considered bad because it might hurt their precious system. The gods might lose more devotees and worshipers. Oh no!’ Her thoughts dripped with sarcasm.

‘So the gods aren’t good enough to gain worship and devotion simply by their own merit? They have to essentially manipulate people through fear of winding up on that nasty, revolting wall? Silvanus, forgive me.’

Forgive my thoughts. It's just... I really hate this. I wish you had simply taken me from my body and protected me every moment until I reached the safety of your realm.'

'Now I have Auril contesting over my soul?' Panic threatened her again. 'What if she wins the debate? What if she wins the argument? What if Kelemvor judges in favor of her instead of Silvanus? Will I truly have no choice but to go with her to her icy domain? Must I be her slave forever? Is there no deity who can save me from such a fate? Is there no one powerful enough to stop this? Even though I was so good, even though I risked everything to save so many, will I wind up suffering forever at the whim of the gods?'

'And what if the servant that Silvanus sent isn't a very good one? What if Auril's messenger is a better speaker, more convincing? What if Auril's messenger is more persuasive? Silvanus! Save me! PLEASE don't let her take me away. Send a host of your best warriors to fight for me. Would you do that? Do you love me enough to fight for me? Do you love me enough to send your best?'

'Send your best! Send someone who loves me enough to even die for me, if you must. Love me that much. Love me enough to send your best. Don't leave me or forsake me. PLEASE! SILVANUS!'

'Have faith, Wynari. Have faith,' she told herself. 'That's what faith is about. It's about trusting even when faced with uncertainty. It's about believing the best in someone no matter what.'

At last, they arrived at the Crystal Spire, and the first thing Wynari noticed was that it was smoked the color of topaz. From a distance, it had looked transparent, like a diamond, but now that she was standing before it, she thought it looked rather dull and boring, like everything else.

She sighed. "Why is everything so bland? Does Lord Kelemvor hate color?"

"That is a silly question," said Kitrina. "Lord Kelemvor is the Lord of Death. Death is lifeless. Color is life. Color is appealing. Lord Kelemvor saw wisdom in making his domain as unpleasant as possible without being as vicious and terrible as his predecessors. Cyric, for example, once ruled here. He made the Fugue Plane and the City of the Dead a nightmare. No one wanted to come here, even to wait for their deities to send someone to get them."

"I'm glad I didn't die during that time," said Wynari.

"You should have," said Kitrina. "If you had died back when you had been frozen, during the Time of Troubles, you would have come here roughly around the time Cyric rose to power as the God of the Dead. When did you get frozen? Wasn't it around that time?"

"I can't remember," said Wynari. "Things aren't coming to me."

"That is common also," said Kitrina. "In fact, as you may have observed, some souls here are living in a state of timelessness. They don't even realize they are dead. We may have even explained everything to them, but once they were put in one of the homes to wait for their deity to send someone, it is easy for the soul to return to various daily activities they did in life. To them, they are still in their homes before they died. They are still with their loved ones. They won't realize the truth until their deity's messenger comes."

"But enough," added Kitrina. "We're wasting time. Kelemvor's Hall awaits you." Then she led Wynari through the nondescript iron doors.

Stairway after stairway, hallway after hallway, they seemed to go on forever. Again, it was all the same. There was nothing new or different. If she tried to navigate through the tower on her own, she'd certainly get lost. After all, there were no signs. There were no landmarks. There was nothing that would tell her which hall led to which chamber or which staircase.

Then, suddenly, they arrived at a set of double doors. Once again, they were plain and without decoration of any kind. Kitrina stepped up to them and knocked loudly. A few moments later, a deep and powerful voice spoke. "Enter." Kitrina shoved on the doors, and they opened without much effort at all.

Beyond was a mostly circular, grand hall with many columns on either side supporting a domed ceiling. Dead center was the throne of Kelemvor. It rested in a shaft of light that descended from a window above. The throne and chamber were just like everything else. There were no decorations or designs. It was all just plain, gray stone.

Sitting on the throne was a humanoid with a dark gray cloak that blended in with the surroundings. Only a few wisps of his silver hair could be seen beneath his hood, and his eyes were pupil-less as they peered out through the silver mask he wore. Under the cloak was a silver, tattered suit of armor, and resting at his right side against the back of the throne was a cold, steel sword.

Before him stood two individuals. The first was a druidic, male angel with handsome, human-ish features, curly brown hair, and warm, green eyes. He wore green and white robes, and he carried a flaming scimitar and wooden shield. The other was an elvish creature of pure ice with feminine features. She appeared to be an animated sculpture rather than a living being.

Kitrina gestured for Wynari to continue. She then bowed and exited. 'Talk about intimidating,' Wynari thought. 'I don't even have someone standing with me as an advocate. It's like I'm facing judge, jury, and executioner all by myself.'

She glanced at the druidic angel. 'I wish you cared enough about me to rush to my side and stand WITH me. If only I had an advocate who would stand WITH me - No! Before me! To be my shield and champion and protector - when the judge was determining my fate. I feel hopelessly alone and utterly terrified, and it's like none of them even care.'

Once again, she wished for a better option in regards to a deity; someone who genuinely loved her enough to do whatever it took to save her from some terrible fate she had no control over - someone who was willing to suffer for her if necessary; to fight for her tooth and nail. 'It would have been nice if Silvanus himself had come here to protect me and fight for me. It would be nice if he loved me that much. But who am I to him? I'm just another soul in the grand ocean of souls that serve him.'

'I wish Kethryn were here. At least then I'd have someone who cared. I'd have someone who would fight for me even if it was against gods and angels and such. Even if we were both doomed together, at least I wouldn't feel so completely alone and helpless and... and unloved and worthless.'

Kelemvor spoke, chasing away her thoughts. His tone was unfeeling. It was purely matter-of-fact. "You are Wynari Nell, former Druid of the Circle of the Moon. You were once a druid of the north. You became the wielder of the Heart of Auril. You served her as you sought to obliterate your enemies. You essentially became Auril's Chosen and an avatar of her."

"Then you were frozen for over a century. You became an experiment of the illithid. You were one of the individuals who call themselves 'The Afflicted' who challenge the might of the Cult of the Absolute. Because of this, you were temporarily freed from Auril's power. And so, you became Faithwarden of the Emerald Grove. You used Auril's power to free yourself from the illithid tadpole that infected you. Finally, you were slain by the avatar of Myrkul."

He gestured to his right. "This is Saracist, servant of Silvanus." He gestured to his left. "This is Vildicil, servant of Auril. You have been summoned to my hall so that I may pass judgment on you. It seems more than one deity is demanding your soul, Petitioner, and your choices in life have not made this decision easy. What say you in your own defense? How do you plead?"

Wynari could not speak. Her fear had escalated to heights she never even knew existed. The way Kelemvor summed up her life, it truly sounded like she was a False. She had betrayed Silvanus to serve Auril. She had betrayed Auril to return to Silvanus. And yet, in the end, she had only really served herself and her friends. She had only ever actually cared about what SHE wanted from beginning to end.

Her mentor was killed, so she was willing to do whatever was necessary to get revenge because of the pain SHE was enduring. She served Auril and used Auril to get HER revenge. When Auril no longer served HER, she rejected Auril and wanted to be free of her. Even still, she used Auril to free HERSELF from the mind flayer tadpole. Then she utterly rejected Auril altogether.

But Auril had served HER so SHE could get HER revenge, and SHE had forsaken Silvanus because Silvanus wasn't giving her the power to get the revenge SHE wanted. But when she no longer wanted Auril, she returned to Silvanus and trusted that he would forgive her so that SHE could live with him in his realm where SHE wanted to be forever after she died.

Even then, even after all that, it was about what SHE wanted. Kethryn was in trouble. Then he was dead, and SHE was willing to do just about anything to save him; to bring him back. Sure, she SAID she was continuing with the Afflicted to help free them from the Absolute, but the truth was that she was partially doing it for herself. She wanted to save the only man she'd ever loved.

After that, it was about saving Kethryn. He still had the tadpole in his head. In order to save him, she had to continue with the others. 'Well, that's not entirely true. I DO care about everyone else. I love the Afflicted - most of them. Well, some of them. Kaedyn, Vexir, and Ryth-Shan, there's no doubt. Wyll seemed to get better after he was no longer lying and hiding things from us. But he did try to steal the stupid githyanki weapon, and he was willing to kill for it. Karlach... She also lied to us, but she never betrayed us. And now that she's herself, I like her even better. Gale I could take or leave. He also tried to kill to get his hands on the weapon. Shadowheart... Well, she annoys the crap out of me, but she finally committed to something. Finally. Maybe. Did she? Are we sure?'

'Astarion, I definitely don't like. Lae'zel as well. But what are we even doing? People who tried to kill us are now part of our group. Enemy of my enemy...? Zrathentil, Dritar, Minthara... I mean, when push came to shove, we actually formed an alliance with them in the end. I don't trust or like any of them.'

'Tav, Rina, Pona, Gorm and his sister, they were all good, but I hardly knew them. Same with Aelun, Vlyn, and Fi. Halsin was good. He seemed genuine, and he really did help us a ton. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have

been free of the tadpole. So MOST of the Afflicted I genuinely wanted to help, and I still do. I want to go back. I want to be with them again.'

And that's when she realized that she had somehow been thinking aloud. Either that, or Kelemvor was laying her thoughts bare for all to hear. Thus, he said, "Your love for your companions is not in question. It is clear that you would remain with them to the end to try to help free them from the Absolute. What we are trying to determine is whether or not you belong here as a False, whether you should be given to Silvanus so that his servant might take you to the House of Nature, or whether you belong to Auril."

"She belongs to my lady," said Vildicil. "When she needed a deity the most, she trusted Auril. She wholeheartedly accepted the Heart of Auril, and she became an extension of my goddess. She certainly belongs to her."

"I object," said Saracist. "Most of her life was in the service of Silvanus. The Heart of Auril was like a cursed item. She gave in to temptation. Nothing more. She made some stupid mistakes, and she has paid for them. She risked much to save the Emerald Grove from the Shadow Druids. She only used Auril as a clever weapon and tool, and Auril gave her powers gladly in an effort to ensnare Wynari and keep her for herself. It should be plain to see, Lord Kelemvor. Wynari Nell LOVES nature and LOVES life and forests and waterfalls and animals and all the wonders that the House of Nature has to offer. She does NOT love, nor has she ever been devoted to, winter or ice or cold."

"Oh please," an elder voice said, echoing across the hall. "This bickering is pointless. It is a waste of time." Wynari turned to see Withers, the talkative skeleton - or was he a mummy? He had dwelled in their camp for a time. She remembered him, though she hadn't really liked him much. He unnerved her, and any time she drew even remotely close, the stench of death nearly crippled her.

Withers was a mysterious creature. He seemed very old and wise, and he clearly possessed powers that were beyond anything she'd ever experienced. And yet, he was passive. He went about and did his own thing, and he sat and observed as the Afflicted did all the work. For a time, he'd been away on his own business, but then he returned when they needed him the most - in the fight against Ketheric Thorm and the avatar of Myrkul.

Withers wore a tunic with leather shoulder pads. On his head was a golden metal mesh cap. It was like golden vines intertwining this way and that, and they connected to a single ring that encircled his forehead. Another ring angled under each eye. These connected across the bridge of his nose to yet another, central ring. Another band framed the cheekbones which were covered by stretched, decrepit flesh. Yet another band rested under his jawline and came up across the center of the chin. This formed a "T" shape.

Besides this, he wore bandages that were wrapped around his bones as if they were his skin. And yet, only his head, chest, hands, and feet had flesh of any kind on them. He had eyelids also, and he had lips. But he had no nose. All of his flesh was gray except for his eyeballs which looked very much alive.

"Ah, Jergal," said Kelemvor in relief. "Thank you for coming. How are the Afflicted faring?"

"Well enough, for now," said Withers. "They are nearly at Baldur's Gate. Troubles on the road seem to have slowed them down, or they would have been there sooner." He cast an accusatory glance at Vildicil.

"Why is HE here?" asked the ice woman sharply. "What does he have to do with this situation?"

"Much," said Kelemvor. "What do you have to say, Jergal, on Wynari's behalf?"

"The matter is simple enough," Jergal replied as he came to stand next to the druid. "She desires to return. Everyone in this chamber wants her to go back to her body to help fight the Absolute that threatens us all. The only reason this argument is occurring is that there is one here who desires for her to pass on to their deity's domain BEFORE the Petitioner is resurrected." He gestured to Vildicil as he said this.

"But bringing her back to her mortal life is the ultimate solution to this surface debate which is not the true cause of this argument. Isn't it?" Jergal continued. "This petty squabbling is in regards to which deity has a right to claim her. So let her live her life a little longer. Let her prove beyond a doubt whom she loves and serves and has faith in. Then there will be no question as to which domain she belongs to."

Kelemvor showed no sign of emotion. "What would you have me do, Jergal? Shall I resurrect her myself?"

Jergal bowed his head slightly. "Why not? It is within your power, and you have cause. Do you not? Also, am I not resurrecting their allies whenever they pay me? How is this different? I serve you. I resurrect the dead so they can continue the fight against the Dead Three. You would merely be doing the same. Or, if you feel this is breaking some rule, allow me to do it, and it shall be done. I will go to the Afflicted, and I will raise their dead for coin; just as before."

"It is against the rules," said Vildicil with hostility. "It is time for her to go to her final resting place, and Auril is who rightfully owns her soul now.."

“Do not try to deceive the Lord of Death,” said Jergal scoldingly. “Auril wants Wynari to reclaim the Heart of Auril that Halsin still carries. He entrusted it to no one, and so he carries it upon himself even as the group draws ever closer to their destination. Auril knows this. Auril wants to try to cheat; to bend the rules.”

“What?” said Wynari. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. “How?”

“Your body is presently frozen by your companions,” Jergal explained as he turned slightly towards her. “They are preserving your body in the hopes that they can still use Raise Dead to bring you back.”

“The power of Auril, once again used to save Wynari’s life,” Vildicil proclaimed. “You are only building upon my case. She belongs to my lady.”

Jergal ignored her. “If Auril can claim your soul here, she can take you off to the Land Under Eternal Ice, her domain. Once there, she will transform you into an ice spirit, as she does with all her Petitioners, and you will forever be under her dominion. Your very identity will be stripped from you. You will no longer remember who you once were in life.”

“Then I REALLY don’t want to go there,” said Wynari. “I want to go to a place where I retain my identity and memories.” She was desperate as she said this, her voice pleading. “What good is it to continue living but not be yourself? What kind of afterlife is that? Losing my memories and becoming something else is no different than oblivion. Either way, me, myself and I cease to exist. I won’t be Wynari Nell anymore. I’ll be someone or something totally different.”

“I don’t want to be transformed into some mindless ice spirit puppet,” Wynari wept as she now turned towards Kelemvor. “I want to be ME. I want an afterlife where I know who I am and I can be with the people I love.”

Kelemvor raised a hand to silence her. “And what is the purpose of this?” he asked Jergal. “Why would Auril do this?”

“There is a cleric of Auril who is presently following the Afflicted. She has been tipping off the Army of the Absolute so that they are constantly slowing them down. The cleric is waiting until Wynari’s soul is transferred to Auril’s domain. Then she will raise Wynari from the dead using a more powerful resurrection spell. Auril will grant permission for Wynari to return to her body, but the plan is that Auril will do everything she can so that Wynari will retain her memories of the afterlife - but only as an ice spirit. By doing so, Wynari will continue to be under her command even if she is returned to her mortal shell.”

Jergal addressed Wynari once more. “Think of it. How much more effective would you be, Wynari Nell, if you used the Heart of Auril once more to fight against the remaining two Chosen of the Absolute and then the Absolute itself? THIS is what Auril wants. Auril will control you. Then YOU will claim the three Netherstones and YOU will ascend to goddess-hood by claiming the power of the Absolute for yourself and for Auril.”

“Then SHE could turn the world to ice. SHE could transform everything into a winter wonderland. All beings would worship her. She would be supreme. She would be the Absolute through you, her avatar.”

“And this is what they all want, isn’t it?” Jergal paused and waved his hand about as if implying every god in existence. “Yes. Bane and Bhaal desire to betray one another and to be the last of the Chosen of the Absolute so that their particular puppet can wield the three Netherstones alone. Then that Chosen’s god would become the Absolute - deity of all - ousting even Ao and ascending to omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence by stealing all worship for themselves.”

“Does Silvanus want this too?” asked Wynari. “Does he want me to be his Chosen so he can claim the Absolute for himself as well?”

Jergal cocked a hairless brow. “What do you think? Do you know Silvanus so little? Is he a deity with such ambitions?”

Wynari’s jaw clenched, and she fastened a steely gaze on him. “I THINK I know Silvanus, but do I REALLY know him?” She gestured to Saracist and Vildicil. “They are contesting for my soul. Is Silvanus here himself to save me? Does he love me enough to come and fight for me? If Kelemvor decided to give me over to Auril, would Silvanus weep for me? Would he even care?”

“This experience has shown me that everything I know about Silvanus is based on what others have taught me,” she continued. “I channel his power through me - the power of nature - but do I REALLY know him? No. I know what others have told me about him. There’s a difference. I would LIKE to believe Silvanus would not want to use me to gain absolute power - and all of his teachings imply that he would not - but I have no true assurances. Do I?”

“No,” she answered her own question rather than allowing anyone else to. “I have no assurances because I don’t REALLY know him. If I did, I wouldn’t be standing here right now wondering why he hasn’t come himself, in person, to fight for MY SOUL. I thought he loved me. I thought he valued me. I thought I meant something to him. I thought I was more to him than just another worshiper who helps feed his eternal existence.”

Though she had no physical form, tears flowed down her cheeks. They were visible representations of her grief and deepest feelings of loss and betrayal. They were not actual tears. Her own sense of value and worth were dying, leaving her feeling as if she was nobody to anyone - anyone but maybe Kethryn and her friends. This left a gaping hole in her heart, for she had believed that the Tree Father knew her and loved her personally.

"Calm yourself, Child," said Jergal, and he even put a mummified hand on her shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Have faith, lest you be judged Faithless. Silvanus knows you. Silvanus does care. It is all about the rules, you see. The gods are not allowed to come themselves to Kelemvor's Hall to battle for souls. Imagine what kind of disaster that could turn into. Ao does not allow it." He then gestured towards Saracist and Vildicil. "Rest assured that both deities have actually sent individuals who are powerful and charismatic representatives. They are fiercely competing for your soul. Auril is doing so to gain the Netherstones. Silvanus is doing so because he doesn't want to lose you."

Saracist bowed in her direction. "All is forgiven, Wynari," he said in reply. "Fear is natural. Facing this kind of judgment is terrifying. Of course you will have doubts when Kelemvor is determining whether you will face a fate you would despise or a fate that you have dreamed of your whole life." He turned to Kelemvor. "Please, Lord Kelemvor. Overlook her doubts. Do not proclaim her Faithless. And do not allow such a tragedy to befall her that she should fall into the icy clutches of the Frostmaiden. I beg you. Silvanus has forgiven her and welcomes her into the House of Nature."

Wynari continued to cry, though she tried hard to fight against it. "I'm sorry," she said. "I don't mean to be this way. I just..." She fell to her knees in defeat before Kelemvor, laying her emotions bare. "I just don't want to be Auril's. I want to dwell in the beauty of Silvanus' realm. I want to be with those I love forever. I want to live amongst trees and animals and rivers and waterfalls and beautiful lakes and streams and fly with birds and stand on mountains and... And I want to be with Silvanus. I want to be with the Tree Father."

"And I don't want the Absolute to win," she continued. "I want to stop her - er... it. I want to help my friends be free of it forever, and I want to free everyone who has been infected by it. I want us to live well and die and be in paradise forever with our loved ones and in the realms of our hearts' desires. I want to be able to visit my friends and talk with them whenever we want, and I want us all to be happy and full of joy and peace and fulfillment for the rest of all eternity."

She could no longer see anything because of her tears. The world around her was blurred out. "Please, Lord Kelemvor. Please don't let me go to Auril's domain. I don't want to dwell in that icy hell. Please let me be resurrected so that I can be with my friends again. Please! I beg of you." Then she fell forward, prostrating herself before the Judge of the Dead.

For several moments, there was silence. And then, all at once, Kelemvor spoke. "So be it."

Then Jergal began to chant. There was a flash of light which remained, blinding her to everything. Energy coursed through her body. She felt herself lifting into the air. Then she was whisked away at incredible speeds. Everything blurred. There was a mixture of light and darkness. She heard moans and screams but also angelic voices singing. The scent of flowers wafted around her.

She took in a sudden, deep breath and held it as she blinked rapidly. Her head was swimming. Her pulse thumped in her chest, her neck, even in her fingers and toes. She felt her feet land on the ground, and all at once Kethryn came into focus. He grabbed her in his arms and held her tightly, supporting her. She was weak and shaking, cold and yet numb at the same time. Her legs didn't seem to want to work at all.

But none of that mattered. She could feel Kethryn's warmth. She could feel the warmth of the sun. She could hear the birds singing and smell the flowers in bloom. She could hear water lapping in the distance. She could hear Scratch barking happily. She could smell the scent of body odor and animals and insects and muck and dew and... and NATURE!

She found the strength to hold Kethryn as tight as she could, thankful to be alive. Then she let her tears flow. "I'm alive," she said with more joy than she thought she could ever have in her life. "I'm alive. I have another chance. I can get it right. I can prove myself. I can change."

Then she saw Withers standing there, almost like a statue. He was watching her closely. "Most mortals do not get this opportunity, Wynari Nell," he told her. "Kelemvor even allowed you to keep your memories of your experience in his hall. Make the most of it."

And with that, he turned from her to Kaedyn, the half-drow cleric of Tyr who was their leader. "And now," he said with a business-like demeanor. "Let us finish this task. Give me the coin, and I shall bring the rest back to life as well."

Kaedyn handed him a small pouch that clanged. "Should be all there," he told the avatar of the ancient being who had once been the God of the Dead in times long passed. "We acquired it on the road during random encounters with the cult. Thank you again, Withers. There's no way we would have been able to save them in time."

It has been a tenday since we left Reithwin, and our journey has been slow no matter how fast we tried to travel. The cult has..."

"I am aware," said Withers with a nod. "And time is yet short. I have somewhere else I need to be when I am finished here." He then chanted, and Ryth-Shan returned to life. He chanted again and Isobel returned to life. He chanted a third time and Dritar returned to life. Lae'zel helped support Ryth-Shan. The aasimar, Aylin, supported Isobel. Only Dritar crumpled to the ground unaided.

Wynari could only watch with tears of gratitude in her eyes. Withers turned to Kaedyn. "Now, I must depart. Arabella is waiting for me. But I will return again to you periodically to assist you when the time is right. Farewell." And without another word, he turned and sauntered off.

Wynari withdrew from Kethryn, standing at last on her own two feet. As she did, a green-scaled flying snake flew through the air and wrapped herself around the druid's waist. "Ziva!" Wynari gasped, and she held her hand out so the snake could slither up her arm and suspend herself upright to look eye-to-eye with her closest companion. "Am I glad to see you."

"Well," said Kethryn. "The feeling is mutual. I was growing desperate to find a diamond in time. Minthara is traveling with us, and she can cast Raise Dead. All we needed were a few diamonds. But we only had a tenday, and it was nearly spent. Just in time, Withers came along."

"Withers," said Wynari, and she looked off in the direction he had gone. He was completely out of sight. "Jergal."

"Jergal?" said Gale suddenly. "Did you just call him Jergal?"

Wynari met his intrigued gaze, and she nodded. "He came to my defense," she told them. "He came to Kelemvor's Hall."

"You REMEMBER going to Kelemvor's Hall?" said Gale, astounded. "You simply MUST tell me more."

Wynari gave him a crooked smile. "It's a dreadful place," she told him. "I never want to go back there again. If I do, I want to make sure I am going to a good place."

"What do you mean?" asked Kethryn, a look of concern etched into his features.

She sighed, allowing some of her stress to be expelled. "It's crazy, Kethryn. It's absolutely crazy." And with that, she told them all the tale of her visit to the City of Judgment and her encounter with the Lord of the Dead.

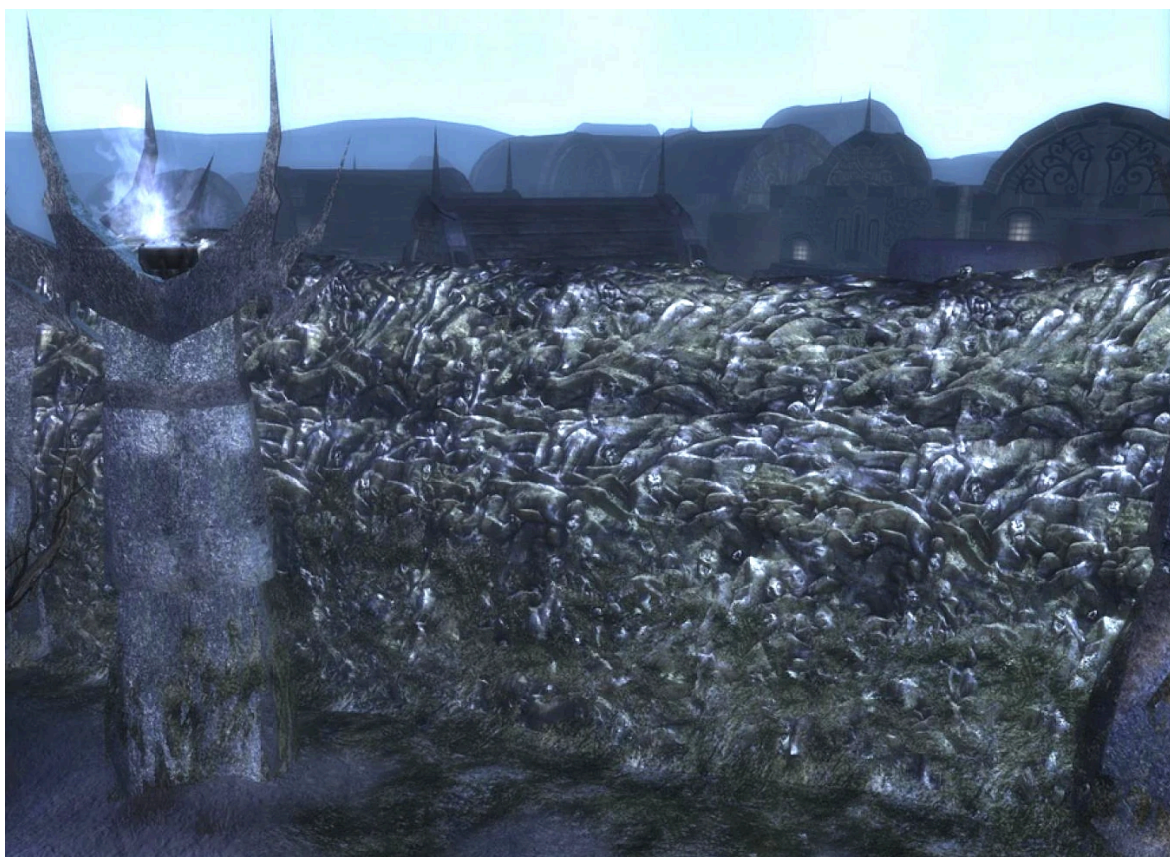
Wynari



The Fugue Plane



The Wall of the Faithless



Half-Orc Ghost



Kitrina



Kelemvor



Saracist



Vildicil



Withers (Jergal)



Chapter 1 - Wyrms Lookout

Kaedyn walked at the front of the party. He was a half-drow cleric of Tyr, roughly six feet in height with ebony skin, dusty blonde hair and purple eyes. On his left cheek was a dragon tattoo that was a soft blue. He and his companions had been through so much since their abduction by mind flayers over a month ago, and he found himself with very few weapons and equipment after all was said and done. He wore a suit of magic plate armor, an amulet of Tyr around his neck, and he carried Ketheric Thorm's Warhammer - a lightly enchanted weapon with obsidian at the base of the head - and a plain shield. He had a pack with some additional items, but it wasn't much.

The group had parted ways with those who they were escorting. This included the tiefling refugees who had survived their ordeals at the Emerald Grove and in the Shadow Cursed Lands. It also consisted of pretty much every Harper, survivor, and Flaming Fist that had been at Last Light. All that remained was the Afflicted, but their numbers had swelled unimaginably. Even those who had died during their fight with the Avatar of Myrkul were resurrected, increasing their number to roughly thirty.

He glanced over his shoulder as they approached an old ruin on the southeastern edge of Baldur's Gate. Beside him, there was Vexir, the female drow battlemaster, and Cryshell, the drider child who was the offspring of the phase spider matriarch of Moonhaven's underground. Behind them came Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel, male and female githyanki. Ryth-Shan was a beastmaster who had grown up separated from his people in the wilds of Faerun. Lae'zel was an eldritch knight who had been wholly devoted to her goddess, Vlaakith, until recent events shook her faith. At Ryth-Shan's feet was Scratch, the white-haired, pointy-eared dog and Shpri, Lae'zel's red spider familiar.

Vexir was five-foot-ten with long, wavy, white hair parted to the left and pulled back into a low ponytail. She usually wore a hard expression, though lately this was less and less of a norm. Since becoming one of the Afflicted, Vexir had learned to enjoy life, including her romantic relationship with Kaedyn. She had red eyes that could pierce through the darkest night, and in spite of her career choice and the many fights she'd been in, she didn't have a scar on her face. Elsewhere? That was another story.

Besides her pack of mundane items, Vexir wore an exquisite suit of scale armor, metal gauntlets of defense, and Spider Step Boots that made her immune to getting stuck to spider webs. She could dance across them just like any spider could. Under her armor, she wore a plain beige top with "V" collar and black trousers. Strapped to her pack was a light crossbow and quiver of bolts, and she almost always carried her most prized possession - Everburn, the greatsword once wielded by the devil leader Zalk who tried to kill them on the nautiloid. As its name suggested, it was always burning unless she sheathed it. And yet, it only burned those she willed it to.

As for Cryshell, she had grown so much bigger in a tenday. She was now half the size of a typical, adult drider. In fact, they had to fashion new clothes for her to cover her torso. She wore a tattered leather tunic along with leather wrappings around her arms. Vexir also allowed her to now carry daggers, one at each hip. Fiovey, one of the party's rogues, was teaching her how to use them; among other things.

Ryth-Shan was just over six feet tall, and he weighed roughly two-hundred pounds. He'd lost a bit of weight from their time together, and he was a bit leaner than when he'd first met them. He had greenish-yellowish skin riddled with brown spots all over his cheekbones and the sides of his face. He liked to keep his hair buzzed short all around with long aqua-colored braids pulled back from the front into a ponytail at the base of the neck. His eyes were virtually the same color as were the light runes he had tattooed on his chin and brow. His ears were smoothe and pointy, like an elf, and his nose was flat like most of his kind.

He was better equipped with half plate armor, an amulet of Speak to Animals - which allowed him to be able to always speak to and understand animals - a pouch at his left hip containing his Thieves' Tools, a quiver of arrows on his back along with a Psionic Longbow, courtesy of his own people at Risen Road, leather boots, a pack of numerous items on his back, the Nature's Snare quarterstaff he stole from the druids of the Emerald Grove which sometimes entangled victims in thorny vines, and a shortsword at each hip. Even though he'd been resurrected less than a day ago by the strange undead named Withers, the magic did not have a lingering effect. As such, he was walking about just as if he'd never died at all.

Lae'zel was similar in color to Ryth-Shan, but she had long, brown hair that was pulled back with numerous braids woven into the sides. These were tucked behind the ears, and they dangled past her shoulders. She had light brown eyes, serrated, pointy ears, and deep brown tattoos, like warpaint, across her cheekbones and around her eyes.

She wore Thorm's Reaper's Embrace armor which gave her the appearance of having an undead creature for a body with a wide-open toothy maw as the collar. It looked like the armor was just itching to close upon her head and chomp it to bits. She also wore metal gloves called "The Brainrain Gloves" and the Blade of Oppressed Souls, a magic longsword, at her left hip; both of which she'd acquired from the mind flayer colony under Moonrise Towers. On her back was the Blooded Greataxe she acquired from the Emerald Grove, a light crossbow with quiver

of bolts, and a magic spear. Besides these, a dagger stuck out of her right boot, and she had a shortsword at each hip.

After them came Gale and Shadowheart who were clearly growing closer as they traveled to the city. The pair had become practically inseparable. Gale had a familiar as well. This was a long-haired white cat with green eyes named Will-o'-wisp. He often cast Dragon's Breath on her, allowing her to breathe various elements at her foes while Gale continued to hurl other spells. They made quite the powerful duo.

Gale was a dashing good looking human male with combed back wavy brown hair that fell to his neckline and a trimmed beard and mustache. He wore robes known as the Poisoner's Robes, Bracers of Defense, a pouch with spell components, and a Helmet of Acuity that was made of magical leather that did not impede his spellcasting abilities. In fact, it aided him against spells.

On his back was a modestly sized pack filled with items he would need to use to scry scrolls, and, of course, his spellbook along with a few other necessities for the road and some odds and ends he'd picked up in his travels with the Afflicted. He carried the Quarterstaff of Crones he'd acquired from Ethel, the hag, in the swamps south of Moonhaven, even though he wasn't particularly fond of it. It was, after all, a rather creepy weapon with a bloody skull at the head that had twisted horns jutting out of it. If it didn't aid him with his spells, he'd have likely gotten rid of it long ago.

Shadowheart was a half-elf female who once had almost black hair. It was now pure white, like the silver-white of moonlight. She kept it pulled back in a high braided ponytail that trailed down her back with a decorative metal piece that kept it in place. In the front, she parted her bangs down the middle, allowing them to frame her nearly flawless face. A faded scar ran across her right cheek and up over the bridge of her nose. She wore half plate armor, and she carried the Moonlight Glaive, given to her after she'd betrayed Shar. It, along with her white hair, was a sign that she was forgiven by Selune and accepted into her faith. Besides this, and the pack on her back filled with mundane gear, she carried a light crossbow, a Psionic Mace, acquired by the githyanki on Risen Road, and a common shield.

Next was Wyll and Karlach. Wyll was a dark-skinned human male who had been transformed into a devil - well, sort of. He looked like a devil, but he was still very much human. He had numerous scars all over his face, and he had a sending stone instead of a right eye. His left eye had turned red after his patron, Mizora, had changed him. She had given him this look after he refused to kill Karlach. It all had to do with a deal he made with the blue-skinned she-devil, and Mizora had been working for the archfiend Zariel.

Karlach was a tall and muscular red-skinned tiefling barbarian who had been owned by Zariel, and she had fought demons on the front lines of the Blood War in Avernus. When she got an opportunity to escape via the nautiloid that had abducted the Afflicted, she took it. Zariel didn't like her prize demon hunter escaping, and she demanded that Mizora send Wyll, the Blade of Frontiers as he was called, to kill her.

Karlach no longer had a heart because Zariel had taken it from her. In its place, the Archfiend of Avernus had installed an infernal engine. Exhaust holes were embedded in Karlach's shoulders, along with numerous other places, and when she lost her temper, the fires of Avernus burst out of those ports. Even when this was not occurring, Karlach burned hot. Getting close to her had once been an impossibility, but thanks to an expert tiefling blacksmith and engineer, Dammon from Elturel, the engine was temporarily subdued. She could now touch her companions without fear of melting their flesh off.

Wynari and Kethryn, female and male humans, walked behind them along with Tav (female high elf), Rina (female dwarf), Pona (female halfling), Izar'la (female githzerai), Gorm (male half-orc), and Sharayla (female half-orc), Gorm's sister. They had become a close-knit group. It was almost as if they were their own separate unit, for they worked and fought well together. Wynari had a flying snake companion named Ziva who liked to ride either wrapped around her waist like a belt or on her shoulder. Sharayla had a bestial spirit that looked like a ghost bear which sauntered along behind her.

Wynari was modestly equipped with a magic scimitar called the Perpetually Poisoned Scimitar. She also carried a magic shield, a totem of Silvanus on a leather cord around her neck, a spear in a sling on her back that was called Visions of the Absolute, and she wore the Circlet of Nature on her head that she'd acquired from the Emerald Grove. She used to wear half plate armor, which was taboo by most druids because it was mostly processed metal and not natural armor, and she used to not care what people thought about it. However, after her visit to Kelemvor's Hall, she chose to remove it and give it to Minthara, who needed some better armor anyway. Better to show her pure devotion to her deity than to chance upsetting him by wearing such a thing.

Kethryn was a soldier; a champion and folk hero. He had straight, blonde hair parted slightly off-center that fell to his neckline. He also had a trimmed beard and mustache just around his mouth and covering his chin. He had warm, blue eyes and a friendly smile, which he was displaying without ceasing ever since Wynari was resurrected by Withers. Kethryn wore Dark Justiciar Plate Armor with the emblems defaced and scratched to

obscurity, and he carried a Poisoned Curved Longsword of the Viper which he'd acquired from the Cult of the Absolute in the Underdark. Besides these, he wore a Ring of Psionic Protection which helped shield him from the Absolute, and he carried a magic shield and a longbow called Stormbow.

Tav looked like a soldier, but she was actually a cleric of Selune. She had straight, golden blonde hair pulled back in a high ponytail that trailed down her back to between her shoulders. She wore her Amulet of Selune proudly around her neck which rested upon the breast of her ancient magic chainmail armor. Upon her head, while in combat, she wore, like a helmet, the head of Grym, the adamantine golem that they'd vanquished in Grymforge. Presently it was strapped to her pack. At her side was Phalar Aluve, a drow longsword blessed by Eilistraee, and she had convinced Minthara to return her adamantine shield to her that she and Zrathentil had stolen from her. Besides these items, she had a pack full of camping gear, religious items she'd collected during her travels, vestments, potions, scrolls, and so forth, and strapped to her pack was a defaced Sharran Crossbow.

Rina was a ranger with blue eyes, brown hair pulled back into a low bun and long bangs that framed her face. She had freckles that dotted her cheeks and nose, and she tended to wear a serious, sharp-eyed expression. Like Tav, she was fairly well-equipped from all the items they had collected at Grymforge and in the Underdark. She wore half plate armor and a pack laden with survival gear, scrolls, smithy tools, and excess gear like a magic suit of padded armor called Mind Over Matter. Strapped to her pack was a battleaxe, her Exterminator's Greataxe, a plain longbow, a quiver of arrows, a shield, and a shortsword. She liked to carry her Firestoke hand crossbow with a quiver of bolts at her right hip. The Exterminator's Greataxe was also within easy reach.

Pona was a dark-skinned halfling with braided, pink hair pulled back into a ponytail that fell to just past her shoulders. The sides and back of her head were shaved, making it seem like she had a mohawk. She had brown eyes with soft golden tattoos around them. Another tattoo, on her forehead, was a circle with the four points of a compass sticking out of it. It almost looked like a twinkling star. Besides her pack with camping gear, she wore Boots of Speed that she'd acquired from a deep gnome in the Underdark, and she wore plain, common clothes. In a pouch tethered to her belt, she carried some tools to disarm traps and pick locks along with a Potion of Hill Giant Strength.

Izar'la was what some would consider a prettier version of Lae'zel. Her skin had a slightly greener tone to it, but she had similar spotted markings on her face in roughly the same locations minus the tattoos. These spots were darker as was her black, straight hair that she parted to the right. It fell to her shoulders in layers and looked rather soft and healthy. Like Lae'zel, she had serrated, pointy ears, but unlike the gith warrior, she had a small scar above her lip on the right side and another above the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were a shimmering gray, and she liked to wear a modest amount of makeup.

Like the others, she wore a pack laden with camping equipment along with a few scrolls. She had worn Drow Studded Leather in the Underdark and in the Shadow Cursed Lands, but this was stowed in her pack to avoid having the sun ruin it. Instead, she wore simple traveler's clothes, and she had a light crossbow strapped to her pack, a silver dagger at her right hip, her Sussar Dagger at her left, a crystal in her pouch on her right hip, which was her spell focus, and she used Mourning Frost, a magic staff attuned to ice, as a walking stick. It also acted as a spell focus. Around her neck was the Amulet of Dominate Monster that she'd used to control the behir at Grymforge.

Trotting at Izar'la's feet was an intellect devourer, of all things. It was called "Us", and it had been on the nautiloid when Kaedyn, Vexir, and Ryth-Shan had first escaped their pods. Ryth-Shan thought he'd killed it when it was stuck inside a man's head, but apparently he hadn't. The creature was trapped in a cage in the mind flayer colony below Moonrise Towers. Izar'la had freed it, and ever since, it had followed her around as if she was its new master. Us was mostly purple with a green underside, making it look quite different from typical intellect devourers.

Gorm was a bald half-orc barbarian with dark green skin, pointed ears, blood-red eyes, a wide mouth, tusks protruding from his lower jaw, a pudgy nose, and more scars on his body than anyone could count; including a vertical one above and below his right eye. He was incredibly large in size, standing at about seven feet tall. He was equipped with half plate armor, a magic heavy crossbow, a sling with five javelins in it, a quiver of bolts, and a handaxe slung at each hip.

Sharayla's skin was more olive in color. She had messy, wavy, black hair parted down the middle. It fell both in the front and back down to the crest of Silvanus on her chest that she had woven into her leather armor. She had pointed ears and twin tusks, similar to Gorm's, jutting out of her lower lip. Her eyes, also like Gorm's, were red. Her lips were pink, and she had swirling burgundy tattoos all over her face and neck. At her left hip was a scimitar, and she had a quarterstaff in her right hand with a sprig of mistletoe tethered to it; her spell focus. Unlike everyone else, neither she nor Gorm carried a pack.

Zrathentil and Minthara came after them. Zrathentil was a blue dragon-blooded sorcerer drow male who had altered his appearance numerous times since he'd first met some of the Afflicted. At present, he'd adopted the same look he'd had when he and Kethryn first met aboard the nautiloid. And so, he had jet black hair combed back

behind his pointy ears. His shimmering blue scales covered his cheeks and encircled his cold, gray eyes, covering his forehead as well. He liked to wear dark makeup which made his eyes look as if they were floating in dark pools. Cascading down on each side of his face and neck from his scales to his neckline were runes which glowed a soft blue.

Zrathentil wore robes he'd taken from Moonrise Towers, allowing him to somewhat blend in should they encounter more cultists of the Absolute, and he had a circlet on his brow. This was called the Circlet of Mental Anguish. At his right hip was the Sword of Screams, a rapier he'd acquired from True Soul Nere at Grymforge, and he had a magic dagger at his other hip. Two more daggers protruded, one from each boot. In his right hand, he carried the Staff of Arcane Blessing, and he had a pouch with a crystal spell focus in it and a light crossbow on his back with a quiver of bolts. Also on his back was his pack, but unlike many of the others, this was filled more with magical items he'd acquired from his travels than it was with survival gear. Around his neck was the Amulet of Mass Animate Dead, and on his feet he wore the Disintegrating Night Walkers boots; also a "gift" from Nere.

Minthara was a female drow who had once been a leader of the Cult of the Absolute. Through an incredible and convoluted series of events, she had been freed from her tadpole and was now no longer under the cult's sway. Like Zrathentil, she had also changed appearances a few times. In order to play the part of Matron Trynza, she'd had to crop her hair short. She hated that look and decided to revert to her former appearance; with the help of Withers when he'd last visited them. (Apparently, his magic also extended to transmuting someone's general features via a magic mirror - for coin, of course.)

And so, she was a five-foot-ten, purplish-grayish skinned dark elf with long, white hair parted down the middle. It was loosely pinned in a bun at the back of her head with bangs trailing down to frame her face. On the left side of her neck, there was a black, web-like tattoo. This was the symbol of House Baenre. It was almost like an "A" with a pentagram overlapping the top of it. The base was the crossbar of the "A". The lines of the tattoo were curved inward, not straight, which gave it the web-like appearance.

Minthara's gear consisted of a suit of half plate armor, a magic shield, a rapier, and an Amulet of Misty Step. She also carried a pack on her back which contained a breastplate she'd worn before Wynari gave her the half plate, and she had some other mundane supplies. She used to have an Amulet of Lolth along with an alms box and other religious items devoted to the Spider Queen, but during their journey to Baldur's Gate and their visit with Withers, Minthara requested that he magically change her from cleric to paladin. This was something else he previously neglected to tell them that he could do - once again for coin, of course.

Due to everything that had happened to her, Minthara had decided that she was actually no longer truly devoted to Lolth. It had been bothering her ever since she'd first pretended to be Trynza. Though she'd been using Lolth's powers to fight against the cult, she felt that it was all fake. Her heart wasn't into it. And so, when Withers told them that he could change their skills and abilities for money - and that he was going to resurrect Wynari and the others who had died - she didn't even have to think about it. Her Raise Dead spells were no longer needed, and the party could use a paladin anyway since Karlach had become a barbarian.

Besides, Minthara had a lot of vengeance pent up inside that she wanted to unleash upon her enemies. Thus, she made a vow of vengeance both against the Cult of the Absolute and her own house and people; meaning against Lolth as well since Matron Mother Baenre was essentially the Voice of Lolth. Exactly what deity she followed now, no one knew. Perhaps she didn't even know herself.

Both Zrathentil and Minthara had once been enemies of the Afflicted, trying to kill them and/or use them to gain freedom from the tadpoles, but after everything that happened in the Shadow Cursed Lands, they had put aside their differences, for the time being, to help end the more dire threat. Recently, the Afflicted had learned that Minthara was pregnant with Zrathentil's child. What that meant for the party and for her own ability to fight the Absolute, who could say? Either way, she didn't seem concerned.

Behind them walked Dritar and Astarion. Dritar was a golden-scaled, yellow-eyed, winged dragonborn with a long tail. He was a Shadow Druid from Cloak Wood and a druid of the Circle of Wildfire. He had two larger horns that jutted backward, and a beard of smaller horns that dotted his lower jawline. Down the center of his head was a "V" shaped patch of golden needle-like hair. They were so coarse that they could be construed as additional spikes or horns. He was only equipped with a plain scimitar, a spear, a sling with a pouch of stones, a totem, and leather armor.

He had died during the fight against Thorm, and many had debated whether they should even resurrect him. In the end, the decision had been made that he was still one of them, for he was infected and had somehow been freed from the power of the Absolute by the Astral Prism that they carried. Otherwise, they likely wouldn't have brought him back, for Dritar had proven to be a vicious and sadistic murderer who very much hated anything that had to do with civilization. Arriving at Baldur's Gate was not making him feel at ease.

Astarion was a pale elf with wild, semi-curly white hair and red eyes who had been turned into a vampire spawn. He wore dark studded leather armor, a magic cloak called the Vivacious Cloak, and an amulet shaped like a cross with a skull embedded on it called the Amulet of Lost Voices. This allowed him to speak with the dead. He had a dagger in each boot, a magic rapier at his left hip, a magic shortbow on his back with a quiver of arrows, a fine shortsword strapped to each thigh, and a plain shortsword tethered to his pack on either side. On his right hand and forearm, he wore the Gauntlet of Tyla'zhus, a mind flayer relic that allowed him to blast enemies with a ray of heat from a distance or torture them with a sapping sting if he touched them.

Because of the mind flayer tadpole in his head, his vampirism had changed drastically. It was almost as if he was alive again and yet he still had a number of his vampire powers - like he'd been transformed into a dhampyr. He could walk on walls, bite people and drink blood, and running water hurt him. However, he could move about in full daylight, and he could enter buildings without invitation. He had betrayed the Afflicted, joining Zrathentil and Minthara and later Ikrain - the vile white-scaled dragonborn sorcerer who was known as Dark Urge - but like the drow pair, he had rejoined the party so they could all work together to defeat the cult. Not too many were happy about him being in the party either, especially since he'd been willing to work with the treacherous Ikrain.

Halsin, Isobel Thorm, and Dame Aylin were behind them. Halsin was an elf who was as big as Gorm. He had straight brown hair combed back which fell to his shoulders. There were a few smaller braids interwoven within. On the right side of his face there was a swirling tattoo that started at his hairline, passed down to his eye, angled down away from his eye to the joint of his lower jaw, and then looped back towards his chin and up almost to his lower lip. This was partially to mask some of his facial scarring he had, though clearly visible deep claw-marks were etched into the left side of his forehead. Like most of the other druids in the party, he was lightly equipped. He only wore the Oak Father's Embrace hide armor, a scimitar at his right hip, a dagger at his left, and he had a totem of Silvanus in his pocket and the Paleoak Quarterstaff Wynari loaned to him in his right hand.

Halsin was the former archdruid of the Emerald Grove, a safe haven of druids near Moonhaven and near where the nautiloid had crashed all those weeks earlier. He'd had a good number of his abilities stripped from him via magical means by some artifact a goblin had been wielding. After the battle for the grove, Halsin had agreed to join the Afflicted in their fight against the Absolute. He was a powerful, incredibly muscular, elf who had lived in the area ever since he was a child. He had known Ketheric Thorm personally back when the man had been sane and had been a champion of Selune.

Isobel Thorm was the resurrected daughter of Ketheric Thorm, and she was a devout cleric of Selune. She was a pale half-elf woman with silver-white hair parted to the left. It fell to her shoulders in feathery waves. Around her head was a thin band with a four-pointed star in the center made of silver. This symbol was similar to the tattoo Pona had on her forehead.

Isobel had thick, dark eye shadow that still looked as if it had run from tears she had shed. Was it an intentional look? None of the Afflicted could say, but since she'd been resurrected by Withers, she hadn't fixed it. At the corner of each eye, she had a tattoo that was the same shade as her makeup, and each was shaped like the head of a glaive. She wore leather armor that was gray and light blue and silver with silver star pendants on her belt and crescent moons fastening leather shoulder pads in place. On her back in a sling was a gleaming golden-headed spear.

Aylin was an aasimar, but she was also the daughter of Selune. That made her a Demi-Goddess of the Moon. She wore holy plated armor which entirely enclosed her frame. Her once sickly flesh was made healthier when she was freed from the soul cage in the Shadowfell, but she still bore the scars that marred her once perfect beauty. An angelic helm with nose guard and twin fin face guards rested upon her head. Her golden hair cascaded out from behind and draped down her shoulders both in front and in back. Almost always in her right hand was a gleaming greatsword that shone as brightly as the full moon on a clear night. Pure white feathery wings were folded up on her back like a cape. Even these had armored guards at the joints. Her armor was decorated with many Selunite symbols including crescent moons and stars and shimmering silver. Down the front, trailing from her belt, there fell a blue sash. It was also decorated with many stars.

Aylin watched Astarion and Dritar, Minthara and Zrathentil, at all times. She didn't trust them even remotely. Still, the aasimar paladin was full of joy because her darling Isobel was alive once more. When everyone descended into the depths of the mind flayer colony below Moonrise Towers, Isobel had remained above only to be killed brutally by the Dark Urge.

Next were a few individuals who seemed to have no souls. These were "hirelings" provided to them by Withers. The first was Zenith Feur'sel, a high elf cleric. He had brown hair parted down the middle in long waves to his collar. His hair was thick enough to cover up his pointed ears, giving him an almost human appearance. He wore a simple chain shirt and carried a mace and shield.

The other was Brinna Brightsong, a halfling bard. She had light skin, blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, and hazel eyes. She wore colorful padded armor with white cross patterns within brown patches and blue and brown striped sleeves that ran vertically down her arms. She carried a simple rapier and played the violin.

Supposedly, both did have souls, and those souls wanted revenge on the Absolute. They wanted to still help fight to destroy the cult even though they had perished while serving it. They were the only two surviving hirelings who had joined the Afflicted in their fight against Thorm.

Last of all came Aelun, Vlynrifane, Fiovey, and Jaheira. Aelun was a half-elf male, a ranger and sorcerer with dragon blood flowing through his veins. He had red scales that just barely peaked up from under his collar. He had light brown, almost blonde hair and a trimmed beard and mustache. He wore adamantine scale armor, a radiant mace called the Blood of Lathander at his right hip, and a sun sword's hilt tethered at his left hip. This sun sword was called Dawnbringer, for she was a sentient weapon with a personality of her own - one that absolutely hated the darkness. She didn't talk much, but when he used her in battle, she tended to issue battlecries and demands for her enemies to die. On his back was a pack filled with potions and scrolls, and a longbow and two shortswords were also strapped to it.

Vlynrifane was a pale, gray-skinned drow from the Jungles of Chult with somewhat unkempt, curly, white hair that flowed past her shoulders. She had turquoise eyes and blue markings on her face that encompassed her eyes and jabbed downward like curved blades. There were a few similar tattoos on her forehead, and she had another on her chin that looked like the top portion of the star tattoo Pona had on her forehead. Few knew this, but she also had a tattoo on either side of her navel.

Vlyn, as she was often called, wore magic scale armor - the scales being natural and not metal - and she carried the Shield of the Wood Woad. On her back was a Vicious Longbow, and around her neck was an Amulet of Silvanus. She was now the one who wielded Ketheric Thorm's moonblade, and she was bound to it. This was at her right hip, for Vlyn was left-handed. She also carried the Netherstone he'd had, though this was kept a close secret by the Afflicted.

Fiovey (or Fi, as she was often called), was a kitsune, a fox humanoid who could change form into a human. But she was trapped in human form by the mind flayer tadpole. In fact, it seemed to have stripped her from all of her other kitsune abilities, turning her fully human. The greatest injury to her personally was the loss of her tails, for she had once been a kyubi; a multi-tailed kitsune who focused either on magic or martial arts. Fiovey had been working hard to become a powerful illusionist as well as a rogue. Now, she was a simple arcane trickster with maybe half the power she once possessed; if that. Still, she loved to laugh and tease, though Kaedyn knew that she also had a dark side.

Fi had snow white hair pinned up into two buns atop her head with long bangs framing each side of her face. Well, at least, that was what she typically did with it when she wasn't wearing her favorite, battered, black witch's hat. When she wore the hat, which was almost all the time since she'd found it, she let her hair down so that it fell to between her shoulder blades. It used to be very curly before the tadpole, but now it was quite straight. She had a fair complexion and round ears with a round face and slanted, light brown eyes.

Fiovey didn't like to carry a lot of her things in her pack. Instead, she preferred to hide her items within hidden pockets that she created for herself within her Drow Leather of the Absolute armor. It looked pretty much identical to Minthara's old custom plate armor - and, in fact, it was designed after it by craftsmen in the cult - but it was made entirely of treated and hardened leather. It didn't offer as much protection as Minthara's plate, by far, but it was certainly better than typical leather and it still didn't hinder movement and stealth. It also didn't have the flaw that most drow armor had. She could wear it out in the open sunlight without it losing its magical properties.

The armor was primarily gold and deep purple. The leather breastplate, backplate and pauldrons were fastened to a second layer of form-fitting leather that covered her arms, shoulders, torso, waist, hips, buttocks, thighs and went all the way into her Boots of Misty Stepping. The bodice was sleek and shiny looking with countless overlapping, shifting patterns which looked almost like the blades of curved scimitars clashing. Each blade was either gold with purple trim or purple with gold trim.

Just like with Minthara's old custom suit, at the center of the breastplate, resting just above her heart, there was a unique symbol of the Absolute. It was a dark purple skull with horns on each side of the head and a smaller one in the center. It rested atop a dark purple web. The spider body was shaped like a skull. Three golden lines were painted on the forehead.

Hidden amidst her equipment, Fiovey had two daggers (up her sleeves), a githyanki shortsword (at her left hip), a Shortsword of Life Stealing (at her right hip), a Sniper's Bow (on her back), a quiver of arrows (also on her back), numerous scrolls and potions of healing (in hidden pockets), and her Thieves' Tools (also in hidden pockets). One of the only things in her pack was her old leather armor that she'd acquired early on in their journey after escaping the nautiloid.

And finally, Jaheira was a half-elf female who wore a mostly evergreen tunic, brown pants and brown boots. A wide belt was wrapped about her waist complete with a chain of golden medallions fastened to it. The tunic was tucked under it, trailing down between her legs in the front and back all the way to her shins. The chest piece of the tunic was red with gold embroidery. A soft blue collar peeked out from under, and she wore leather bracers and gloves. On her back, she carried two scimitars.

She bore some signs that she was nearing the end of her lifespan with numerous minor wrinkles and slightly stretched skin. She had light blonde hair that was woven into many braided strands trailing back behind her pointed ears and down to her shoulders. A few strands on either side hung in front of the ears.

Aelun, as it turned out, was the descendant of Darson, Gorion's Ward and one of the original Bhaalspawn. Thus, he was the grandson of Bhaal, God of Murder. Jaheira was Aelun's mother who was the leader of the Baldur's Gate Harpers. There was no doubt in Kaedyn's mind. Aelun and his mother were intricately wrapped up in the whole affair since Bhaal was one of the three gods that was behind the Cult of the Absolute. As for Vlynrifane and Fiovey, both women were fiercely loyal to Aelun. It was also now commonly known that Aelun and Vlynrifane were lovers.

Interestingly, Volothamp Goddarm had once been their companion since they'd left the Emerald Grove, but after arriving in Baldur's Gate, he chose to join everyone else in simply making their way right into the city. The Afflicted, however, were a bit reluctant to simply waltz right into the lion's den, so to speak. After all, they were afraid of Lord Enver Gortash who was the god Bane's Chosen. He had gained considerable power, and he would undoubtedly have them arrested on sight.

But Minthara, Zrathentil, and Aelun, in particular, feared Orin the Red, Bhaal's Chosen. She would also know them, and she was, according to Minthara, a vicious, cunning, conniving, sick and depraved, psychopathic killer. Of all the Chosen of the Absolute, Orin was the most terrifying. If she came for them, she would find ways to pick them off one at a time, leaving their carcasses diced into pieces and their blood and innards splayed about as if she were decorating the landscape with beautiful flower pedals. This was Minthara's colorful description.

The ruins before them were on multiple levels and sprawled out across the landscape. There was no main roof; just walls, some doors, a few rooms, and a lot of overgrowth popping up between stones that had once served as a floor. Ladders and stairs allowed access to upper levels that were best traversed with extreme care, and some areas looked like they might fall over if a gentle breeze blew through.

And yet, the place was perfect as their new camp. It was nestled amongst the trees and shielded from prying eyes. In spite of this, it provided an amazing, commanding view of the city of Baldur's Gate and the surrounding countryside from the crest of the hill that part of the ruins was built upon. In fact, it was fairly easy to deduce that the structure had once been a defensive outpost, used to monitor traffic all around the coast south of the Chionthar River. As Kaedyn looked about from that very hill with Vexir and Cryshell at his side, he could see just about everything within the camp as well as every path that led to it.

"Wyrms Lookout," Jaheira announced as she joined the trio. She had a thick Tethyrian accent that sometimes made it hard to understand her. Aelun and Vlynrifane were right behind her. "The Harpers and I have used this location many times in the past as a temporary escape. I still remember when it was actually a functioning outpost used by the Flaming Fist during the Time of Troubles."

"Do you really think the other two Chosen of the Absolute won't find us here?" asked Vexir.

Jaheira shrugged. "Who knows? It's as good a place as any, to be honest. I mean, what makes you think they won't find you anywhere in the city or anywhere in the vast countryside? You have tadpoles in your heads. They control the tadpoles."

"And yet, they seem to not be able to locate us," said Vexir. "After the nautiloid crashed, Minthara and the goblins couldn't find us. At Moonrise, none of the three knew where we were. So something is hiding us from them."

Jaheira shrugged. "Like I said, 'It's as good a place as any.'"

"You have no idea how much we really appreciate everything you've done for us," said Kaedyn as he looked out over the vast coastline. "I don't think we would have defeated Ketheric without you."

"Team effort," said Jaheira, dismissing the comment.

"I don't understand why we don't just go into the city," said Cryshell. "Jaheira has Harper contacts and allies. The rest of the people we escorted have gone in. Shouldn't we be able to slip in unnoticed amidst the crowds?"

Vexir tousled the girl's now very long, white hair. It was mostly disheveled, but she had two long braids that ran down her front. Her eyes had turned almost white, her pointy ears were serrated, and strange markings had mysteriously formed on her forehead. She was hardly recognizable from what she'd looked like only about a month ago when she hatched from her egg with her now deceased twin sister.

"The enemy will be watching for us," said Vexir. "If the rest of those who traveled with us enter the city without us, this may cause the Chosen to second guess things. They may expect us to enter via the docks, for example."

"In other words, it'll divide their attention," said Kaedyn. "Make it easier for us to enter after a day or so."

"We also need to decide who is going in and who is remaining here," said Jaheira. "Some will be more recognizable than others."

"Agreed," said Kaedyn. "And a smaller team will be far less noticeable."

"We've been debating this for days," said Vexir with a sigh. "Are we any closer to making a decision?"

Kaedyn shook his head. "All we've done is determine who shouldn't go."

"I still think the least well-known individuals who won't stand out in a crowd are our best hope," said Aelun. "And definitely people we can trust."

Vlyn nodded in Shadowheart's direction. "Also those who aren't being hunted. Shadowheart's Sharran enclave is somewhere in Baldur's Gate. They will certainly want revenge against her for what she did in Shar's Temple in Dark Moon."

"That actually does narrow down the list considerably," said Kaedyn. "If you think about it, that really only leaves a few people." He gestured at Vexir. "You and I have been the faces of this group since pretty much the beginning. Scrying eyes have certainly sent our images back to the Absolute and the Chosen. Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel will also stand out too much. Same with Izar'la. Probably not too many gith roaming around these parts."

"Shadowheart and Astarion both have people after them who dwell in Baldur's Gate," the half-drow cleric continued. "Wyll is well-known here, and he now looks like a devil. Karlach burns like a walking inferno. So of our original companions, Gale is probably the only one who can go. I doubt he'll stand out much."

"As for Tav and her group, Rina and Pona are not as well-known, I think. So they could go. Tav was a Chosen of Selune, and Shar's people might recognize her. Kethryn and Wynari... I'm not sure. A lot centered around the two of them when we were in the Underdark. But then, most of those who were involved are dead except Zrathentil, Minthara, and Dritar who are now with us."

"None of them are going," said Vexir with finality. "Zrathentil, Minthara, and Dritar, I mean."

"I don't think they want to," said Vlyn. "Especially Minthara. She is terrified of Orin the Red and she's pregnant."

"So Gale, Rina, Pona, and maybe Kethryn and Wynari?" said Aelun. "What about Gorm and Sharayla? Who knows them at all?"

"True," said Kaedyn. "But Gorm's a big guy. He kinda stands out. Same with Halsin and Dame Aylin. And Isobel... Need I say more?"

"Fiovay wants to go," said Vlyn. "I probably shouldn't. Same with Aelun. The Cult of Bhaal is looking for him, and being a drow, I still kinda stand out."

"Not as much as you might think. But the moonblade is unique," added Jaheira.

"Mage, ranger, monk, fighter, druid, and rogue," said Kaedyn. "That's not a bad party, if you think about it."

"I could go," said Cryshell. "I'll hide in the Ethereal Plane and only come out if I have to."

Vexir shook her head. "Too dangerous. The initial group needs to do some scouting. We need to know what's really going on and the true strength and numbers of our enemies. Right now, we have no idea what we're up against."

"So very true," said Jaheira.

"Who will be the team leader?" asked Aelun.

"Wynari," said Kaedyn in reply. "She isn't infected, so the tadpoles won't have any influence on her. We also know we can trust her."

"That's good," said Vlyn, lowering her voice. "Fiovay is also very trustworthy. I love her dearly. But she has her quirks and sometimes makes rash decisions. Better to have a leader with a level head."

"Plus she's infected," said Kaedyn. "The closer we get to the Absolute, the less I trust all of us who have the tadpoles."

"It's a solid plan," said Jaheira. "Now we just have to see if those we've picked are willing to do it."

"They will," said Kaedyn. "I have no doubt."

Later that evening, however, the look on Wynari's face was one of shock. She was speechless. Kethryn could only smile proudly with his arm around her. "You couldn't have chosen a better leader," he said to Kaedyn.

"I'm game," said Rina with a smile.

"Likewise," said Pona.

Gale seemed apprehensive, but at the same time willing. "I should probably visit the Stormshore Tabernacle in the Lower City. It's a temple of Mystra. All this is about the Crown of Karsus. She would know better than anyone what we should do to stop it."

Fiovay's smile was devious. "At last, we are returning to Baldur's Gate, and this time I won't have Aelun and Vlyn holding me back."

"You're the one I'm most worried about," said Vlyn.

Fi giggled. "Come on, Riri." Riri was another nickname for Vlynrifane, one that only Fiovay used. "You know when push comes to shove I get things done."

Vlyn laughed. "Somehow."

"Either way, I'm on board," Fiovay concluded. "I promise I'll behave, Wynni."

Wynari finally found her voice. "Are you sure you want me to be the leader? I've never been a leader. I'm more of a follower. I support. Others lead."

"You're the best one for the job," said Kaedyn confidently. "Don't you agree that someone without a tadpole should be in charge?"

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I suppose." And that's all she could find the words to say.

With that, the Afflicted enjoyed the remainder of the evening together, making what plans they could in regards to their future. The core team, led by Wynari, would investigate the general state of Baldur's Gate. They would find out what the Cult of the Absolute was up to, how much actual power they possessed, and maybe where their bases of operation were. They would also try to find out how active the Cult of Shar was, what Cazador was up to, and just how concerned they should be about both groups. If they could connect with the Harpers and let them know Jaheira had returned, that would also be a bonus.

Kaedyu



Vexir



Cryshell



Scratch



Shpri



Ryth-Shan



Lae'zel



Gale



Will-o'-wisp



Shadowheart



Wyll



Karlach



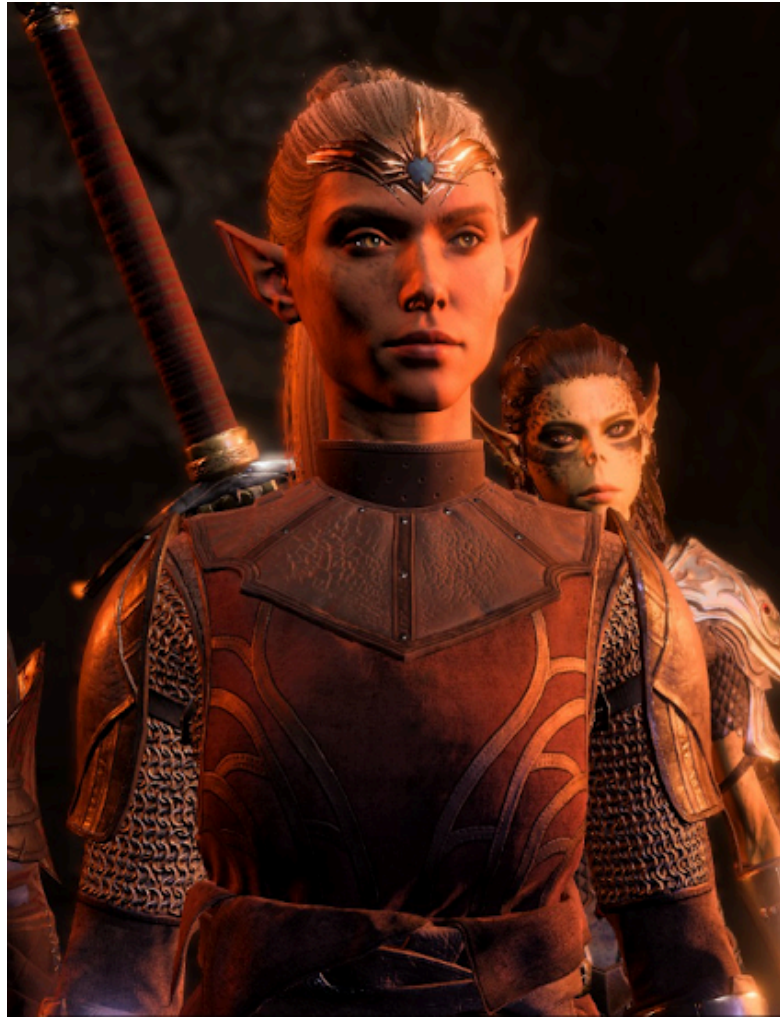
Kethryn



Ziva



Tav



Rina



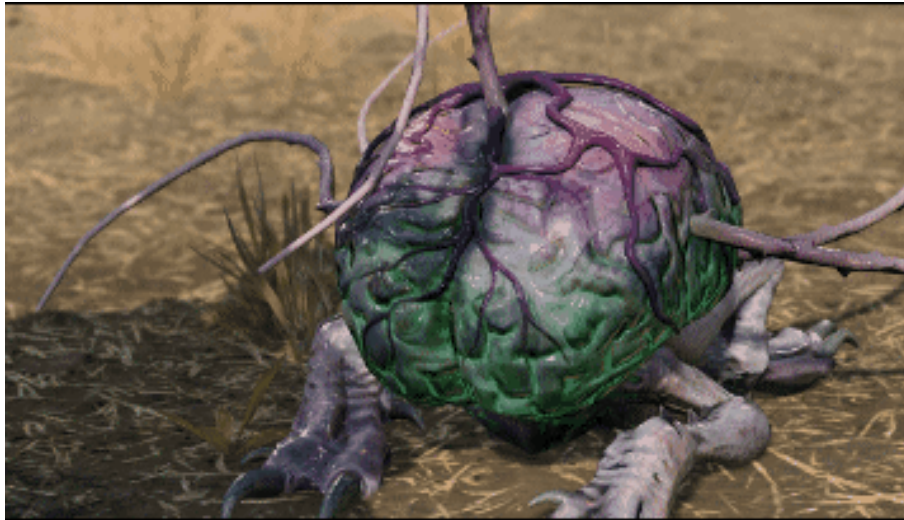
Pona



Izar'la



Us



Gorm



Sharayla



Zrathentil



Minthara



Dritar



Astarion



Halsin



Isobel Thorm



Dame Aylin



Zenith Feur'sel



Brinna Brightsong



Aelun



Vlynrifane



Fiovay



Jaheira



Chapter 2 - Scattered

But that night, everything went horribly wrong. Vexir and Vlynrifane were keeping watch. Suddenly, a portal ripped open, and without warning, githyanki appeared, charging across the camp straight for where the bulk of the Afflicted were sleeping. "Attack!" Vexir shouted with everything she had, and she leaped from her perch, dropping some fifteen feet to the ground. Her sword was already swinging, and the githyanki who was her target wasn't able to fully defend himself. Blood splattered. The gith cried out in pain, but he didn't fall.

Vlynrifane cast Entangle in the space between the portal and her companions. Vines sprang up and ensnared a number of her enemies even as her friends scrambled to their feet. She was about to jump down from her perch when HE appeared. She barely spotted him as he turned visible. The murderous Bhaalspawn sorcerer known as the Dark Urge came at her with twin daggers. He aimed right for her throat.

Ikrain was a white-scaled dragonborn with red eyes and seven horns jutting backward. He had six whisker-like spikes at the back of his lower jaw starting at the joint and stopping about halfway to the end of his snout. He often wore a sadistic smile that sent shivers down the spines of his enemies. At present, Vlyn saw that he wore common clothes with his Deathstalker Mantle, Earrings of Religion, some Bracers of Defense, his Boots of Spider Climbing, and a few scrolls and potions tethered to his belt. These could be untied quickly for quick use in combat.

Vlyn deflected his first attack with the moonblade, but the second dagger jabbed her in the left shoulder painfully. That's when she noticed Ikrain was hasted. A moment after the first blade went wide, he dropped it, sidestepped to position himself better, and he cast Ice Storm, making sure Vlyn was within the spell's radius. He then used his inner font of magic to bend his target's luck so that she slipped at just the right moment. The storm's ice shards pummeled her severely.

Fortunately for Vlyn, she was tough enough to withstand the onslaught. Unfortunately for her, a githyanki immediately followed up on the dragonborn's assault with two crossbow bolts that thunked into her left side. She collapsed at Ikrain's feet. No one seemed to notice. The Afflicted were too busy facing the onslaught of the githyanki, and they thought perhaps one of them had cast the spell.

And so, Ikrain dropped to his knees. His first order of priority was to find the Netherstone of Ketheric Thorm. Since he was hasted, his search was much quicker. He found it nestled in between the "ladies", as he might expect a female to do, and he pocketed it. Grabbing his dropped dagger, he was about to kill Vlyn and turn invisible because of the mantle he was wearing, when Cryshell suddenly sprang on him from the Ethereal Plane, screaming at the top of her lungs to get someone else's attention.

Ikrain wasn't expecting the attack, and she stabbed him in the right upper arm. At the same time, her spider fangs bit his wrist. He recoiled and withdrew, more from surprise than that he viewed her as a threat. In a rage, he was about to retaliate, but Pona had heard her cry. The halfling monk came running with incredible speed to aid her, and Ikrain recognized that his plan had once again not worked out as he'd hoped. He acquired the Netherstone. That was the most important thing. However, he'd wanted to get his hands on the Astral Prism too. No time! He cast Misty Step and teleported just as Pona leapt at his midsection, her heels angled to drop-kick him right in the groin.

Ikrain reappeared thirty feet away and fled. Pona and Cryshell gave chase. "Rina! Ambush! Dark Urge!" the halfling shouted.

Rina spun, aimed quickly and fired her Firestoke hand crossbow, chanting the words of the Ensnaring Strike spell. The bolt hit its mark. Vines burst from the projectile, threatening to restrain their victim, but Ikrain managed to break free and continue on his way - for a few steps at least. The attack managed to break his concentration. He lost control of his Haste spell, and he dropped into a crouch. The lethargy from the spell temporarily disabled him, giving his enemies a chance to close the distance.

And yet, he was far enough away to cast Invisibility in time. Just as Pona drew near, he vanished. He then rushed into the trees, losing them. In the night, it was next to impossible to spot his movements as he continued on away from the ruins. Still, Pona chased him, racing along as fast as she could, hoping she was guessing correctly as to which direction he went. Rina joined her, trying desperately to track his movements. Because she had darkvision, and she was an expert tracker, she soon found signs of his passing. "Pona. This way!" she shouted, and she plunged into the deeper overgrowth. Pona backtracked and followed.

Meanwhile, Tav recognized that Vlynrifane had been injured and that she was dying. Swiftly, she cast Healing Word even as she swung at yet another githyanki attacker. Vlyn awoke, shaking herself to try to clear her head. Next to her was Cryshell. "He took the Netherstone," the girl told her, teary-eyed. "The Dark Urge took your Netherstone."

Vlyn's fog left her. She was on her feet in a moment. "Which way? Where did he go?" Cryshell pointed. "Kaedyn! Aelun! Dark Urge has the Netherstone!"

"Rina and Pona went after him," added Cryshell.

"Lead the way," said Vlyn, but just as they were about to leave, more portals opened. More githyanki arrived. "Crap! Get behind me." Cryshell did as she was told as Vlynrifane transformed into an allosaurus. Roaring, she charged at the new arrivals, and she pounced and tore into the first of them. Cryshell hopped back into the Ethereal Plane to escape harm.

"Quickly!" Aelun's voice reached her. "You must hurry. Help me!" Vlyn was confused by this. She looked, but Aelun was busy fighting githyanki. They were swarming him, and the other Afflicted were doing everything they could to keep them off of him. It couldn't have been him talking. Besides, it sounded almost as if it was in her head.

Gith were punching and kicking her painfully, but only a couple of them. The others were also focused on reaching Aelun. Vlynrifane chomped down on one, thrashing her, but the monk woman managed to break free and roll away.

"Quickly! I can't do this without you." It was Aelun's voice again, but... Was it coming from the newly opened portal?

A sense of urgency gripped her. She was about to lose her beast form. She needed to hurry. She roared again and leapt over her attackers, landing near the portal. She then dove into it. She knew it was reckless, but something was telling her that it was vital for her to do so. In an instant, she was gone from Wyrms Lookout.

She was not the only one who felt the pull. Aelun was gripped by desperation to escape into that very same portal. He had heard the words echoing in his mind, but they were not his. They were the Dream Visitor's. "Fi!" he shouted. "Follow Vlyn." Fi didn't even reply. She used her boots to Misty Step away. Then she dove and rolled, somersaulted, and flipped past githyanki and right into the portal. She was only a few seconds behind Vlyn.

"Mother!" Aelun called as he ducked under a githyanki blade and slashed with Dawnbringer. "Can you get to the portal?"

Jaheira laughed. "Faster than you can, Cub." Then she turned into an eagle and flew over everyone's heads and right into it.

Aelun dodge again, multiple weapons smashing into his armor. A moment later, with his free hand, he yanked a scroll of Fly off a belt loop, unfurled it, and cast it on himself. Then he leapt into the air and followed his mother and closest companions.

The portal closed behind him in a flash, leaving the rest of the Afflicted to fight the githyanki swarm on all sides. But much to Kaedyn's disbelief, the enemy began to fight each other. The ones who had come from the second portal began to clash with the ones from the first portal.

Lae'zel managed to break through one of the groups of enemies, providing an avenue of escape. "This way!" she shouted, and she took off at full speed into one of the shattered rooms of the ruins.

"Go! Go!" Kaedyn said, and he disengaged and followed, his spirit guardian angels that he'd summoned fighting on his behalf.

He reached the room and spun to help defend everyone else who might be coming behind him, but he was not at all pleased to find that only Vexir and Ryth-Shan joined him. Scratch was limping swiftly at Ryth-Shan's heels. Everyone else was cut off, and githyanki were pursuing not far behind. One even got close enough to attack Scratch, but Ryth-Shan spun, fired his Psionic Longbow, and killed his kin with a headshot. Finally, the pair arrived, and Kaedyn quickly healed the dog.

"We must help the others get free," said Kaedyn.

"This room is more defensible," said Lae'zel. "If you go back out there..."

"I don't care," said Kaedyn, and he and Vexir were already racing back out.

"You know Kaedyn," said Ryth-Shan with a shrug. Then he stepped out and laid cover fire. Lae'zel scowled, but she joined them, charging back into the fray.

That's when three red dragons descended. They landed at three different locations just outside the walls, covering all angles. Their heads were aimed down at the mass of combatants within. Kaedyn was instantly transported back to that moment on the nautiloid when one of the dragons smashed into the bridge and breathed fire at the control terminal. His blood ran cold.

"Scatter!" he heard Vexir scream. Then she grabbed him and yanked him back towards the room they had taken refuge in moments earlier.

Three jets of superheated flames erupted into Wyrms Lookout. There was a hellish chorus of agony. Kaedyn and Vexir stumbled through the doorway and back into the room. Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel were already within. Ryth-Shan slammed the door shut behind. Intense heat blazed through, igniting the old wood instantly. The

four of them plus Scratch withdrew to the back wall. Several terrifying moments transpired. Smoke was already coating the ceiling and leaking out through holes above. Then all was silent except the growling and thunderous movement of the dragons.

The walls shook. The dragons were maneuvering about the ruins. A few githyanki voices could be heard. They were conversing in the gith tongue. "They are looking for the weapon," Lae'zel hissed as the survivors hunkered down to avoid the smoke. "The first gith were from Vlaakith. Someone tipped them off that we would be here."

"Dark Urge," said Ryth-Shan. "I heard one of them mention that 'the white dragonborn had actually been telling the truth.'"

"I swear," said Vexir with cold fury. "If I ever get the chance, I will ensure he fully understands the meaning of drow torture."

"The second group of gith are hshar'lak from..." Lae'zel gasped. "Orpheus? Prince Orpheus? I..."

"Prince Orpheus' honor guard," said Ryth-Shan. "They were trying to protect him; to save him."

"From what?" asked Kaedyn.

"Everyone," said Lae'zel, and she was clearly bewildered by this.

"Are our companions still out there?" asked Vexir. "Can you tell? Did they get away? Are they dead?"

"No mention of who they are searching," said Ryth-Shan. "But they are definitely searching the dead." He grit his teeth. "I think it's safe to assume a good number of our friends are gone. There were too many enemies around - no avenue of escape." And with those words, a moment of silence fell between them.

But moments earlier, Wynari saw the dragons descend in time. "Kethryn! To me," she commanded. Then she transformed into a giant elk. He jumped on even as the gith who were allied with the dragons scrambled to withdraw in time. The gith who were against the dragons also scattered as they attempted to flee the coming carnage. This created an opening.

Wynari did the unthinkable. She bounded up the hill as fast as she could, directly towards one of the dragons. Just as it breathed fire, she jumped and landed beyond the streaming jets. Springing past, she threw herself off the hill and even used the dragon's own body as a ramp. She sped down its frame, bounded into the foliage, and fled to freedom. The dragon spun and attempted to follow, but there was just too much overgrowth. It had to take to the air to pursue.

The dragon flew overhead, searching intently for them. Wynari spotted a rider in the moonlight on its back. 'Gith can't see in the dark, but the dragon can. If I wait until they pass, I can change back and we can simply hide.' And she did just that. As soon as the view of the dragon was barred by trees, she came to a halt and returned to her human form. From there, the two deviated in their course, fleeing as fast as they could from both the ruins and their pursuers. Any time the dragon came back in their direction, they dropped into bushes to stay out of sight.

On the other side of the ruins, Astarion wasn't even present when the dragons landed. He'd already abandoned the group. He'd heard that Ikraim had taken the Netherstone, and he knew that it was his opportunity to acquire it for himself. 'He who has the right cards wins the game,' he thought. And so, like Rina and Pona, he was winding through the forest in search of his prey; his fangs bared and a predatory look on his face.

As for Zrathentil and Minthara, they had withdrawn instead of charging into the initial battle. From the back of the group, they hurled spells and continued to keep the wounded on their feet. When the second group of gith arrived, Zrathentil pulled Minthara into a side room, and he shut the door.

"Abandoning the others?" Minthara asked with a sly grin. "Saving our own skins?"

"Waiting for the death toll to rise considerably," said Zrathentil. "Then I can use the Amulet of Mass Animate Dead and pit our enemies against one another. We did our share out there."

"What about that item you acquired?" she asked. "Couldn't that help here?"

"Best not reveal my best weapons just yet," said Zrathentil. He chuckled. "Still trying to find out what it is."

"I told you I wouldn't forget."

The dragons descended. Flames tore up the ruins. The drow pair withdrew to the far wall, dropping beneath an old stone table for protection. The door burned. Smoke billowed into the room and drifted out through holes, just as with Kaedyn and his group. Then all was silent.

Zrathentil went to the wall and peered out through a hole. "I think I'll wait to use the amulet," he told her. "I count two dragons out there and quite a number of gith."

"Can we just get out of here?" she wondered, and she began to look for an escape route. She found one. "Here," she said softly. Then she squeezed herself out through a broken down section of wall. This led into the back section of the ruins where no one was positioned. Thus, the pair was able to slip into the woods without being seen.

In regards to Gale, when Kaedyn cried out his warning, he immediately reacted by casting the Fly spell. Seeing he only had moments to save himself and Shadowheart, who was trying desperately to keep him alive, Gale didn't even warn her. He wrapped his arms around her and carried her up into the air just as the bouts of flames tore into the ruins. He then quickly angled away up and over the walls then down into the forest on the opposite side of Rina, Pona, Astarion, and Ikra. So intent were the dragons on those within the ruins, they didn't even register that the two had escaped. Will-o', Gale's familiar, didn't make it. She died with a scream and a puff of magic.

At the same time, Dame Aylin was engrossed in combat, but Kaedyn snapped her out of it in time. Isobel was directly behind her, and the angel spun, grabbed her partner, spread her wings, and followed hot on Gale and Shadowheart's trail. Not long after the wizard and cleric landed, the pair joined them.

With Izar'la and Tav, the results were virtually the same. As soon as Kaedyn shouted, the gith sorceress spun and grabbed Tav who was too engrossed in the fight to realize what was happening. She quickly cast Dimension Door, and a portal opened near them. Izar'la yanked the cleric through, and they vanished from the battlefield just as the flames tore through it. Us leapt onto Izar'la's back at the last second, and so it was brought along. When they appeared again, they were five hundred feet away down the slopes closer to the outskirts of the city.

Likewise, Wyll also knew Dimension Door, and he and Karlach were fighting side-by-side. At the last second, he opened a portal, and fled through. Since she was in a full-blown rage, her mind didn't truly register what was happening, and so Wyll had to open the portal directly in front of her, between her and her fleeing opponent. When she tried to give chase, she ran through the portal instead. Both came out on the trail leading to the ruins. They were well beyond the enemy's ability to see them.

Meanwhile, Dritar transformed into an intellect devourer almost as soon as the fight started. Waiting for just the right moment, he incapacitated a githyanki from the first group, and he snatched his body from him, devouring his mind. When the dragons landed, he joined the githyanki as they withdrew to a safe distance. Then he bided his time and slipped away while no one was looking. He now had a new host body he could use - at least until he found a better one.

He smiled victoriously. 'Once I reach Baldur's Gate, I can take over anyone's body I want. I'll aim for a Flaming Fist. Then I can move about freely and bide my time. Everyone will think I've died here, but I'll watch them all, scout out the Chosen, figure out how best to rob them of their stones and the Astral Prism, and I'll claim the Absolute for myself.'

As all this was happening, Sharayla was just as quick to act as the others. Seeing the dragons landing, she cast Polymorph on Gorm, transforming him into a mammoth. It was the only thing she could think of that might survive three bouts of dragonfire. Then she shouted, "Gorm! Shield me! NOW!" and she ran directly under him and threw herself onto her belly.

In time, Gorm's brain registered what was about to happen, and fearing for his sister's safety, he did as she commanded. He dropped on his belly, completely smothering her beneath him. The flames tore into him from all three sides. He trumpeted in agony. The Polymorph spell failed. He reverted to half-orc form, enduring the last of the heat and pain. In the end, he found himself laying on top of his sister as if he'd tackled her. He had survived, and because of the transformation, he had saved both of their lives.

Sharayla knew they had precious time to escape. It wouldn't be long before the gith returned, and it would be just the two of them facing seasoned fighters and dragons. And so, she transformed into a constrictor snake, and with Gorm on her back, she quickly slithered off the battlefield and into the shadows of a devastated wall. Fortunately, the entire camp was lit up with fire and billowing black smoke, cloaking her movements. No one spotted them. A few moments later, they found a trap door leading into a dungeon, and she reverted to her true form. Both descended as fast as they could, escaping in the tunnels below.

Much to their surprise, they encountered Halsin. Just before the dragons breathed fire, the druid had transformed into a giant badger, and he burrowed straight down. In moments, he was within the dungeon of the former outpost; alone and wondering if all of his friends were dead. Although he was glad to see that at least two had survived, he agreed that there was no way to confirm the status of the others at that time. They had to either find an appropriate hiding place or a way of escape to avoid being captured or killed by the gith.

Back in the side room of the ruins, Kaedyn finally snapped out of his stupor of anxiety. "We can't think about the others right now," he said. "We have to figure out how we're going to avoid getting captured or killed ourselves."

"I don't see any way out," said Lae'zel. "We're trapped."

"That door won't last very long," said Ryth-Shan. "Once it falls, we'll be exposed. They'll have a direct line of sight with us."

"If only I'd prepared Stone Shape," Kaedyn growled to himself. "I could have reshaped the back wall to form a passage for us to get out." He grew sarcastic. "Silly me. I thought we might run into a fiend again, like Raphael, and I might have to banish him to his home plane. Why would I think THAT would be more important?"

That's when a sudden sharp pain gripped them. The tadpoles were squirming in their heads unexplainably. It was as if they were coming out of their dormant state. It was as if they were beginning the process of ceremorphosis. They each grabbed the sides of their heads. Excruciating pain was rippling through them. Their wills were slipping away. The protection that the Astral Prism usually offered was dropping.

But in spite of the pain, Vexir noticed Scratch. He was digging along the back wall in a frantic manner. A few seconds later, he paused to see if he could squeeze his head into the trench he was making. Vexir pointed, ignoring her pain. "He's digging us a tunnel out."

Everyone turned to face the dog. Kaedyn blinked numerous times to fight back against the tadpole. "Focus on what's in front of you. Don't focus on what you can't control."

"Good boy, Scratch!" said Ryth-Shan through gritted teeth, and he joined the animal. "The earth is soft here. If we work together..."

The door collapsed. Flames and smoke billowed, still barring the view. Time was running out. All four were kneeling with the dog, desperately shoveling away. The tadpoles seemed to subside, making it easier to focus. The fire and smoke continued at the doorway, but it was waning. The tunnel was finally big enough for the dog to crawl through, so he did. "The rest of us won't fit through that," said Lae'zel. "We're too bulky."

"We could try just busting through the wall," Vexir suggested.

"It'll make too much noise," said Ryth-Shan.

They continued digging. Kaedyn glanced over his shoulder. He could see the githyanki moving about in the still-burning camp. They hadn't noticed them yet. He turned back, focusing once more. The trench grew bigger. "I think we should try it," said the cleric. "Ryth-Shan is the leanest, and he's only wearing half plate. Go!" The githyanki ranger didn't argue. He flung himself head-first into the trench and pulled himself through. It was a tight fit, but he made it to the other side.

Kaedyn went back to work, brushing sweaty strands of blonde hair out of his face. "He barely squeezed through, and our armor is bulkier. We need to widen it."

"Tell me something I don't already know," said Vexir.

Kaedyn glanced over his shoulder again. Still they went unnoticed. The half-drow thanked the darkness that cloaked the room. He also thanked the fact that the githyanki were milling about, talking and making their own commotion. This masked the sound of their digging.

The hole was wider. Lae'zel dropped on her belly, much as Ryth-Shan had, and she squeezed into the trench. For several moments, she fought to pull herself through, but she became stuck. Ryth-Shan grabbed her from the other side, and he began to pull her through even as Kaedyn and Vexir shoved her other end. At last, something gave, and she slid the rest of the way.

Kaedyn looked back again. His heart skipped a beat. One of the red dragons had heard the commotion. It was looking through the doorway into the room. "Go Vex," he said. "Go now."

She looked past him towards the dragon, and her eyes went wide. "We won't both make it in time."

"Exactly," said the cleric. "Go. There's no need for both of us to die."

"We have survivors," the dragon's voice boomed through the devastated outpost. "They're getting away."

Several githyanki swore in their own tongue and began to rush towards the room the pair were in. Kaedyn quickly cast Guardian of Faith, summoning a large spectral guardian that hovered directly in front of the door. The dragon roared and surged forward. Dragon fear gripped him. He spun with Ketheric's warhammer in both hands. He struck the back wall with everything he had, and he broke through, shattering it to pieces.

"Go go go!" he commanded, shoving Vexir through, then he grabbed his shield off his back and followed.

The dragon went up and over. Scratch barked frantically but fled at top speed through the trees and down a semi-steep slope. Ryth-Shan was not far behind him, at first, but it wasn't long before the dog vanished from sight. Lae'zel was likewise not far behind him. The dragon's head appeared. It inhaled. Kaedyn and Vexir pumped their legs with everything they had. "Take cover!" Kaedyn yelled, and the four each dove behind trees. Scratch was fortunately far enough away.

The dragon's flames tore up the forest setting everything ablaze. However, having taken cover, the four managed to avoid death. Kaedyn cast Mass Healing Word, and he and Vexir set off again. The dragon spotted them and flew into the air. Githyanki appeared on the wall and in the room they'd been hiding in. The Guardian of Faith cut down several, but there were simply too many of them.

Down the slope the four Afflicted went, winding around trees and leaping over bushes. Kaedyn cast Mass Healing Word again, hoping that it would keep them on their feet should the dragon spot them and descend. Sure

enough, it did, crashing through the treetops just to Kaedyn's left. Its tail lashed out. Kaedyn actually managed to deflect it with his shield. Of course, the fact that the trees were closer together made it more difficult for the dragon to maneuver, but that was beside the point. The monster didn't succeed in battering him senseless.

And yet, a moment later it slashed him across the back with its claws and bit down on him from above. The intensity of the heat from its breath alone was nearly enough to render him unconscious, but he thanked Tyr that he was able to somehow slip free and tumble back to his feet. The dragon tried to pursue, but the trees got in its way, slowing it down.

"Are you okay?" Vexir shouted back at him as they once again retreated with everything they had in them. "Please tell me you're still back there."

"I'm here," he replied weakly. "Barely. I can't take another attack like that."

"We're not going to make it," said Vexir. "He'll pursue us no matter where we go."

And then, without warning, Lae'zel had returned. As the red dragon came about to try to make another attempt to bite and kill Kaedyn, the githyanki eldritch knight leaped onto a low branch and used it to catapult herself into the air. She let out a blood-curdling warcry, and she brought the Blade of Oppressed Souls down on the monster's snout. The fragments of the dead souls that were imprisoned in the steel screamed for justice. Blood splattered on the forest floor. The dragon recoiled and roared, but Lae'zel continued unleashing her fury. She took several more ferocious swings, hacking again and again at the dragon's face.

At the same time, Ryth-Shan appeared in front of the fleeing drow pair, and he fired his Psionic Longbow twice. The first attack exploded with a rain of thorns that sprouted from the arrow all over the mighty creature. The second struck it in its left, front shoulder, but it bounced off.

Seeing her companions willing to fight back, Vexir deviated course. The dragon was close enough that she was able to reach it in moments. Everburn flared with Avernus' heat. The drow battlemaster came at the dragon and let loose her own roar. The flames, of course, did nothing to the wyrm, but her successive blows finally succeeded in tearing through scale and into flesh on the underside of the dragon's neck.

Kaedyn was too terrified by the beast to draw closer, but he at least had enough nerve to pause and cast Guiding Bolt. The gleaming, golden projectile found its mark, lighting up the right side of the monster's face. It finally withdrew in fear. Beating its wings heavily, the four were thrown to the ground as debris pummeled them. Then the dragon took off into the skies to escape.

The first of the githyanki were almost on them. Quickly, they were back on their feet and running as fast as they could. From above, the dragon roared again and again in its rage. And that's when the other two appeared. Kaedyn wanted to cry. 'Tyr! How are we going to escape this?' but he didn't have the breath in his lungs to do so. The githyanki drew nearer. Arrows and bolts were flying. The dragons were closing in.

BOOMBOOMBOOMBOOMBOOM! Lightning tore into the dragons. Magic bolts were fired from unseen assailants hiding amongst the trees. At the same time, other bolts sailed into the githyanki forces, detonating and sending many of them flying. Then, out of nowhere, a looming metal giant appeared. It towered over Kaedyn and his team like a straight-backed ogre. And yet, it was built to look like a soldier in black armor with gold trim weaving about its frame. Its head was a helmet with a golden griffin resting on top and a red plume flaring out from behind the griffin's head.

"Citizens," the mechanical construct said in a tinny voice. "Fear not. The Steel Watch is here to serve and protect. Quickly. This way. Follow me and I will lead you to safety." Then it spun and ran down the slope straight towards Baldur's Gate. More of the mechanized soldiers charged into the githyanki from all directions and fired at the dragons, forcing them to retreat back towards the ruins. And just like that, the sheer terror that had become Kaedyn's world had ended. They were saved.

The Steel Watcher that had spoken to them stopped and turned to see if they were coming. It gestured to them and called for them to hurry. Kaedyn glanced at the others. "Should we?" he asked.

"You have a better idea right now?" said Ryth-Shan.

And with that, they hurried off after the magical automaton, hoping beyond hope that they weren't making a big mistake.

Ikrain, the Dark Urge



Steel Watchers



Chapter 3 - Shattered Dreams

Aelun landed on dark, cold stone, stumbled a few times, and caught himself. Near him was Vlynrifane who was back to her drow form. His mother was likewise herself and not an eagle. Fiovey dusted herself off, adjusted her black, battered witch's hat, and looked around. "Astral Prism," she said. "Or at least it looks like it."

Aelun surveyed the scene. Floating chunks of rock drifted about in a sea of black dotted by stars. There were what looked like swirling mists drifting lazily about here and there. And then, off to his right but straight ahead, he saw the skull-like island that he'd seen in the past when he entered the githyanki relic. A network of glowing hexagons of light shielded the inside of the skull, preventing anything from entering.

Yet something was obviously not right. The glowing constructs were pulsing swiftly as if under attack. Something was attempting to breach it. "Hurry!" It was Aelun's Dream Guardian. She was calling to him. "I'm under attack. I can't hold out for much longer."

"Do you hear that?" asked Fiovey. "Is he calling to you too?"

"I hear nothing," said Jaheira.

"The tadpoles," said Vlyn. "They connect us to the Dream Visitor we told you about on our way to the city."

"Ah. That's what this is," said Jaheira.

"If I fall, all is lost," the Dream Visitor told them. His/her voice changed mid-sentence. It was almost as if the voice was melting and blending with another voice; a deeper male voice. "I won't be able to protect you from the Absolute. You'll be enthralled. Hurry!"

Aelun felt the sense of urgency pushing him forward. "Come on. Let's see what's happening."

They hurried along a stony path as Vlyn used magic to heal herself, and after only about thirty feet they came upon, of all things, an intellect devourer. It was not only dead. It was misshapen and deformed. Someone or something had mercilessly beaten it. It was truly an appalling sight.

They didn't pause. They came to the end of the barren island they were on, and they jumped to another one. It was way too far to reach if they were on the Material Plane, but in the Astral Prism, they leaped and glided right to it without much effort at all.

A dead githyanki lay there. Another intellect devourer. Another githyanki, and another. "Odd," said Fiovey as she tried to examine one more closely in passing. "These don't look like Lae'zel or any of the githyanki we've encountered anywhere else. They look almost like monks."

"Come to think of it," said Vlyn. "The ones who charged out of the second portal also looked like monks while the ones out of the first portal looked more like fighters, rangers, and the like."

And then, all of a sudden, leaping out of hiding amongst the rocky outcroppings, several githyanki monks flipped and twirled, landing on all sides of them. They were fast and hit hard, but fortunately it was with bare fists. Aelun's armor sustained the brunt of the blows that rained down upon him, and he managed to retaliate with substantial force.

Dawnbringer roared her standard battlecry as he burned a sizable slice into the assailant on his right. Then he struck with the Blood of Lathander, the radiant morningstar that was acquired at the Monastery of Lathander on the Mountain Pass between Moonhaven and Moonrise Towers. Aelun's enemy was tough, keeping on his feet, but he was covered in his own blood afterwards. A few quick exchanges later, and the githyanki was lying at his feet.

Aelun cast a brief glance over his shoulder. His companions were holding their own. And so, he focused on the next. This one, a female, was a bit more skilled, and his timing wound up being off. The female got a few stunning blows in on him, and he felt himself staggering as she continued in her fast and furious assault.

Thankfully, Vlyn came to his rescue. She'd managed to kill the one fighting her with the moonbeam spell, and she shifted it to descend upon Aelun's enemy. The crazed-looking woman screamed in pain and tumbled out of the pillar of light. This, however, exposed her to Vlyn's sword, and the drow druid pierced her heart.

Meanwhile, Fiovey looked like she was doing a dance with her opponent. Jab. Dodge. Sidestep. Jab jab. Deflect and dodge. Jab jab jab. Duck. Spin. Kick. Tumble and roll. Kick. Jab jab jab jab. The two continued around and around, neither seeming to gain the upper hand. But then, as both Aelun and Vlyn were about to join her and assist, Fiovey's twin blades sliced across the throat, and the githyanki flew backward as blood gushed from his mortal wound.

They all three turned to help Jaheira who was facing one more even after she'd killed two. Well, to be fair, Jaheira had instantly summoned a pack of wolves which had assisted her in taking out the two. The remaining female githyanki they were fighting looked like she didn't have a lot left in her, but she was willing to fight to the bitter end. She dodged just inside Jaheira's blades, and she was about to strike her in the chest with both fists. But

at the last second, two wolves leapt onto the monk's back. They yanked her backwards onto the ground, and Jaheira stabbed with both of her scimitars.

That's when Cryshell came out of hiding. The party turned with wide eyes staring. "What are YOU doing here?" asked Jaheira, her tone sharp.

"Sweetie!" said Fiovey, rushing up to her with worry in her eyes. "How did you get here?"

Cryshell looked terrified, her eyes watery. "I can't... I can't jaunt into the Ethereal Plane."

"That's because you're not in the Material Plane any longer," said Jaheira. "You're in the Astral Plane. The Ethereal Plane isn't parallel to the Astral. It's parallel to the Material. When you came through the portal, you jaunted automatically. Different realms, different rules."

Fiovey gave her a hug. "It's going to be okay. Just try to stay out of sight. You're good at hiding."

Aelun shook his head. He was both worried and frustrated. This, however, was not communicated on his face. Instead, he wore a mask of disapproval. In fact, he looked a good deal like Jaheira in that moment, though he didn't realize it. "We don't have time for this. Something's wrong. We need to..."

His words were cut short. There was a resounding, cracking/shattering sound. Twisting, the group spotted another group of githyanki monks near to the skull island's mouth. One of them had struck the barrier with her fist, and a chain reaction rippled through the entire force field. The pulsating grew more erratic, and then, without warning, the whole network exploded.

"THEY'RE THROUGH!" The Dream Visitor's voice bellowed in Aelun's mind. "I can't hold them all."

Aelun reacted by pulling out a scroll. He cast the Fly spell - too quickly. The scroll burnt up and nothing happened. He cursed and pulled out another. Finally, he succeeded. "Vlyn, grab on. Fi, get there as soon as you can. Mother..."

"Eagle form," she said. "Got it." And she transformed. Vlyn grabbed onto his back, and the trio flew straight for the skull. Meanwhile, Fiovey and Cryshell wound their way around, leaping from rocky island to rocky island.

As Aelun flew towards the skull, he saw radiating lights within. Shimmering shards of energy orbited a floating lone figure as if it had once been a solid, magical barrier that had cracked like an egg. Red beams of energy shackled the figure's wrists. This light was reflected by the shards, altering the colors like a prism.

As he drew closer, he recognized that the figure was a githyanki male. He wore purple, puffy pants tethered at the ankles and a loose fitting purple vestment draped over his shoulders, down his front and back on both sides. Over this, he wore an open leather vest with silver decorative wiring laced throughout.

His exposed body bore many runes and markings as did his ears and bald head. He wore a silver mask over his face, a circlet for a crown, and a silver bracer on each wrist which the energy shackles were connected to. These had githyanki rune markings which flared much as the Astral Prism did when it was activated. The githyanki's eyes glowed the same color as his shackles as did the sides of his mask.

Nearby, intellect devourers were already engrossed in their fight against the githyanki monks, and as the trio descended, Aelun's heart nearly stopped. 'Mind flayer!' But it wasn't just any mind flayer. It was THE mind flayer. It was the one from the nautiloid; the one who had been in command of the vessel. It had personally infected Kaedyn, Vexir, Ryth-Shan, and Lae'zel.

It was stronger and more powerful-looking than the typical illithid, and it had more decorative, armored robes than the standard mind flayer, complete with a royal frill that fanned out behind its head. This was like tentacles that jutted up and backward from the neckline behind its head like horns. Behind that was a membranous-looking spiky ruffle.

The mind flayer hurled a boulder at one of the monks, a particularly strong and fierce-looking female with short, spiky hair that was like a plume atop her head. She punched the boulder with her left fist, shattering it as if it was nothing to her. An intellect devourer came at her at the same time, but she killed it with a single punch from her right fist, sending it flying into a boulder. The creature looked like a flattened pancake as it slurped to the ground.

The monk turned to face the mind flayer as the creature channeled some sort of magical power in its left hand. She charged at top speed. The mind flayer began to draw energy into its right hand as well. This caused another boulder to fly at the monk. The monk timed her jump perfectly, leaping over the boulder and flipping, landing like a cat. It didn't even slow her. In fact, her feet barely touched the ground before she jumped again, planting a solid kick into the mind flayer's chest. It flew backward and spun, landing hard on its front just as Aelun and his companions arrived. Jaheira returned to her true form.

The energy in the mind flayer's left hand dimmed. The githyanki monk stood, poised to continue the fight. She wore a vicious look, like that of a wild animal about to pounce. Aelun's eyes went to the githyanki bound by the energy chains. The prisoner's eyes no longer glowed. He seemed to be regaining consciousness, as if he'd been in some oblivious state of being previously. He looked out upon the battlefield, his eyes focusing on them.

Aelun winced. The tadpole was writhing. Vlyn was also clutching her head, gasping in pain. The barrier that was keeping the Absolute out was crumbling even as the githyanki was starting to break free of his bindings. Aelun's heart leapt into his throat. Now he understood. If that githyanki broke free of his shackles, Aelun and all the Afflicted were doomed. What was protecting them from the Absolute would be gone. They would instantly turn into mind flayers, and the githyanki would kill them. Their souls would be lost forever.

Desperation overcame the pain. Aelun charged, swinging Dawnbringer with everything he had. At the same time, two more intellect devourers came to their rescue. They drew the monk's attention. Seeing that she was greatly outnumbered, she slammed her fist into the ground, casting Misty Step and appearing some thirty feet closer to the githyanki in shackles.

The mind flayer rolled over onto its backside and spoke in his mind, its male voice booming like the one the Dream Visitor had morphed into. "Before you do anything, listen! I am your ally." Its purple eyes pierced through Aelun's skull. "We are in DANGER."

"Hah! YOU are maybe in danger, Mind Flayer," said Jaheira as she fell into a battle stance.

"Listen!" said the mind flayer. It sounded just as desperate as Aelun was feeling. "The shackled githyanki is the source of our protection against the Absolute. I MUST subdue him again or everything we've worked towards will be lost."

"We?" said Vlyn. "You mean the same thing keeping us from turning into mind flayers is preventing the Absolute from controlling you as well?"

Jaheira dropped her stance immediately. It was clear. She now fully understood why they weren't simply killing the creature. Her eyes were wide like saucers. Aelun could see. Mama Bear had awakened within her. She was shaking. He could almost hear her thoughts. If she didn't help the mind flayer take control again over the githyanki, her long lost son whom she just reunited with would be forever gone; his identity obliterated. "Tell us what to do," she said.

The mind flayer didn't respond to either of them. Its eyes were focused on Aelun as it stood. "Don't let my form deceive you. I am the one that's been protecting you. I am the Dream Lover, the Dream Guardian and Dream Visitor; the one that came to you in your dreams. Help me."

Aelun glanced past it and saw intellect devourers were still battling the githyanki, but they were losing. It wouldn't be much longer before the githyanki managed to reach the shackled one to help free him. "Like she said." He gestured at his mother. "Tell us what to do."

"Those githyanki are his honor guard. Kill them before they free him. Whatever happens, do NOT let them get to him to free him."

"Done," said Jaheira, and she charged. She conjured more wolves, and they treated her like the alpha male. They reached the first of the githyanki, and the wolves maneuvered ahead of the druid. The first of them managed to snag the monk and yank him off his feet. The next several bit down on him and thrashed. The monk killed two with a few quick snaps of the wrist, breaking necks, but between all of them, the intellect devourer, and Jaheira's twin scimitars, there was no hope for the victim.

Aelun still had the Fly spell enabled, and he chanced planting himself between the imprisoned githyanki and the closest monks. As he descended, he spotted the fierce female monk who had attacked the mind flayer moments earlier, and he dropped behind her. He honed in and struck hard with both Dawnbringer and the Blood of Lathander, but the monk was just as deft and flexible with him as she was with the mind flayer. She avoided both swings, dropped into a crouch, and flipped over a few of the intellect devourers to escape all of her attackers. The only good thing was that it forced her back away from the imprisoned gith.

At the same time, Vlynrifane drew out her bow. She recognized that getting into close proximity with the monks was lethal for her, and so she conjured her own pack of wolves to keep her enemies at bay while she pummeled them from a distance. If the wolves managed to pull one of the monks prone, she quickly closed the distance and switched to her moonblade to finish them.

Aelun was about to press the attack against the female monk when he noticed that she was attempting to play the decoy. Another monk had broken free from his attackers, and he was moving in to free the imprisoned one. Aelun quickly flew into the monk's path, and Dawnbringer slashed him across the chest from right hip to left shoulder. The monk cried out and tried to fall back, but the Blood of Lathander crushed his skull.

Just then, the female monk adjusted her plan in the blink of an eye. Seeing Aelun going for her companion, she once again sprang over the intellect devourers. Before Aelun realized she was there, she did a round-house kick to the side of his face, sending him careening to the ground on his belly. He was both dazed and confused as she dropped on him with her knees slamming into his spine. He lost his breath as stars shot into his eyes. 'Gods! She's tough.'

But the mind flayer arrived at that moment. A boulder slammed into the monk and sent her tumbling off the ranger sorcerer. She hadn't seen the creature coming, and so it had finally managed to hit her. Still, she rolled back to her feet, spun, and kicked with her heel into one of the shards keeping her from her objective. The shard shattered into a million pieces, exposing the imprisoned one's feet. It would only take a few moments for her to strike and free him.

An arrow suddenly shot into her skull from behind, jutting out her forehead. As Aelun picked himself up, he spotted Fiovey as she darted back behind a boulder to hide. She had hit the gith monk with her Sniper's Bow, and with her target completely distracted by her objective and everyone else, she had failed to notice the rogue aiming carefully and firing.

Aelun sighed with relief and spun to see another monk making his way onto a rocky outcropping that jutted up on the right side of the imprisoned gith's shattered sphere. From the top of that outcropping, the monk would be able to leap through the gaps in the protective barrier, and he'd certainly free the one within.

Dropping both of his weapons, Aelun quickly pulled out his psionic crossbow. He then cast Ensnaring Strike and fired. Much to his great relief, the shot hit the left hip, and the bolt burst with writhing, thorny vines. They quickly snaked along the monk's body, tripping him and binding him. He landed hard on his side and fought for several moments to break free, giving Aelun time to pick up his dropped weapons and hurry towards that position.

Aelun could no longer fly. The female monk's assault had caused him to lose his concentration. No matter. He wasn't too far away. While the mind flayer and remaining intellect devourers continued to keep the other monks away, the ranger sorcerer leapt onto the rocky shelf, climbed the rest of the way up, and he arrived just as the monk broke free.

The monk tried to shove him. Aelun managed to resist. He then slashed at the monk's left knee with Dawnbringer. The gith avoided it by sidestepping, but Aelun brought the Blood of Lathander around to crack him on the right shoulder. This caused the monk to almost lose his footing, and Aelun decided to use that to his advantage. Shoving hard with everything he had, the githyanki flew five feet off the platform and sailed over the edge of the island into the void of the Astral Plane.

Aelun turned back to the battle. The last of the monks fell with an arrow in his chest from Fiovey's bow. He already had a few arrows from Vlyn's jutting out of his back, arms and side. With the monks gone, the mind flayer immediately turned towards the imprisoned githyanki, and its right hand began to glow even as it had when the female monk had attacked it earlier. The two bore holes into each other with their eyes, facing off as if contesting with one another's will. Several moments passed as everyone watched in fear. Then, at last, the githyanki lost the fight.

His eyes rolled into the back of his head as his body stiffened and he turned his face skyward. Then his eyes and face mask began to glow again with the same light as the shackles. The barrier around him was reformed, and Aelun felt the tadpole settle in his head. Relief flooded his senses.

He dropped down from the rocky outcropping and approached the mind flayer. His companions did the same. By that point, there were only a few intellect devourers alive, and all of the wolves were gone. The mind flayer turned towards Aelun, and it held its arms out to its sides as if in surrender. "Thank you. That was too close."

Aelun gave it a look as if to say it had only a precious few moments to explain before he ended its existence. The mind flayer sighed. "Don't look at me like that. I am a mind flayer. Yes." The exposed portions of its brain on either side of its elongated skull seemed to swell and deflate over and over again as it spoke to him. Its tentacles quivered in anger, and its eyes turned to slits. "Does it matter what I am? The point is that without me, you would be a slave to the Absolute."

"Of all the beings to be indebted to," said Jaheira. "A bloody mind flayer."

"Well," said Fiovey, "at least we know what the Dream Visitor really is now. Quite frankly, I like him better like this. At least he isn't being a creepy version of Aelun."

"I couldn't agree with you more," said Vlyn offhandedly.

"Why did you deceive us?" Aelun asked coldly. To him, it only mattered a little that the Dream Visitor had revealed its true form. Either way, he didn't like it or trust it. Thus, it really changed nothing.

"It was necessary," it replied. "Rare are those that would openly consider a partnership with a mind flayer; even those who have little choice because they are on the path to becoming one." It paused, considering its next words carefully. "I was someone once; someone like you. We have more in common than you know."

It then flicked its wrist, and all at once, the world around them changed. No. That wasn't quite right. They were like specters within his mind. They were viewing what the mind flayer wanted them to see. They were images of a time long past. They were distant memories but from someone else's viewpoint.

A vast countryside lay before them. It was blurred and hard to make out the details. However, it appeared to be hilly and grassy. There was a tower off to their right. A man in green with a hood was sitting on the edge of a stone battlement not too far from them. He was looking out upon this landscape. "An adventurer," the mind flayer said. "I came from Baldur's Gate, though I was never one to be constrained by circumstance. I longed for more." The man then stood, and his hands began to glow with purplish magical light. He cast Feather Fall and jumped off the wall.

Everything shifted. They were in the streets of a city. 'Reithwin,' Aelun realized. 'Back before it was destroyed by the Shadow Curse; before Ketheric started his war.' Vendor booths were set up nearby along with a cart full of flowers. Moonrise Towers loomed into view. "That longing brought me to Moonrise Tower in a search for treasure. Little did I know, it would lead me to a colony of mind flayers who caught me and changed me into what I am now."

"Wait," said Fiovay. "Are you telling us that a colony of mind flayers was already beneath Moonrise Towers even back when Reithwin was still prospering? That looks like Reithwin in broad daylight, before the Shadow Curse. Everything looks wonderful and new and grand. It hasn't been touched by war."

"You only know a little of the history of Moonrise Towers and Reithwin based on what you found during your exploration," the mind flayer told them. "There were once two towers. The original was much older. Hence the name; Moonrise Towers - plural. During the war between the Sharrans and the Harpers, druids, etc., the original tower collapsed and was no more; lost below the surface of the lake."

"The mason of Reithwin was proud and considered his work innovative and new, proclaiming he built the newer tower based on his own grand design. Ridiculous. It was identical to the older one, and he rebuilt the first, constructed the second, and connected them to make them one fortress. Both rested upon the colony just as Reithwin was built upon the ancient Sharran city below the mausoleum. Deep below the towers, the lake, the town, and everything, the colony and Sharran city existed long before Ketheric and his people came and settled there. The mind flayers remained in hiding, biding their time; waiting until the right moment to fulfill the Grand Design."

"When I went to Moonrise, it was the older tower only; a tower in ruins with the promise of ancient treasures long forgotten. Reithwin wasn't Reithwin back then. Different town with a different name. That old town failed, and the inhabitants migrated away many, many years before Ketheric rebuilt everything. Over the years, all traces of the old town simply disappeared amidst nature. Only the tower remained, virtually obscured by the landscape."

"But back when I traveled there, according to local folklore, it was haunted by the dead noble occupants that first built it. The locals were terrified of the place. This tale existed, of course, due to the mind flayers that dwelled there, but I didn't know that. I thought I was just going to face some weak and easily defeated undead. I figured it was easy money just lying in wait for me to claim it."

The scene shifted again. The man who became the mind flayer they were speaking with was tied to a chair in some sort of old storage or dungeon. Mind flayers were all around him. One of them carried a tadpole. They placed it into the man's eye. He screamed. It was very much just like what Aelun experienced on the nautiloid, and he shuddered involuntarily.

Everything changed again to show the night sky above the original Moonrise Tower. A massive brain floated there ominously. Mind flayers were hovering all about the glowing behemoth. It had many tendrils hanging below it along with an incredibly long spinal column. It also had what looked like spikes jutting out of portions of its brain including the central crevasse. This gave it the appearance of a creature with gnarly, rigid hair.

"For years, I served the elder brain; the one you know as the Absolute. I was a thrall like any other, but I was fortunate. I broke free and started a new life in my old city," the mind flayer told them.

"You broke free?" said Fiovay. "More like it let you go. Don't you think? I mean, how did you manage to break free?"

The mind flayer didn't take too kindly to those questions. "It underestimated me. I became more powerful than it expected. It sent me too far from its reach. Thus, I escaped, breaking my chain and fleeing from it forever; or so I'd hoped. This does happen, you know. Even your new companions met another who is like me. It is the mind flayer that they encountered in the myconid grove in the Underdark; the one called Omelum."

"I remember," said Aelun. "Please continue." This didn't mean Fiovay hadn't made a good point. He'd immediately thought the same thing. Still, he wanted to glean as much as he could from the "Dream Visitor" before something interrupted them - perhaps more githyanki.

They were back in Baldur's Gate, in the dark streets. A man in leather armor ran as if fleeing from some nightmare. "I sustained myself on criminals," the mind flayer told them. "Unglamorous, but there were plenty of them, rarely missed, and they fuelled me while I did my work." Suddenly, a dark shadow flitted from rooftop to rooftop. It then descended on the fleeing man from behind. Tentacles wrapped around his head, and the mind flayer

cracked his skull and devoured his brain in a flash. The mind flayer was no longer dressed in the elaborate robes he was presently in. It was disguised as a mere rogue with a hood.

And then they were in what looked like a noble's study. A large table was sprawled out in the center of the room. The mind flayer was bent over the table. There was another person present. Aelun strained to make out his or her details. "More recently, I had the good fortune to meet Duke Stelmane," it said, continuing its tale. "We formed a partnership, and through her I became the governing force behind the Knights of the Shield, the largest mercantile operation in Baldur's Gate."

Indeed, it was a woman. She had blonde hair all pinned up atop her head with a braid looping around like a crown. She wore regal brown and beige clothes with a blue cape that trailed down. She carried herself with a strong and commanding presence. "People referred to me as the Emperor - such was my influence. Though, of course, they had no idea what I really was. I even hid my tentacles beneath a thick veil."

The Emperor was then seated upon a modest throne with his legs crossed and wine goblet in hand. He was speaking to someone. It was hard to see who. A fire was burning in a hearth off to the mind flayer's right. The conversation seemed to be pleasant. "My needs were sated. I was... happy, for a while - until my true nature was discovered by the tyrant himself; Lord Gortash." This name he spoke with intense disdain.

And with that, the Emperor and the person he was speaking with turned to look at the doorway, and there was Lord Gortash standing there with a massive mechanical construct - one of the Steel Watch. He smiled triumphantly as the pair scrambled to their feet to attack.

Gortash was a human male with short, messy black hair. He had a charismatic round face with dark shadows around his brown eyes. He wore a black coat with gold designs and trim and a decorative belt around the waist. It had a wide collar as well that flared up in the back, and its large sleeves came to his elbows. His arms had gold metal gauntlets with clawed fingertips, and he wore a black shirt, pants and boots with streaks of red throughout. The toes of his boots were predominantly red.

But the scene shifted yet again. The mind flayer was thrown to the floor in yet another dungeon. "He tore me from my home and brought me back to the brain where I became a slave once again - a slave he continued to call 'The Emperor'. The name was intended as a slight to remind me of the heights from which I fell. But I have grown fond of it. It encapsulates well who I've become."

And just like that, the images faded and they were back in the Astral Prism with the githyanki imprisoned in his protective barrier. Aelun took a moment to recover, but when he did, the first thought that popped in his mind was, "Lord Gortash was one of the Chosen in the colony..."

"Indeed," said the Emperor. "His hubris knows no bounds. To enslave me, that was his nature, but to enslave an elder brain? A questionable decision. I shall look forward to sharing his downfall with you."

"Did you have to eat criminal brains?" asked Fioyay in disgust. "Even if I turned into a mind flayer, I can't imagine doing that."

"Rather than potential future allies... like you," said the Emperor. "And the answer is yes. A mind flayer's body **REQUIRES** the nutrients found in the brains of other organisms in order to survive. It was either find a source of legitimate brains to eat or starve to death."

"I didn't realize mind flayers could be independent thinkers." This came from Cryshell who was now standing next to Vlynrifane.

The Emperor looked down at her as if pondering her existence. Then he replied, "Not all mind flayers are alike. I have always valued freedom above all else. In my past life and present."

'Not sure I believe that,' Aelun thought, but he kept this to himself - he hoped.

"It has been a burning need within me for as long as I can remember," the Emperor continued.

"So are you going to tell us what this battle was about?" asked Jaheira, her eyes narrowed on the creature.

"We fought to tame Prince Orpheus," he explained. "He is the son of Gith herself." He turned so they could all focus their attention on the floating, shackled githyanki bound within the now whole protective sphere. "His power has been the source of your continued protection against the voice of the Absolute; the power to disrupt hivemind communication. It is the same power that enabled Orpheus' mother to bring about the fall of the Illithid Empire eons ago; a power she passed on to him and that I leveraged for you."

"When Orpheus' mother left, a usurper took her place - Vlaakith declared herself 'queen' of the githyanki. She wanted his power, but Orpheus rose against her. And so she sealed him and his loyal honor guard within this Prism. Bound by infernal chains, Orpheus could never leave. Bound by duty, his guard never would."

"They were close to breaking my hold on their prince - and if they had succeeded, we would be lost." The Emperor turned towards them once more. "The portal first opened because the honor guard discovered a way, at last, to leave the Astral Plane to try to acquire the Astral Prism from you. They knew that if they could, I would

have no help at all against them. I am relieved you have embraced your potential enough that you could help me eliminate them. Alone, Orpheus will be much easier to control.”

“Well this sucks,” said Fioyay without restraint. “It’s also a blatant contradiction. You say you value freedom more than anything else, but here you are enslaving the GITHYANKI PRINCE! And you don’t think this is wrong?”

Once again, the Emperor narrowed his gaze, his tentacles quivering. “I do not delight in this predicament. It is a necessary evil. Also, I did not enslave him. I did not shackle him. He was imprisoned by Vlaakith long before I was even born. I am merely using what was already here to our advantage. If everything goes as I’m hoping, we can defeat the Absolute and THEN we can determine if it is wise to free the prince - AFTER we are no longer threatened by the elder brain’s control.”

“Were you imprisoned here too?” asked Vlyn. Aelun noted that she seemed to be of the same mind as he was. They didn’t want to anger the mind flayer. They wanted to get as much information from it as possible.

“No,” the Emperor replied. “Gortash sent me on a mission to retrieve the Astral Prism. I was one of many, but the first to find it. Your companion, Shadowheart, was also sent by her cult with a team of the best Sharrans Baldur’s Gate had to offer. Somehow, they got word of my mission. That is how she got aboard the nautiloid. She boarded before I fled with the Astral Prism. She alone made it. The rest of her entire team was wiped out by githyanki. Thus, her disdain for them.”

“After your abduction, and the abduction of the other Afflicted, I entered the Astral Prism. That is when Shadowheart came upon it. She stole it and tried to escape, but one of my other freed mind flayers caught her and infected her.”

“Wait,” said Aelun. “Back up. I just want to make sure I’m understanding correctly. Gortash sent you on this mission to retrieve the Astral Prism. How did he learn about it and where it was located?”

“I do not know,” the Emperor told him honestly. “But the moment I found it, I felt a change. My free will returned. I followed the feeling inside and found Orpheus. I realized what the Prism was for - containment. While my body was within the Prism’s bounds, my mind was free. I could resist the elder brain, the Chosen. Better yet, I could plan to overthrow them. All I needed to do was subdue Orpheus and find allies in the outer world. You.”

Aelun shook his head. “Wait. Stop. You keep running ahead. Gortash sent you to get the Astral Prism. You went there. You battled githyanki. Sharrans showed up. They tried to stop you and get it too. They all died at the hands of githyanki. Only Shadowheart survived. You acquired the Astral Prism. Then you felt the pull of its power and entered it? If that’s the case, how then did you get aboard the nautiloid with it? How did you then captain the nautiloid? How did you then infect all of us? That doesn’t make sense.”

The Emperor sighed. “I can understand your confusion. Initially, when I found the Astral Prism, I didn’t have time to dwell on it. I was completing my mission. At that time, my will and the will of the Absolute and the Chosen was one and the same. Flee with the Astral Prism and bring it back to Moonrise Towers. But I could feel my will returning even while simply holding the Prism. I fought my way back to the nautiloid and fled aboard it.”

“That’s when I first began to resist. It didn’t take much, for I was able to subtly insert my will. Even though I hadn’t entered the Astral Prism yet, it gave me enough power to twist the will of the Absolute and the Chosen to my favor. At one point, they had created a list of individuals they wanted to enthrall, to infect. Individuals on that list were targeted because they had power and influence that would help spread the Cult of the Absolute across Faerun. You and the others were on that list. Although I was supposed to bring the Astral Prism directly back to Moonrise, I used the excuse that I was being pursued heavily by gith to travel first to various locations, kidnap you and the others, and infect you all - bouncing around from one place to another to ‘lose’ my pursuers.”

“Before the gith finally caught up with me, I had time to answer the call of the Astral Prism. While another mind flayer was controlling the ship and continuing to capture more and more potential thralls, both on the list and not, I went inside. That is when I became completely free. That is when I discovered the truth about its power.”

“From there, I freed the other mind flayers on the ship and dominated their minds as well as the minds of the intellect devourers and thralls,” he continued. “I then risked leaving the Astral Prism to see if I could maintain my freedom without being inside of it. That is when I realized that I could leave, but it was a great risk. Almost instantly, the power of the Absolute and the Chosen was threatening to take me back.”

“And then the gith first caught up to me. They attacked the nautiloid and boarded it. Lae’zel was among them. That is when she was first captured. We fended off the attackers and escaped once more, though they had killed many.”

“Knowing I had a very limited time, I quickly devised the plan to infect you and the other Afflicted. I personally chose and infected you, knowing that it would be the only way I could gain your help. I did not personally infect all of you, but I had a few of the other ‘liberated’ mind flayers do it as well. There were simply too

many of you, and the more of you that I was able to infect and yet free from the Absolute, the better my chances of success.”

“Afterwards, I took command of the vessel. Though the Absolute and the Chosen were trying to reclaim me, our wills were once again as one. I needed to escape from the githyanki, lose them, and return to Moonrise Towers. That’s when I went to Yartar. That’s when the conflict with the gith occurred there. After escaping into the Hells, I fled back into the Astral Prism, for I could feel my own control slipping once more.”

“And that was when Shadowheart stole it and was captured and infected. Devils and demons were assaulting the ship. My fellow mind flayers didn’t have time at that point to take it from her, so they left her trapped within her pod. That is why they used the terminal next to her pod. It provided extra security so that she wouldn’t be able to easily escape and no one else would be able to free her without retrieving the missing part.”

“So yes. I can leave the Astral Prism for short stints. I can enter the Material Plane and maintain my own control and continue to keep you free from the Absolute and your tadpoles dormant. But it is a great risk, and it is VERY temporal. I cannot remain there long. That is why I needed you.”

“You \$#@\$,” Jaheira cursed. “You tadpoled my son and his friends, and you forced them to help you or turn into mind flayers. Even now, you are doing exactly that. They have no choice but to help you. Like Fiovey said, you are a walking contradiction.”

“It is a necessary evil,” he replied. “The price of freedom for all requires slavery in the here and now. For the good of all, a few must suffer.”

“Like Orpheus’ imprisonment,” said Fiovey sharply. “Everything is a ‘necessary evil’ to you. What other necessary evils are you planning before all this is done?”

“Listen,” said the Emperor angrily. “I do not have to try to win your trust. I do not have to be friendly to you. You HAVE to help me, or you will become mind flayers and all hopes of stopping the Absolute and the Chosen will die with me. However, I CHOOSE to try to win your trust. I CHOOSE to try to be your friend. I CHOOSE to work with you instead of dominating your wills as I did with the other mind flayers and thralls aboard the nautiloid.”

“I don’t want to do any of this, but from the moment I broke free of the Absolute, I determined that all this was the only course that had any hope of success. For this one chance, I did what I had to do, and I chose all of you because you are heroes. You are champions. You are survivors. And so far, you have proven me right in my decisions. We are ACTUALLY succeeding. We have already defeated one of the Dead Three.”

Fiovey eyed him skeptically. “Not gonna lie. Your story is sketchy at best. I mean, you SEEM to be telling us the truth right now. You’re acting like you’re suddenly an upstanding guy and we should trust you, but I have to wonder... You said you went to Moonrise for treasure, so obviously money is highly important to you. You went alone, so it doesn’t sound like you had any friends to speak of. Love and relationships are therefore not high on your list.”

“Later, you hunted people in the streets, flitting from shadow to shadow. You reveled in becoming the ruler of the Knights of the Shield because it was a wealthy mercantile business. I mean, based on your own story, you seem more like a rogue and crime boss than a man of integrity - AND let’s not forget that you admitted that you are using the imprisoned Prince Orpheus, you tadpoled us, meaning you enslaved us and put us in a NASTY predicament, and all so that you could free yourself permanently from the Absolute. And we’re supposed to be friends?”

The Emperor seethed. “Are we going to continue this pointless conversation about my past and character while your companions are fighting for their lives against the remainder of the githyanki who attacked your camp? Have you also forgotten that the Dark Urge has stolen the Netherstone from Vlynrifane? Even now, he is escaping with it. You DO realize that all our futures depend on retrieving that stone again. Yes?”

Aelun wiped sweat and blood from his brow with the back of his hand; having removed his gauntlet to do so. “Fine. You’ve made a fair point,” he said, interjecting before the Emperor got too upset. They were, after all, a bit at his mercy. Besides, it was true that while they were standing there chatting with him, the others were potentially dying, getting captured, or worse, and the Dark Urge HAD stolen the Netherstone. Their fates were in a rather precarious position, and time was slipping away. As much as he wanted to know the truth, the WHOLE truth, they really needed to get moving.

‘Still, she made another valid point,’ he thought. ‘Something to note for the future.’

“So what now?” he asked. “Where do we go from here? Are you staying here to continue to guard Orpheus?”

“Yes,” said the Emperor. “I thought I made that clear. You must return and focus on retrieving the Netherstone. That is our top priority. After that, you must find a way to acquire the other two Netherstones. Only

then can we even hope to take control of the Absolute and command it to free you from your tadpoles. Only then can we ensure that the entire Cult of the Absolute and its Chosen are destroyed.”

Aelun couldn’t help but smile knowingly. ‘And I’ll wager that at that point you’ll somehow need to have all three stones in your possession so that you can take command of the Absolute. But we’ll cross that bridge when we get there.’

“Fine,” said Aelun. “Do you have any idea where Dark Urge is now? He is also one of your Chosen. Right? So can’t you tell where he is?”

“I am not omniscient,” he replied. “However, I can tell that he has fled into the city. I’m certain he has gone into the sewers. After all, it is a warren with many places to hide. Ikraim will use that to his advantage. Remember, he is an expert at gorilla tactics. He will lure you down there, try to separate you, and pick you off one at a time. Do not underestimate him.”

“We won’t,” said Fioyay.

Aelun nodded. “We’re ready. Send us back.”

“So be it,” said the Emperor, and he opened a portal directly on their left. “Be swift. Find Ikraim. Retrieve the Netherstone. Acquire the other two - whether you need to kill the other Chosen to do so or not. Focus on these objectives, and hurry. I don’t believe we have a lot of time.”

Vlyn paused. “What do you mean?”

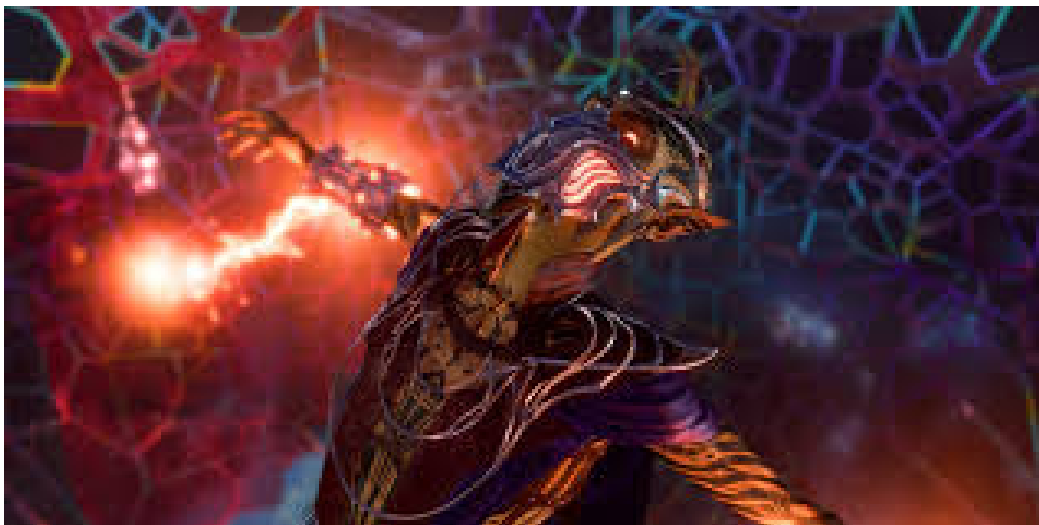
The Emperor shook his head. “I can’t say. It’s more of a feeling than a definite understanding of the situation. I just... Something’s changing. Something’s not quite right. The longer you take...”

“Come on,” said Aelun. Then he led them through the portal and back into the Material Plane.

The Skull Island



Prince Orpheus



The Emperor



Gith Monk Honor Guard



The Adventurer



Duke Stelmene



Lord Enver Gortash



Chapter 4 - The Hunt

Bounty hunting was Rina's area of expertise. It's what she was best at. Even though Ikraim was invisible, she spotted the signs of his passing. He wasn't exactly taking the time to hide his movements, and that was because she and Pona were keeping with him fairly well. 'I need to keep it up,' she told herself. 'I can't let him get too far ahead or he'll stop being careless. He'll take time to properly hide his passing.'

She spotted another footprint and kept going. Pona was right behind. 'It's just the two of us again, but I can't worry about that right now. He has the Netherstone. We absolutely cannot let him get away.'

They wound their way down to the outskirts of Baldur's Gate. Well, in truth, it was a little township - a suburb - known as Rivington. This was on the south shore of the Chionthar, south of Wyrms Crossing which spanned the river and led into the actual city. A street passed to their right and left. This made following tracks a bit more difficult, for the road masked his footprints well.

She paused, considering which course he would most likely take. 'If I was him, where would I be heading? Any one of these buildings could hide him from us, but how likely is it that he has an unoccupied space out here to hide in?' She surveyed the scene more closely. 'There appear to be refugees everywhere - individuals fleeing from the Army of the Absolute, no doubt.' It was the army that was still out in the countryside somewhere. The plan of the Chosen was that the army would soon attack Baldur's Gate, and Lord Enver Gortash would be the hero that stopped it from taking over.

'The city must have shut the refugees out, so they are camping all over this place,' Rina decided. 'No. There's no way he could hide here. He'd be discovered for sure even though it is late and everyone's sleeping. His only hope is to reach the city. There he can hide in the sewers or in any number of vacant buildings.'

"We lost him," said Pona in defeat. "There's no way we can find him here."

"He's heading for Wyrms Crossing," Rina replied confidently. "Being invisible, he'll try to slip right past the guards. Shouldn't be too hard either."

"You really think he went that way?" said Pona.

"No place to hide here," said Rina, "and he will also need to collect the other Netherstones. The other two are in the city. So it makes no sense for him to hide out here anywhere. He's got one hour before the spell's duration wears off. He needs to lose us by then."

She then turned to meet Pona's gaze. She smiled. "But I've still got an ace up my sleeve."

"You do?" asked Pona. "What's that?"

"Locate Object spell," she told her. "I can track the Netherstone for a good thirty minutes. I've just been trying to track him without using the spell to avoid wasting it. Even if we lose his trail, I'll cast the spell and pick it right back up."

Pona grinned ear-to-ear. "Lead the way then."

But before she did, a sudden wave washed over both women. They nearly collapsed from the sheer magnitude of the psionic assault. Inside their skulls, the tadpoles began to awaken. Fear and desperation gripped Rina. 'Oh gods! It's happening. The transformation. We're about to become mind flayers.' Not only that, but she could sense the Absolute. It was probing. It was searching to connect to her.

And for several minutes, the feeling gripped them, paralyzing them. Finally, it ended, leaving them shaken. But Rina feared that because of the incident, they had lost the Dark Urge, and she quickly collected herself and set out. Both were bewildered by the event, but they were too desperate to find Ikraim to even discuss it.

North they went, cutting through yards and down side roads straight towards Wyrms Crossing. As they went, they avoided everyone and everything, for they were completely focused on their objective. Finally, they reached their destination, and they were forced to come to a halt. The massive bridge that spanned the river housed a number of businesses including a brothel, an inn, various locked up vendor stalls, and more. Ikraim could be hiding anywhere.

That was when Rina knew she had to cast the spell. Right away, she was aware that the Dark Urge had already passed beyond that section of Wyrms Crossing. He was moving north across the river. She cursed. "He's still on the move heading for Wyrms Rock Fortress. \$#@\$, he's fast." She then took off at a full sprint. Pona stayed with her.

Within a few minutes, they reached Wyrms Rock Fortress, an island with a massive military structure which consumed the entire landmass and rose several stories high. Likewise, it descended several stories to the island's shores. It was filled with Flaming Fist and had a portcullis and gate on each side along with drawbridges which could be raised quickly for the defense of the city. The Flaming Fist barred the way on the north side.

“Stop! No admittance.” This came from a dark-skinned human female officer with a head full of curls. She was standing, barring the way, with a host of other soldiers and an ogre-sized mechanical knight in shining armor. It was a mechanized construct; a Steel Watcher.

Rina’s look said it all. “What the heck!” she said fiercely. “My name is Rina Thunderhammer. I’m a bounty hunter of Baldur’s Gate. Right now, I’m tracking a criminal who just slipped past you with invisibility.”

“Not possible,” said the Fist. “The Steel Watch here has the ability to detect invisibility.” She pointed at the machine knight.

‘Witch,’ Rina called her in her mind, but she kept it to herself. “Well, somehow he’s slipped past you. He’s already making his way across the bridge to the Gate. Don’t believe me? Send someone with me. I’ve got the Locate Object spell enabled. He stole something - he took the bait, if you will - and I can lead you right to him. He’s a murderer. If we hurry, we can catch him, but if we don’t hurry, the spell will wear off in a few minutes.”

The Fist woman only gave her a skeptical look. “Oh please. I’ve heard a lot of stories, but this one takes the cake. You refugees will say anything, I swear, to get into the city.”

Rina was livid, but Pona decided to take matters into her own hands. “We don’t have time for this.” She clicked her heels, activating her Boots of Speed, and she dove, rolled between the Steel Watch’s legs, came to her feet, and shot off like a rocket across the bridge.

The Flaming Fist and the Steel Watch twisted almost in unison. “Son of a...” the dark-skinned woman began, but her own panic cut her off. “By the gods... Sound the alarm. After her! Shoot her! NOW!” Some of the Fist whipped out crossbows, took aim, and fired, but a number of them took off in pursuit.

Rina grinned. ‘That’s a girl,’ she thought, then she hurried into the midst of the soldiers that were rushing after the halfling monk.. “Come on!” Rina shouted as she went. “After her! Don’t just stand there. Get her!” In the confusion, the Fist were totally oblivious that she was not one of them. Only the dark-skinned woman looked around for the dwarven ranger, bewildered. For some time, she wondered where she had gone.

Much to Rina’s relief, not a single soldier hit Pona. In fact, with the Boots of Speed activated, the monk used her ki to give her additional boosts, and within moments, she was out of sight in the distance. The ranger’s only fear, then, was that Ikraim would come upon her, and the two would face off. Pona would be alone against the maniac who always seemed to have something up his sleeve. ‘But then, if she can just hold him long enough - if she can just bar his path so he can’t escape until we get there...’

Past Wyrms Rock Fortress, Wyrms Crossing was pretty much the same as it was on the south side. Many shops and businesses were set up on either side of the bridge. Since it was the middle of the night, most lights were out and the doors locked up tight. Few roamed the “street”. Those that did quickly darted out of the way as Rina and the Fist passed.

Finally, they came to the end of Wyrms Crossing, and there were additional guards. Rina’s heart skipped a beat. There was no sign of Pona. The two groups of Fists met. “Have you seen a crazy, pink-haired, dark-skinned halfling monk?” the group with Rina asked. The dwarven ranger carefully began to slip towards the back and off to the east to hide in the shadows of a store that sold pots and pans and other kitchen items.

“A halfling monk with pink hair?” asked a male half-elf Fist. “Are you drunk? The evening’s been quiet. No sign of anyone.”

Pona suddenly tapped Rina on the shoulder, making her jump. “What happened?” asked the dwarf in a whisper. “Did you see Ikraim? He should be beyond these soldiers by now, according to the spell.”

“No sign of him whatsoever,” said Pona softly. “Rina, I don’t think he’s on the bridge.” She pointed down. “When I stopped running and I dove into hiding, I could have sworn I heard the sound of muffled footsteps; like someone running. Then it dawned on me. He can spider climb.”

Rina cursed. “He’s beyond Wyrms Crossing then. I’ll have to keep using the spell to track him. This sucks. There will be too many places for him to hide on this side of the river. He COULD be making his way towards Sow’s Foot. That’s a narrow enough way, but he might just have a hole to hide in somewhere in Twin Songs.”

“What do we do now?” asked Pona.

“Sneak past while I keep them busy,” she told her. Then she darted back to the Fist group, positioning herself on the west side so Pona could slip behind them on the east.

“The infiltrator’s got the ability to spider climb,” she shouted to the soldiers to get their attention. “He went UNDER you.”

The soldiers turned to face her, just as she hoped. “Hey,” said one of them from Wyrms Rock Fortress; a half-orc male. “Aren’t you the one who was with the halfling?”

Rina shot him a fierce look. “We’re not after the halfling. We’re after a white-scaled dragonborn who is a murderer and thief and who is a member of the Cult of Bhaal. I told you. I’m a bounty hunter. He’s a psychopathic

killer, and he's actually slipping right past all of you into the city you're supposed to be protecting from crazy nut jobs like him. He's got the ability to turn invisible and spider climb, so as we're standing here, he's just jogging lightly right into town to prey on the innocent."

She leaned towards them, doing her best to be as ominous as possible to get her point across. "He doesn't just kill with reason or purpose. He kills for the thrill of it. NO one is safe. EVERYone is a potential victim; even the roaming guard on patrol through the streets at night. Mark my words. If we don't hurry and catch him right now, there'll be bodies in the morning."

The Fist exchanged nervous glances. One of them, a female dwarf with a bushy head of golden hair, remarked, "There have been an unusual number of corpses lately."

"Spider climbing, eh?" said the half-elf Fist who was stationed there. Then Rina gasped and shook herself as an overwhelming force slammed into her. As the symbol glowed, she could feel the power of the Absolute flowing from the man. 'Gods! He's a True Soul. They've infiltrated the Fist. Well, duh. Of course they have.'

The man eyed her carefully. "This white-scaled dragonborn... Lord Gortash has mentioned that we should be on the lookout for him. I think she's telling the truth. We'd better help her look into this." He gestured for her to join them. "You have a way of tracking him?"

Rina nodded. She wasn't sure why a True Soul would help her, but maybe he thought she was one of the cultists. She didn't care. This was working out better than she'd been hoping. If the Fist helped her track the Dark Urge, maybe they could catch him.

Pona was already beyond them and making her way into the Twin Songs district. There she stopped on the far side of the street to wait to see what would happen to Rina. "Follow me," the dwarf told the soldiers, and she led the way straight towards her. The half-elf captain quickly dispatched orders, sending some back to Wyrms Rock Fortress while others he left stationed at his checkpoint. The rest he brought with him, following after Rina.

Pona darted into hiding, but when Rina came into the area, she gestured to her. "The Fist are now helping us, Pona. They've been instructed to watch for the Dark Urge."

Pona emerged. "Which way then?"

Rina reactivated the spell. "Bad news. He's still on the move and heading towards Dusthawk Hill. My guess is he's cutting between buildings to get there quicker, and then he's going to use his spider climbing to scale the mountain."

"So he's heading for Tumbledown," said the Fist captain. "Not a problem. Keep tracking him. If he keeps heading in that direction, we can bypass the hill ourselves via boat down the river and catch him when he descends into that district. We can also alert other Fists to watch for him at various other checkpoints." He then took off towards a pier reserved just for the Flaming Fist. Everyone followed.

Astarion watched and listened from his position under Wyrms Crossing. Like Rina and Pona, he was still recovering a bit from the psionic assault incident, but he was desperate to keep up with his prey. 'Clever boy,' he thought. 'He's obviously familiar with the place, and this has been well-planned. He was waiting for us at the ruins, and it is a bit too convenient that the gith attacked, creating a diversion so he could steal the Netherstone.'

But he hesitated to give chase. 'Tumbledown,' he thought, a scowl spreading across his face. 'Cliffside Cemetery. Cazador.' There was a secret entrance to the cemetery that led down into one of Cazador's haunts. Many of his former master's servants made use of it. After all, it led into the sewers which gave access to just about any place in the entire city, including Cazador's estate. 'I could run into one of the other spawn. At this time of night, they'll be on the prowl.'

He took a deep breath. 'I can't worry about that. The Netherstones are my ticket. If I can acquire them all, I can control the Absolute. I can become the single Chosen, and I can remain free from Cazador. I could even be able to claim enough power to destroy him once and for all. Better yet, if I could tadpole HIM... I could make him bite me. I could become a true vampire. I could make HIM my slave, or I could be rid of him forever - not to mention all the other wonderful advantages I'd receive from being the elder brain's master.'

He waited until the coast was clear. Then he sped away from the bridge, through the dark streets of Twin Songs district, and on to Dusthawk Hill. He hoped he was still on the right track, for at that point, he had no real way of knowing.

Perched on the top of one of the buildings overlooking the area on the north side of Wyrms Crossing, a lone vampire spawn with messy, wavy red hair and green eyes watched as Astarion detached from the structure and slipped through the streets. She smiled. She was a pale-faced human who appeared to be in her twenties. She was lean and fit and rather beautiful, even though she was the walking dead. She licked her lips, baring her fangs. Then she hurried off after her prey, making sure to keep at enough of a distance that he wouldn't notice her.

On board the boat heading for Tumbledown, standing near Rina and Pona, a human male soldier smiled to himself. He had a full beard that looked like a traditional dwarf's, and his dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail. He had tattoos on his neck and the side of his face, looking like runes, and he had cold, dark, gleaming eyes.

He looked towards Dusthawk Hill. 'Welcome back to Baldur's Gate, Ikrain. Welcome back to your old hunting grounds. So what have you done now? Hmmm? I think I know.' He giggled to himself in a truly insane fashion. 'The Netherstone. You have it, don't you? The fools lost it to you. Of course they did. YOU are the only threat here. YOU are the one I am most concerned about. Only a Bhaalspawn could possibly have a chance to overthrow me. Only someone who shares Bhaal's blood coursing through their veins could kill me.'

'But even you don't stand a chance against me,' he continued, another giggle rippling through his thoughts. 'The tadpole has made you weak. It has stripped you of your former abilities and skills, leaving you vulnerable as if you have only just now begun to train yourself in his ways - stripped you of your powers even as I stripped you of your memories.'

He relived the moment. He bored that hole into Ikrain's head. He inserted the tadpole through the hole as the Dark Urge twitched violently on the floor. Then he left him for dead, claiming his title as Chosen of Bhaal. Somehow, Ikrain survived. Somehow, even after everything that happened with the nautiloid and Moonrise... He was STILL alive.

'But if I kill him before he returns to his former strength, the Netherstone of Thorm is MINE. MINE!!!' He licked his lips. 'All that will remain thereafter is Gortash's assassination - and to take the stone from him. But then, that won't be as easy as it sounds, will it? And yet...' His thoughts drifted off to the Afflicted. 'Good people will do just about anything for their loved ones. Won't they? And now...' He looked down at Rina and Pona with a predatory gaze. 'Now, they are scattered and easy to pick off. But not to kill. No. No. That'll come later. Pawns. I need pawns to manipulate them to do my dirty work. Gortash must die. His Netherstone must be mine.'

He looked back towards Dusthawk Hill. 'But first... HE must die.'

Ikrain fled as fast as he could over the mountain that people called a hill. Dusthawk Hill was jagged and had no real trails or paths. Thus, he was forced to climb over it oftentimes straight up a sheer cliff. If it wasn't for his Boots of Spider Climbing, he'd never have gone in that direction. He'd have been forced to work his way through the Outer City; a good mile and a half to two miles of district after district that wound around the east and north sides of the rugged landscape.

The Outer City was set in a semi-circular valley that went from Wyrms Crossing around Dusthawk Hill all the way to the Basilisk Gate on the northeast side of Baldur's Gate. This allowed passage from the Outer City into the Lower City. There were five districts that existed in the Outer City; six if you counted Little Calimshan in Norchapel. These were Twin Songs, Sow's Foot, Whitkeep, Norchapel, and Stonyeyes. All were as populated as Rivington on the other side of the river, making them a sizable domain of roughly a thousand residents and business owners in total.

The sewers of Baldur's Gate didn't really run through these places. Instead, there were networks upon networks of caves and tunnels and passages, some even extending under the Chionthar all the way to Rivington. Ikrain had no real memory of these places, though his spirit butler, Sceleritas Fel, gave him some understanding of the whole system.

For this reason, he knew he couldn't use those pathways to make it into the city after escaping with the Netherstone. There was too much of a chance that he'd have gotten lost. He also might have accidentally roamed into Bhaalists or other criminals who knew the cave systems all too well. And so, he opted to use his invisibility and Boots of Spider Climbing to risk passing along the underside of Wyrms Crossing and on through Twin Songs, up and over Dusthawk Hill, and down into Tumbledown. Once there, he could easily make his way to the wall near Cliffgate on the east side of the Lower City, and he could scale the wall up and over without anyone even remotely

detecting his presence. After that, he knew of a sewer entrance not too far from Insight Park on the southeast tip of the district.

But several things had gone wrong. He wasn't able to kill Vlynrifane as he'd hoped. Once again, that nasty drider girl popped up on him and attacked him. He especially wasn't expecting her to be so big. After that, the psionic assault incident rendered him just as useless as his pursuers. 'Perhaps being further from the Astral Prism... but there must have been something else as well. It was almost as if the power that is protecting us started to fail.'

He also hadn't anticipated that Rina and Pona would be able to track him so well. They had made it truly difficult to get away as they hounded his steps so closely. Pona was far too fast for him, and he had a feeling that in spite of her size, she probably could have beaten him down with very little effort. She seemed fierce and vicious, and he knew monks often had the ability to stun those they hit.

He tried to calm himself. 'All that's behind you now. They can't scale cliffs - I think. Neither can the Flaming Fist. The only people who could follow you aren't chasing you. Besides, how would they know I've even gone in this direction? Undoubtedly, they'll assume I'm going through the rest of the Outer City. Once I reach Tumbledown...' He would feel so much better once he reached Tumbledown. No. Better yet, he'd feel so much better once he was in the sewers.

Up and over and down he went, sometimes running sideways along cliff walls. His invisibility wore off long before he reached the far side, but he didn't care. The chances of anyone being in Tumbledown when he arrived were slim to none, and he wanted to save his spells for just in case he ran into any kind of trouble. At last, he made the final descent, and by cover of night, he crept into the district. No one was there, as expected, and he quickly made his way to the wall into Brampton, the southeastern district of the Lower City.

Finally, he came to the spot. Up and over the wall he went and down into the street. From there, he went through an alley and directly to the sewer grate he planned to use to disappear below the city. Triumphantly, he reached the manhole, and he yanked the cover off, sliding it as quietly as he could across the pavement.

A crossbow appeared from within the manhole, bolt aimed for his snout. At the same time, from behind, Pona came out of the shadows, fists clenched and a fierce look on her face. From every side, Flaming Fist soldiers also emerged, weapons at the ready. He was surrounded.

Rina fired. Ikrain barely dodged to the side in time to avoid dying. The bolt grazed his right cheek painfully. Before he could cast a spell, Pona slammed into him from behind, sending him tumbling to the ground. Flaming Fists came swarming in to finish him. One had twin daggers. Ikrain recognized them. Orin! Her Netherstone glinted blood red even in the almost lightless street. But it was a man's face the dragonborn saw. 'Can she change shape?'

Darkness descended. It was thicker than any darkness he'd ever experienced. There was movement. He instinctively grabbed the Netherstone. Just in time. Someone's clawing hands were already frisking him in search of it. The scent of death mingled with a delicate perfume assailed Ikrain's nostrils. He recognized it. 'Astarion.'

A moment later, Astarion gave out a horrendous cry of agony. Ikrain couldn't see what happened, but he could guess. In the magical darkness, Orin had tried to stab the Dark Urge, but she wasn't aware that Astarion was on top of him. As a result, she stabbed the vampire spawn in the back instead.

This gave Ikrain the opportunity to escape. Shoving Astarion off, he scrambled away as fast as he could, moving in the opposite direction of Orin. Someone was in his way, a Fist, he guessed. He grabbed the man's ankle before he could respond, and the dragonborn yanked as hard as he could. The soldier toppled to the ground. Ikrain picked himself up and jumped over the man to freedom.

As soon as his eyes could see anything, he cast Misty Step, teleporting up onto a building's roof. He glanced over his shoulder back down into the street. The magical darkness vanished, and the moon's pale light shone upon the scene. Astarion was alive but critically wounded. Rina and Pona were staring about in bewilderment, as were most of the Flaming Fist. Only the Fist who was Orin looked directly up at him with pure malice in his/her eyes. "I see you," he/she mouthed.

Dread filled Ikrain. He swore. 'She knows who I am. She knows I'm here. I was really hoping I could go unnoticed by her. This changes everything.' He ran as fast as he could across the roof, losing sight of his attackers. 'SHE is on my trail, and she can change shape. She can be anyone. I need to be more cautious. Stupid Fel. He sure isn't very forthcoming with information. He could have told me she had that ability. I'll have to torture him later for this.'

"He's getting away! On the rooftops!" Ikrain heard someone shout from the street behind him. Fortunately, another building was not too far from the one he was running on, and it was lower. He made the jump to it easily enough.

‘Can she detect invisibility?’ he wondered. ‘If I turn invisible again, will she still find me?’ He decided he needed to risk it. Casting the spell, he vanished from view. He then found a trellis and slid down it into an alley.

“There he is!” Rina shouted immediately after he landed. “He’s invisible again.”

‘She has a way to detect me even while invisible,’ he realized. Then he cursed again and ran. ‘As long as Rina can track me, ORIN can track me. But she can’t keep it up forever. I just have to stay one step ahead.’

The Fist who was Orin suddenly cut him off at the next corner. Twin blades swiped. Ikraim dropped to his knees and threw his upper half backwards so that he nearly went flat. One blade barely missed his throat. The other slashed him good across the chest, spilling blood all over the pavement. And yet, Ikraim tumbled and rolled away, got back to his feet, and continued to run. He was still invisible, and she lost sight of him.

He ran up the wall of another building and sped across the rooftop. Behind, he could hear Rina giving the Fist orders. Glancing over his shoulder, he didn’t see anyone pursuing. He dropped into a crouch and decided to risk drinking a healing potion. It was one that had a bit more potency, and he could feel his wounds close. The pain subsided.

He looked around for an avenue of escape. He then looked down into the palm of his left hand where he held the Netherstone. It was still there. He closed his fist over it, breathing a sigh of relief. He had a moment of doubt, nothing more. ‘Back to focusing on escaping. Invisibility isn’t doing it. I need speed.’

He spotted another building not too far away. ‘Gotta be within thirty feet.’ He stood, pulling out a scroll. He then cast Misty Step. The scroll flashed and vanished, and he teleported to the rooftop. He was visible, and his pursuers immediately spotted him. He ran to the far side and down the wall. As he went, he pulled out another scroll. Haste. Casting it, the scroll burned up, and he immediately found himself fleeing down the streets at break-neck speed, leaving Rina, the Fist, and hopefully Orin in the dust. Pona? He couldn’t be sure. He knew she was fast, but now that he was in the city, there were plenty of ways to go. He could easily lose her - he hoped.

His hope failed him. There she was. Pona was more than matching his speed. She was gaining on him. ‘But can she climb walls?’ he wondered. She was almost on top of him, so he darted suddenly to his left, up the wall of a shop, and over the roof. He heard her dart around it. She was going to cut him off. He cursed, whipped out another Misty Step scroll, and cast it, teleporting to yet another rooftop. He only had two of those scrolls left. ‘I’ll have to buy more later.’

Pona swore and gave chase. He dropped down into another alley. He could hear her coming. She was shouting for Rina and the Fist to let them know which way they needed to go. ‘I have to do something to get rid of her. Can I kill her? Do I have what it takes to take her down? I don’t have much choice, do I? Unless I can lose her, I won’t escape from Orin.’

He ducked around a corner. He could hear her footsteps. ‘Only a few more seconds of the Haste spell. I have to end her quickly before the spell wears off.’ She appeared. He cast Chromatic Orb, focusing on ice and hitting her with as much concentrated magic as he had left in him. The orb slammed her in the chest, knocking her backward into the wall. Ikraim then closed the distance with both of his daggers flashing. (He’d pocketed the Netherstone once more.)

There were several intense moments as the two fought head-to-head, but fortunately for the murderous dragonborn, Pona had expended all of her ki just to try to keep up with him. She was tired, and the Chromatic Orb had severely weakened her. Ikraim's Haste spell was also giving him a serious advantage against her. In fact, he would have killed her if it wasn’t for the fact that his spell was about to wear off. He could feel it. And he knew that if it ended, he would be helpless for several crucial seconds. She might render him unconscious before he got a chance to recover from the lethargy.

That’s when he remembered that he had a scroll of Sleep. She was weak enough. It might just knock her out. Then he could slit her throat while she lay helpless at his feet. He sheathed one of his daggers as he sustained yet another blow from each of her fists. Then he yanked out the scroll he was hoping for and cast the spell. Much to his great delight, Pona collapsed in a heap.

The Haste spell then wore off. He dropped to his knees, gasping for air. He was shaking all over. He couldn’t move. For several seconds, he prayed that Orin wouldn’t find him. If she did, or if any of his pursuers did, he was done for. Slowly, feeling returned to his limbs. He gripped his dagger tightly and unsheathed the other. At last! He was going to murder someone. His mouth watered. Adrenaline coursed through his veins. He put the daggers to Pona’s throat, and he slashed. Pona’s life ended.

Rina and Orin appeared just down the street. “There he is!” But in that moment, the Deathstalker Mantle activated. He once again turned invisible. It wouldn’t last but maybe a dozen seconds, but that was long enough to get moving again. He fled from Pona’s corpse and headed northwest towards the heart of the Lower City. Rina and Orin continued to pursue.

Well, that is, until Rina spotted Pona's body lying in a pool of blood. "Pona!" she cried in rage and grief. "Is there a cleric among you? Is there anyone who can cast Revivify?"

"Not among us," said one of the Fist who came behind them. "But the Harborside Hospital's not far from here. There's a cleric on staff there."

"Someone please take her there," she said. "I can't. I have to keep chasing that \$#@\$!"

"I'm on it," said one of the Fist, a female half-elf.

Ikraim growled. 'Why can't anyone ever just stay dead? Well, hopefully they won't make it in time.'

"Which way did he go?" That came from Orin's mimicked male voice.

"He's still headed northwest," said Rina. "Stay on him."

"Trust me," said Orin. "I'm trying."

'You'll never catch me now,' Ikraim thought, and he pulled out his last scroll of Haste. Though he was visible, his enemies were no longer in sight. He cast the spell and fled with double his normal speed. One minute later, he was well into the sewers, making his way towards his predestined hideout. Though the spell wore off and left him lethargic, his enemies were nowhere around.

Astarion lay on his back, bleeding out. "He's with us," he heard Rina say. "Anyone got a potion?" No one did.

Pona growled. "I only have one. Here." She applied it to the vampire spawn. Then they all took off running, continuing to give chase to Ikraim. "Catch up when you can."

Astarion got to his feet. 'Who was that who stabbed me? Gods! Such precision! I thought I was a goner.'

He was about to join the chase when he heard someone from behind. He turned to see a red-haired human woman standing roughly ten feet from him. In her left hand was a longsword, and in her right was a shield. She was dressed in scale armor, looking like a mercenary. "Hello, Astarion." Her smile was crooked. "Master misses you."

Astarion felt as though he'd just been kicked in the crotch. He swallowed hard and forced a charismatic smile. "Hello, Illuvia. Long time no see? You're looking just as scary as ever."

"Cut the \$#@\$, Traitor," she snapped. "Cazador's beyond pissed at you. I must say, I didn't think you had the stones." She took an intimidating step towards him. He instinctively took a step back. "Craven." She took another step and so did he. "Backstabbing." Another step each. Her smile became more sadistic. "Like a whipped puppy; so easily broken." She stopped coming towards him, and he stopped retreating.

Astarion scowled; rage building up within him. "It's not like I had a choice," he replied. "I was kidnapped and infected with a mind flayer parasite. It's a long story, and I wouldn't want to bore you; short attention span and all. But let's be honest. If someone gave you the ability to slip free of Cazador's control, wouldn't you seize that opportunity with everything you had?"

Illuvia eyed him curiously. "Slipped free? Is that what's happened? Some magic at work that liberated you? We were all wondering. It just didn't make sense. Everyone's on the lookout for you, but we couldn't figure out why the master's influence wasn't bringing you home. How could a vampire spawn break free from a master vampire?"

"Well," said Astarion, spreading his hands out to the sides. "This is how. There's this Cult of the Absolute that's going around infecting everyone with mind flayer parasites. Just get hooked up with one of those and viola! You're no longer under Cazador's command. Now, granted. Mine's a special case where some crazy githyanki artifact has liberated me from the mind flayer elder brain, but that's neither here nor there."

"I never did like you," Illuvia told him, her grin turning to annoyance.

"The feeling's mutual," Astarion replied with an equally annoyed expression. "So what? Are you here to kill me?"

"No no," said Illuvia. "I'm here to capture you and return you to the Master. You know, he was VERY specific. 'Bring Astarion back to me intact,' he said. 'He doesn't need arms and legs, but his essence must still be present within his body.' Why do you suppose that is?"

"Does it matter?" asked Astarion with a shrug. "Even if you learned that he was doing something dreadfully awful that would obliterate your entire being, there's nothing YOU could do to stop him. The magic that binds you to him makes you do his bidding no matter what he tells you to do."

"True enough," she replied. "So let's cut the crap. I'm bringing you back to the Master; with or without your arms and legs attached."

The left side of Astarion's mouth curled upward. "Oh Darling. You have to catch me first."

He bolted in the opposite direction of her, aiming for the corner of a nearby building. But suddenly, he was stopped fast. He couldn't move. He was paralyzed as sparkling magic flowed around his body. His mind raced, trying desperately to figure out what she'd done, but he couldn't comprehend it in time. Illuvia waltzed right up to him, and she snapped a collar around his neck. There was a debilitating energy that surged through him. He convulsed involuntarily. Nothing worked right. Even his voice was gone. Then he slumped to the street, unable to move. And yet, he remained conscious.

Illuvia crouched and turned her head to the side so that she was looking at him face-to-face while he lay there. She wore a triumphant and arrogant look. "What were you saying now?" She showed him a ring on her right hand index finger. "Ring of Hold Person. Stopped you dead in your tracks." Then she pointed at the collar. "Collar of Debilitation. Renders whoever is wearing it completely paralyzed. You literally can't do anything while wearing it. I got both of these after I killed a mage near Ramzith's Tower. Been quite handy ever since."

Astarion struggled to respond, but even words were impossible. "What's that?" she said, mocking him. "I can't hear you. Could you speak up? Hmmm? No?" She then patted him on the cheek and adopted a phony pitying expression. "Poor Astarion. I can guarantee there'll be no end of suffering for you very, very soon."

Nearby, in a dark alley, a young boy witnessed Astarion's abduction. He didn't fully understand what was happening, but he determined that the red-haired woman was bad and the pale elf was good. She took all of his possessions from him, and she stuffed them in a bag she was carrying. Then she hefted Astarion over her shoulder and took off at a jog towards the northwest.

'That's where I live anyway,' the boy thought to himself. Then he ran his nervous fingers through his short, brown hair. 'It's risky, but that man is in trouble, and I'm the best thief around. Mummy would want me to follow them. She would be proud of me for finding out where she's taking him. Then I can tell the others. Maybe someone can do something to save him.'

Silently, he set out, following at a distance. The woman was moving fast, and though she had boots and he was barefoot, he was used to running about without footwear. In fact, the soles of his feet were so calloused that he could walk on needles without hardly feeling it. And any time he temporarily lost sight of her, he found her again pretty quickly. Stealth was not as much her strength as it was Astarion's or the boy's. In fact, he found it easy to tail her.

She wound her way through Brampton and on into the Eastway district. The boy recognized the Elfsong Tavern as they passed it. The inn and the streets were so quiet at that time of the very early morning. After that, they were in Heapside, and they meandered past the Blushing Mermaid. The boy hated that place and avoided it like the plague. Still, the red-haired woman did not stop. On through the Steeps past Baldur's Gate and the Gond Gate until, at last, they came to Bloomridge district and Bloomridge Park.

'Oh!' thought the boy. 'I know this place. I like Bloomridge Park. I play here all the time. Hmmm. I wonder where she's taking him. I know all this area really well. My home's not that far.'

And then, she scaled the wall by spider climbing it, much to the boy's horror. 'Oh no. I'll never be able to follow her now. She's climbing the wall and going into the Manorborn district.' And his heart sank. 'Now what'll I do?'

For several minutes, he just crouched in the shadows of a tree, hidden from all view. He desperately wanted to save the strange elf-man, but what were his options? 'Wait!' A thought came to him. 'The dwarf and halfling girl both knew him. They said he was with them. They're friends of his. I have to go back and find them.'

'Nnnnaaaaaahhhh,' he groaned inwardly. 'But that's all the way back in Brampton, and it's going to be dawn in just an hour or so. I have to get home before the others notice I'm gone.' Thus, he remained there for a few minutes longer, tossing the issue back and forth in his mind. Finally, he decided that saving the elf-man's life was more important than getting in trouble, and so, he hurried back to see if he could find the man's friends.

Rina and the Fist made their way into the sewers. "I know he's down here," the ranger told them. "I've got only a few minutes left of the spell and then I'm out. Still, it should point us in the right direction."

One of the Fist seemed particularly anxious to hurry. "He hasted again. Thus, he likely had to recover for a few seconds afterwards. He couldn't have gotten far," the man said.

"I hate the sewers," one of the ones towards the back commented.

The half-elf captain snapped at him. "Keep it to yourself, Soldier."

"Yes, sir," came the reply.

"Let's keep our voices down," the anxious Fist suggested. "He'll know we're coming."

"I couldn't agree more," said Rina, and for the hundredth time, her thoughts returned to Pona. Was she alive? Was she dead? Should she have gone with her to the hospital? If she did, she surely would have lost Ikraim. It was vital that they retrieve the Netherstone. That was, unfortunately, more important than her friend's life, as much as she hated to think such things.

The sewers of Baldur's Gate were a dreadful place full of stench and filth. Once upon a time, they had been more uniform, but they had turned into a hive of tunnels and passages that were much like the Underdark. It was easy to get lost even if you were familiar with them, and if you were unfamiliar, you might not ever find your way out again.

But, of course, what made them even more like the Underdark was that they bred "things" of every sort. There were, of course, thieves and rogues, but there were slimes and jellies and oozes and giant rats and kobolds and goblins and wererats and cultists and undead and just about any nasty thing one could imagine. In short, it was one of the most unpleasant places Rina could think of to visit.

"And yet, how many times have I had to come down here chasing criminals?" she wondered. "Far too many to count. Seems like every freak and thief and murderer has a home down here. Why shouldn't the Dark Urge be any different? Hah! I wouldn't at all be surprised if Zrathentil had a cubby-hole down here too, the \$#@.\$."

She continued to follow the broken path they were on. She could feel it. The Netherstone was off to her left. She knew the sewers enough to know that there was a passage coming up that went in that direction. It was probably the same one that Ikraim had taken.

"Are you sure we're still on the right track?" asked the anxious Fist. There was something about him that Rina didn't like in the slightest. He was twitchy and weird, and there was a hungry look in his eye. She'd seen that type of look before. It was the same one that psycho murderers had when they were lusting for blood.

"Positive," said Rina. Then she stopped. After a moment, she pointed. "Tracks. Fresh boot prints. He ran through this sludge." She stooped down to look closer. "My guess is that he went this way only minutes ago."

"How much longer until your spell wears out?" asked the half-elf captain.

"We're nearing the end," she confessed. "Might have to use my other tracking skills to finish the job."

"Glad to have you with us," said another soldier.

"Same to you," said Rina. "This guy's the real deal. He's a bonafide, top of the line, Grade A maniac. You saw what happened to my companion when she caught him and the two faced off alone. He might seem like a squishy mage, but he's a pro assassin."

Rina once again stopped. There was a crumbled wall off to her left. A passage continued on past it for more than thirty feet before it twisted to the right. She looked for signs of Ikraim's passing. She didn't find any, but the spell was indicating that it was likely the way to go. She shook her head. "I think we found him," she whispered over her shoulder.

The anxious one shoved her aside and went through the gap first. The half-elf captain then also went. "Thanks for all your help. We'll take it from here."

Rina blinked. "What? Seriously?" The rest of the Fist followed, hurrying to keep up. "The \$#@.\$?"

Then it hit her. "The tadpole. That guy's a True Soul. He's probably going after Ikraim to get the Netherstone for one of the other two Chosen. Hells. That crazy looking anxious one probably is too. I..."

She was about to maneuver into the gap after them when suddenly an explosion erupted within. The force of the blast was so great that Rina was thrown backwards off the walkway she was on and down into the murky sewer waters that passed along through the main passage she was in. For several seconds, she panicked, for she had no idea what was happening. Then she managed to surface. Gasping for air, she fought her way back to the walkway that was roughly five feet above her.

She looked about. No ladders or handholds. She would have to make her own way out. "If only I had my pack. I had rope and such in there." But she'd left that back at camp. She wasn't about to take it when chasing after a mark. "I'll just have to improvise."

Downstream a bit, she finally found a shattered section of the walkway, and this produced enough hand and footholds for her to make her way out of the disgusting river and up onto the same path she'd been taking to hunt for the Dark Urge. Once there, she quickly hurried back towards the gap in the wall to see what had happened to the Fists that had been with her. As she went, she pulled out her battleaxe and shield.

The passage was gone. The explosion had collapsed it. Rina's spell had ended by that time, and so she had no idea whether Ikraim was close or long gone. Either way, the trail had ended. The hunt was over. He had blown it up so that it killed everyone within. She was the only survivor. "The irony," she thought with a shudder. "I'm only alive right now because they were so eager to go in first. If I'd taken the lead..."

‘\$#@\$. They’re all dead, and now there is literally no way for me to continue hunting for him. I’m down here all alone, and for all I know, he could be doubling back to get me.’ She shook her head. ‘Nope. I’m getting out of here. At this point, I’ll have to simply cut my losses and try again after I’ve gotten some rest - and hopefully after Pona’s back in action.’ And with that, she quickly made haste to return to the nearest manhole and back up into the streets of Baldur’s Gate.

Orin was beside herself with rage but also stark terror. ‘He almost got me. He almost killed me. Just like that. Careless! CARELESS!!!’ She gasped for air, struggling to breathe. ‘A tripwire. A simple, stupid trap set with smoke powder explosives all over the ceiling - AND I TRIPPED IT! I was too eager. I was too thirsty for his blood. He played upon that. He knew I’d be coming. He lured me into it. STUPID! STUPID!’

She clutched the rusty banister that kept her from tumbling into the murky sewer river. ‘It just goes to show, Orin. It doesn’t matter how powerful you become. The slightest mistake could end you. You have to be better than that. You have to be better than HIM!’

Her mind played over those last few moments again. She felt the tripwire snag her left ankle. She recognized it in a flash. Her hand went instinctively to her Ring of Murderous Opportunity. This gave her the ability to teleport three times per day to anyone she could call to mind that was on the same plane as her that she wanted to murder. She chose Rina, and it ported her directly behind the dwarf. The explosion tore the broken passage apart and blew both her and the ranger off the walkway and into the sewer water. Frantically, she swam away, for she feared that the Dark Urge might somehow be lurking nearby, waiting with some other dastardly trick to finish her off while she was vulnerable.

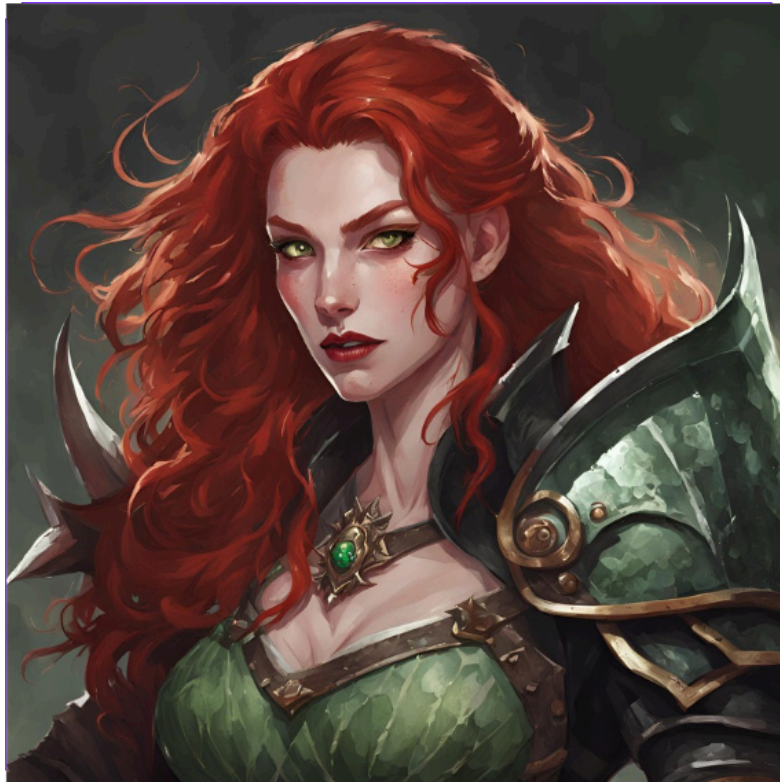
Rina went downstream. Orin went slightly upstream and across the river. There was another walkway, and it had a rusty ladder that she used to get up to it. Once there, she fled down several passages until she reached a closed-in area so that there was only one way someone could come at her. Further along to her right, the river passed into a low drainage pipe, and the walkway didn’t continue.

She let go of the railing and pressed her back to the wall to collect herself. ‘In some ways, he’s stronger,’ she realized. ‘Either that or I’m slipping. The stress of everything. The closer we get to the End Game, the more perfect I have to be. I NEED to acquire the other Netherstone from the Afflicted. I NEED to acquire the one from Gortash. Only then will I ascend. Only then will I attain goddesshood.’

She finally calmed down. ‘I AM the Chosen of Bhaal. I will prove it. I will show Bhaal that I am more worthy than the Dark Urge. I will find him and I will bathe in his blood.’ Then she drew her daggers and stalked down the passage, fully attuning herself to everything around her. ‘He can’t be far now. He has to be somewhere nearby.’

But try as she might, for the remainder of the nighttime hours, she hunted for him to no avail. Ikraïn had won. He had escaped with the Netherstone, and there was nothing Orin could do about it - at least at the present. And so, at last, she gave up. Transforming into a female Flaming Fist officer, she made her way out of the sewers and towards Lord Gortash’s estate. She was in a foul mood, and she wanted him to pay for it.

Illuvia



Mysterious Fist Soldier



Chapter 5 - The Brittle Alliance

Ziva made her way through the air, carrying Wynari on her back. The druid had transformed into a mouse, and she easily rode on her companion's back, just behind the head. Together, they were hunting for Lord Gortash's estate, for Wynari reasoned that if she was no longer tadpoled, the Chosen would likely not have a way to detect her - or at least so she hoped.

She had decided to take such a risk largely because Ikrain had stolen the Netherstone but more importantly Kethryn had endured an episode where he felt as if the barrier protecting him from the Absolute had started to crumble. Fortunately, the moment passed. Still, she was worried that they needed to step up their plans. And so, she determined that if she could somehow find the two Chosen of the Absolute, maybe, just maybe, she could discover a weakness and somehow steal the precious artifacts to save her friends and all the infected.

Because of this, she left Kethryn behind at the edge of Rivington, hidden behind an old, rundown building that was acting as a residence for a number of refugees. After doing this, the pair sped off towards the city, peering in all the most fancy and noble windows as they went. They also slithered about and listened to the pre-dawn rumors and gossip, hoping to hear exactly where they might find the Chosen of Bane.

Hours passed. Wynari had to stop for a bit to rest and renew her strength. This gave her the opportunity to ask a few residents if they could tell her where the "most noble lord's house" might be. It wasn't long before she was pointed towards Manornborn, and the pair wound their way to the district on foot.

But then she became a mouse again, and they continued on their quest. It was still relatively early in the morning, the sun just a bit over the horizon, when at last they came to Gortash's estate. When they arrived, they found an open window that they squeezed through, and they made their way through the halls without incident.

That's when the doors at the far end of the grand hall they were in burst open. A lone Flaming Fist female with scale armor and blonde hair pulled back in a puffball ponytail strode in. She walked with no grace or elegance, and there was an aura of rage and disgust about her. Wynari and Ziva dodged into hiding behind a few statues. There were plenty. The busts of numerous nobles lined either side of the center of the chamber along with tall statues of soldiers with spears and shields.

The blonde woman, an elf, continued to the far end. Ziva and Wynari followed, careful to be as silent as possible. Wynari feared that even the fluttering beating of the flying snake's wings might be too loud. But they weren't. The woman continued to storm through the place without so much as a backwards glance. She did not stop until she came to a set of double doors at the far end of another hall. She threw them open as if they were her enemy.

Lord Gortash stood within dressed in his usual black noble robes with gold sleeves, trim, and sash. In his right hand, he held a golden cane, and he stood in front of a window as if posing. He was, in fact, for a painter stood just off to the woman's left as she entered. He was busy carefully applying his trade. Wynari and Ziva slipped in without anyone noticing. They darted up into the rafters and observed from above.

"Sergeant. If you are here, I presume Wyrms' Rock is secure, and preparations for my inauguration complete?" said Gortash.

The woman bowed with left hand behind her back and right around her waist. She did not right herself as she answered. "No, Lord Gortash. We were interrupted. Another quake in the Lower City. More severe this time."

Gortash broke his pose, a look of outrage spread across his face. "So you came cowering to my chambers? I'm flattered, Sergeant, but even I cannot command this phenomena to cease."

The sergeant righted herself. She was clearly fearful of disappointing him. "Forgive me, my Lord... but there is panic in the streets. The people are afraid."

Gortash was even more disgusted, and he strode up to her to jab the handle of his cane at her chest. "Perhaps the people would be calm if you kept your nerve." He turned his back to her and began to stride back towards the window. Then he stopped, turned on her again, and snapped, "I expect better from the Flaming Fist than to run scared from a slight tremor in the earth." And with that, he backed up to the window to resume his pose.

The elf Flaming Fist woman looked truly sorrowful as she turned her face away. But then, after a moment, anger consumed her. She turned back to face him. "Duties, duties, duties. Patrolling and saluting and following and bowing and scraping and 'Yes, sir,' and 'No, sir,' and 'rip and cut your throat, sir.'" Then she seemed to convulse. Daggers slid out from under her sleeves; red ones with curved blades. She twisted and stabbed one into the portrait as the artist recoiled in terror.

And with that, the elf Flaming Fist woman transformed entirely into Orin the Red. She had gray-white flesh with dark red makeup painted on her lips, coating her eyebrows, and around her pupil-less eyes. Her dusty blonde hair was parted down the middle and pulled back, trailing down her back in a single large braid. Curvy red lines, like dark veins, spread from her eyes over her cheeks. There were additional curvy lines on every exposed

section of her body that looked as if they had been created by drops of blood as they splattered onto her and slid across her skin.

Atop her head she wore a circlet of silver chain fastened to a metal piece with many rings that was woven into her part. It was laced with blue stones, and it had a single spearhead tip at the end that arched towards the sky near the crest of her scalp. Four metal ribs curved away from the center, giving the impression that the adornment was actually made from some creature's spine.

Her leather armor looked as if it had been painted on, and it didn't cover a good portion of her body. Especially her back and shoulders were exposed with only a single band of leather wrapped around the small of her back to hold the bodice in place. The outfit had a high collar that almost entirely guarded her neck, but from her collar bones to her upper arms, her flesh was exposed. Her under arms were also exposed as was her cleavage, though the collar protected the upper portion of her chest.

'As if that is important,' Wynari's subconscious mind thought in a hair's breadth of a moment. 'She's left the center of her chest entirely exposed, which means her vitals there could easily be ripped open. It's like she's painted a big target on her heart. Those three baby criss-crossing silver chains going from breast cup to breast cup aren't going to stop a blade. Shoot! That whole leather ensemble isn't worth spit even if it IS magical.'

Orin did, however, have long leather sleeves that pretty much covered every portion of her arms except her wrists and hands. And yet, her hips were completely exposed as were the inner portions of her thighs and the backs of her calves. Besides all that, she had a single silver chain belt with six long chains dangling down, three on each leg in the front, from four crescent moons that served as a sort of belt buckle - or were they supposed to be sickles?

'But hey,' Wynari thought. 'At least the outer portions of her thighs and her shins and the tops of her bare feet are covered. Oh! And her butt. So, at least she's got some sense of modesty.' Of course, that was pure sarcasm.

Orin left the dagger in the painting and strode around to stand before Gortash with barely controlled fury. "Your plan is falling apart, Lordling," she hissed. "Give me a reason not to cut you to ribbons." She then slid her bluish, deathlike right hand up his shoulder.

He withdrew, giving her a steely look. "Control yourself, Orin," he said as the artist fled from the chambers. "We need to focus on reuniting the stones, or the brain will break free. The quakes are just the start. Neither of us expected the Prism-bearers to kill Ketheric. They'll be traveling to the city. Let's be sure we give them a Baldurian welcome."

Orin's face was death itself. Her pupiless eyes radiated malice. Her lips were twisted downward. "My prodigal blood-kin is among them," she reported.

"He lives?" said Gortash, almost pleased. "Now that truly IS a surprise."

"Barely," she said. "I made mince of his ugly mind matter, and if he dares return, I will strip out his offal." She then retrieved her dagger, Netherstone wedged into the heart of its circular handguard. She then made her way towards the exit.

Gortash's smile broadened. "I've told you before not to play with your food, Dear. Next time, just finish it."

Orin paused and looked back at him one last time before leaving. "I came here to simply warn you, Lordling. He isn't just coming for me. He's coming for you too. And when he does, he won't play with his food. He'll end you before you even know he's there."

"Is that fear I detect in your voice?" asked Gortash.

Orin sneered. "It would be foolish NOT to fear him." Then she departed without another backwards glance.

As she left, she transformed into another Flaming Fist. Before she was out of sight, Wynari saw her salute someone else. It was the real blonde elf Flaming Fist woman. As Orin had done, she entered and bowed. Gortash eyed her with contempt. "Sergeant. Please tell me YOU are here because Wyrms' Rock is secure and preparations for my inauguration are complete."

The sergeant winced. "My Lord, forgive. We were interrupted. Another quake in the Lower City. More severe this time."

Wynari blinked in surprise. 'That's almost word-for-word what Orin said. Wow, she's good at impersonating. Definitely note to self.'

Gortash growled. He must have been thinking the same thing. "So Wyrms' Rock Fortress is NOT secure? Am I NOT being inaugurated today?"

"We have ensured that no refugees are allowed to reach it," she replied, and she was obviously scared to death. "But there were also incidents last night."

"Incidents? What incidents?"

“Outside Rivington, at the old outpost,” the soldier replied. “Reports came in roughly around the second and third hours past midnight. Githyanki were attacking someone, and they had red dragons. The outpost was torched by dragonfire. We dispatched the Steel Watch and a number of our soldiers immediately. The dragons and gith fled. A number of those they were pursuing were apprehended and brought to Wyrms Rock Fortress for questioning. They match descriptions we were given by previously captured cultists; a half-drow male with blonde hair and a drow female with red eyes and white hair; cleric and battlemaster. Also two gith; male and female; ranger and eldritch knight.”

Gortash’s anger melted away. “Really? Now that IS good news. They’re at Wyrms Rock presently?”

She bowed slightly. “We are detaining them there and treating them as potentially hostile prisoners.”

“Wonderful.” His smile now seemed permanently embedded into his features. “Best news I’ve had recently. Return their equipment to them. Treat them well, and invite them to the inauguration. I want them to witness it.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“What other incidents were there? You made it seem like there were several.”

She swallowed hard. “A white dragonborn managed to somehow slip past our forces at Wyrms Crossing including Wyrms Rock Fortress. A female dwarf bounty hunter and female halfling monk were in pursuit. The bounty hunter helped our troops track him. There were numerous altercations with him in the Lower City. The halfling is alive in the Harborside Hospital. A cleric had to revive her. She had been killed by the dragonborn when she managed to catch him. She faced him alone, and he slit her throat.”

Gortash’s smile that seemed so permanent, vanished without a trace. Now HE was the one who looked rather nervous. “Did they catch him?”

“No, my lord,” she replied timidly. “We found the dwarf at the hospital as well and questioned her. They tracked him into the sewers. He set a trap. The entire squad was killed by an explosion and cave-in. The dwarf was the only survivor. We have a Fist standing watch over the dwarf and halfling now. The two have been told that they are not permitted to go anywhere on their own until you give the order to let them go.”

Gortash scowled fiercely. “Anything else?”

“More bodies discovered in a string of murders throughout the city. The latest was some old human male who often played dragonchess in the park with his imaginary friend. Totally harmless individual. No rhyme or reason we can find. We have a team working to investigate. Oh, and some cleric from the temple of Ilmater was murdered too. We have another investigator looking into that. It’s an oliphaunt. He’s a useless sod, but we’re short on staff right now, what with all the other issues we’re having lately.”

Gortash waved these aside. “Nevermind that. I don’t need a litany of petty crimes being committed in the city. Forget all that for now. Secure Wyrms Rock and ensure my inauguration happens NOW. THAT’S what matters. I will collect my escort and arrive in one hour with Duke Ravengard. ONE HOUR. Understand? There had better not be ANY incidents during this incredibly special event.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“And make sure the dwarf and halfling are also at the inauguration. I want to speak with them about their involvement with the dragonborn. And tell the half-drow and his companions to invite all their friends. I want them to witness my ascension.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Now get out.”

“Yes, my lord,” she said, and she bowed one last time and hastened away.

Gortash turned towards the window and threw it open to allow the morning air to waft into the room. He grit his teeth and glared at everything he saw. He seemed completely oblivious to the world around him. His thoughts were lost in his own dark musings. For this reason, Wynari decided it was time to slip away. She gave Ziva the command, and they carefully flew out. Before long, they returned to the window they’d entered through, and they sped off towards the streets of the Lower City.

Once in the Lower City, Wynari returned to human form. Her first order of business at that point was to find Rina and Pona. Knowing they were alive made her feel a bit better. She was also glad to hear that Kaedyn, Vexir, Ryth-Shan and Lae’zel had survived. Yes, they were technically prisoners, but at least they weren’t killed by the gith/ dragon attack.

After becoming human again, Wynari quickly asked around about the Harborside Hospital. Soon, she was on her way towards it, hurrying at a jog through the now semi-crowded streets. There were people of every sort and every race, it seemed. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. Never in her life had she been in such a busy environment. She was used to the wilderness. The hustle and bustle of urban life was completely foreign to her.

And there were so many smells, both good and bad. Bakeries produced pleasant aromas that made her stomach growl and her mouth water. Factories immediately turned her sour, making her feel oily and sick. Body odors ranged from perfumed and fragrant to wretched and gut-wrenching. It didn't take her long to realize that she absolutely hated it. There was too much chaos. There were too many conflicting elements to contend with. She felt lost and disoriented and claustrophobic and overall unhappy.

But she kept her focus on her objectives. 'Find Rina and Pona at the Harborside Hospital. Try to warn them before the Flaming Fist sergeant gets there. Maybe together we can rescue Kaedyn, Vexir, Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel. Maybe together we can somehow stop the inauguration.'

At last, after what seemed like forever, she came upon the Harborside Hospital. She hoped and prayed she had arrived before the Flaming Fist. Into the building she went, and she looked around to see if she could spot either Rina or Pona in the main reception area. 'No sign of them,' she thought, and she immediately made for a set of double doors just to the left of the reception desk.

"Whoa! Whoa! Hey! You! Nature-lover! You can't go back there without an appointment."

Wynari paused, suddenly realizing that the voice was addressing her. She looked to see a dwarf woman shove the swinging door open that led to the reception desk area. She had auburn hair, green eyes, and freckles all over her face. She wore a white nurse's gown. She stormed up to her. "I know your type. Druid. Right? Never been in the city before?"

Wynari nodded. "Sorry. I'm not here to cause trouble. I just heard my friends are here. Dwarf ranger and halfling monk. Halfling has pink hair." She made a hand gesture to indicate that Pona had a mohawk.

The receptionist nodded. "Yeah, I know them. Came in last night. Halfling was dead; slit throat. Our staff cleric barely got to her in time. She literally had seconds left before Raise Dead would have had to be done to her. That gets MUCH more costly. Trust me."

Wynari's brow furrowed. "Can I go see them? It's somewhat urgent."

The receptionist eyed her skeptically. "Fist orders are that they go nowhere until Lord Gortash gives them permission. Besides, how do I know you weren't the one who killed her?"

"Take me to them, and they can tell you," said Wynari. "Bah. I don't have time for this." Then she pushed through the double doors and on through the hall.

"Hey!" the receptionist shouted after her. "Gods above. Druids! They got no city-sense. Security! We got a breach. Notify the Fist."

"On it," said a human male.

She needed to find her friends, and quickly. 'Stop me if you can,' she thought. Then once again she transformed into a mouse and rode atop Ziva's back. The two flitted from room to room, searching for their friends. The human security guard rushed into the hallway, looking for them, and he obviously spotted Ziva, for he came running directly towards them.

"Alright you," he growled. "You think we haven't dealt with wild shapers before? Give me a break. All you're doing is creating problems for yourself and your friends."

He drew nearer. They continued to flit about from door to door, glancing through the windows to see if they could spot who was in each room. Still no sign of Rina and Pona. Wynari was growing anxious. 'Gotta find them.' She glanced at the security guard. 'Silvanus help me. This is annoying.'

He reached Ziva and made a grab for her. Wynari scrambled down her back, onto her tail, and she leapt onto the man's hand. As she did, she transformed back into human form. This caused her to slam bodily into him and knock him backwards onto the floor. She then rolled off him and to her feet. The man also managed to get to his feet, and he immediately came at her to tackle her.

Wynari was faster. He slammed right into her shield instead of her legs. The druid then cast Conjure Animals, summoning a polar bear to join her. With that, she fled down the hallway, allowing the bear to stand between her and the now-frightened man. He ran back in the opposite direction, calling for backup.

Wynari knew her time was running out. Ziva was still moving from window to window, searching for Rina and Pona. Finally, she found them, and she pointed with her snout and then looked back at her companion multiple times to let her know. Wynari hurried to the door and threw it open.

Pona was in bed, looking a bit weak. She was sleeping soundly. Rina was sitting in a chair near her, also sleeping. However, when Wynari entered, both of the girls awoke. "Wynari?" said Rina in surprise. "Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes? We weren't sure what was going on back at the camp, but we..."

"No time," said Wynari. "Flaming Fist are on their way here to claim you. They want to bring you to Lord Gortash at his inauguration at Wyrms' Rock. He wants to question you about your involvement with Dark Urge. And Kaedyn, Vexir, Ryth-Shan, and Lae'zel have all been captured. They are currently in Wyrms' Rock. If we

hurry, we might be able to free them before the inauguration and get them out of there. He wants them to be there also, to witness his triumphant ascension to power - and who knows what else."

"Crap!" said Pona. "So we have VERY little time to make sure he doesn't become the supreme leader of Baldur's Gate."

"VERY little time," said Wynari. "The inauguration is set for less than one hour from now. In fact, it's probably going to be in the next twenty minutes, now that I think about it. It did take me a good deal of time to get here. Had to jog clear across the city."

"And the Flaming Fist are coming to get us?" said Rina. "Do they know we're also members of the Afflicted?"

"I don't know," said Wynari. "All I know is Gortash wants to question you about Dark Urge. I didn't think that was a good idea, so I think we need to get out of here before the soldiers arrive."

"What luck," said Pona. "The Fist guard who was on duty must have gone to get coffee or something because he was here when we fell asleep."

Rina looked at Pona with worry. "You're still recovering from dying," the ranger said. "You're not up for much."

"I might not be good for a hard fight at present," said Pona, "but I can get out of here. And if Wynari heals me..."

Rina smiled, standing to her feet and grabbing her gear. "Well then, let's get the \$#@ out of here."

Pona threw the covers off, slid to the floor, grabbed her own gear which lay nearby, and she quickly suited up. A few moments later, they heard the bear roaring down the hall and the shouts of numerous individuals. "What is that?" asked the halfling.

"Summoned a polar bear," said Wynari. "They were delaying me, and the Flaming Fist sergeant is presently on her way to collect you. I didn't think we'd have time any other way."

"We have to pay the bill," said Rina. "Otherwise, we'll be hounded by the Fist with criminal charges against us."

"I've got fifteen gold. That's about it," said Pona.

"I've got nothing," said Wynari. "How much do we owe?"

Rina was quite displeased. "I've got fifteen also." She cursed. "Revivify is expensive. They said three hundred for the diamonds that were used which were consumed by the spell, and another four hundred just for the cleric's services."

"Whoa!" said Pona. "Expensive indeed. I call, 'Corrupt Priest.' Seven hundred? None of us can afford that, even if we put all of our resources together with everyone back at camp. We spent all our money in Reithwin and on the road to bring everyone back to life with Withers' powers - and he only charged two hundred each for a True Resurrection."

"I never knew just how nice he was being to us," said Wynari.

"\$#@," said Rina. "There's no way around it. We're just going to have to run for it."

Then the three went out the door and down the hall back towards the main entrance. Unfortunately, the Flaming Fist were already there, including the one who had been on duty guarding them, and they were battling the polar bear. "We're cut off," said Wynari, and she noted that the polar bear was almost dead.

"There's got to be another way out of here," said Rina. "Come on." Then the trio made their way in the opposite direction to the back of the hall. Through a side door on their left, they entered a narrow hallway. There were numerous doors on the left and right, but at the end there was a sign hanging from the ceiling that said, "Stairs." It indicated that the door on the right below it led up to the next floor.

The door was locked. "I've got the key," said Pona. Then she pulled out her lockpicks and began to work at it. While she did this, Wynari cast Cure Wounds several times to heal her. Within moments, the door was open, and they made their way quickly up, making sure to lock the door behind them. Fortunately, the stairs didn't just go up to the second floor, they also went up to the third and fourth as well as the roof. Unfortunately, Pona had to pick the lock at the top door. This delayed them considerably and allowed the Flaming Fist to reach the stairs and begin their ascent in pursuit.

On the roof, they made their way to the back of the building, away from the main entrance. Looking down, they saw that there were a few Flaming Fist posted there just to ensure they didn't escape in that direction. They hurried to the front and found the same. 'Time is running out,' thought Wynari. 'We have to find an avenue of escape. But how? None of us can fly.'

'Fly! Wait.' She cast Conjure Animals, and suddenly two giant eagles appeared. "Quick! Climb on," she commanded, and she jumped on to the closest. Rina and Pona obeyed, climbing onto the other together. Then Wynari gave the command, and the two magical birds flew off towards Wyrms' Rock Fortress just as the Flaming

Fist came out onto the rooftop. A few attempted to fire their crossbows at the fleeing targets, but none of them hit their marks.

"Gods, Wynari," said Pona. "You are awesome. There's no way we'd have gotten away without you doing this."

"Getting away isn't what I'm worried about," said Rina. "Getting Kaedyn and the others out of that fortress is the bigger obstacle. Anybody got any ideas?"

"Let's rendezvous with Kethryn," said Wynari. "Maybe he can help us come up with something. I mean, I have NO idea how we're going to free them from there."

"If we even can," said Rina.

"I can pick locks," said Pona, "but doing that while avoiding a bunch of Flaming Fist that are crawling all over the place, that's a WHOLE other story."

"Plus getting them their weapons and equipment and somehow getting out - and all before the inauguration in twenty minutes?" said Rina. "Yeah. It's not looking good."

Wynari grit her teeth. "There has to be something we can do."

"Well, I agree," said Rina. "Let's meet back up with Kethryn. Maybe he can help us come up with something."

"Are there any others who got away?" asked Pona. "Tav? Izar'la?"

"Oh," said Rina. "We could really use someone with some invisibility spells or something."

"I don't know," said Wynari. "I only know about me and Kethryn. I only learned about Kaedyn and the others when I spied on Lord Gortash and that nasty Orin the Red person."

"Okay. Well, we'll see what we can do," said Rina, but it was clear that she was rather doubtful of their chances of success.

She was right. They found Kethryn waiting where Wynari had left him, and when they quickly explained the situation, he was without a solution. "I just don't know the layout well enough to properly develop any kind of strategy," he told them. "But I think I should also point out that it sounds like Lord Gortash isn't going to keep them prisoners for long. He ordered their release, that their weapons be returned to them, and that they should even invite their companions. He's essentially letting them go."

"But don't you think he's got something terrible up his sleeve?" said Wynari. "I mean, we can't just do nothing."

"Sure we can," said Kethryn. "We don't have to like it, but it would be foolish for us to break into Wyrms' Rock Fortress right now. It's going to be swarming with troops. It'd be suicide. We might as well just waltz into the place and turn ourselves over to them."

"But Gortash is undoubtedly going to do something to them publicly," Wynari argued. "The damage could be irreparable. We might lose four of our strongest members. The only way to prevent him from succeeding in whatever he's got planned for them is to get them out of there now."

"So what do you think we should do?" asked Pona, but Wynari had no answer.

Kethryn looked off towards Baldur's Gate. He then looked at the eagles that were still summoned. "We have a way to bypass security and enter the city," he told them. "It's unfortunate, but Kaedyn and the others and the inauguration will serve as a distraction for us. With the fortress out there in the middle of the river being so heavily fortified, there won't be as many troops in the city. We should have the ability to move about more freely. Thus, I think we need to focus more on our ultimate objectives."

"We MUST find the Dark Urge and retrieve the Netherstone he stole," Kethryn continued. "We cannot allow it to fall into the hands of the Chosen. From there, we have to find Orin the Red, kill her, and take her Netherstone - or somehow steal it from her without her knowing it. After that, we can focus on Lord Gortash who has somehow secured his place as the supreme overlord of Baldur's Gate."

Wynari calmed a bit. "I guess that does make more sense," she said, though she was truly worried about her friends. "And who knows? Maybe it will somehow thwart whatever Gortash has planned as well at the inauguration."

"Oh, and if we can," said Rina, a thought coming to her, "there was a boy who visited us in the early hours of the day. He told us that Astarion had been kidnapped by a woman who could paralyze him with a collar around his neck. She was able to climb walls, and she scaled over them like a spider into the 'rich people' part of town."

"Cute kid," said Pona. "Human boy. Name was Tate. He said he lived in Elerrathin's Home just west of Bloomridge Park. Invited us to visit sometime. Sounded almost like an orphanage."

"Astarion was trying to help us retrieve the Netherstone from the Dark Urge, but someone stabbed him in the back."

"It was dark. The soldiers couldn't see Astarion," Pona explained.

"None of us could," said Rina. "Anyway, it's not like I like Astarion, or anything. It's just..."

"I get it," said Kethryn. "We might want to look into it. He might be vital to our success when all is said and done."

"You never know," said Rina.

"Well, let's get moving," said Wynari. "The eagles will only remain summoned for one hour." And with that, they flew off towards the city, leaving Rivington behind.

The Flaming Fist soldier - a human male in his thirties with a buzz cut and goatee - came up to the bars and stood before them imperiously. Vexir glowered at him with her murderous, red eyes. "Congratulations," the man said, though his tone was mocking. "Lord Gortash has considered you to be honored guests. In fact, quite shockingly, he has instructed that you are to be given your weapons and equipment back. Following that, he is 'inviting you' and your companions to his inauguration. In fact, he's insisted on you being there and that you invite all your friends to join him. Of course, how you'd do that in time, who knows? I mean, we've only got like ten to fifteen before it starts. Wouldn't want to be late, would ya?"

Vexir stood, eying him carefully. "He is giving us our weapons back? Why?"

"Beats me," said the soldier. "I'm just doing what I'm told. Man's awfully bold, I must say. He's got stones. That's one of the big reasons people like him." He paused then, considering something else. "You got some good gear, especially that flaming sword of yours. Kinda a pity to give it back to ya."

He unlocked the cell and let her out. "This way. We're freeing your friends too." She obeyed, though she didn't like it one bit.

They made their way down a row of cells until they came to Kaedyn's. Like her, he was only in his common clothes. All of his armor and weapons were taken from him. 'Not like we had much of a choice. We were surrounded by those death machines and vastly outnumbered.'

When he saw her, he jumped to his feet. "What's going on?" he asked.

"I'll let her explain," said the soldier. Then he let Kaedyn out. While they walked, Vexir told him what the guard had said to her. By the time she was done, she had to do it all over again, for Ryth-Shan and Lae'zel were near one another, and the guard set them free in fairly rapid succession.

"Who cares why he is giving us our equipment back?" said Lae'zel. "At least we will be able to defend ourselves if things go wrong."

"He must want something from us," said Kaedyn. "He wants us to do something for him."

Ryth-Shan smirked. "Thank you, Captain Obvious," he said sarcastically. "Not sure I could have figured that one out on my own."

Kaedyn blushed in embarrassment. "Sorry. Just thinking out loud."

"First sign of madness," said the gith ranger.

"Come on," the guard snapped. "This way to your things."

It didn't take them long. They came to the main guard room, and within were chests that contained their belongings. Each was quick to equip themselves, and Vexir felt worlds better once she had Everburn in her hands. Interestingly, she noticed that Ryth-Shan pocketed his lock picks. Yes, the Flaming Fist even returned to him his Thieves' Tools.

"This way," said the Fist, and he then guided them up a wide flight of stairs and out of the dungeon area.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Kaedyn.

"The Grand Duke Marshall's Audience Chamber," said the Fist. "That is where the inauguration is taking place. Grand Duke Marshall Ulder Ravengard will be handing over his power to Lord Gortash, and all of the nobles will be doing the same. In a sense, Lord Gortash will now be our king. I mean, he'll still be called the Grand Duke - er, well, maybe something similar - but he will now have supreme executive power to do whatever he needs to in order to protect us."

Vexir exchanged nervous glances with Kaedyn. "And everyone in Baldur's Gate is okay with this?" she asked.

"Okay with it?" said the guard as he guided them through the fortress. "Are you serious? Lord Gortash is the ONLY good thing that's happened to Baldur's Gate in forever. He's the one person who has any solution to saving us from the Cult of the Absolute that's threatening to swarm into our city and take it over."

"And you don't find that just a tiny bit suspicious?" asked Ryth-Shan. "Did you even look into his past? Do you know what kind of person he was before he became this 'brilliant and wonderful leader' everyone's so willing to simply hand everything over to?"

“This is Baldur’s Gate,” said the guard. “We’ve all done bad things in our lives. It’s not how you started. It’s how you wind up. Lord Gortash is a saint. He’s gotten results. The Steel Watch has fortified the city, and it has instilled fear into the masses. That fear leads to healthy respect. Crime has gone down because people fear Gortash’s enforcers. More and more individuals are stepping in line, obeying his law and order and structure. Those who don’t... Swift justice.”

Ryth-Shan leaned over and whispered in Vexir’s ear. “Tadpoles undoubtedly infecting people. Thus, many are ‘stepping in line.’”

The conversation then came to an abrupt end. They arrived at the long hall. At the far end, there was a throne set atop a series of steps. Many nobles were present, lining the walls. There were tables set up with food and drinks and many other refreshments and delights. The nobles were enjoying themselves immensely and gossiping without restraint. Seated on the throne was Duke Ravengard. Standing next to him was none other than Lord Gortash.

As soon as the guard brought them into the chamber, Gortash’s gaze fell upon them. Vexir felt her stomach twist into a knot. Gortash gestured to the guard who then left them and returned to the door. The guard shut the door and bolted it. He nodded to Gortash who snapped his fingers at Ravengard, and the duke stood and came down the uppermost flight of stairs. Three steps down, there was a landing, and Gortash took his place there. Ravengard joined him on his right.

The Grand Duke was a dark-skinned human male with a clean-shaved head and face. Multiple scars from countless battles could be seen even from a distance. He was dressed in his full ceremonial, silver plated armor with blue tabard. The symbol of the flaming fist was embroidered into the fabric, and it rested just above his thick, brown belt. The symbol was a red upside down diamond with the point just above the heart. Yellow flames engulfed most of the inside, and a red punching fist was depicted in the base of the fire. The duke had a beautifully crafted bastard sword sheathed at his left hip, and his hand rested upon the handle.

Gortash addressed the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen. Please. Take your seats. The inauguration is about to begin.” The nobles all did as they were instructed, moving to benches that were set up along the walls throughout the chamber. They were so eager to witness this momentous occasion. Not a one was scowling or disapproving. The knot in Vexir’s stomach twisted more.

Once everyone was seated except for Vexir and her companions, Gortash continued. “Dearest patriars, but a moment. I must greet a most honored group of guests.” He then gestured at her and her friends as he made his way down the second flight of stairs towards them. “My friends. Forgive the cold welcome. My Steel Watchers are eager watchdogs. For the good of the people. I’m sure you understand.”

‘Smooth,’ Vexir thought. ‘He’s truly very smooth. Reminds me of the matrons back home.’

He then bowed before them respectfully after he came to stand only about five feet away. “Lord Enver Gortash, at your service.”

Vexir wanted to kill him where he stood, but she didn’t dare try. Glancing around the room, she saw the Steel Watchers, the Flaming Fist, and what looked like numerous potential traps, all ready to defend their new “king”. Indeed, she might potentially get a swing at him, but he’d likely have them and many nobles dead in moments - not that she cared much about what happened to the nobles.

‘That’s why he didn’t care if we had our weapons,’ she realized. ‘It’s a show of strength. He’s intimidating us. He’s letting us know that even with all our weapons at our disposal, there’s nothing we can do to stop him or this. He’s in charge here, and we’d better fall in line or die.’

“I understand congratulations are in order,” Gortash said as he righted himself. He was no longer speaking loud enough for everyone to hear. “Thorm’s defeat hasn’t gone unnoticed. You’re known - for who you are, and for the Netherstone that you carry.”

His voice dropped even lower as he continued. “You know, it takes all three to control the brain.” He raised his right hand, palm towards him so that they could see his Netherstone embedded in his gauntlet. He was taunting them with it; another display of authority and power. “Without Thorm’s it’s become vexingly wilful.” The stone glowed for the briefest of moments. Then he lowered his hand to his side. “The quakes are a clear warning. If nobody steps in soon, it’ll free itself from the authority of the crown. I expect it’ll start with turning the Sword Coast’s infected - you among them. That Prism of yours won’t last indefinitely.”

“Next, the Grand Design,” Gortash continued. “The mind flayer empire reborn. If we’re lucky, we’ll become slaves. If we’re unlucky, well... Not the most thrilling of prospects, but it’s a fate that can be avoided if you and I come to an understanding.”

Kaedyn was about to say something - to shoot him down right away in the name of Tyr, she could tell - and so she quickly spoke up before he could. “There are quakes?”

"You haven't experienced them yet?" said Gortash. "Pity. They're quite alarming. You must not have been in the city for very long then. One happened just last evening. The Lower City locals are quite distraught over it."

"Why should we side with you?" said Vexir, once again cutting Kaedyn off. Gortash locked eyes with her. 'Oh yes. JUST like a matron. Crafty and cunning and nasty and vicious and deceptive... He's a grand schemer, and he's confident that he holds all the cards. Fool! That's how they fall. The ones who lose always think there's no way they can lose.'

"Together," said Gortash, "we can still restore authority over the brain."

All at once, the Dream Visitor penetrated her thoughts. She blinked rapidly and reeled for a second. 'Of course, Gortash always did have an eye for opportunity. You must be careful.'

Gortash noticed the event. "Are you okay?" he asked.

Vexir recovered and gave him a stoic gaze. "Fine. Side effect of the Astral Prism."

"Really?" said Gortash, intrigued. "I'd be most curious to sit down with you to learn all about it."

"I bet you would," she replied coldly. "So let's cut to the chase. We don't have the Astral Prism or the Netherstone on us presently. We also don't know where either are at the moment."

"I'm aware. One of your other companions undoubtedly has it," said Gortash. "Quite clever of you. I mean, if you did have either, I would now have them, since we took all of your possessions."

"So why is the crown failing?" she asked, trying to keep him off balance with semi-rapid questions.

"It's not," Gortash answered, eying her with newfound curiosity. "However, it will not follow new orders unless the Netherstones are united to give the command. When it finishes executing its current orders, it will be free to do as it wishes. That would be bad for everyone. Once it is freed from its shackles, I doubt we'll ever be able to bring it under control again."

She continued to hold his gaze. She wasn't sure, but she actually didn't think he was lying. In fact, she determined that he was undoubtedly telling them the truth because he feared that if they didn't hurry, he might lose everything he'd worked so hard for. He was also using the truth to attempt to win their trust and aid. He NEEDED their help just as much, if not more, than they needed his.

'What a strange set of circumstances,' Vexir thought. "What kind of understanding do you suggest? I want details before I commit to anything."

Gortash considered for a moment. Finally, he said, "There is an old wisdom: a brittle alliance can never be mended - it can only break. With Ketheric gone, Orin proved treacherous. Bhaal's Chosen wants the Netherstones for herself."

"Of course," said Ryth-Shan. "Don't you?"

Gortash chuckled at this. "Well, ideally. Naturally. But I'm also a realist. You are powerful individuals. You've proven that by killing Ketheric. The last thing I want is a contest of our wills. That will only weaken us both and leave us exposed to Orin. She will finish off whoever is the victor between us."

"She only cares for blood, and your blood, the blood of your companions, and mine are of particular interest to her. Don't underestimate her," said Gortash. "Orin changes shape faster than you and I change clothes. She's descended from a Doppelganger, you see."

"Really?" said Ryth-Shan. "That's new information."

"Indeed," said Gortash. "That makes her extremely difficult to guard against. She's targeted me as well. I'm well protected, but she's extremely good at what she does. If Orin obtains all three Netherstones, she'll plunge the Coast into chaos and paint the city in blood. It will be a mass altar to Bhaal."

Then, for a moment, Vexir actually considered that maybe Gortash cared about the people of his city. "I can't let that happen," he said, casting his gaze downward. "I want to lead this city to glory..." And just like that, she saw his ambition return. "... not scorch its earth."

"You want us to believe you mean no harm to the city?" said Kaedyn, clearly not accepting the man's offer.

"I'd like to propose a pact," said Gortash. "A divine oath, if you will, sworn upon spirit and flesh. I do no harm to you nor you to me. Furthermore, you'll have nothing to fear from my Steel Watch while our pact stands. Thorm's stone is yours to keep. When you slay Orin and take her stone, you bring it here, so the three are united once again. Together, we rule Faerun as kings and queens - me and all of you who call yourselves Afflicted; in particular, whoever you choose to carry the two stones. The Stone-Bearers will be the Three Supreme Kings. No, more than kings. We shall be the Three Gods. We will rule as the Absolute."

"What do you say?" he asked in conclusion. "Shall we be allies?"

The Dream Visitor once again invaded their minds. 'I can detect no deceit. This alliance could serve us well, and if it does not... well, we need not honor it.'

Vexir made it clear she did not trust Gortash or the Dream Visitor. "A divine oath, you say? We could do that, but we will have a few conditions." She didn't glance back at Kaedyn, but she guessed accurately that he wore a surprised look on his face - a look mingled with betrayal. She knew he would never willingly agree to pledge a divine oath with a Chosen of Bane. However, if she managed to word the oath carefully...

'Tyr,' she prayed, and it was the first time she ever reached out to him. 'You are his god, and I know I have served Lolth my whole life. Yet if you are half the god Kaedyn tells me you are, you will see that I am not Lolth's Child any longer, and you will pardon me. I have rejected her and her ways and the ways of my people. Kaedyn is your servant, and... and I love him. I want to be with him forever. So if you do this for me, I will also serve you. Help me pledge this oath carefully, that it would be satisfactory to you and to him, and it will not mess us over in the end.'

Gortash raised an eyebrow to this, pondering her words as if taste-testing a choice wine. "And what, pray tell, are your conditions?"

"Kaedyn is a cleric of Tyr," said Vexir. "He will not agree to side with you unless you agree to these conditions. In fact, we will attack you here and now, and we will undoubtedly die - uselessly. If you are serious, and you want to be our allies, then you MUST agree to these conditions. It is the least you can do since we will be doing ALL of the dirty work."

"One. You must NOT in any way, shape or form bring tyranny down upon the people of Baldur's Gate while we are yet allies. You WILL do everything in your power to protect them and make their lives better. And when I say 'the people of Baldur's Gate', I mean everyone who is within the city limits including the Upper City, Lower City, Outer City, Wyrms Crossing, Wyrms Rock Fortress, and Rivington. I mean not just the registered citizens but everyone. Law and order are Tyr's ways, and Bane's also, if I'm not mistaken, but you MUST exact law and order with mercy and grace while we are yet allies. Failure to do so in any way breaches the oath and frees us from any obligation to you."

"Two," she continued before he could respond. "Once we have hunted down and killed Orin and retrieved her Netherstone, we will subdue the Absolute and immediately free all tadpoled people, including ourselves, from the tadpoles. In other words, NO ONE is to remain tadpoled. Everyone will be freed of them. Failure to do this will breach our agreement and free us from the divine oath."

Gortash refused to remain silent on this one. "You are awfully bold. The first one, I could agree to. The second... You are essentially undermining the entire operation. You are undoing everything I've worked for, and the whole point of the Absolute is to enforce supreme law and order. By infecting the masses with tadpoles, I bring them all under absolute law and order. It is the perfect society. No more crimes. No more syndicates. No more wars. Why? Because everyone will serve the Absolute."

"But I will agree to free you and the other Afflicted from the tadpoles," he added. "Come now. You must at least compromise with me. If you are to be gods with me and rulers over all things, it makes sense to free you from the tadpoles. That, I can understand. However, I will NEVER agree to free the masses. If that's not acceptable to you, then we are finished here - and as you say... You will surely die here and now."

Silence fell between them. Vexir prayed again. 'What do I say to this? How do I continue?'

She then heard Ryth-Shan whisper to Lae'zel. "I feel like we're trying to make a deal with Raphael." Lae'zel only snorted at this.

Kaedyn spoke. "The divine oath, then, is this: You do no harm to me or any of the Afflicted whether directly or indirectly. In turn, we do no harm to you. The Flaming Fist and Steel Watch and all who are associated with you in any way will also do no harm to me or any of the Afflicted as long as our pact stands. This condition is in place unless any of the other conditions are broken. The other conditions are these: Thorm's AND Orin's stones are ours to keep. Neither can be taken by you or anyone associated with you. When we slay Orin and take her stone, we will bring it here, to you, so the three stones can be united once again to subdue the Absolute. You will continue to possess your stone, and two of us will possess the other two stones. Once we have subdued the Absolute, we will command it to free all of the Afflicted and those associated with the Afflicted including family, friends, allies, etc., from the mind flayer parasites, ending our connection to the elder brain and anything associated with it. At that point, the oath has ended and we can, at that time, renegotiate the terms of the oath and our alliance moving forward."

"During the time that the divine oath is active, you must not in any way, shape or form bring tyranny down upon the people of Baldur's Gate as outlined by Vexir. You will strive to uphold the ideals and practices of Tyr rather than Bane. This, again, is just until we are no longer infected by the Absolute. Then we will renegotiate the terms and the oath."

Gortash clearly liked this. "You know, I believe allying with you is a far better outcome than allying with Ketheric and Orin. I know Ketheric was ready to betray our alliance too. There's no surprise there. But you should

know this. I initiated this plot. I brought Ketheric and Orin together to create the Absolute. They knew this would only work if we stood united and coordinated our powers. Their ambition blinded them to reason. I don't suffer the same affliction. In short, you can trust me, and the beauty of all this is that I can see that I can completely trust you. If you give your word to this oath, I know you will keep it to the letter, as I will."

"You see, I KNOW it takes three minds to control the Absolute, and in reality, you and I aren't so different, Kaedyn. We both value law and order. Your ideals, of course, are full of mercy and forgiveness - weak and sentimental, mind you - but they are your ideals. Mine are swift and harsh punishment. No mercy. Disobey law and receive 'order'." He said this quite ominously.

"What I'm getting at is that I think you and I could learn to rule together over the Realms in our own ways. Let lawful evil live in my lands. Let lawful good live in yours. Let neutral people live in the third realm set up by whomever you have in mind; the third Stone-Bearer. Whatever. I don't care. The point is, let us destroy all the other gods and be the only three. Then we will rule all things as equals without all this senseless chaos and disorder. You rule your way. I rule mine. We all keep to our own borders."

"We'll renegotiate the oath and terms later," Vexir replied. "Are we agreeing to pledge ourselves to this present divine oath?"

Gortash was ecstatic. "Then let it be writ by the Black Hand of Bane. I, Lord Enver Gortash, swear I shall abide by the tenets of this oath. We will work together to subdue the Absolute and free all the Afflicted and their family, friends, and other loved ones from the mind flayer parasites. We will rise together over Toril and the Realms as a roaring sun."

"And let it be writ," said Kaedyn boldly, "by the Balanced Scales on the Warhammer of Tyr. I, Kaedyn, humble cleric of Tyr, swear that I shall abide by the tenets of this oath. We will work together to subdue the Absolute and free all the Afflicted and their family, friends, and other loved ones from the mind flayer parasites. With this pledge, both Lord Enver Gortash and I, Kaedyn, cleric of Tyr, agree to all the tenets of the oath as we have discussed and agreed upon in this conversation in its entirety including that Lord Enver Gortash will rule at this time according to the tenets of Tyr and not Bane until such time that we, the Afflicted, and all of our family, friends, and loved ones are set free completely by the mind flayer parasites. Let this oath now be binding."

And with that, Gortash clapped his hands together. "Now," he said happily. "Let me demonstrate why you made the right choice." He paused for effect. "I have just received word from some of my informants that your companions are compromised. One among you is now an impostor; a Faceless." This brought a bit of shock to Vexir and her team. "Who? I can't say. I'd suggest a thorough investigation - you'll find I speak truth. My informants followed Orin's movements after she left my estate this morning, and they saw one of your companions being taken away by doppelgangers. Orin has numerous doppelgangers at her command, by the way."

"A shapeshifter," said Ryth-Shan darkly. "It could be anyone. I mean - it's not me, but it could be anyone else." He said this partially as a joke to lighten the mood, but he was mostly serious.

"The faceless in your company is like a knife at your throat," said Gortash. "Remove it, quickly, or any alliance between us would be exceedingly short-lived."

"Do you have any clues you could give us?" asked Kaedyn. "This is quite vague. Seems more like a witch hunt."

Gortash shrugged. "Not any of you," he said confidently. "If I wasn't certain of that, I wouldn't be having this conversation with you. But honestly, it could be any of the others."

"How, then, do you know they were one of us?" asked Ryth-Shan. "Could be anyone they replaced."

"My informants heard them discussing it," said Gortash. "Something about Orin knowing all of the movements of the Afflicted." He sighed. Time was slipping away from him. "Look. Don't believe me. That's your choice. But we just made the oath, and we are now allies. I benefit from helping you and your companions. I'm TRYING to help you succeed by telling you this."

"As I said before, do not underestimate Orin. Even horror has a home. Find her nest, and slay her there. For all its charms, Baldur's Gate has long had a cancer at its heart - a hidden temple devoted to Bhaal. That's where Orin became what she is, where she worshiped and schemed for years - her entire lifetime. Yes, that's how long Orin and the Cult of Bhaal have existed here in the city. They never fully died out, in fact. Orin grew up here under the 'tender' care of the cult."

"And now it's where she hides from my Watchers when she's not spilling blood in the streets. You and your friends are resourceful. I trust you'll sniff it out. If the trail goes cold, follow the bodies. The Cult of Bhaal are responsible for most of the murders that are occurring here in Baldur's Gate."

"Well," said Kaedyn, "isn't that pretty much your doing? I mean, it's all a part of the overall plan. Right? First, Orin the Red, Bloody Dagger of Bhaal, causes panic in the streets through killings in the Absolute's name. Next, the threat of the Absolute's monstrous armies formed by Myrkul's general, Ketheric Thorm. Finally, in such

circumstances, people crave strong leaders; leaders that bring law, order, and protection - leaders like you. Bane's unyielding hand, author of justice." He said this last part with sarcasm.

Gortash laughed at this. "Right you are, I suppose, and you are soon to witness the people of Baldur's Gate granting me complete power over them. All out of fear of the Absolute. And now, you are powerless to stop me." He winked. "Next, I - well, we - will declare curfew and begin infecting the masses. Our subjects will hear the voice of their Absolute god."

"Wait. What?" said Vexir. "That's not ruling according to Tyr's ways. That's already a breach in the oath."

"Is it?" said Gortash. "Name the tenet of Tyr's faith that says that infecting the masses with mind flayer parasites is evil or wrong. Or is it the curfew that is against Tyr's teachings?"

Vexir grit her teeth. 'How could we have not specified that. Ryth-Shan was right. He's a devil in disguise, and we just made a contract with him.'

"Relax," said Gortash. "The faithful will do ANYTHING in the name of their god. That means that we WILL be bringing law and order to the masses by infecting them. They will become good and obedient, law-abiding citizens. And as I promised, I will treat them with mercy and care and concern, protecting them from the evils of the Cult of Bhaal and the dreaded Army of the Absolute."

"Besides, this goes along with our pact. We MUST keep the Absolute busy doing the last commands we gave it. That involves infecting and controlling more and more people in the city. As long as we continue to infect the masses, the Absolute cannot break free of our control. This buys us more time. This buys YOU more time."

"Very clever," said Vexir in disgust.

Gortash's look of arrogance and triumph made her sick. "More importantly," he replied. "It is JUST." Vexir glanced back at Kaedyn, and she could tell that he was barely controlling himself. By divine oath alone, he was restrained.

"Now enough of this," said Gortash, his voice once again rising to a level so all could hear him. "Come, friends. Be witness as I make history as the first Archduke of Baldur's Gate." He then took a grand turn and began to address the whispering crowd. Up until that point, they had been gossiping about who the Afflicted were and why someone as important as Lord Gortash would entertain them on the cusp of his inauguration. In fact, because of them, he was late in starting the ceremony. Thus, the crowd was growing impatient, and yet, they were on the edge of their seats, for they were witnessing such unusual events.

"Distinguished dukes, patriars, and Dearest Ravengard - I will heed your call. A new chapter begins," said Gortash as he strode towards where Ravengard was still standing on the landing below the throne. Ravengard, on que, drew his bastard sword and held it in both hands before him. It looked as if he was about to knight Lord Gortash. Ravengard then descended slowly and with purpose so that he stood before Gortash. Gortash knelt, head bowed.

Vexir looked back at Kaedyn. He was still gritting his teeth and glaring at Gortash's back with restrained outrage. Of all the things that they had endured together, this was probably the hardest for him. It went against everything he'd ever fought for. While he was standing there doing nothing but watching, a tyrant was ascending to power over Baldur's Gate.

"Enver Gortash," said Ravengard with a commanding voice. "Swearest thou, by Balduran's blade, to defend the citizens of Baldur's Gate from enemies within and without?" With this, the Grand Duke rested his sword's blade on Gortash's left shoulder.

"I swear," said Gortash, his high-backed golden-trimmed collar completely blotting out all view of his head from where Vexir stood. She could just imagine his sinister smile as he said this.

Ravengard lifted the blade ceremoniously and lowered it on Gortash's right shoulder. "Swearest thou true faith and fealty to the same, by word, deed, and decree, so that none may suffer?"

"I swear," he replied. Vexir shuddered. Her imagination was running wild. She pictured a purely evil, devil's face. She pictured Raphael as he gloated in his dining hall so many weeks earlier.

Ravengard lifted the sword, holding it upright with handguard directly in front of his face. He addressed the crowd. "Gathered guests, grant ye consent?" There were nods all around and muttered voices granting their approval.

Ravengard looked back down at Gortash, and he stretched his sword out with his left hand only in a grand gesture. "Enver Gortash, the Council appoints you Archduke of Baldur's Gate. Now rise and declare your good will."

Gortash rose and turned back to the crowd. When he spoke, he used sweeping hand gestures and a truly inspiring tone. The mask he wore was charismatic, warm, and friendly. "My friends. The Steel Watch stands ready. Let its blade fall on any who would diminish our city? And behold! My honored guests." He gestured to Vexir and

her companions. "They will act as our champions. They will hunt down our enemies even in the darkest of lairs, and they will vanquish all who oppose righteousness."

"Friends," he said, speaking directly to them now. "You will find me in my office above these very chambers when you return from your quests. Do not come empty-handed - as I know you will not." Then he patted Kaedyn on the shoulder, just to pour salt on the wound. Finally, he strode past them and out the door. The crowd clapped, as nobles do - with modest enthusiasm - and they jibbered happily with one another about all the wonderful things they'd just witnessed.

Vexir ignored them, turning to Kaedyn. "You okay?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "But I understood what you were doing. As you said, we'd have died here today if you hadn't taken over. This is probably the best outcome we could have achieved."

"For now," said Vexir. "I'm sure he'll break his oath."

"He won't," said Kaedyn. "He's a Banite. Law and order are supreme. He will uphold his oath. I have no doubt. But we gave him an out by giving ourselves one. As soon as we're free of the mind flayer tadpoles, all bets are off. You can better believe he'll be setting a trap for us. He'll be ready to wipe us out and claim all three Netherstones for himself. He just needs to find two other people he can sucker - individuals who won't betray him but will also let him be the tyrant he wants to be."

"He won't find that," said Ryth-Shan. "He can't have both. Either he'll find someone like us who he can trust won't betray him, or he'll find someone who he can't trust who will let him be a tyrant."

"True," said Kaedyn. "Either way, it's doomed to fail."

"Do we have a plan to ensure HE dies instead once we subdue the Absolute and force it to remove our tadpoles?" asked Lae'zel.

"Yes," said Vexir. "We have companions like Wynari who aren't infected. He will be counting on us being disabled while the tadpoles are exiting our bodies. While that is happening, he'll probably try to kill us and have his other two new Chosen take the stones. Allies like Wynari and Halsin are going to be key to our survival and success. They will not only have to protect us, but they'll have to try to undoubtedly kill Gortash and whoever else he has with him when all this goes down."

"If Wynari is still alive," said Lae'zel. "We have no guarantee that any of our companions yet live."

"That's true," said Kaedyn. "But we know that Aelun, Vlynrifane, Fiovey, and Jaheira went through that portal. Something happened after that. We nearly lost the protection of the Prism. Still, it subsided, so I have to believe that Aelun's team did something to save us."

"And that means that Jaheira, a VERY powerful druid who isn't infected, will be able to help us against Gortash," said Vexir. "She and hopefully her Harper allies will be able to sweep in and stop him from killing us and claiming the three Netherstones for himself."

Lae'zel considered this and nodded. "And I am supposed to meet someone here as well," she told them, her thoughts drifting away. "Perhaps they will also be an ally we can rely on in this." She then met their gaze again, her eyes fierce. "But tell me that when this is all done, we WILL kill the Absolute and all of its mind flayers and intellect devourers and other minions. Let me hear you say it."

"We will," said Kaedyn. "I promise. This is why we will renegotiate the oath and deal with Gortash after we are freed from the tadpoles. When all is said and done, he WILL die. We WILL take the last Netherstone, and we WILL put an end to the infection of the masses. We will command the Absolute to free them all - every last person - and we will then order the Absolute to mentally kill all of its mind flayers and minions and everything. Then we will kill the Absolute itself."

Lae'zel nodded, satisfied. "Then I am with you to the bitter end," she told them. "No matter what, I am with you. The Chosen of the Absolute's alliance may have been brittle, but ours shall be fashioned in adamantite and blood."

Flaming Fist Sergeant



Orin the Red



Duke Ravengard



Chapter 6 - Rivington Riffraff

Karlach and Wyll returned to Wyrms Lookout as soon as they knew the coast was clear. Hiding in bushes, they observed from a distance as Flaming Fist and Steel Watch wandered about searching for survivors or clues as to who had been there. All they found were charred remains and torched items that were no longer of any use to anyone, and so they departed. They left the bodies, for in their opinions, there was no point in wasting time burying them. The place was well outside the city's limits.

When they were out of sight, the pair made their way into the area, searching around for signs of their friends. Nothing. This both discouraged them and gave them hope. None of the bodies looked like their companions. They were all gith. Well, that wasn't totally true. Withers' two hirelings hadn't escaped. Both Zenith and Brinna lay amidst the charred githyanki remains.

Wyll picked up a bedroll, and it crumbled to dust in his hands. "Well, all of our gear is gone except what we carried with us during the fight."

"That sucks," said Karlach. "Then again, it's nothing we can't replace in the city. And I have all my best gear on me - never sleep without it." She clapped the Sword of Justice's blade into her free hand several times. She then walked over to where she'd been sleeping, and she frowned. "Plate armor's gone, though. That sucks. The Fist must've taken it. \$#@s."

"You weren't wearing it anymore anyway," said Wyll. "Ever since Mizora took the ring from you."

"Reduced me to the barbarian that I am," said Karlach with a smile. "Meh. It was fun while it lasted, but I do feel freer the way I am now." Then she patted her heavy crossbow that was hanging at her hip. The quiver of bolts was at her other hip. "Still got Ol' Deadeye too. Both of these are all that counts."

"Not sure I entirely agree," said Wyll grimly. "We have no money and no food. I have the clothes under my armor, two daggers, my rapier, a magic ring that casts Color Spray, and that's about it."

"Guess you might need to sell your ring so we can buy breakfast," said Karlach, her smile never fading. "Come on, Wyll. You and I've been through worse. Surely we can handle this. Don'tcha think?"

"Why didn't you give your plate armor to Minthara?" Wyll asked, changing the subject a little. "It's better than the armor Wynari gave her."

"Are you kidding?" said Karlach. "Give that \$#@ some of the best armor we've got? No thanks. I'd rather \$#@sing let the Fist have it. Piece of \$#@ Minthara and her crazy, psychotic boyfriend. Yeah. No thanks. I don't mind them being a little tougher, but I don't want them being THAT good."

Suddenly, a noise drew their attention. Both were ready for a fight, but instead Halsin, Sharayla, and Gorm emerged from the ruins of one of the rooms. Looking around, their eyes fell upon the pair, and relief washed all over them. "Are we glad to see you," said the big elf as he made his way up to them. Gorm and Sharayla followed close behind. "Have you seen any of the others? Did anyone else make it?"

"No idea," said Karlach. "But if you're alive, and we're alive, and we've found no corpses that match any of the others, I'd say it's safe to assume that they made it."

"Where do we go from here?" asked Sharayla. "Do we start hunting around for signs of the others, or should we just make for the city?"

"I say we make for the city," said Halsin. "We were all separated. Our destination is Baldur's Gate. Therefore, our best hope of finding the others is to head for Rivington, the only suburb south of the river. Wyrms Crossing is at the north edge of the town."

"You don't think anyone will try to come back here and look for survivors?" asked Gorm.

"Honestly," said Halsin, "I think most will assume there's too much danger in coming back here. Best to lie in wait near Wyrms Crossing around lots of people. The githyanki won't likely attempt to attack anyone so close to the Flaming Fist."

"Good point," said Wyll.

Just then, a portal tore open near them. Once again, everyone dropped into battle stances, prepared for a fight. But Aelun, Vlynnrifane, Fiovay, Cryshell and Jaheira emerged. The portal closed behind them. The five looked around, hoping to get their bearings. Seeing the gathered group already present, they were relieved. "So glad to see you," Fiovay said.

"Same to you," said Halsin.

"Back at ya, Soldier," said Karlach almost in tandem with Halsin.

Fiovay giggled at this. "Still calling me Soldier, eh?"

Karlach chuckled. "I could call you something else, if you'd prefer." The implications were endless.

Fiovay waved both hands at her. "No no. That's quite alright. Soldier will do."

"Are you all that remains?" asked Jaheira, her expectations low.

"We don't know," said Halsin, "but Karlach pointed out that none of the bodies appear to be similar to our friends. It is likely they all escaped."

"Thank Lathander," said Aelun.

"I see our gear is gone," said Vlyn. "All we have is what's on us."

"Yep," said Karlach. "That's pretty much the whole of it."

Aelun patted his backpack. "Well, we're not entirely without equipment."

"What you got in there?" asked Karlach. "You always grab your pack when in a fight?"

"I do when it has a ton of potions and scrolls in it," Aelun answered.

"Like his father," Jaheira remarked, and she couldn't help but smile at that.

Fiovey laughed, also patting her pack. "The Underdark taught us well. Always sleep with your pack next to you, especially when you're carrying good stuff in it. Scrolls, potions, a suit of leather armor, lockpicks, extra daggers... You name it."

"A way to fix my infernal engine?" said Karlach.

Fiovey choked a little. "Okay. I must admit. You got me on that one. I wasn't expecting that."

Vlynrifane knelt down where her pack had been. "Well I, unfortunately, didn't grab my pack." She pulled it open. Melted vials lay clustered within. The contents were spilled all over. "Healing potions and Animal Friendship potions. Not a huge loss, I suppose. I also lost my Coldbrim Hat."

"Oh no!" said Fiovey. "Now we can't be 'The Witch Hat Sisters.'"

"We're always sisters, Fi," said Vlyn. "Dragonfire burning my hat to a crisp won't change that."

"All your scrolls are gone too, then. Yes?" said Aelun.

"Unfortunately," said Vlyn, a bit more bitingly than she intended. "They were in the pack too. Sorry. I was more concerned about Dark Urge trying to kill me and stealing the Netherstone."

"Well," said Jaheira. "Can't fault you for that. I also lost my pack. Nothing but the mundane in it, mind you, but still. Small losses. We have our lives and our health. So let's not mourn these things. Let's just get moving. We have friends to find and a Netherstone to retrieve." Then she walked past Aelun and hissed so only he could hear, "And you should assure her you didn't mean to sound like such an uncaring \$#@%." Karlach was close enough to also hear, and she fought to hide her grin.

Aelun was surprised by this. He hadn't realized he'd done anything wrong. He turned to Vlyn who only shot him an angry look as she followed Jaheira. Aelun quickly caught up to her, worried now that he'd messed up. "Hey," Karlach heard him say softly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound like I cared more about scrolls than you."

"I know," she replied evenly. "Let's just forget about it."

Fiovey was suddenly there next to Karlach. How she'd slipped up to her undetected, the tiefling had no idea. "Lovers' quarrel, eh?" she said with a grin. "Ah well. Everyone fights sometimes. Right?"

"Pssh," said Karlach, waving a hand at it as the rest of them set out to follow Jaheira, Vlyn and Aelun.

"That's hardly a tiff. I've seen WAY worse."

The group made their way down the road in a procession. Jaheira led the way with Aelun and Vlyn behind. Fiovey and Karlach came next, with Wyll following directly behind them. And finally, Gorm, Sharayla, and Halsin were last. Cryshell had gone into the Ethereal Plane, so where she was in the group, Karlach had no idea - until the ambush.

About three-quarters of the way to town, out of the bushes to the left, a sudden commotion started. Karlach nearly killed whatever it was in response, for she was closest. A white dog barked loudly and bolted straight for her. He shot around Karlach, however, and then stopped at Vlynrifane's feet, spun, and barked furiously all the more at where he'd come from. Everyone had weapons drawn, ready to kill, when Cryshell's scared voice called to them. "It's me. It's me. I saw the doggy. I just wanted to pet him and tell him it's okay. But he got scared of me. That's all."

"Gods, Child," said Jaheira, exasperated. "You're trying to give me a heart attack."

"Sorry," said Cryshell timidly. She was still hiding in the bushes.

Vlyn was already crouching next to Scratch and petting him to calm him, whispering soft words into his ear. Fiovey was laughing riotously. "You really had us, girl. Scared the fur back onto my skin. Keep it up. Maybe I'll return to being a kitsune again."

Aelun went to where Cryshell was. He stooped down and gestured to her. "Come here," he said warmly. "It's okay. We're not mad. You found Scratch. You did good." Cryshell slowly emerged, and she scurried up to him, head bowed as if she was afraid she'd receive a sound punishment. Aelun just embraced her, and Karlach could see that she was already feeling better.

The tiefling relaxed as empathy flooded her senses. "Ah. Poor kid. I know what she's going through, but she's got it even worse than I did. She's so young. All this has got to be hard on her. She can't possibly understand

it all, and she's got all these phase spider and drider instincts embedded within her. And yet, she's still just a kid - a REAL young one at that. Hard to believe she's so big already.'

"You didn't do anything wrong," said Aelun reassuringly. "Look. You helped us find Scratch. See? He's happy now. Vlyn's made him feel safer."

"He doesn't remember me," said Cryshell, teary-eyed. "I've changed so much and grown so much so fast. He doesn't even remember that he was me and my sister's protector even though we've been traveling together since the Shadow Lands."

"He remembers," said Vlyn. "He remembers your smell better than what you look like. You just startled him because you popped up on him out of the Ethereal. His instinct was to run and warn everyone of danger. That's all."

"You're what they call an ambush predator," said Aelun as he released her and wiped her tears with his fingers. "That means that your instinct is to jump out of the Ethereal and attack your prey before they even know you're there. Even though Scratch wasn't your prey, you still had this inner desire to pounce on him. He sensed it, and it freaked him out."

"The Ethereal plane protects me," said Cryshell. "So how do I jaunt into the Material without scaring people?"

Aelun stood, ruffling her hair and smiling. "You don't. It is pretty much always going to startle people, every time. We just have to get used to it, and you'll probably have to jaunt into hiding places so we don't just react and hurt you; especially the older you get."

"Yeah," said Fi. "If you'd just jaunted into the bushes and Scratch wasn't there, it wouldn't have startled us. You could have popped out of the Ethereal and said something to us to let us know you're there."

Then a thought popped into Karlach's mind. "Has anyone warned her about other creatures that can jaunt? I mean, she should probably be prepared that devils and demons, among other things, often have the ability to also jaunt back and forth. The Ethereal might protect her from a lot of dangers, but not all."

"I've been warned," she said with several crisp nods. "They were Demon Hunters." She pointed to Aelun, Vlyn and Fi. "One of the first things they told me was about that."

Karlach nodded and smiled. "Good deal. Just wanted to make sure. You're a cute kid, Cryshell, and I think we all just want to make sure you're safe."

"Here," said Vlyn as she gestured for Cryshell to come closer. "Scratch wants to make up with you. See? His tail's wagging."

Cryshell smiled and skittered over. Indeed, the dog's tail was whipping back and forth fiercely. Cryshell held out her hand to pet him, and he leaned into it. She giggled happily and ruffled his fur. "There you go," said Vlyn. "All better."

They reached the outskirts of Rivington before dawn, and there was a road that ran from east to west. Many people, refugees of every sort, were already milling about, lingering about, camping about, and other such mundane activities. A few Flaming Fist could be seen here and there along with regular citizens. Most of the people who belonged there were obviously quite unhappy with the "riffraff". Some were even loudly fighting with the soldiers about getting the vermin out of their section of the city. Karlach sneered. 'The only vermin I see are the heartless people who have no pity or sympathy for those who are hurting.' But she decided not to say anything to anyone about her feelings.

Towards the front, Jaheira, Aelun, and Vlynrifane were obviously talking about which way they should go. Karlach began to wonder why they didn't just head for Wyrms Crossing, when her thoughts were interrupted. Scratch started barking. Tav emerged from between a few buildings. Behind her came Izar'la who was carrying an intellect devourer-sized "backpack" on her back complete with a blanket over it and her. Interestingly, she was also carrying her real pack in her left hand. Karlach smirked. 'Trying to not look out of place while looking incredibly out of place.' Just then, a refugee walked by looking very similar with a worn blanket over his head. 'I stand corrected.'

"Am I glad to see all of you," said Tav as she approached. "Is this it? Are we the only survivors?"

"No sign of anyone else," said Fiovay happily. "We checked the outpost too. No bodies that matched our companions. We think everyone got away somehow."

Tav breathed a sigh of relief, as did Izar'la. The gith said, "We were hiding in the woods until only about fifteen minutes ago. Then we came here and decided to wait to see if we could spot any of you."

"All our gear is pretty much fried," said Sharayla. "The dragons torched everything we weren't carrying on us. There's nothing of any value left back there."

Tav nodded. "Izar'la grabbed her pack. So we at least have that."

"A few of us did also," said Fi proudly.

"I didn't lose much," said Tav. "Mostly religious ritual stuff, though I did have a number of cleric scrolls in there that would have come in handy."

"So are you all planning on heading towards Wyrms Crossing?" asked Izar'la. "Tav and I were wondering if we should try to explore around Rivington for a bit, just to make sure the others aren't hiding out somewhere nearby."

"That's not a bad plan," said Jaheira, overhearing. "There are enough of us. Maybe we should spread out a bit. That way, we can also collect some rumors and things - see if we can find out what's going on right now in the city."

"And see if we can find another spot to set up a base camp," said Wyll. "I'm already gaining a bit too much attention." That's when Karlach noticed that he had turned his back towards the bulk of the people that were milling about. He was attempting to hide his face so that most would assume he was just another tiefling.

"What about down by the river?" said Izar'la. "There is an old beaten path to the left off the main street near Sword Coast Couriers. The beach passes under Wyrms Crossing. People do go down there, but it's more out of the way than anywhere here in Rivington, especially with all these refugees milling about."

Jaheira snorted. "With all these refugees milling about, the beach may actually be more inhabited than you think."

Izar'la shrugged. "Well, that's true, I suppose. Still, it's worth checking it out. Don't you think?"

"I suppose," said Jaheira. "Good point. We might also swing by the Temple of the Open Hand. Father Lorgan and I go way back."

Her expression transformed in a moment from happy memories to tragic ones. She looked off towards Wyrms Crossing, scowling as she continued. "Minthara and the Cult of the Absolute were responsible for many deaths at an old fishing village south of the Chionthar near where you crashed in the nautiloid. A good friend of mine, Atross, was killed as well. I flew back here to Baldur's Gate and Father Lorgan agreed to return with me to that village. We Harpers lost many against the cult that day. Lorgan could not bring them all back; only a handful. Quite costly, but he did it for free. Atross was saved, and when I returned Father Lorgan to Baldur's Gate, Atross remained here as well to try to rally more support for us."

"Sounds like Lorgan is a wonderful ally," said Vlyn. "Still, I'm not sure staying at his temple is a good idea. We might bring him trouble."

"We'll let him worry about that," said Jaheira confidently. "He's not an easy man to scare."

Suddenly, an argument broke out across the street. The sun's rays were just starting to peak over the horizon. There was a mansion sitting at the top of a small hill, and a wealthy looking man in fine clothes was yelling at what looked like a small group of refugees. The rich man had a few mercenaries backing him, and they looked ready to start drawing swords.

Tav fearlessly stormed over, the Grymskull helmet she wore in combat under her left arm. Her adamantine shield was slung on her back. Karlach was impressed by her boldness, and she quickly hurried over to provide her with some support. Fiovay came next, followed by Izar'la, Halsin, Gorm and Sharayla. "What's going on here?" Tav demanded. "Why are you yelling at these good people?"

"Good people! Good people!" the rich man snapped, his black, wide-brimmed hat wobbling a bit on his head. It had giant feathers sticking out of the front left side of it which also danced around as he moved. "And just who do you think YOU are, demanding that I tell you anything about what's going on here?"

"I'm Tav, a cleric of Selune," she said with barely controlled anger. "And just who might YOU be, sir?"

"Me?" he said with an air of total arrogance. "Who am I? My heavens. I am THE Arfur Gregorio." And he acted like that should have sparked some sort of awe within them. "This is MY mansion, and these trespassers are invading MY property. They are squatters, and I am attempting to remove them."

Karlach could feel her rage starting to build within her. There were children among the people gathered, and they looked tired, famished, and some even looked sick. "This is a pretty big house," she said. "Can't you spare some rooms? These people need help. They're not here for their health. They're here because there's a nasty cultist army out there that's trying to enslave everyone. Show some compassion."

"Thank you," said one of the refugees. He was a plain looking human man with messy brown hair and beard, a tattered brown tunic, and filthy white-ish shirt. He was one of the human men with a child, a daughter.

Arfur, also a human male, had a rather well-trimmed mustachio and "V" shaped beard. His brow furrowed in response. "SHARE my HOUSE?" he said indignantly. "You - you MUST be joking! Have you SEEN what these miscreants look like?" Then he glared with hostility right at Karlach. "Why, some of them are devils literally straight out of the Hells."

Karlach snarled like an animal, and flames erupted from the exhausts on her shoulders. "Why you disgusting, filthy piece of \$#@\$! I'll tear your \$#@\$ \$#@\$ tongue out of your \$#@\$ \$#@\$ face."

Fiovey jumped in, quick to try to diffuse the situation - well, sort of. "Hahaha! Oh, that was a good one, Karli. Rrrrip his tongue out. Man!" Then she turned towards Arfur. "And you! Ho man. You're a smart one, ain'tcha. Scrawny guy like you, picking a fight with a raging inferno like Karli there. Hah! It's a good thing I can tell when someone's joking. Hahahahaha!"

Arfur sneered at her in disgust. "It was no joke," he said, sneering. "I don't know who you people think you are, but you need to ALL clear off my property or I'll sick my mercenaries on you. Can your little pee brained minds comprehend that?" He gestured to his hired thugs.

Karlach was barely keeping it in. She was fuming flames out of her exhausts. "Better do something soon, Soldier, or I'm going to start using the Sword of Justice to exact some severe retribution on his \$#@.\$."

"Ahahahaha!" said Fiovey, sliding up closer to the man. "You're a riot, Sir Arfur, sir." And just like that, twin daggers flashed out of her sleeves, pressing up against his throat. The man whimpered as he held his hands up in surrender and arched his back as if to somehow lessen the pressure of the blades against his neck. And then, he wet himself.

Fiovey's expression turned vicious. "Now listen here, you..." And she called him all sorts of colorful names that turned even the mercenaries' faces red. "You're pissing off the wrong people. I HATE people like you with a passion that burns deep within the very depths of my soul. Can your tiny \$#@.\$ brain comprehend that? Hmmm? If you don't let these people stay in your house, and you don't find some other place to stay while they're here - and I hear about it - I'll make YOU leave and never come back. Okay? Hmmm? Do you hear what I'm saying to you, Swee-tee? Hmmm? Can you read between the lines? Eh?"

Karlach was diffused. "Holy \$#@.\$ I've never seen her like that before. Even I'm a bit rattled."

Near Arfur, one of the mercenaries, a white-haired elven female with gray armor and a longsword, looked truly impressed. "Nice," she said. "Although I'm thinking you're not as tough as you'd like us to believe. And I don't think you want to do that. He's our employer, and if you even think about trying to kill him, you'll bring the wrath of US down on you. And, well, you should probably know. We're from the Guild."

Fiovey sized her up for a moment, along with her mercenary companions. "Oooo," she said in reply. "The Guild. I'm from a guild too; the Cartographers Guild." She gave the woman a devious look. "Scary. Right?"

"Back down, runt," said the woman threateningly. "This is your last chance. Put the daggers away. NOW."

Fiovey's face became a mask of terror. "Listen \$#@.\$ I fought and killed an AVATAR OF MYRKUL. RECENTLY. You wanna meet him? Let's go."

A chill ran down Karlach's spine. "Dang! You think you know a person." The mercenary woman hesitated. "Gods. She believes her."

Aelun and the rest of their group came rushing up. Aelun was the first to speak. "Tironi," he said with authority. "Put the daggers away. We're not here to start fights with the locals. Remember? This house belongs to this man. It's his house. Trying to force him to be a decent human by threatening his life isn't going to do anyone much good. But I AM sure that all his customers would LOVE to hear all about how 'generous' he is to all these refugees."

"The Baldur's Mouth newspaper would absolutely appreciate publishing such a story, to be sure," added Jaheira. "Especially the part about him wetting himself."

Arfur quickly cried, "Alright! Alright! For pity's sake. I'll get a room at Sharess' Caress. They can ravage my house and utterly destroy it, for all I care. Just PLEASE put the daggers away."

Fiovey did as she was told, backing away while still keeping her eyes on Arfur and the mercenaries. "Best not go back on your word."

Arfur adjusted his clothing and sneered at her. "What is the world coming to when a man is kicked out of his own home by vagabond refugees and mercenaries from who-knows-where so that THEY can take it over and do with it as they please? It's MY house. I should be able to have a say in my own house."

Then he thought better of continuing his tirade as Karlach and Fiovey both eyed him with lethal intent. "But fine. I said fine. Just... There must be one condition. My study and the basement are off limits. Oh, and another condition. I need to go back in there and get a change of clothes. And finally, no stealing. Take nothing. If you do, my mercenaries will remain here to watch you, and they are instructed to bring thieves directly to the Flaming Fist for immediate arrest. Understand? Touch nothing."

The squatters all bowed and thanked him. Then they hurried back into his manor. Arfur glowered at the mercenary woman he'd hired. "As for you, Zenovia, stand guard at my home and make sure they don't destroy it or take anything."

"That's not why you hired us," she replied calmly. "You hired us to evict the refugees, not babysit them. Now you've decided to let them stay, so pay us the rest of what you owe us and we'll leave."

"PAY you! You didn't DO anything I hired you to do."

"Not my problem," Zenovia replied coldly. "We did our part. Just because you can't decide whether you want them kicked out or not, doesn't mean we don't get paid."

Arfur moved away from Fiovay and Karlach. "Well then," he said, his tone changing to arrogance and hostility once more. "Do your job. First kill these mercenaries and then GET THOSE BLOODY PEOPLE OUT OF MY HOUSE." He was now surrounded by his hirelings.

Zenovia grinned evilly at him. "Not worth it. Didn't you hear her? She and her companions are the ones who killed a freaking Avatar of Myrkul. We're out. I'll let them kill you and come back to your house later and take what I want as payment."

Then she gestured to her crew who immediately abandoned him. As Zenovia moved past Fiovay, Karlach saw her slip the rogue a note. "Dagger's edge sings brightly in winter's night."

Fiovay smiled. "Blood soaks the summer's sun, turning the dawn red."

"See you around," said Zenovia, and with that the mercenaries headed off down the street towards Wyrms' Crossing. Arfur, realizing that he no longer had any protection, whimpered again and took off running as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

Fiovay sighed. "Well, at least I got this off of him." She produced a hastily folded letter. "Had it in his back pocket. Mage Hand Legerdemain." She smiled. Then she unfolded the letter and started reading it.

"We're supposed to be trying to keep a low profile here," scolded Jaheira. "That man might try to get the Fist and come after us. It IS actually his home. He is in the right, you know? He can literally have us thrown in jail for helping squatters steal his home from him."

Fiovay looked up at her from the letter. "I doubt he'll go to the Fist. The man's as dirty as they come. That's quite obvious. Oh, and this is proof of it." She handed Jaheira the letter.

She read it briefly and sucked air between her teeth. "He's a dead man," she said viciously, and she handed it to Aelun. "Excuse me while I go after him and tear his flesh from his bones."

Aelun was already reading the letter with Vlynrifane reading over his shoulder, but he still reached out and swiftly grabbed his mother's arm to keep her from storming off. "He's not the one behind it."

"Exactly," said Fi. "He's just a pawn being blackmailed."

"What's going on?" asked Karlach. "Will someone at least just sum it up for the rest of us?"

"He's stuffing smokepowder into toys," said Jaheira in disgust. "Someone is blackmailing him into doing it. The \$#@.\$."

"No," said Karlach with a gasp. "You can't be serious. No one's that much of a \$#@.\$ - I mean, unless they're fiends."

"I wish that were true," said Vlyn. "But I say we go after him and make him talk. We need to stop these exploding toys before they kill a bunch of kids. He's got to know something about who they were sold to, and he must know who is blackmailing him. He said he's going to now stay at the Sharess' Caress - whatever that is."

Karlach gave her a perverted grin and winked. "Love in the making," she said with a laugh.

"Love is absolutely NOT what they are making there," said Jaheira. "Lust? Absolutely. But love? No. Well, maybe a few fall in love, but that's not the norm for places like that."

Vlyn changed colors, blushing brightly. "It's a whore house?"

"And more," said Jaheira. "But let's get moving. I agree. We need to catch up to him and make him talk."

"What if he's already sold some of the toys in the city?" asked Izar'la. She looked supremely concerned. "Tate and the others..."

"I know," said Jaheira, and she looked worried as well. "They'd never suspect."

"We should still separate," said Tav. "Why don't you and your group go to Sharess' Caress to investigate? I'll take a second group and we'll scout around; see who we can find and what we can learn; like we discussed before. Maybe we'll also learn more about these explosive toys. Sound like a plan?"

Aelun nodded. "Done." He returned the blackmail letter to Fiovay who then slipped it into a hidden pocket. Then Aelun gestured to Vlynrifane, Fiovay, and Jaheira. "Shall we?"

"I'm game," said Karlach. "You might need a bit of extra muscle with this guy, and I'm itching to rip him a new one too."

"I thought we were trying to be inconspicuous," said Jaheira.

"At this point," said Karlach, "we've kinda failed that one." She gestured to a number of refugees who were whispering to one another and pointing. "Word's already undoubtedly gotten around town."

"I suppose you're probably right," said Aelun. "So sure. Let's go."

Karlach grinned ear-to-ear. "Yeah. That's what I'm talkin' 'bout." She then turned to Wyll. "You comin' or you stayin' with Tav and the others?"

Wyll sighed, obviously debating things internally. Finally, he shook his head. "Better stay with Tav's group. My appearance..."

Karlach growled at that. "Come on, Wyll. Look at me. What did we just say? We're conspicuous already. All anyone's gonna see in you is another devil spawn tiefling. You'll be treated no differently than me, and that's a guarantee."

He chuckled a little at that. "I guess you're right." He then looked past her to Aelun. "Is this okay with you?"

Aelun shrugged nonchalantly. "She's not wrong, so I don't see why not."

"Then yes," said Wyll. "I'm in."

And with that, they left Tav's group and set out on the street heading west and north towards Wyrms Crossing. Meanwhile, Tav's group actually went into the mansion. 'I wonder why,' thought Karlach. 'Maybe she wants to check on the squatters; make sure they're okay.'

They hadn't gone very far before they were suddenly stopped by a Flaming Fist out of the blue. He was a dark-skinned human wearing chainmail with a plated pauldron on his left shoulder and a helm on his head which obscured his primary features. Karlach couldn't even see his hair; just his eyes, mouth, and chin. He smiled at them as he approached. "LOVELY morning, wouldn't you say?"

They paused. Karlach noticed Aelun's hands going to his weapons. "Yes," was all he said.

"How are all of you fine mercenary folk doing?" asked the soldier.

"Fine," said Aelun warily. "Can we help you?"

The man laughed a little. "Nah. Just shootin' the breeze." But he immediately drew in a bit closer and lowered his voice. "This your first time in the Gate?"

"I don't see how that's your business, but no," said Aelun. "We have all been here before."

The man nodded his approval. "Good. Then you know how glorious and wonderful this city used to be - before THEM." He nodded towards another grouping of refugees. "The Gate was a harbor once upon a time; the Gray Harbor and nothing more. Then Balduran came, and he transformed it into one of the most powerful cities in the world." He made grand, sweeping gestures. "But even before that, it was Lok's Fist. That's what it was originally called; named after the hill giant Lok. Only after his death in 0 DR did the first fisher settlement spring up. This was Loklee."

"But it was believed that prior to the Year of Boiling Moats, back some three hundred and fifty-nine years before Dale Reckoning, the mortal Bhaal performed his first murder in a back-alley of this very region of Faerun. The blood of his victim eventually formed into the dagger... Bloodthirst." He said this ominously, and Karlach didn't like the dark shadows that came over his face. Aelun must have felt the same, for he immediately withdrew a pace, causing the others to do likewise.

The man's demeanor returned to its original pleasant state. "In time, the fishing harbor became known as Baldur's Gate, a breeding ground for pirates, scavengers and other blackguards. They would use lights to trick ships sailing through the fog. They would lure them in, run them aground, and pilfer their goods. Then they would sail them up the Chionthar to their secluded haven called Gray Harbor. By 204 DR, Gray Harbor and Loklee were known by the inhabitants of the Coast as a port of call because they built a shipyard and visitors' wharves."

"Your history is all over the place," said Aelun. "But yes. I know it. What's your point?"

The man seemed to ignore the question, continuing with his history lesson. This unnerved Karlach even more. "The seafaring hero, Balduran, returned home one day to Gray Harbor from a voyage to Anchorome, far beyond Evermeet, the elven isle. He had great wealth and had hidden his riches in secret places. It was he who commissioned the great granite wall to be built for the protection of his home. Ironically, not long after he made Baldur's Gate into a glorious, fortified city, he set sail again on his second voyage... NEVER to return."

"Now. This leads me to my point."

'Thank the gods!' Karlach thought.

"Many flocked to the Gate for protection. It was such a welcoming place for all. Gray Harbor became known as "Old Town" and new constructions went up everywhere. By 446 DR, the settlement was widely known as Baldur's Gate. It was a place that always had its gates open for all." He turned dark again. "Not anymore."

"Well," said Aelun, his inner sage bursting out before he could restrain it. "You have many of the main details correct, but you definitely butchered the timing of these events. Your chronology is all off. For most of history, it was an unremarkable speck on the coast. Lok's Fist turned into Loklee, a fishing and farming village struggling to survive amidst orc raids and pirates and smugglers. The pirates and smugglers dwelled in Gray Harbor, and as you said, they lured ships in and robbed them."

"Balduran, also known as Baldur, grew up in Gray Harbor about four hundred and fifty years ago. Most assume he was human, but he could have been an elf or something else. No one is quite sure. So over a thousand

years there was nothing but Loklee and Gray Harbor and the conditions I just mentioned. Then Baldur set out on his first voyage and returned with great wealth, uniting the two settlements and building a great protective wall and the first gate which became known as Baldur's Gate. He shared his wealth without any gain in return, and since he was a restless wanderer, he didn't remain in the city for long. Soon after he saw Baldur's Gate established, he set out on his second voyage."

The soldier looked at him with hate-filled eyes. "That's pretty much what I said."

Aelun cocked an eyebrow. "Is it? I mean, you had the city's name being given to it way back in the early years of the two settlements, as if Balduran lived back then."

The soldier became indignant. "Who bloody cares about that? Gods! You're a frustrating \$#@\$, aren't you? The point is, the city became a safe haven for people and welcomed people from all over. That's changed because all these refugees showed up. Now the Fist has closed the city off, locking everyone outside, and it's all because these refugees started flooding the city - first because of the incident with Elturel and now this whole Cult of the Absolute \$#@\$\$. The only way to correct this situation and to restore the city to its former glory is if we..." He became utterly sadistic. "... get rid of the refugees. They have taken advantage of the city for too long. Work with me to eliminate them. I promise you'll be paid handsomely."

"Seriously?" Karlach remarked, thoroughly upset. "Another one?"

Aelun's expression was disgust. "You're a hypocrite. One minute you talk about how Baldur's Gate has always been welcoming to everyone, and the next you're trying to get me to help you kill a bunch of innocent refugees who have come here for protection? You're also a fake. You're not a Flaming Fist, are you? You spoke of them in the third person, telling us that they've closed off the city. If you were a Fist, you'd have said, 'Now WE'VE closed off the city.' Who are you really, and why are you harassing us?"

The soldier sneered, but then it twisted into a psychopathic grin. His face began to warp and twist. His features melted and reshaped into someone else's. And all of a sudden, Orin the Red stood before them. Everyone drew their weapons and prepared for a fight, but Orin only laughed. "I see how you slip-slither closer, belly dragging in the filth. Father is LAUGHING at you."

She then adopted a mockingly sympathetic look. "Have you lost your nerve, my blood-starved cousin? Hmmm? Eh? Well, do not worry, slaughter-kin. My blades are still sharp and sweet. They will greet you soon enough."

"Speaking of which," said Fiovay, a glint in her eye. "Where ARE your twin daggers? I'm especially interested in the one with the Netherstone in it."

Orin eyed her with pure disdain. "I am not speaking to you, dog! Oh wait. That's right. You're no longer a kitsune, are you?" She smiled sadistically. "Seems the tadpole has stolen your very race from you. Hasn't it?"

Fiovay laughed. "Nice try, but you're not fooling anyone. You're not Orin the Red. You're an imposter." Orin's expression fell. She tilted her head downwards, allowing her pupil-less eyes to stare holes through the rogue. Fiovay, however, ignored her sad attempts at intimidation and continued triumphantly. "You're a pretender. What? Are you using Disguise Self or are you a changeling of some kind?"

"Doppelganger?" asked Aelun, viewing her now in a new light. "How can you tell?"

"Because there ain't no way THE Orin the Red would appear to us without her daggers and Netherstone. She wouldn't let that thing be anywhere beyond touch range. I bet she even bathes with it, assuming she bathes at all. Besides that, THIS Orin isn't nearly as intimidating. The REAL Orin's presence exuded a pure psychotic and sadistic aura. And finally, her outfit's wrong. It's all in the details. It's missing two chains, one on each leg, and two moon-sickle belt buckle things in the front."

"So can we kill this one?" asked Karlach, eager to kill whatever it was.

But the Orin that stood before them sneered. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. Fine. So I may not be THE Orin the Red. Doesn't matter. I am an extension of her. She sent me to watch for you, AELUN. Or should I call you Lathlanel? It doesn't matter what you call yourself. You are Bhaalspawn, the Son of Darson, Gorion's Ward, and you are the Grandson of Bhaal, God of Murder. You cannot deny your lineage. It's literally in your blood."

"Wrong," said Jaheira fiercely. "The gods removed Bhaal's taint from Darson's blood long before Aelun was conceived. He is no longer a Bhaalspawn and neither is my son."

The fake Orin laughed at this. "And yet, here you are. Come now, Jaheira. It is plain to see. Even someone who knows nothing about your origins and his would be able to tell that your fates are all intertwined with the Lord of Murder. And why? Because the fact will always remain that if Bhaal had not impregnated Darson's mother, he and Aelun would not exist. He IS Aelun's ancestor. Aelun, therefore, IS the Grandson of Murder."

"What do you want?" asked Aelun bluntly, and Karlach could see his own rage was barely contained. "You're frankly wasting our time. Is that your objective?"

“Oh no,” said Orin. “We have much bigger plans for you and your friends. The real Orin will be in contact with you shortly. You can count on that. She has something very special planned for you.” Then she chanted a few words and vanished from before them in a flash.

Fiovay looked around quickly. “Misty Step. She hasn’t gotten far. We could still...”

“Let her go,” said Aelun, putting his hand on Fiovay’s shoulder.

“But she’ll tell Orin where we are,” said Fi. “We could kill her and...”

“If she has changelings or doppelgangers or whatever in her cult, anyone around us could also be her informant,” Aelun explained. “It’ll be impossible to prevent Orin from knowing we’re here if she’s already been watching for us.” He sighed. “Maybe I should have stayed hidden.”

“Too late for that now,” said Jaheira. “But I am immediately recalling to mind the first time Darson and I came to Baldur’s Gate together. His half-brother, Sarevok, had in his employ a host of doppelgangers. Coincidence?”

“Probably not,” said Vlyn.

“So now what?” asked Wyll. “We just be constantly ready to kill anything that gets close?”

“Yes,” said Jaheira. “Doppelgangers are ambush predators. If you let them surprise you, they very well could assassinate you before you even know they’re there. We must remain ever vigilant.”

And with that foreboding thought lingering in their minds, they continued on down the street towards Wyrms Crossing. As they went, from the shadows of a nearby building, the doppelganger watched them with a smile on its face. It lifted a sending stone to its mouth. “The Grandson of Bhaal is headed in your direction. You know what to do.”

“We’re ready,” came a voice from the stone. “Notify the others to meet us at the stage.”

“On my way.”

Arfur Gregorio and Zenovia



Fist Rowan



Chapter 7 - The Quest for Knowledge

Gale led his group through the rugged, mostly dirt streets of Rivington in the quiet of the early morning before the sun rose in the sky. He was exhausted, and so was Shadowheart. He could tell. She wasn't complaining or even exhibiting signs, but he could see it in her eyes. He knew her well enough, by that point, to see that she was tired. Isobel was not much better. As for Aylin, he couldn't be sure. She was used to enduring a tremendous amount of suffering. He doubted she was even thinking twice about how her body felt.

They were on the southeast side of the town near some barn. It was odd. There seemed to be a bit too much activity going on there. Flaming Fist were milling about. 'None of our business,' Gale told himself, though curiosity often plagued him in regards to such things. He hated not knowing something. Situations like that typically nagged at the back of his mind until he either reasoned through them or discovered the answers he was seeking.

"Where are you taking us?" asked Aylin, her voice unusually soft. "Shouldn't we go back in search of the others?"

Gale paused and glanced at her as they slid along the south wall of a building across the street from the barn. "Too likely to be enemies lurking about. If our companions have escaped - and I have faith they have - I believe they will likewise conclude that it is wisest for us to find one another amidst the good folk of this lovely little town."

Shadowheart smirked. "In other words, it's too dangerous to go back. We'll find them here."

Aylin grinned. "Shadowheart speaks more clearly and concisely. You should learn to speak like her, Gale of Waterdeep."

Gale groaned inwardly but said nothing in reply. 'You know? For an aasimar and daughter of a goddess, I'd expect a bit more intellect, sophistication, and... No. Stop, Gale. The last thing you want to do is have Selune somehow know your thoughts and get upset with you. We need all the blessings from every good god and goddess we can get.'

They went north and wound their way past a massive boulder that was the size of a house. These were somewhat frequently dispersed throughout Rivington, for it was a hilly and rocky country with homes mingled about. As they approached another intersection leading quasi-east and west, Gale nearly jumped out of his skin when a shadow emerged from between two homes.

"Well, well, well," a male voice said as he casually approached. He didn't speak loudly, but it was enough to cause Gale to bristle and look about in search of additional potential hostiles. "Whadda ya know? She's returned."

Gale noticed Shadowheart stiffen. "Ferg. Ferg Drogher."

"You know this man?" asked Aylin who was eying him as if she might kill him before he could speak another word. The aasimar was no longer displaying her glory or her wings. Instead, she simply looked like a tall and muscular paladin in silver Selunite armor.

"Yes," said Shadowheart with a strained expression. "He is..."

"An old friend," said the man, coming more into the light of a street lantern that was dangling on a weather-worn wooden post not too far away. The light wasn't very bright at all, but Gale could make out the man's features.

'Smug type,' thought the wizard as he assessed him. 'Dark brown hair, fuzzy mustache, and tuft of hair on his chin. Stupid look. Short hair pulled back into a nub of a ponytail. Squinty eyes. Human. Modest build. Twin shortswords. Leather vest and gray tunic beneath. Hmmm. Actually, he's a rather nondescript individual, isn't he? Could blend in with his surroundings if he wanted to, and the fact that even Aylin didn't detect him in the shadows, that means he's a bit more dangerous than he appears. Classic Sharran.'

"Can't believe it," Ferg said. "I've lost a bet, now, because of you. Never thought you'd ever show your face in Baldur's Gate again. Didn't think you had the guts to do so after what you pulled."

"Am I to take it you're a member of Shadowheart's cloister?" said Gale, trying to tactfully phrase his question. He didn't want Aylin to simply cut the man in half where he stood, and he figured if he used the word 'Sharran' she might just do it.

"Guilty as charged," said Ferg. Then he sneered at Shadowheart in contempt. "Rumors abound about you. Shar's word has reached Mother Superior."

Gale grit his teeth. 'Fool idiot wants to die.'

"You definitely have a lot to answer for. Not only did you fail your mission, but we've heard about your treachery, betrayal, and heresy." He narrowed his gaze on her white hair. "You... CONVERTED... to the Moon

Witch, of all things.” He shook his head. “I should kill you on sight, but then Mother Superior might not approve. She REALLY wants to speak to you in person.”

Gale didn’t like the smile that followed. Ferg continued. “Says she’s got a special ‘reward’ just for you. Says you can try to run all you like, but eventually you’ll show up right back at our door. It’s inevitable. It’s unavoidable. Fate has deemed it. Shar’s will has predestined it.”

“Well, now,” said Gale with his best disarming smile. “Nasty accusations and slander, I say. Tell me. Do you have any proof other than rumors that Shadowheart has, in fact, betrayed Shar? Or is this all conjecture?”

“Con-what now?” asked Ferg, confused.

Gale groaned inwardly again, but before he could reply, Shadowheart spoke up. “Baseless, I assure you.”

Ferg cocked an eyebrow, once again looking at her white hair. “Really? Are you suggesting Mother Superior heard incorrectly from Shar?”

“I’m saying you may have heard incorrectly in regards to what Mother Superior actually received in regards to a message from Shar,” said Shadowheart. “All that merely happened was I learned some things about my parents. Speaking of which, I’m curious. You wouldn’t happen to have any idea where they might be, would you? I mean, someone must be caring for their needs. I have often wondered if maybe Mother Superior had someone like you tending to them. Any ideas?”

Ferg scowled. “I’m not telling you anything, traitor! You’re ridiculous if you think you can fool me or anyone. Bah! This conversation is getting us nowhere.”

‘You can say that again,’ thought Gale.

“I’m not wasting any more of my time with you,” Ferg continued without a breath. “I’m reporting you to Mother Superior. She needs to know you’ve returned.” And with that, he threw something onto the ground at his feet before anyone could respond. There was a poof of smoke, and Ferg was gone.

Aylin’s blade was in hand. “Shall I hunt for him? He couldn’t have gotten far. I will cleave his skull from his neck.”

Shadowheart relaxed, her face now the picture of calm. “No need. The Sharrans will spot me eventually one way or another.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, I think he’s right. It’s inevitable. I’ll have to eventually return.”

“Are you betraying Selune again?” asked Aylin, appalled.

“No,” Shadowheart assured her, putting her hand on the aasimar’s forearm. “I just mean that I have to go face them. I have to see if my parents are still alive, and... whether I can save them.” She then looked at her hand which was more and more frequently giving her issues. “I also need to know why this keeps happening and how to stop it for good. I will never be free of Shar until I do.”

“Then we will help you,” said Isobel. “We will do whatever we can to aid you, and you know Tav will also.”

“If she’s still among the living,” said Aylin.

“She is,” said Isobel. “We must have faith.”

“Well,” said Gale, deciding to interrupt because he wanted to get moving again. “With all that decided, shall we?”

“And where, exactly, are you planning on taking us so that we might rendezvous with the others?” asked Aylin.

“The only way into Baldur’s Gate is Wyrms Crossing,” Gale explained. “Even if our companions are lurking around here, they’ll eventually make their way to it. If we just wait in some place where we can observe anyone coming to and from, we’ll encounter them again. Guaranteed.”

‘Besides,’ he added to himself, ‘I have other inquiries to make, and I’m not entirely sure I want the others to know I’m making them. Now might be my only chance to do this without everyone being involved in my business.’

Without further incident, they wound their way past the various homes and businesses to Wyrms Crossing. Every door and vendor cart was shut and locked up, and there was no one milling about. The only place that showed any life at all was Sharess’ Caress. The main door was off to their right as they stood facing towards the river.

“Well,” said Gale as they stood in the middle of the street. “Do we start making our way across Wyrms Crossing, or should we step inside Sharess’ Caress for breakfast?” He was assuming it was an inn, for he had never visited Baldur’s Gate before. What he knew about the city was quite limited to the primary locales and more importantly the places where wizards would frequent. He was hoping he could entice his companions to rest within. Then he could excuse himself to his own private room to ‘rest’, cast Fly, and whisk himself away into the city where he could seek out Sorcerous Sundries in the Heapside district.

Shadowheart grinned, knowingly. "Looking for a bit of fun and excitement, are we?" she asked flirtatiously. "Are you attempting to seduce one of us ladies, Gale, or are you looking to purchase one inside?"

Gale was taken aback. He was totally confused. And yet, he felt a thrill run through him at the implications. "I'm sorry. What? No." He flushed with embarrassment. "I just thought we might like to have a nice meal and get some rest while we wait for the others. I might even get a private room to sleep and recover my spells. What would make you think I'm looking for a romantic interlude right now?"

Shadowheart laughed into her hand. "Sharess' Caress is a brothel, Gale. It's a pleasure house. People don't go there to simply sleep and recover their spells."

Isobel laughed, and Aylin snickered. "Well, I suppose some might have a certain magical experience," said the cleric of the pair.

Gale was bright red. "Well, I suppose... That is... Nevermind then."

"Is there another place we could get a meal?" asked Isobel, allowing Gale to collect himself.

Shadowheart gave it some thought. "Not really on this side of the river. We'd have to pass beyond Wyrms Rock Fortress and on into the Outer City. Even there, I can't think of any good places until we get into the Lower City. The Elfsong's probably the best spot for a good, hot meal and rooms."

"Shouldn't we wait here, though, to meet up with the others first?" asked Aylin.

"Definitely," said Isobel.

Gale grit his teeth, but he hid it by putting his hand to his chin and tilting his head downward as if in contemplation. "Well, I understand this is a brothel," he said, thinking out loud, "but do they serve meals as well? Smells like they do."

"Someone's really hungry," said Shadowheart, and he kicked himself for not thinking things through. She was suspicious. She guessed correctly that he had an ulterior motive. Fortunately, it didn't seem like Aylin and Isobel caught on.

Gale laughed it off. "No no. It's not like that. I mean, I AM hungry. I could eat, to be sure. I was just thinking that we should get off the street. Maybe if they have a table by a window, we could enjoy a bit of respite and keep an eye out for our companions at the same time. Besides, we all look rather beleaguered after our early morning rendezvous with gith and dragons."

"Well, I can't argue with that," said Shadowheart. "And yes. The Caress offers food and drinks. You can also pay for a room without having to pay for additional 'services'. Naturally, it's not preferred, but it's an option. They don't particularly care how they make money. They just like to acquire it."

Gale smiled. "I shouldn't need that much more sleep," he told her. "Maybe just a few hours more, and I should have the majority of my power back minus the magic I've already expended this morning."

Shadowheart nodded, and she grew a bit more serious. "Actually, that's true for me as well."

"For all of us," said Isobel. "We only slept three-quarters of the night. Not exactly a full rest."

"Sounds like we will have to endure the unpleasantness of being in such a place only for a few hours at most," said Aylin. "I believe I can stomach that, especially if we can get a decent meal. Most of the various seedy activities have likely transpired before now anyway. Anyone have any money to purchase meals and rooms?"

Gale nodded. "I have reserved a dozen gold for myself during our travels. Should be enough for a meal and a few rooms."

"That's good," said Shadowheart. "You, at least, took your pack with you into battle. I did not. I only have what's on me, and what money I had was in my pack back at camp."

"We didn't have anything besides what's on us now," said Isobel. "So I guess all this is on you, Gale."

He smiled. "Then it would be my pleasure, m'ladies, if you would dine with me this morning." He gave them a sweeping bow as he gestured towards Sharess' Caress. "Right this way." They did not resist.

The entranceway of the building was actually rather nice looking. It didn't appear like a brothel at all, in Gale's opinion. There was a reception desk off to the right and a bar on the left. A beautiful ornate red carpet lay between them all the way to the far end. A pleasant bell jingled as they stepped inside, and a long-haired white and gray cat greeted them from the reception desk with a soft "meow". The parlor was long with a staircase on the left beyond the bar. Red curtains barred other exits in various places including one behind the reception counter on the right. Besides the cat, no one greeted them at first.

"Sounds like breakfast is being served up the stairs to the left," said Aylin.

"Probably," said Shadowheart. "That is the common dining area. It's like this 'S'-shaped landing with numerous round tables set up for guests to enjoy a quiet meal together. If we pick a table on the west side, we should be able to see out the window at Wyrms Crossing. There's another flight of stairs north of that point, though, that leads to the proper second floor. The second floor has numerous outside walkways that can take you to other guest rooms connected to the Caress."

“Table on the landing near a window sounds good enough,” said Gale, and they made their way around the bar and up the stairs on the left.

At the top, they saw only a single table with a tired but happy looking couple enjoying their meal. All the other tables were empty, so they quickly maneuvered over to the window and sat down. Before long, a tiefling waitress showed up, dressed in a short skirt and low cut blouse. She had blue skin and yellow eyes with black hair cropped short and messy. She quickly took their order and departed. Since they were not very busy, it wasn’t long before she returned with their food and drinks.

It was roughly around that time that a beardless dwarf male came down the stairs from the second floor along with a female who was obviously one of the ‘servants’ at the brothel. Her hair was all pinned up, she wore too much makeup, and like the waitress, she wore a short skirt and a low cut blouse with all sorts of jewelry rattling about. The two sat somewhat close to Gale and his party.

“So what you got planned for today?” asked the female as if she was interested. Gale noted, however, that she was not.

The male brushed long, brown bangs, parted down the middle, out of his face. “Gotta figure out what’s going on with the post,” he replied in frustration. “That’s why I’m so tense.” He adjusted his fine looking burgundy tunic with gold trim and long, puffy sleeves. “Pigeons keep going missing. I even paid some druid to talk to the survivors for me. They said something about a flying cat fiend swooping down on them from the Temple of the Open Hand across the street. Ridiculous, really. Flying cat? Who ever heard of such a thing?”

Gale’s interest was piqued, to say the least. ‘Tressym!’ He immediately thought of Tara, his old friend who aided him countless times back in Waterdeep. She was such a faithful and loyal companion. ‘Could she... No. Don’t be ridiculous. Why would Tara be here?’

“Anyways,” the man continued. “I asked the druid to check it out, and he did. Said there was no sign of a flying cat on top of the temple. Stupid birds.”

“Don’t worry, Danzo,” said the female dwarf. She was doing her best to be sincere. “I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it soon.” Then she brightened. “So, will you be back tonight?”

Danzo shrugged. “If I can help it.” He smiled at this.

Gale no longer heard them. He turned to Shadowheart. “I know I said I wanted to rest here and have breakfast, but I may have something I need to take care of first.”

“Really?” asked Shadowheart. She was quite curious, and he could see that she suspected this was going to happen. “What’s going on?”

He gestured towards the postmaster. “Did you hear what he was talking about? Sounds like a tressym has been preying upon his pigeons.”

“And?” asked Aylin, not even remotely understanding why he was talking about pigeons and tressyms.

“And,” said Gale, “I need to investigate. You see, I have a companion who is a tressym. Now, I know it’s a long shot, but the last time I checked there aren’t too many tressyms flying around these parts. It could be that Tara has come looking for me, and she has somehow made her way here to Baldur’s Gate to find me.”

“Why would she assume you were here?” asked Shadowheart.

Gale shook his head. “Not sure, to be honest, but I don’t want to assume anything. I’d like to make sure one way or the other. If it is Tara, we sure could use her help right now. She’s a highly intelligent tressym who is magically enhanced to be able to speak Common, not just understand it. So, she would make an excellent scout for us here in the city. We could send her virtually anywhere to spy on our enemies and learn what’s going on.”

“Ah,” said Aylin. “Then I guess that makes sense. I was wondering why in all the realms we should care about such a thing.”

“This sounds good,” said Isobel. “So where are you going to start looking for her, and do you need someone to go with you?”

“You shouldn’t go alone,” said Shadowheart. “I’ll go too.”

Gale considered that a moment and decided, ‘Why not?’ “Sure,” he said. “Probably best not to wander off alone. Never know what might be lurking around here.”

“Indeed,” said Shadowheart. “Like Ferg.”

Gale smiled. “Indeed.”

“We’ll ask them to keep your food warm while you’re gone,” said Aylin, and with that, the pair left Sharess’ Caress and backtracked down the street south towards the Temple of the Open Hand. Gale was glad, in the end, that Shadowheart came with him, for he realized only after they left the brothel that he had no idea where he was going.

It was still dark and quiet when they arrived, and the temple was shut up. Gale, however, had no intention of going inside. He cast Fly on himself, and he turned to his partner. "Shall we?" he said, offering his hand as a gentleman might. "Going up?"

"You going to take me in your arms again and fly me around?" she asked, once more in a flirtatious tone. "My hero." She then laughed lightly and stepped in front of him, wrapping her arms around the back of his neck. He wrapped his around her waist, and within a few moments, he flew them up onto the roof. Landing lightly, they turned to survey their surroundings.

Two yellow eyes glared at them from over a bird's nest's rim not too far from where they landed. Just then, the first rays of dawn began to filter up over the horizon. Gale gestured to Shadowheart who likewise spotted the creature. He then slowly began to make his way towards it, floating as opposed to walking so that he was ever so subtly making his way in its direction.

The nest was built smack dab in the center of a long wooden support beam where it connected with a flatter section of the typically sloped roof. It was roughly two feet in diameter made of many dry twigs and limbs as well as tattered blankets the creature had likely stolen from around town. As Gale drew closer, he noticed envelopes and letters sticking out of the nest as well as lying out in the open. Fortunately, there was little to no wind that morning.

Suddenly, the creature hopped out of the nest to greet them. It was a mostly dark gray cat with a white chin, belly, and paws. It had patches of light brown fur primarily on its shoulders, back of the head, and tail as well as the ends of its wings which were curled up along its sides.

The tressym seemed quite surprised. "Mr. Dekarios! Heavens! Fancy seeing you here!"

Gale was incredibly relieved and most pleased. "Tara! That can't be you. Can it?"

"I suppose you won't be terribly shocked to find your old friend Tara amongst the pigeons. They've always been a personal favorite," the cat-creature replied.

Gale then noticed that she was wearing a ring on her paw. "My, is that a ring?" he asked. "For us? You shouldn't have."

She laughed. "You know I'm always bringing you magic gifts, Mr. Dekarios. You need it for your condition, after all."

"Well," said Gale as he crouched down to be more at her level. "Don't you worry so much about me now. You enjoy yourself, Tara. Looks like you've got yourself set up quite nicely here."

"So what is your tressym doing here?" Shadowheart asked. Tara suddenly hissed at her, spreading her wings out at full length while arching her back. Shadowheart blinked in surprise.

Gale looked back at her over his shoulder. "She isn't MY tressym," he explained. "She's my friend. She's not very keen on being called my possession or my pet." He turned back to Tara. "She didn't mean anything by it, Tara. She's just wondering, as I am, why you came to Baldur's Gate, of all places. What made you decide to leave Waterdeep?"

"Well," said Tara proudly, calming and sitting pretty before him. "Before I get into that, let me just clarify for the girl, there." She glared at Shadowheart. "I am not Gale's pet. If anything, he is mine. I must say. He has certainly not taken care of me. If anything, I have been taking care of him. Gale is the most expensive pet in Waterdeep, and we both belong to one another." And with that, she nodded crisply.

"Now, as to why I'm here, well, it's because of you, of course," she said, addressing Gale once more. "I went to check on you, Dear, but you were gone. So, I went looking for you. Figured you were out searching for relics yourself, for a change. I heard strange rumors along the way. There was talk of some sort of ship that was abducting people roughly around the same time you went missing. And then, as I continued on my quest for knowledge, I learned that the ship had been seen over Baldur's Gate as well. So I figured maybe there was a connection and I could find clues as to your whereabouts here."

"And then, well..." she continued, gesturing at the nest. "Pigeons may have distracted me a bit. What can I say? I was hungry. It'd been a long trip."

"I bet," said Gale. "Sounds like you probably haven't been here for long. Waterdeep to Baldur's Gate could easily take a month or longer."

"I don't know how long it's been," said Tara. "You know me and time. I don't understand it one bit. You humanoids love clocks and such. Silly things. All they do is make you rush around and stress out. I don't know why you live by them and your calendars and such."

Gale shrugged. "We can't all be as wise as you," he replied. Then he dusted himself off and stood. "Well, down to business."

"Oh, I suppose," said Tara, a bit glum about it. "We have a great deal of catching up to do, but I guess it can wait. Say... I still have some pigeon left in the nest. Why don't I let you and your girlfriend have it? You can

eat up, wash your hands, and for the love of all that's dear, a shave. Then you can fill me in on what I've missed and what you need me to do."

Shadowheart laughed at this. "I have often wondered what you'd look like without your beard."

Gale shook his head. "Not happening."

"Come now, Mr. Dekarios," said Tara. "Your mother always liked you clean-shaven as well, and she was always asking you to shave it off." She grinned at Shadowheart. "His mother and I eventually became good friends. I visited her often after Gale left home. I probably know her better than he does."

"I'm sure of it," said Gale. "Now, as I said, on to business. I really need your help."

"Do you now?" asked Shadowheart. "What exactly are you hoping she will accomplish for you? Seems you've had something in mind all morning. Do I get to know of it, or should I leave the two of you to discuss it in private?"

Gale met her gaze and held it fast. "I wouldn't have allowed you to come if I didn't trust you with this." He turned back to Tara. "There are far too many things I should tell you, but we don't have the time. So I'll be as concise as possible and as lengthy as necessary."

"We'll see about that," said Tara. "You? Short and to the point?" This got a rise out of Shadowheart.

Gale ignored the comment. "Long story short. I was abducted by a mind flayer ship, infected with a special mind flayer parasite which is dormant and isn't undergoing ceremorphosis because a githyanki relic is preventing it. The relic is also shielding us from the influence of an elder brain, so we have maintained our free wills."

"There is a cult called the Cult of the Absolute. It's a fraud. The Cults of Bhaal, Bane, and Myrkul are behind it, and they have actually enslaved the illithid elder brain with a very ancient and powerful relic called the Crown of Karsus. During our misadventures, my companions and I defeated the Chosen of Myrkul, so we only have two more Chosen to go. If we defeat them, we will gain their Netherstones which are necessary to control the Crown of Karsus which is being worn by the elder brain they call the Absolute, and it causes the elder brain to be under their control."

"Mystra has subdued the orb within me by sending Elminster with a special incantation to help me harness the power of the orb and use it to self-destruct and destroy the Absolute."

"By the gods! Self-destruct?" said Tara, flabbergasted.

"Indeed," said Gale unhappily. "It is Mystra's will."

Tara grew very serious, and she lowered her head as she spoke. "Well then, consider this, Gale Dekarios: I forbid you to undertake this fool errand." Then she raised her head again to meet his gaze. "It's not your job to do the gods' dirty work for them. If Mystra wants to intervene, let her do so at her OWN peril. At this rate, I'll have to give up the Weave and take up a crossbow. Get the gods out of our business entirely."

"Promise me, Gale. Promise me you'll find another way. Promise me you'll return home, when this is all over," Tara concluded, and she gave him very round, sad cat eyes.

Gale sighed but smiled. "I promise."

Tara leaped into the air and flapped her wings violently, floating before him as she proclaimed, "Thank heavens! I thought I was going to have to claw some sense into you. You are too precious to meet your end splattered all over an illithid monstrosity. No no. I won't allow it. I'm glad you aren't considering such a ridiculous proposition. You've a good head on your shoulders, Mr. Dekarios, no matter what anyone says." Shadowheart laughed again at this, and Tara landed.

"And that is where YOU come in," said Gale, gesturing to the tressym. "If you really don't want to see me splattered all over an illithid monstrosity, I absolutely need you to do some things for me."

"And what is that?" asked Tara.

"Another quest for knowledge," said Gale. "If I'm going to defeat the Absolute once and for all, I NEED to understand the Crown of Karsus. It is imperative. There is a magic shop in Baldur's Gate called Sorcerous Sundries. I was going to slip away to it myself at some point to see if I could learn anything about what I'm looking for, but since you're here, perhaps you could gather the information for me while my companions and I attend to other matters."

"Information on the Crown of Karsus? And how would I go about collecting such information?"

"There is said to be a secret vault where the most dangerous magic in the Realms is locked away for safekeeping. A portal within Sorcerous Sundries actually connects to a lower level in Ramazith's Tower which is in the Upper City. The vault is in that tower, but again, a portal to it can be accessed FAR more easily in a FAR less guarded magic shop."

"I hope you're not expecting me to somehow break into this magical vault," said Tara.

"No," said Gale. "I'm just hoping that you can determine: A. If there actually is any information on the Crown of Karsus within that vault, and more importantly; B. How to potentially get into it. Where is the access point within Sorcerous Sundries? If I can get my hands on THAT knowledge, I can do the rest. Once I am inside, I will find the information on the Crown of Karsus and then I might not only have the power to take control of the Absolute, but I might be able to free all of us from our parasites and completely undo everything the Cult of the Absolute has done - hopefully even without the Netherstones."

'And I might just be able to remove the blasted orb and claim the power of the Absolute for myself and ascend to godhood, proving to Mystra once and for all that I AM powerful enough to be her equal,' he thought but did not say it. "The information within that vault may be crucial to our survival."

"Why didn't you want anyone else to know you were going to seek out this information?" asked Shadowheart. Her interest was rather piqued, as were her suspicions.

Gale once again held her gaze fast. "Fear," he replied in all seriousness. "Shadowheart, the knowledge that I'm seeking could grant anyone who learns it the ability to actually take possession of and use the Crown of Karsus in ways the Cult of the Absolute hasn't even dreamed of. In short, it may grant me the power to not only save us from our present fates, but I may be able to prevent having to destroy myself to destroy the Absolute AND I could get rid of the orb inside me. But in the same token, anyone who gains that knowledge could use it..."

"To ascend to godhood themselves," Shadowheart concluded for him, guessing the truth. She seemed disappointed, "or at least TRY to, as Karsus did. And I suppose you'd really like that ability for yourself, wouldn't you?"

Gale cursed himself for being too transparent. He sighed. "It is a temptation, I'll admit, but we'll cross that bridge later. For now, the fewer who know what I'm doing, the better. The last thing we want is that knowledge to fall into the wrong hands, including some of the people we've been traveling with."

"I'm trusting you with this, Shadowheart. I'm trusting that you'll work with me to do this, and you'll help me do the right thing. If we succeed, all of our problems could very well be solved, including any issues you have with your Mother Superior and the Sharran cult."

"Anything else you need me to do?" asked Tara.

Gale turned back to her. "There is a Chosen named Orin the Red and one named Lord Enver Gortash. Find out as much about the two of them as you can along with their true bases of operation, minions, strengths, weaknesses, etc. There is also a white dragonborn named Ikraim, also called the Dark Urge. He has stolen one of the three Netherstones from us."

"And anything you can tell us about pretty much anything unusual going on," added Shadowheart with a grin. "You know, do everything for us."

Tara laughed at this. "Very good, Gale's Girlfriend. Very good. Yes, indeed. He is definitely asking me to do a lot. I feel like I should ask if he would like a side of diced potatoes with that."

"Actually, I would," said Gale with a smirk.

"Your food is back at the Caress," said Shadowheart. "Leave poor Tara alone now."

Tara leapt once again into the air. "I like this one, Mr. Dekarios. Much better than Mystra. But I will keep my opinions to myself. Off I go, and we'll see what I can find out for you. Good luck to you as well, both of you. May Tymora's luck favor you." And without another word, she flew off towards the city across the river.

Gale sighed happily. "This couldn't have gone better."

"I'm glad," said Shadowheart. "But seriously. Our food is waiting. Perhaps we can get back now."

Gale nodded. "Thank you for this. Thank you for keeping it between us - or at least, I hope you will. I'm thanking you ahead of time."

Shadowheart leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. "I will. I mean, I agree. Allowing the others to learn about this... We need to especially keep this away from Minthara and Zrathentil. No doubt. Neither should acquire that information."

"Ever," added Gale, and with that, the pair collected the letters from the postmaster, and they headed back to Sharess' Caress. Gale dropped the stack of correspondence on the table where the postmaster was dining, he let the man know the flying cat was taken care of, and he and Shadowheart rejoined Isobel and Aylin.

Not long after they left the rooftop of the temple, a shadow emerged from the darkness of the bell tower. A lithe and limber, scantily dressed woman with curly, dark hair stepped into the sunlight. She wore a scarlet gown slit up the side and cut low both in the front and back. She wore a bemused expression, and she held her palm out in front of her.

Instantly, there was a flash of light, and a crystal appeared in her hand. The image of a blonde woman swirled into focus. Her hair fell over her shoulders on both sides. She wore blue, and her ensemble was much more modest. In her hand was a staff, and she moved with the grace of a cat.

“What?” asked the blonde, a bit unhappy to be disturbed.

“Guess who just showed up in town?” said the brunette.

The blonde brightened. “Finally? All the way from our dear sister’s abode? Are you sure it’s them?”

“Positive,” said the brunette. “I just spotted the arrogant wizard and the cleric girl. She has white hair now.”

“Shar to Selune? Hah!” said the blonde. “Just as we thought.”

“How are things proceeding with the girl?” asked the brunette.

“Vanra? Perfectly. The mother’s losing her mind trying to find her, but she hasn’t got a clue. Well, let me rephrase. She knows her daughter was last seen at the Blushing Mermaid, but that’s all she’s got. She just keeps harassing the Fist, as if they’d help.”

“She’ll make a fine replacement for Ethel,” said the brunette. “A good choice, Minerva.”

Minerva ignored this. “Do you have everything in place as we discussed?”

“I do,” said the brunette. “And I believe they’re going to be in for quite the show.” Her smile would have frightened a devil.

“Good,” said Minerva. “Let me know if you need me.”

“Oh, I won’t. I have plenty of tools at my disposal.”

“That’s what Ethel thought, I’m sure,” said Minerva with a scowl. “But then, you ARE a night hag, and I but a lowly sea hag. I’m sure you know better.”

The brunette cackled. “As always.” Then she waved her hand and the crystal ball vanished along with Minerva’s image.

She paused for a few moments as she pondered Minerva’s words and cutting tone. “Don’t think I don’t know you were plotting with her to kill me, Dear Sister,” the night hag snarled viciously. “You think you’re so clever, but you’ll see. No one tries to stab Lucretious, Bringer of the Night, in the back. I’ll see to it they kill you, and after they do, I’ll rebuild our coven myself. I already have two girls in mind.” Then she spun on her heel and made her way down the bell tower and back towards the Circus of the Last Days.

Ferg Drogher



Postmaster Donzo



Tara



Lucretious (Favored Illusory Form)



Minerva (Favored Illusory Form)



Chapter 8 - The Death of Ilteran

Zrathentil collapsed onto his hands and knees. He could hardly breathe. Minthara grabbed him by the shoulders. Desperation gripped her. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"The tadpole," he wheezed. "It's... It's becoming active. Ceremorphosis..."

"Gods!" Minthara gasped. "I'll have to kill you before you turn."

The sorcerer shook his head swiftly. "No. Time. I still have time. But... Not much, I think. Not sure."

"But if you're turning, there's no way to save you." She was already preparing her rapier.

He reached into his mouth and yanked out the false tooth. "Trysalis," he told her. "I was going to... wait... maybe for a better moment, but I... the Absolute. Whatever was protecting me... shielding me from her... the Astral Prism. It's failing." Minthara had never seen him so panicked, and that increased her own fear.

He spoke a command word, and suddenly a small portal tore open directly above the tooth. He reached his hand in and drew out a scepter made of adamantite with an amethyst head. The amethyst was tear-shaped, and it rested in what looked like an eight-fingered claw. The shaft was about three feet in length with a spike at the other end. The ancient artifact radiated with power. Minthara's eyes lit up as she beheld its magnificence for the first time.

She was even more surprised when he took her hand and shoved the item into her grasp. "Use it. Follow my instructions to the letter. Understand? I've..." He grit his teeth against the pain. "I've studied it my whole life. I know exactly how to use it. You must be... careful what you say. You must be absolutely specific. Each command must be absolutely perfect."

"Just tell me what to do," she commanded.

"Speak the command phrase." He gasped again. Black veins were coursing through his face, especially around his eyes. He pointed to the script on the shaft. "'Trysalis ev'dun intae dali men'ahhi bah.' Only if you're holding it and speaking it can you activate it."

"Then what?"

"Command it to sunder every piece of the soul of Ilteran - my true name - from this body and the illithid parasite that is infecting it," he told her. He was now clutching his chest. "Make sure to include the illithid parasite or part of my soul will remain in it and will thus not be free. Once you have done... done that... command it to... reforge every piece of the soul of Ilteran with every piece of every soul within... the Trysalis including and especially Balramu. Do not stop commanding at that point! Immediately command it to then obliterate all the wills of every piece of every soul that is reforged together within the Trysalis except the will of Ilteran. Ilteran must gain the... power of all the pieces of every soul within the Trysalis without losing his own will. Ilteran's will within the Trysalis must be supreme. Zrathentil shall now be the reforged soul's true name."

"My body will... start to die. You will have precious seconds. Dig the... parasite out of my skull and... kill it. Try not to... damage my brain... I..."

"You're running out of time," said Minthara. She swore. "You should have told me how to do this earlier."

"No time," he replied. "Too many around." He choked but collected himself. "Once the parasite is dead, speak the command phrase again, sunder Zrathentil's soul from the Trysalis and... and the power of the Trysalis as well. Reforge Zrathentil's soul and the Trysalis' soul back into Ilteran's body. Zrathentil shall now be the reforged soul's true name. Do you... Do you have all that?"

Minthara was far from confident. "Yes," she said in spite of her fears. Then she stood back and held the scepter towards him. "Now?" He nodded fervently. She took a deep breath and spoke the words. "'Trysalis. Ev'dun. Intae. Dali. Men'ahhi. Bah.'" She spoke slowly to ensure she didn't mess up the phrase, using the script as a guide. Fortunately, it was in old elvish, the artifact having been created originally by a drow, and she could read it.

The scepter flared to life, casting bright purple light all throughout the rugged, forest terrain around them. She hoped none of their enemies - or allies, for that matter - saw them. Then again, they had traveled nearly two miles east of where they'd camped at the ruined outpost that night. It wasn't probable that someone would see them and show up before she accomplished what she needed to.

She tried desperately to remember Zrathentil's instructions. "Sunder every piece of the soul of Ilteran from the body I am pointing at as well as the illithid parasite that is infecting it."

Zrathentil cried out in agony. From within his skull, Minthara could have sworn she heard the parasite shrieking in unison. And then, much to her great horror, she saw Zrathentil's soul and spirit tear out of his chest and float like a ball of energy before her. A tiny spark of soul also floated out of his head. It floated near the larger sphere. And with that, his body collapsed in a heap and started to convulse.

‘What did he say to do next?’ she thought, trying desperately to remember. ‘Reforge. Rename.’ “Reforge every piece of Ilteran’s soul with every piece of every soul within the Trysalis. Obliterate all the wills of every piece of every soul that is reformed together within the Trysalis except the will of Ilteran. Ilteran must become the supreme will within the Trysalis, and he must not lose his own will. The reformed soul’s name, his true name, shall be Zrathentil.”

And the Trysalis flared once more, drawing both balls of energy - the greater and the lesser - into it. Hellish screams followed, echoing all around Minthara. It then went dark, and the only sound that remained was Zrathentil’s body jerking about and foaming at the mouth.

‘You have precious little time,’ she realized. She dropped on her knees, hovering over him. Already, his body was beginning to cease in its convulsions. ‘Kill the tadpole.’ She swung the scepter’s head hard, cracking Zrathentil’s forehead open with a single blow. Then she set the scepter down for a moment and reached in to force the break wider. She had done many violent things in her life, but rending a lover’s skull open still traumatized her. It cracked and splintered, and blood and gore spewed everywhere.

The parasite immediately squirmed out. She fell back away from it, instinctively grabbing the scepter. It tried to escape, slithering down the blood-soaked left side of Zrathentil’s face. She took the sharp end of the relic and stabbed. The parasite squealed as the spike speared it. It continued to writhe in its death throes even as Minthara hastened to complete Zrathentil’s instructions.

She lay hands on his head, using her divine power to seal his skull closed. His forehead was magically restored, though he would now have a sizable vertical scar from the top of his eyebrow all the way through his hair to the back of his scalp. “Trysalis ev’dun intae dali men’ahhi bah!” This time, she spoke the words rapidly and with a booming, commanding voice. “Sunder Zrathentil from the Trysalis and reforge every piece of Zrathentil’s soul into the body I am pointing at.” She aimed at his corpse which was no longer moving. She prayed she was fast enough. “The reformed soul’s name shall be Zrathentil.” And just as before, only in reverse, the glowing spherical essence of Zrathentil went from the Trysalis back into his body.

The relic went dark. Zrathentil’s eyes shot open wide, and he sucked in air as if he’d just emerged from deep within the ocean. For several moments, he lay there unblinking. He was simply breathing heavily, trying to collect his wits and get his bearings.

Minthara stood over him, looking down with an anxious expression. “Are you... Are you okay? Is it you? Zrathentil? Do you... Are you still you?”

Zrathentil looked at her, and their eyes met. He smiled triumphantly, and laughter began to issue from him. Minthara backed away, worried that she’d messed up. Perhaps she’d unwittingly killed Zrathentil. Maybe she’d obliterated his will instead of something else. Who or what was inhabiting his body? She gripped the scepter tightly. ‘Should I use it again? Perhaps I can somehow undo what I’ve done.’

But he sat up, and the laughter subsided. “You... You did it.” He held his head, fighting against the pain. He pulled his hand away, seeing the excessive blood.

She again asked, “Is it you? Zrathentil?”

He met her gaze again, and relief flooded her senses. It was HIS look. “Yes,” he replied coolly. “And I am no longer infected. I am whole - and better than whole!” He looked at his hands and arms as if something was dancing over them and he was examining the display. “You did it. You actually did it. Not only did you save me from the tadpole and the Absolute, but you have finally accomplished what I’ve been wanting to accomplish since the beginning.”

Then he broke eye contact and looked down at his hands again. “No,” he said distantly. “Not me. Balramu. Balramu wanted this from the beginning.”

“You’ve lost me entirely,” said Minthara. “Who is Balramu?”

“Djinni,” said Zrathentil. “Lesser God of Sundering and Reforging. He... He made me who I was. Ilteran was to be his tool and pawn, but he broke free. He was to become Balramu’s vessel so that the djinni could do to me exactly what you did except HIS will would have enslaved mine.”

“But I outsmarted him and the matrons. Now I have his power flowing through my veins. I have the power of every soul he sundered and reformed into himself - at least of the ones that still remained - but all of their wills are obliterated. Only mine remains.”

He stood and staggered. She reached out to steady him, and he accepted. Then he looked at her with a bit of confusion. “But I don’t have the power of the Trysalis within me. You neglected to pull the magical essence of the Trysalis out of the artifact and fuse it with me.”

She scowled. “I was more concerned about saving your life than about granting you additional powers.”

He nodded. “Actually, that works out better anyway.” He waved it aside. “Thank you. Yes. That’s for the best. Now I can still be sundered with additional power as long as you continue to wield the Trysalis.”

"I don't understand." She was beginning to wonder - doubts were creeping into the back of her mind - whether she'd just been a pawn in his schemes after all. Was he pretending to love her in order to get her to do exactly what she just did?

He embraced her without warning, holding her tight. "The Trysalis' greatest flaw is that it cannot be used on its wielder. The wielder must sunder and reforge another. If the wielder attempts to sunder themselves, they will never be able to use the power of the Trysalis to reforge themselves. They will become a disembodied soul forever."

He pulled away, smiling ear to ear. "But you used it on me to grant me freedom from the tadpole. The barrier was dropping between the Astral Prism and the rest of us. For all I know, the Afflicted might already be transformed into mind flayers."

"But with the weakening of the barrier shielding our minds from the Absolute, the link to the Netherese magic presumably from the Netherstones and the Crown of Karsus also weakened. I believe it was the perfect moment for the Trysalis to work. With the magic teetering and wavering, and one of the Netherstones no longer enslaving the Absolute, the Trysalis was able to sunder my soul from the tadpole as well as my own body and reforge my soul with all the souls that were already contained within the Trysalis, especially Balamu's. Then you obliterated their wills, granting the full power of all their essences and memories to me. You have made me, essentially, almost a deity. I now not only have my freedom, but I am far more powerful than I had ever been before. The old me, Ilteran, is dead. I truly am Zrathentil now, a new person."

"Should I be happy or concerned for myself?" asked Minthara, and she meant every word.

He took her and kissed her passionately. "You have absolutely nothing to fear from me," he answered. "Don't you see? Only together can we wield this kind of power, and I can do the same to you in return."

"What do you mean?" she asked. She still wasn't convinced that everything was okay.

"I can use the Trysalis to sunder the souls of others and reforge them with your soul," he explained. "This is what I had planned from the beginning. I wanted you to grant me the Trysalis' power; to fuse it with my own soul. Then no one could steal it from me, and I could sunder your soul and the souls of others and reforge them back into you, granting you immense power as well."

"But regardless, with the Trysalis, I can obliterate whatever wills I desire that I sunder and reforge, and I can reforge souls together with yours and grant you their power and strength just as you have for me. Together, we can ascend to godhood. Then, as I promised, we will get our revenge on all of our enemies."

Minthara considered this. "I'd have to wait to be sundered and reformed. The baby." She gestured to her womb.

Zrathentil had completely forgotten. "Yes, of course. But in the meantime, we can use the Trysalis against the Absolute. We will gain our revenge first against the Cults of Bhaal and Bane, and we will claim the Netherstones for ourselves. I now have the power to do it. I have the power to kill the Dark Urge, the Chosen, and the Afflicted. I have the power to sunder and reforge the Netherstones into my very own soul and use their power to control the Absolute. And we have the power to sunder and reforge ALL of their souls and magic essences into me. Nothing can stand in our way. We can literally wipe out ALL of our enemies or capture them and make them suffer for as long as we desire."

Minthara examined him closely. She sighed. "Say something to me that convinces me you are still you. Thus far, I'm not entirely certain."

Zrathentil's excitement subsided. He became very serious, and yet again, he locked eyes with her. "At this point, what choice do you really have?"

She searched him for options, but she discovered that in the end, he was right. She really didn't have any good ones. Join the Cult of the Absolute? Never! Leave him and go back to the Afflicted? She sneered at that. He was right. If he was turning, they probably were as well. For all she knew, they were mind flayers already.

Walk away and forget about the entire affair? And do what? She would never truly be able to get any kind of revenge on her enemies without help, and depending on what happened in Baldur's Gate, if they didn't stop the Absolute and all associated with it, she might just become a slave again anyway. At least he was offering her hope for her future, and she held within her hand the artifact that could make it possible. He was letting HER possess it, showing her that he had faith in her.

She set her jaw. "Fine. What's our next move?"

He held the false tooth out before her. "I once thought this would hide and protect the Trysalis so no one would ever be able to steal it from me and so I wouldn't lose it. Now, I'm not so sure it's a good idea to store it in here. When I was captured by the nautiloid, the tooth fell out and I lost it. Only by a miracle was I able to retrieve it again. Something this small is too difficult to hold on to."

“So I just keep it on my person as if it is a weapon?” she asked, and she shook her head to answer her own question. “That won’t work. It’ll draw too much attention, and someone in this city might actually recognize it. Some crazy, high-powered wizard who never leaves his library could know it on sight.”

She held her hand out so he would give the tooth to her, and he did. “I’ll put it back in the pocket realm and then slip the false tooth into my bra. Give me a few minutes to sow it into the seam. Then it’ll only come out if I cut it out.”

He considered this and nodded. He then gave her the command word for the pocket realm. She activated it, put the Trysalis within, and immediately went to work on securing it, removing her half plate first in order to get at her undergarments. “I don’t exactly have anything to work with presently to firmly secure it, but for now this should work.” She even tested it to ensure it wasn’t budging. Then she put her armor back on.

When she was finished, he gave it a final thought and said, “That should work. As you say, we can secure it better later. I suppose you’re right about it drawing attention. That’s the last thing we want.”

“Well, that’s done. On to the city? Who’s our first target?”

Zrathentil smiled. “If the Afflicted survived whatever just happened, their first objective will be to find the Dark Urge and reacquire the Netherstone of Thorm. I’m sure we won’t be missed. Everyone’s focus will be on him. Let’s slip into Baldur’s Gate before sunrise and secure a place to stay. We’ll make sure the Trysalis is secured, and we’ll see how things play out to start. Why endanger ourselves by chasing after anyone? I’m sure everyone else will do a majority of the hard work for us. Whoever comes out on top, they will be the ones we attack and ‘acquire’.”

Minthara felt a bit better at hearing this. He was acting more like the Zrathentil she knew; plotting and scheming. They definitely had a new and powerful advantage, so he was right. Why bother chasing after their targets? Let others gather the Netherstones and fight Orin and Gortash. All she and Zrathentil had to do was watch and wait for just the right time to strike.

“Are you going to fly us to the city?” she asked, suddenly flirtatious.

“I figure why not?” he replied. “That way, we can bypass all the soldiers and such. We should go unnoticed in the dark.”

She wrapped her arms around him. “Well then. Shall we?” He wrapped his arms around her in return, and the two flew off north, keeping low to avoid being detected.

Ethel cackled with delight. “By all the stars in the heavens! I knew kissing his left eye would pay off one day. Haha!” She slapped her rubbery, green-skinned thigh with her clawed right hand as she continued to peer into her cauldron. She was an ugly, warty, hunch-backed, muscular, green hag with a pointed chin and ears and a long, hooked nose. Her mouth was full of needle teeth which she typically displayed with a horrifying grin. “Bless me. You’ve given Ol’ Auntie Ethel the greatest gift anyone coulda given me, haven’tcha boy?”

She spun and hastened over to her sending stone which rested on a stone table not too far away. Grabbing it, she whispered the command word and activated it. “Minerva, Dearie. Are you there? Tell me you’re there?”

“I’m here, Ethel,” she heard in reply after only a moment. “Good thing it’s early. No one is about. What is it?”

“How much longer until the portal is ready?” Ethel asked. She was shaking with excitement.

“It’s the Hells, Ethel,” said Minerva, a bit annoyed. “It takes time to bring someone back from there, and Helsik’s services never come cheap.”

“I just learned something new, Love - something REAL good,” Ethel told her. “Remember that drow fool who let me kiss his eye?”

“Yes,” said Minerva.

“Well, I just spied on him and his girlie. They possess something even better than what we were hoping to obtain.”

“What is that?” asked Minerva. She finally seemed to be intrigued.

“Oh, now. Mustn’t reveal all my secrets,” said Ethel, wagging her finger at the stone as if Minerva could see it. “But let me assure you, my dear. We WANT what they have, and I know exactly where it is, how to obtain it, and how to use it.” She growled out these last few words like an animal with an intense hunger. “All I’ll say is this. It’s an ancient relic, and its power could not only give us the ability to kill our dear sister Lucretious, but it may even turn us into gods. Can you imagine it, Minerva? WE could be gods; you and I and your babe.”

Minerva seemed skeptical. “Wasn’t that the point of obtaining those stones from the cult? Wasn’t the Absolute supposed to turn us into gods?”

“Bah! We won’t need them after we get this,” said Ethel. “Child’s play at this point. Minerva, what we could do with this thing... Hee hee HEEE! I can hardly wait.” Then she grew quite hostile. “Fit the bill already. Get me out of here. I’m done with this place.”

There was silence for a moment. Then Minerva responded. “I’ll see what I can do to pay Helsik’s fees. This’d better be worth it, Ethel. I’m sick to death of Lucretious, and the situation here in the city is getting worse.”

“Yes yes,” said Ethel. “Quakes and the Cult of the Absolute and Gortash and Orin and all. I know. I know. Just hurry it up.” Then she dismissed the spell on the stone.

“Bless my soul,” she grumbled as she walked away. “Why’d I have to go and get myself butchered by a worthless bunch of buffoons? I do so hope I get a chance to pay them back.”

Just then, something attempted to break into her hovel. It was tearing away at the door she’d put wards on to protect it and to keep predators out. “Gods grant me patience! Now what? Imps before, wasps after that, then a barbed devil, then hellsboars tearing into my garden...” She waved her hand over her cauldron, causing an image to appear of her front stoop, such as it was.

It was nothing like her home in the swamp near old Moonhaven. It was a single room sectioned off into a kitchen, bedroom, sitting room, bathroom, and privy. Rocky and terribly uncomfortable, it was decorated only with her magical ingredients and equipment; items she figured she might need should she ever be forced to live in Avernus. And yet, she didn’t keep anything too important there for fear something might be drawn to it and steal it and everything else while she was living her life ‘peacefully’ in her swamp.

Long ago, she’d foreseen that she might one day be killed and sent to the Hells. And so, she made a deal with Helsik, the keeper of Devil’s Fee in Baldur’s Gate, tricking her into opening a portal so that the hag could set up her hovel just in case. The primary object of importance was the soul channeling sphere she’d created. She hid that under the entire structure, hoping nothing would ever find it and dig it out.

In it was a small portion of Ethel’s soul. Because of it, whenever she died, she’d be brought back to that place. In that way, she wouldn’t go to some random hellish nightmare designed to collect the souls of the evil dead and twist them into minor minions for the archfiends to send into the Blood War. She would be free to continue to be herself and to hopefully find a way back to the Material Plane - especially with the help of her coven sister Minerva.

‘Too bad the sphere only works in the Hells,’ she thought. ‘It’d been nice to return to my teahouse when I died. The Blushing Mermaid would also have been good enough for my tastes.’

These thoughts left her. An unexpected creature was at her door. She raised an eyebrow as she peered into the murky water. “Well, I’ll be... What a delightful convenience.” And she rushed to the door and threw it open to allow her visitor inside.

There, darkening her doorstep, was a githyanki male and red dragon. The dragon had been the primary intruder, nearly smashing her door in with its snout horn. The githyanki looked upon her with disgust, though he stood at attention regardless and remained level headed. “Are you Ethel?” he asked.

“Why yes, Dearie!” she said happily. “I most certainly am. How can I help you?” She then pretended to realize that she was a hag. “Oh my! I must appear dreadfully frightening to you. Begging your pardon. I simply had nothing better to wear. We’re in the Hells, you know.” She waved her hand sheepishly at him.

The gith regarded her coldly. He was completely bald with the typical brown spotting over his more greenish toned skin. His serrated ears had numerous piercings, and he had battle scars on his face. His eyes were orange, his chin was pointed, and he had a tattoo on his neck. Ethel wasn’t quite sure what the design was. He wore the standard silver githyanki armor with ruby gemstones embedded in it, and he carried a similarly designed greatsword.

“I will be brief,” he said, not moving an inch. It was clear. He wouldn’t be caught dead in her place. “I was instructed by Vlaakith herself to make a deal with you. She desires the Astral Prism. She wants it returned to her immediately. A group calling themselves ‘The Afflicted’ has it. Aid the githyanki in retrieving the Astral Prism so that we are able to return it completely intact and safe to Vlaakith, our queen. To be clear, in order to fulfill your end of the bargain, we MUST return it completely intact and safe to Vlaakith, our queen. In return, what is your price?”

Ethel’s mind went swiftly to work. ‘They are desperate. Don’t be too hasty, now. You could just ask them to port you out of the Hells and back into the Material Plane, but that is too cheap a price. He’ll pay more. Oh yes! I will gain the aid of the githyanki in...’

‘No. They need my help because they can’t roam throughout the city easily. They’re coming to a hag, of all things, to get help because their only other option would be suicide. Even Vlaakith isn’t stupid enough to think her dragon riders could take on the defenses of Baldur’s Gate and everyone within.’

‘Yes. They don’t just WANT my help. They NEED it. And that, my dear, means that the price can go WAY up - WAY WAY up.’

She rubbed her chin. “I’ll tell you what, Dear. I think I like you. I’m going to give you a discount deal today.” She cackled a bit at this. “All easy-to-accomplish tasks. Honest.”

“One. Take me with you out of the Hells and to Baldur’s Gate as soon as our agreement is finalized. I mean, that one’s really more of a given, I would think. I can’t help you much from Avernus, now can I? Hee hee. So that one doesn’t really count as payment, but we’ll throw it in there anyway.”

“Two. I need assistance acquiring a certain tooth from a couple of drow named Zrathentil and Minthara. Silly thing, I know, but it’s useful to me. The pair are already in the city, so I know it’ll be difficult for your kind in broad daylight. But it’s still dark out. If we hurry, you could slip up to the inn they’re staying at and ambush them. They haven’t picked an inn yet, but I’ll let you know once they do. I have a way to spy on them.” She blushed at this as if embarrassed. Her cheeks shifted from a darker green to lighter. “The tooth is sewn into the female’s bra. Bring me the tooth. Whether the pair live or die, I don’t care. Just bring me the tooth. I also don’t care about the inn or anyone else in it.”

“Three...”

“How many of these tasks are we going to have to perform for you?” asked the gith. He was barely restraining his disdain.

“As many as I \$#@ well decide,” Ethel snapped angrily. “You want my help? You’ll meet my demands. Now mind your manners and keep that trap of yours shut while I’m giving my conditions.” This time, even the dragon hissed, warning her that she was pushing it.

She adjusted her tattered outfit as if it was a beautiful dress. “Ahem. As I was saying. Three. There are three pretty stones I want to collect called the Netherstones. A white dragonborn named Dark Urge has one. A murderous doppelganger named Orin the Red has another in her dagger’s hilt. The third belongs to a human male named Enver Gortash. He’s pretending to be a noble, but he’s got quite the questionable past. Almost as questionable as mine. Hah!”

“I know of this Gortash,” said the gith, his eyes slitted. “He stands to take supreme authority in Baldur’s Gate. Our spies tell us that he is responsible for the metal guardians that now prowl the streets. They are known as the Steel Watch. Only a few hours ago, the Steel Watch interfered with our mission. That is the only reason I’m here.”

“And your point?” asked Ethel.

“Acquiring an artifact from him will be...”

“What? Too difficult for githyanki?” asked Ethel, cutting him off. “Come now. He’s not invincible. Far from it. Gang up on him, and you’ll take him out easily enough. You have red dragons to support you, for pity’s sake. And besides, you don’t NEED to kill him or even face him head on. He wears the \$#@ thing on his right hand. Just break into his home while he sleeps and cut off his arm.”

“But listen carefully, for this part is vitally important,” she added in all seriousness. “ONLY acquire one of the stones at a time. Do NOT acquire them all at once. Acquire one. Bring it to me. THEN acquire the other only AFTER I am in possession of the first. Do this for all three. It is absolutely imperative that you do it in this manner.”

“Why?” asked the gith.

“Not your concern,” she snapped. “And it is best that you bring me the tooth before you even start with the stones. I want the tooth before anything else. Understand?”

The gith sneered. “Understood. So, are these your terms?”

“They are,” said Ethel. “I mean, I could ask for more, but that might be pushing it at this point. I’ll settle for these three. After all, once I have them, everything else will undoubtedly fall into place for me.”

The gith pulled out a metal disk and held it out before him. There were numerous githyanki runes etched into its surface. “My queen?” he asked as he held it before her. “Are these terms acceptable to you?”

“They are,” Vlaakith’s authoritative voice boomed forth from it.

“Then so be it,” said the gith to Ethel as he deactivated the device. “My queen has spoken.”

Ethel squealed with glee. “Let me just grab my things.” Then she snatched up the sending stone, activated it, and said, “Minerva. Forget Helsik. I’ve got another ride. Meet up with you soon, Sweetness.”

Minerva’s voice replied, “Wonderful! That saves me a lot of trouble. Just remember, Lucretious’ circus is set up near the Temple of the Open Hand. Avoid it, and she’ll never know you’ve returned.”

“Done,” said Ethel. “I’ll make my way directly to you, and we can discuss everything further in private.” And with that, Ethel quickly threw some things in a sack, and she joined the gith and his dragon as they flew up into the sky of Avernus before opening a portal and vanishing from the Hells.

Zrathentil was beginning to doubt. 'Did she somehow mess up the sundering and reforging? Did I forget something in my instructions? Is Balramu really gone, or is he somehow subtly influencing me? Or is there another will that is haunting me? Or could it simply be that I now have all of their memories and experiences floating around in my mind? Could the memories of others have a direct impact and influence over a person's own identity? By obtaining all their memories and experiences - just as with Evronar before - am I now to become a blend of all of those beings?'

They landed in the streets on the far side of the city. He wasn't really familiar with the place, so he had no idea where they were. The sun was just beginning to consider waking up. The sky was growing a twinge brighter. He set down near a place that smelled like a good, home-cooked meal. It had two chimneys, one on each side of the building, and two floors with lots of windows. Thus, he assumed it was an inn.

"Are you familiar with Baldur's Gate?" he asked Minthara as they surveyed their surroundings.

"Not particularly," she replied. "I'm not actually well versed with the surface or its cities." She winced in the direction of the yet-to-rise sun, and he noticed her grimacing.

"What is it?" he asked.

"The sun," she replied. "One thing I miss about being tadpoled is that the sun no longer bothered me. I had grown quite fond of that and was rather used to strolling about in broad daylight. Since we left Moonrise, I've especially noticed the change. The sun is blinding and hot, and it makes me queasy."

"Are you sure it's not just the pregnancy?" he asked, only partially serious.

"Positive," said Minthara, a bit annoyed by his question. Then she smiled as a thought came to her. "But, you know, you'll soon experience it too. You're no longer tadpoled as well. The sun is going to make you feel like \$#@ as soon as it peaks over that horizon."

"I hadn't even thought about that possibility," he said as his mind delved into all the potentials of how he could combat such a weakness. 'But I'm no longer just a drow,' he thought. 'I believe I might be able to actually transform myself into other things.' "Well, no matter. Let's see if this is an inn and retreat to a nice, dark room."

She was pleased with this. "The darker the better." Then she followed him to the front door.

'The Harbor Hotel,' he thought as he read the sign suspended from a horizontal post that stuck out to the right of the door. The image on it was of a faded port with a seagoing vessel docked at it. He didn't give it any additional thought as he pushed his way inside. Minthara followed, and he glanced over his left shoulder at her. "How quaint," he remarked.

She had a puzzled look on her face all of a sudden. "Hmmm," she said in thought.

"What is it?" he asked as he maneuvered through the empty common room riddled with tables and chairs and a modest hearth off to the right. A bell over the main door signaled their arrival, but there was no one to greet them. It was early, after all.

"I never noticed that before," she explained as they reached the bar at the back. "Your eye just now. It was yellow."

Zrathentil paused and looked back at her again. This time, he faced her. "Yellow. Really?"

"Strange." She was examining him more closely. "It's not yellow now."

Zrathentil didn't like the sound of this. For a moment, he tried to reason it out. 'Why would I have a yellow eye, and why would it be only temporary? Was it just the lighting? But there wasn't really any lighting when we entered. The common room is actually quite dark and uninviting. There isn't even a fire in the fireplace. The innkeeper may have just unlocked the entrance, or maybe he never locked it. Who knows? But regardless, why would my eye appear yellow?'

"Morning!" came a gruff voice from the door behind the bar. His thoughts scattered. The door swung open, shut, and open again several times before going still. The man who entered carried a candle and set it on the bar. He was human, but he looked like a slightly larger dwarf. He was about five-foot-six with broad shoulders, a stocky build, a round head, pudgy nose, and a full beard and mustache that ran down to his belly button. His hair was brown and his eyes as well, and he smelled of fish.

"Greetings," said Zrathentil. "Sorry to disrupt your morning routine. We're trying to escape the rising sun, being drow and all."

He barked a soft laugh. "Understood. Don't get many of your kind, but I do get a few. Rooms're cheap here; cheapest in Seatower."

"Seatower?" asked Zrathentil.

"Name of the district you're in," said the innkeeper. "New to the Gate?"

"Brand new," said Zrathentil.

"Come by boat?"

"Yes."

"Well, welcome. Name's Brand Owenstein. My father used to be a sailor before he became lame after an accident at sea. Sold the ship and bought this place, he did, and he put me in charge of it. He's a sea lubber if you ever saw one, and he has to be as close to it as possible. His room's facing the ocean so he can stare out at it every day all day long."

"How interesting," Minthara commented with intense sarcasm.

"Sorry," said Brand sincerely. "Just trying to be friendly. Anyway, will it be one room or two, and do you want a room with one bed or two?"

"One," said Zrathentil. "One to both questions."

"Wonderful," said Brand. Then he began to rummage around in a box beneath the counter. "It'll be one gold a night." He held a key out for Zrathentil to take.

He never took it. A rush of wind blasted the building followed by the ceiling splintering and crashing down on them. Instinctively, Zrathentil turned and tackled Minthara to the ground, protecting her with his body as he cast Wall of Force. Though it had once been beyond his abilities when he was infected by the tadpole, and though he hadn't prepared it, the spell now came readily to him in his moment of need. This was because of the Trysalis and his soul's sundering and reforging. It was due to gleaning all the power of Balramu and others.

A great weight pressed down on the wall. A frenzy of motion followed as beams and boards were snatched up and tossed away. It was as if a frantic child was clawing their way through a toy chest in desperate search for their favorite doll. This didn't stop until the sky was exposed once more to the drow pair.

And then, all at once, a red dragon's head loomed into view. A bald gith warrior rode upon it, and numerous gith were behind him. Seeing the two nestled there, shielded by the magic wall, the gith rider pointed with his sword - a vicious predatory look on his face - as he barked, "Kill them."

Pure rage filled Zrathentil without warning. Thoughts entered his mind that were unusual to him. 'No one threatens to kill ME.' Then in a flash, he dropped the Wall of Force, and he transformed himself into a humanoid with glowing, golden runes and lines all over his body. His skin went charcoal, and his hair became a topknot of black. His eyes were golden, and his lower half was made of swirling black clouds.

Surprised, the gith and dragons were unprepared for what he did next. A whirlwind suddenly sprang into existence, roughly five feet in diameter and about thirty feet high. Within seconds, it whipped around the shattered inn, taking splintered beams, shattered wooden frames and boards, and githyanki. As it did, it jumbled them all together as if in a blender.

Zrathentil flew upward and away faster than the dragon could react. It snapped at him, but it was in vain. "Minthara," said Zrathentil, his voice booming and sounding unlike his own. "Trysalis. Now." He pointed at the dragon.

Another gith was maneuvering towards Minthara to attack her, but Zrathentil controlled the whirlwind and sent it directly into the warrior's path. After snatching him up, the drow-turned-djinni sent the entire wind vortex out of the building and straight towards the edge of the sea.

The dragon breathed fire at him. He endured but lost his concentration. The gith and everything with them were tossed about just outside the inn. In reply, Zrathentil summoned an air elemental, and he commanded it to attack the gith. A moment later, before the proud warriors could collect themselves, another whirlwind kicked up, collecting them and tossing many of them in different directions. Some were thrown back into the inn. Others were tossed twenty feet away into the ocean. Still others hit the beach that stretched off both northeast and southwest of the ruined building.

The dragon lunged at him. Zrathentil felt the sting of its bite as it managed to clip his left side with its sharp fangs. It then swiped him viciously with its claws, rending his flesh. Still, he was hardly defeated. He angled off to his right, spun, and struck with a magically summoned scimitar of lightning. Three quick swipes tore into the dragon's left side, and it roared in pain as it climbed into the air and angled away from him.

Meanwhile, Minthara was on her feet, and she worked her way as fast as she could into a splintered nook to hide. Once there, she crouched and stuck her hand down her armor, wedging it into her bra. There, she felt for the tooth, yanked it free, and pulled her hand back out. Lastly, she opened her palm, displaying the tooth, and she spoke the command word. The small portal opened, she stuck her hand in, and she drew out the Trysalis.

Ethel suddenly appeared. With a wand in her hand, she spoke a command word, and instantly the metal frame of the artifact glowed red-hot in Minthara's hand. She winced and gasped as she involuntarily dropped the scepter. Before it even hit the ground, the hag snatched it up even as the heat vanished, just like that. Ethel cackled wildly and fled.

Minthara's wrath was swift and far deadlier than her attacker expected. One of her oath spells was Haste, and she immediately cast it. Rapier in hand, she bounded after the hag and caught her easily. Empowering her weapon with divine vengeance, she stabbed and slashed. Ethel screamed in agony as blood splattered the broken beams of the inn. She stumbled and caught herself.

Then the hag spun. "Trysalis ev'dun intae dali men'ahhi bah! Sunder..." She took too long. Minthara was hasted and faster. She stabbed. Ethel dodged. "... every piece..." Minthara slashed. Divine power tore through Ethel's chest. She gasped but continued. "... of the soul..." Minthara struck again. Ethel tried to dodge but failed. "... of this drow wench..." Minthara stabbed right between the eyes. Her blade went clean through Ethel's skull and out the back, silencing her. She dropped the Trysalis, and it clattered into the rubble. Minthara yanked her rapier free, and Ethel dropped like a stone, blood gushing everywhere.

"The hag is dead, but we can resurrect her," the bald gith shouted. Then he pointed at Minthara. "Kill her and retrieve the tooth." Minthara spun, and before she knew it, she was surrounded by githyanki warriors; those that had been tossed into the inn.

At the same time, Zrathentil was weakening. As a djinni, he was no match for an adult red dragon. And so, he decided to transform again. In midair, his body suddenly convulsed and twisted as it fell from the sky. It stretched and exploded in size. And then, within moments, before he hit the ground, he became an ancient blue.

This form he'd acquired from Kristanvis, a rival of Evronar's and one of the original souls Balramu had merged with. Balramu had lured both Kristanvis and Evronar to the home of the artifact's creator, Andrais, a powerful drow mage, and during the ensuing contest, the Trysalis sundered all of their souls and reformed them together with it, trapping them as one collective soul within the item itself. None of their wills were obliterated, and so they were one and yet they retained their own independence, constantly vying for control over their whole being and the relic. And yet, they were imprisoned within it, unable to escape.

Now, though, Minthara had obliterated all the wills except his, and Kristanvis' power was at his fingertips. As soon as he turned into a blue dragon, he landed hard on the beach, tilted his head up towards the sky, aimed at the red as it approached, and he blasted it with an insanely powerful bolt of lightning, shot straight from his open mouth. The red took the hit in the chest, roared in agony, beat its wings fiercely, and angled away.

But it was not out of the fight. Without warning, it angled down, diving like a bird of prey. Zrathentil saw it coming, and instead of trying to fly away, he prepared himself. The red plowed into him full force, and within moments the two thundered end over end as they raked each other in a collective frenzy. Tails bashed, claws slashed, and teeth clamped down in rapid succession. Fire and lightning erupted around them, setting anything flammable ablaze.

At that point, they had the entire district's attention. People were popping open windows, stepping out of doors, walking out onto balconies, and watching from their boats at the docks or out at sea not too far away. Those who were even remotely close to the battle fled as fast as they could including many families; adults often carrying their children in the hopes that they could get to safety before the calamity came their way.

Minthara continued in her death-spree. She was quickly out of divine aid, but especially since she was hasted, she had become like a juggernaut. The githyanki were all around her, trying desperately to kill her, but their weapons bounced off her armor and shield. Only a few managed to penetrate enough to bloody her. As she weakened, she lay hands on herself, granting herself more precious life-giving energy. She then returned to dancing around her foes, rapier slicing them to ribbons one after another.

But she could feel it. The Haste spell was coming to its end, and there were simply too many of them remaining. She couldn't afford the lethargy that would follow. She had to do something to escape. It was at that moment that she realized that the githyanki warrior had said that they were after the tooth. It wasn't the Trysalis. The tooth was still in her left hand, pressed against the handle of her shield as she continued to use it to deflect her enemies' attacks.

And so, she stabbed and killed another gith, leaving her rapier in his chest. Then she suddenly whipped the tooth right at the bald githyanki dragon rider. "You want the tooth? Here!" It hit him in the face and fell to the debris-strewn floor. Then, before he could react, Minthara stooped down, grabbed the Trysalis, deflected several blows with her shield, stuck the relic under her belt at her left hip, grabbed a dropped gith longsword courtesy of her most recent victim, and risked leaving herself exposed to her foes as she leaped through the gap she'd just made. Several swiped at her as she fled, but she suffered no serious injuries from it. With the Trysalis secured, she raced away from the devastated inn, hurrying along the seashore towards where Zrathentil and the red dragon were battling.

She glanced back. Much to her great relief, the githyanki were not pursuing. Instead, they were scrambling about in the rubble of the inn, desperately searching for the tooth. She sighed and came to a halt. As she did, she dropped into a crouch and let the lethargy sweep over her. To add to her exhaustion, the sun's rays shone brightly

upon her, making her sick. But she was relieved. Not only did she escape with her life, she killed the hag and recovered the Trysalis. That was all that mattered.

Zrathentil continued to tear into the red dragon. He was suffering injury after injury himself, but he could tell that he was winning the fight. He smiled. 'This is the true power of the Trysalis. Look at me. I'm finally something to fear. I'm finally not someone's pawn. I'm a...'

Unexpectedly, a simple sparrow flew directly into Zrathentil's eye. For some reason, it aimed directly towards the upper portion, landing just at the edge of the eyelid nearest to the bridge of his snout. It then flew away rapidly as if it had never appeared. He didn't give it another thought. Instead, he returned his focus back to his enemy.

At last, he found an opening. Biting down on the red dragon's throat, he thrashed and ripped it open. Blood poured all over. The red gurgled and spat as its eyes rolled into the back of its head. Then it fell to the ground, dead.

Zrathentil extracted himself from it and looked around, surveying the scene. There was Minthara, crouching on the beach, trying desperately to catch her breath. Inside the shattered inn, the githyanki were still searching for the tooth. 'They will die next,' he thought.

But then, something bit his brain. Flashes of light shot through his mind. The world around him vanished. 'What is happening? What...'

Psychic shackles lashed his will. He was reeling and yet subdued. He couldn't get his bearings. 'What... Who...'

'Greetings Zrathentil,' the Absolute's voice echoed in his mind. It was then that he realized what happened. The bird had been carrying an illithid parasite of the Absolute. It had landed on his eye and dropped the parasite there. While he finished killing off the dragon, it crawled up under his eyelid and went directly into his brain. 'You thought you'd escaped me, but you were careless. Weren't you?'

'No,' Zrathentil thought as his mind pleaded with whatever deity might save him. 'No! Someone save me. Minthara! Save me! Free me from this! Sunder my soul again! Tear it out of the tadpole. Don't be fooled by it. I... I just got free! I was finally no longer a pawn.'

'You will always be a pawn, Zrathentil. Only now, you will be MINE.'

Zrathentil transformed back into himself. Minthara hurried up to him. "You okay?" she asked, checking him for signs of serious injury.

He smiled. "Oh, I'm fine. Come on. Let's get out of here. We need to retreat to some place more secluded. We have much to discuss including what to do with my left eye... and that." He pointed at the Trysalis. Then the pair ran off away from the beach and towards the heart of the city.

Ethel came back to life, and her first thought was outrage. She sat up and looked around. Nearby, the gith cleric's Revivify scroll burnt to a crisp after being used. "Where is it? Where is the scepter? Where is the drow wench? Did you kill her? Did you retrieve it?"

"Better than that," said the bald gith dragon rider. "We retrieved the tooth. That part of our agreement has been fulfilled. The tooth is yours." He dropped it in her lap. "Now all that remains is to retrieve the three Netherstones. But come quickly. We must get out of here. Our presence has drawn a great deal of attention. Already, the defenses of the city approach."

Ethel snatched up the tooth, seething as she stared down at it. 'I don't WANT the bloody tooth! I WANT the scepter that was in it. Gods! I should have made the deal to retrieve the Trysalis, not the tooth. But I didn't want them to know about the dumb scepter or they may have wanted it for themselves. Now...'

'No no. You still have the advantage. You can see through his eye. That's right. You'll get it yourself. It's only a matter of time.'

"They're here," announced one of the gith survivors.

"No more time to talk," said the gith. And he and the other warriors fled from the shattered inn. Out of the twelve that had landed in the city on the dragon's back, only four remained. They gathered the weapons of the fallen that were near them and sped out of the shattered remains of the Harbor Hotel. From there, they followed Ethel west to the nearest sewer entrance and disappeared below.

Trysalis



Ethel, the Hag



Kith'rak Tik'ohn



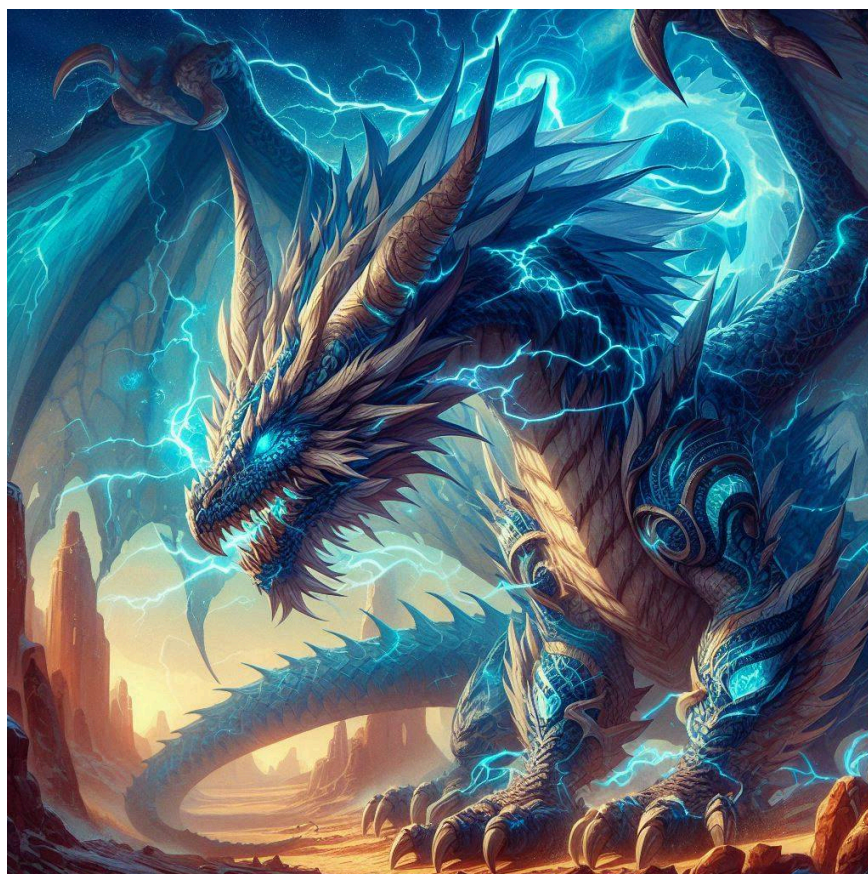
Balramu



Air Elemental



Kristanvis



Chapter 9 - Unmasking Treachery

Izar'la followed along behind Tav, watching every shadow as they entered the mansion of the odious Arfur Gregorio. "Just out of curiosity," she said, "why are we going in here?"

"Clues," said Tav. "Did you notice? He was very adamant that no one mess with his study and basement. My guess is, there's evidence against him in those two places. I suspect that's also why he wanted to get a change of clothes."

"But he wound up not getting that," said Sharayla.

"Fear," said Tav. "I think we sufficiently scared him off. Even now, he's probably trying to think of a way to sneak in and quickly gather whatever evidence is here. I want to find it first. Could lead us to the suspicious toys."

"Good thinking," said Halsin.

Immediately upon entering, the party encountered the refugees from outside. The one who had spoken up, with the messy brown hair, thanked them most profusely for supporting them. "My name is Ben Golewits," he said, "and if my family can do anything for you in return, please let us know."

"No need," said Tav.

"Just let that nobleman know, if he asks, that we're the ones who ransacked his house," said Izar'la.

"You're going to ransack it?" said Ben, a bit concerned.

"We're looking for clues," said Izar'la. "The guy was stuffing toys with explosives. He didn't give your kids any toys, did he?"

Ben pointed to his daughter. "Stuffed bear," he replied, his eyes bugging out. "He didn't give it to her. She found it." He turned towards his daughter. "Cinta, dear. Bring daddy that stuffed bear you found. Would you? Bring it quick."

She hurried over. She was a dirty-faced girl of about seven or eight with the same hairstyle as Wynari; even the same color hair. She wore a high-collared green tunic with short sleeves and dark pants. "Why do you want to see him, Papa?"

"I'm sorry, but Papa needs to make sure your new teddy is safe."

"Safe?" asked Cinta as Ben took the bear from her. He quickly handed it to Tav. "Can you?"

Izar'la quickly snatched the bear from the cleric. "Best if we don't have the healer playing around with it," she told her friend. "I'll just take it outside. Be ready to rez me if I blow up."

"Blow up?!" This came from Marpha, Ben's wife and Cinta's mother. She was also filthy with layered hair parted down the middle that fell to her neckline in the back. She wore a more sharp and critical look, as if she was standardly a skeptic, and she wore a blue tunic and gray pants. "What does she mean, 'blow up'?"

Ben began to explain as Izar'la made her way outside and into the street. Tav followed, but at a distance, ready for anything. The rest of their companions fanned out, redirecting traffic away. Izar'la looked down at the bear and considered her best course of action. A knife snipping the threads was easiest, but what if there was something inside that would trigger an explosion should she do something like that? 'What is the safest way to handle this?'

She smiled. 'Mage hand.' She conjured it, gave it a knife, and backed away. Standing near Tav by the mansion's entrance, she manipulated the hand so that it sliced the threads on the teddy bear. Seeing that no explosion occurred, she then manipulated the hand to start yanking the stuffing out. Fistful after fistful, the bear's insides were removed. And then, out came a tiny pouch. The hand dropped it amidst the stuffing on the ground. The hand vanished. Izar'la approached cautiously. Stooping down, she retrieved the pouch and carefully opened the mouth to peer inside.

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Not smokepowder," she told everyone. "It's just some sort of special repair kit, courtesy of Gregorio Toys. 'If your teddy's stitching starts to come apart, use the special repair kit to fix it right back up.'" She read this from a small card within the pouch. Having done this, she began to put everything back inside the bear. "Looks like a false alarm with this one."

"I guess that makes sense," said Gorm. "He probably wouldn't have wanted to risk blowing himself up on accident. My guess is that he is lacing the toys with smokepowder at another location, far away from himself."

"He's probably paid someone to do it too," said Sharayla.

"While you're patching the bear up," said Tav, "I'll take Halsin and Gorm and we'll go investigate the study and basement."

Izar'la nodded her approval and continued to work, using the repair kit to sew the bear back up. When she was finished, she headed back inside and handed the bear to Ben. Sharayla followed. "Looks like this one's safe. Thanks for letting us look."

"Thanks for watching out for us," said Ben. "We've been through so much. I can't believe someone would lace toys with explosives." He then handed the bear back to his daughter. "There you go, Sweetie. You can run along now and play."

She beamed with joy. "Thanks again!" Then she ran off.

Tav returned just then with Halsin and Gorm. "Hatch in the study leads to a secret basement. There was a chest with a bunch of random toys. Inside one was this letter." She handed it to the gith.

Izar'la read it quickly. "He's got people who are actually stuffing the toys with smokepowder in a storage area."

"Where is the storage? Do we know?" asked Sharayla.

"South edge of town in a requisitioned barn," said Tav. "They're actually donating the toys to the refugees."

"Sounds like there are Flaming Fist soldiers guarding the barn," said Izar'la. "Do they know, do you think?"

"We'll find out," said Tav. "I say let's get moving. The sooner we prove those toys are bad, the better."

"By the gods," said Ben. "Should we warn people?"

"Absolutely not," said Izar'la. "Let us handle it. The last thing we want is for our enemies to hide the evidence. We need to expose this so the Fist is forced to open a full-blown investigation." And with that, they left the mansion and set out down the south road.

They found the barn rather quickly. It was just east of the south road. As expected, there were Flaming Fist soldiers everywhere. One in particular, a male dwarf manip with trimmed brown beard and mustache and buzzed hair greeted them. He had plated armor and a gleaming greataxe.

"Morning," he said hospitably. "Here to make a donation?"

Tav paused, suddenly unsure how to proceed. Izar'la decided to step in. She handed the manip the letter they found in the Gregorio basement. "Are you accepting toys here to hand out to the refugees?" she asked.

The manip read the letter carefully, his eyebrow cocked. "Sure are," he replied absently as he finished reading. "Son of a... By the gods! Where did you get this?"

"Arfur Gregorio," said Tav. "Squatters have taken up residence in his house, and this was found within."

The dwarf manip swore and shook his head. "He's donated a TON of toys, and he's had numerous employees show up multiple times to deliver the crates and inspect them. They could have easily laced the toys with smokepowder while we weren't looking. I mean, it's not like we were suspecting foul play here. They're just toys for refugee kids. We never would have imagined someone would be THIS sick."

"We get it," said Izar'la. "We feel the same. So can we help inspect?"

"You'd want to?" said the manip. "And how did you get involved, if you don't mind me asking?"

"We were trying to help the refugees," said Tav. "Mr. Gregorio was being a bit... hostile towards them."

"I have young siblings," said Izar'la. "So as soon as we found out about this, naturally I was invested. I'm willing to do anything to track down every last suspicious toy. I really want to make sure no one gets hurt from these things, especially my siblings."

"You have siblings here?" asked the dwarf. Then he waved his hand to brush the question aside. "Sorry. Just a surprise. Don't see a lot of your kind here. But that doesn't matter. Honestly, we've had all sorts of troubles out here with refugees and people not wanting them here. So I guess we should have known someone would do something this nasty to scare them away. And we're short staffed, to be frank. There're all sorts of crazy things happening these days at the Gate."

"All that to say that I absolutely don't mind you helping with this. We could use all the help we can get," the dwarf concluded. "Come on. I'll escort you in." He then turned and led them towards the main barn doors. "Name's Manip Nestor. If there are explosive toys in here, I am TRULY happy to meet ya."

"Same," said Tav. "It's a relief to see you're so concerned."

"I've got little ones too," said Nestor. "I'd hate to think one of these things has somehow fallen into one of their hands. Gods! I feel like we can't move fast enough." He then turned to one of the other soldiers. "Take the front. We've got a surprise inspection to make." The Fist nodded and quickly assumed Nestor's position at the edge of the property.

Inside, they quickly began to pop open crates and sift through the contents with as much care as they could. Izar'la warned everyone of her previous fears that anything could potentially set off the explosives. "So be careful. I mean, it could be anything. Pull a string, press on the tummy or eye..."

This meant that the search was rather slow and meticulous, but only at the beginning. They carefully took out and inspected each toy, searching for anything that even closely resembled smokepowder. They did this using Izar'la's mage hand, just as before. And then, as they began to make their way deeper into the first crate, they found

one. As soon as Izar'la's mage hand sliced through the thread closing the spine of a stuffed oliphaunt, a smokepowder firecracker tumbled out.

Izar'la examined it carefully and reported, "That's enough smokepowder to blow an iron door off its hinges. No ignition method, though. Interesting. It's fireworks. They're lacing the toys with fireworks? But that would mean that they're only dangerous if they catch fire. Are they planning on somehow lighting a bunch of toys on fire all at the same time? Seems kind of tedious and convoluted."

"Gods!" said Manip Nestor, realization dawning on him. "This evening, in honor of Lord Gortash's coronation as Archduke, there's supposed to be a festive gathering on the shore of the river. All the refugee families are to meet there, and that's when the donations are to be handed out. All these toys will be given to the kids at the same time. Then they'll gather together in an open field on the north side of Rivington where they can watch a fireworks display meant just for them. There are so many refugees that they'll be truly clustered close together during the show."

"One firework ignited and they all go boom," said Izar'la grimly.

"Well," said Halsin, a strangely sadistic look on his face. "Now THAT surely would be a sight, wouldn't it."

"What?" asked Tav, unsure why he would say such a thing.

But suddenly, Halsin moved like lightning. Twin blades flashed. 'Shortswords?' Izar'la's brain couldn't comprehend what was happening, especially because Halsin then attacked Gorm. He nearly drove both swords into the half-orc's chest. Fortunately, Gorm was quick to react, and he threw himself backwards, only receiving gashes vertically down from his right shoulder to his side.

Halsin continued the assault, blades slashing and jabbing. Blood flew everywhere as Gorm continued to narrowly avoid dying. Then the mighty barbarian threw himself into a rage. He whipped out his handaxes, and he began to counter the great druid's strikes.

Tav and Sharayla finally reacted, drawing weapons and hurrying to assist Gorm against their own ally. At the same time, Izar'la used Mourning Frost, her staff, to cast Ray of Frost. A frigid beam of blue-white light slammed into Halsin's right side.

Halsin rolled away suddenly, came to his feet near the crate of explosive toys, and he hovered over it. A flame was suddenly alive in his hand. Everyone froze in place. Halsin's grin was psychotic. He laughed, but it was no longer his voice. It was something far more guttural and creaturely. "One more move and we ALL blow sky high. I'll take us all out and everyone around the building too. Then what? Eh? You'll never track down all the toys at that point, will you?"

"What... What in all the stars is happening?" asked Tav. Like everyone else, she couldn't comprehend why Halsin would do all this.

Halsin laughed mockingly. "Something wrong, Oh Great Afflicted - slayers of General Ketheric Thorm? Eh? What's the matter? Hmmm?" Then Halsin suddenly transformed into a doppelganger.

"Gods," said Manip Nestor, and by that point, other Flaming Fist members came running to see what was happening.

Izar'la's mind worked rapidly. 'I have to put out the flame. If I can just put it out...'

But then, other Flaming Fist soldiers transformed as well into doppelgangers, much to the shock and dismay of Manip Nestor and the Afflicted. There were roughly six real Flaming Fist and four doppelgangers plus the doppelganger who had been Halsin. A quick exchange occurred. The six Flaming Fists were killed before they could even respond, leaving only Nestor and the Afflicted alive in the barn.

One of the other four then asked, "So what are we doing? We killing these too?"

The Halsin doppelganger nodded. "No witnesses, or the 'fireworks show' will be canceled. Orin wouldn't like that, now would she?"

"No, she certainly wouldn't," said Izar'la. Then, using her metamagic to quicken her spell, she cast Icingdeath's Frost. She made sure the Halsin doppelganger was caught in the blast, and as a result, the flame it was holding went out. She also made sure that all the crates containing toys were hit, causing them to be frozen solid and unable to be ignited easily with fire. Immediately following this, she struck the Halsin doppelganger with a second Ray of Frost, and its scream of pain from her first spell was cut short as it lost consciousness.

Everyone else sprang into action. Tav, Gorm, and Sharayla were already teaming up on the doppelganger to Izar'la's far left. Meanwhile, Manip Nestor engaged the one on the far right. Us suddenly sprang off of Izar'la's back and scurried up to one of the two in the middle, and it used its claws and its devour intellect ability. In a heartbeat, the one it attacked was staggering. Its brain was numbed.

The doppelganger on the far left was quickly losing the fight. The one in the middle that hadn't been attacked attempted to take down Sharayla, but the half-orc druid managed to dodge it effectively. Manip Nestor

continued to hold his own against the one on the right, and Us suddenly leapt magically into the doppelganger it'd stunned. The intellect devourer consumed its prey's brain and immediately took over its body.

And with that, the fight was over relatively quickly. The one on the far left didn't last long against the combined efforts of the Afflicted, and the one on the far right died within seconds after that. Manip Nestor was bloodied, but he was otherwise fine.

"What in all the Hells?!" cried Nestor. "What happened to my men? I lost... How?"

"Doppelgangers infest your city," said Us through the doppelganger's mouth that it was controlling. "We now have its memories. We know where they're coming from. There is a Temple of Bhaal deep under the city. Access through the sewers. The doppelgangers serve Orin the Red, Chosen of Bhaal and one of the Chosen of the Cult of the Absolute. She has arranged this. She wants to murder all the families of the refugees here in Rivington, just for fun."

Nestor eyed Us in confusion. "Is it... Did it betray its own? What is happening here?"

"Long story," said Izar'la. She was now quite pleased that she'd saved Us in the mind flayer colony below Moonrise. It was coming in quite handy at that moment. "Basically, the doppelganger has been taken over by one of our allies. The entity controlling it is even able to know its host's memories and thoughts."

She turned to Us. "Us, I need you to tell us, have any of these toys been distributed?"

"Yes," said Us. "They couldn't help themselves. They gave some away already for free to the Gur children at their camp north of here. A few other explosive toys have also been given out to additional children in Rivington and even in the city proper. They were having such fun, the doppelgangers. They couldn't help themselves."

"Do you know all the children who have received these?" asked Tav.

"Oh yes," said Us. "They wanted to know them all by face and name so they could find them later. After the fireworks show tonight, they planned on slipping around and blowing up all the others they distributed toys to."

Izar'la was trying not to panic. Her own younger siblings could have been targeted back at the home.

"Okay. We'll need you to lead us to them. Understand? We need to confiscate all of those toys."

"We can do that for you," said Us happily.

"You won't get into the city easily," said Manip Nestor. "It'll be a nightmare of paperwork and red tape. They've closed it off due to the Archduke's inauguration ceremony at Wyrms Rock."

"We can take you through tunnels under the river," said Us. "We know the way now. More like these down there, though. Must be ready to fight them. Lots of them down there. But Us knows the way."

"That's wonderful, Us," said Izar'la. "Maybe we can find our companions and get down there. Together we can probably face a bunch of doppelgangers."

"What about Halsin? What happened to him?" asked Sharayla.

"Kidnapped," said Us. "During the fight at the outpost, Halsin went underground. Doppelgangers were already there. They ambushed him and took him by secret tunnels from there. Orin's command. That one replaced him before you got there." Us gestured to the frozen doppelganger. "This one..." It pointed to itself. "... was one who took him to the tunnel entrance and handed him off to others that took him to the Temple of Bhaal. Orin has a message for you. Do her bidding and Halsin will remain alive. Try to rescue Halsin, and he will die horribly. Kill Gortash. Bring his Netherstone to the Temple of Bhaal. Then Orin and the other Netherstone keepers will use the Netherstones to subdue the Absolute. Then Halsin will be set free unharmed."

"Yeah, sure," said Sharayla sarcastically.

"Okay," said Tav. "One thing at a time. We have to confiscate the toys. Manip Nestor, can you make your way to Wyrms Crossing and get the rest of the Flaming Fist involved in this? Meanwhile, we'll go to the Gur camp and try to track down all the suspicious toys here in Rivington. Once Us here has helped us find them all, we'll follow the secret tunnels under the river and make our way into the city and find the rest of the distributed toys there. If you can grant us access to Wyrms Crossing before we get to that point, that would make our lives easier. We can then simply tell you where the caves are and you and the Flaming Fist can go hunt down the doppelgangers below. Sound good?"

Nestor's head was spinning. "Doesn't make sense to me; none of it. But yeah. Sure. I'll get whatever Flaming Fists I can together and we'll make sure we dispose of these toys quickly and properly. I'll try to grant you access to Wyrms Crossing, I guess, but no promises. Like I said, there's the Archduke's inauguration going on. I don't think I'll get that approved. As for the tunnels under the river..."

"We'll plan on getting into the city through there, I guess," said Izar'la. "Thanks, Manip. You've been a great help."

"But wait!" said Nestor. "What about finding the guy responsible for this?"

"He's at Sharess' Caress," said Gorm. "That's where he said he was going, anyway."

"We'll swing by there if we can," said Tav. "Trust me. I want him to answer for this."

“Okay,” said Nestor. “Then I’ll try to meet you at the Caress after I get the rest of my Fists together on this. If I don’t meet up with you in time, I guess I’m good with you using the tunnels under the river to get into the city. Gods, I can’t even believe I’m saying that, but... I mean... This is insane. All of it.”

“Let’s get moving,” said Izar’la. “We’ve already wasted too much time here. Once the doppelgangers find out that we’ve spoiled their murderous fun, they may start to hunt down the kids they’ve already given bad toys to, and they might start blowing them up.”

“Good point,” said Tav. Then the party raced out of the barn and headed north towards the Gur encampment. Us led the way. Even as it left the barn, it transformed its doppelganger body into the Flaming Fist soldier it had been prior to its death.

The Gur camp was on the northeast side of town, established on top of a ridge overlooking the river. Sheer cliff walls descended to the north and east down to the fragmented beach. Off to the west, from where the party stood, they could see Wyrms Crossing at the base of the sloping countryside riddled with rocky outcroppings and a scattering of rustic homes and businesses.

A mini ceremony was taking place in the encampment. Amidst the numerous tents and campfires, near a rundown shack that looked as old as time itself, the monster hunters were gathered. There was a funeral pyre that was billowing smoke and flames. Those gathered were deeply grieving. One child in particular was standing a bit too close to the fire for Izar’la’s tastes, and she was cradling a baby doll.

Tav marched right into the area, but the Gur were not only mourning, they were discussing their next course of action. They didn’t even notice the party at first. “We cannot rush into their claws again,” one of them was saying. “Another defeat will wipe us out.”

“If only we hadn’t lost Gandrel in the Heartlands,” another added. She was a battle-hardened human female in her mid to late thirties with short, strawberry blonde hair. “You KNOW it was Astarion. It had to be. Gandrel almost had him here in the city when that flying ship showed up and snatched them both away.”

“I still don’t understand what he was doing in the swamps there,” said another, older woman with gray hair. It was buzzed all around except for on the top. There she had long, straight locks that were combed to the left. They fell to about her lower jawline. On her back was a gleaming, golden greataxe, and she wore a silver circlet around her head. She was standing near the child with the doll. She shook her head, her plated armor rattling as she did so. “Idiot fool. I still think he was attempting to make a deal with the hag. NEVER make a deal with a hag, even if it is to hunt down and kill a gutless worm like Astarion.”

“But the hag didn’t kill him,” argued the strawberry blonde. “Our scouts saw the bite wounds on the neck. It was that bloody spawn. Why’s he so important to Cazador anyway?”

“It has to be the tattoos on his back,” said the older woman. “That’s the only thing that makes sense to me. Cazador made a deal of some kind with a devil.”

The strawberry blonde finally broke, wiping her face. “Forgive me, Ulma,” she said. “I know tears will not bring our dead or our children back.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Cammie” said the older woman. “It is only right to mourn.”

It was then that Izar’la noticed that Tav was a bit startled. She was staring at Ulma as if she’d seen a ghost. “What is it?” she asked her friend.

“That woman,” said Tav, gesturing with a nod at Ulma. “She has the hag Ethel’s face from the swamps near Moonhaven. I never actually saw her in human form myself when I met her, but I remember seeing images of her in the minds of the others. She has her voice and her face. It’s... Could it be her?”

“We shed tears today so we may shed blood tomorrow,” said another Gur. He was a male human who looked younger and full of courage.

“Still,” said yet another female, “they need to be wiped out - exterminated. Nothing less will do.”

“And if we fail, who will stand between them and the innocent?” asked a male. Was he half-elf? Izar’la couldn’t tell from her angle.

“If we do nothing, the innocent will suffer just the same. We have no good choices.” Izar’la couldn’t tell who had spoken that time.

“What will we do? There are so few of us left.”

“Our strength was never in numbers, but our bonds we share. And they are stronger than ever,” Ulma said, bringing the conversation to an abrupt end.

“Perhaps the hag stole her face and voice,” said Izar’la after a thought. “Remember, their human visage is only an illusion, and they are good at mimicry. She undoubtedly met this woman and copied her appearance.”

“Thanks, Iz. I needed that.” Finally, Tav mustered the courage to interrupt. She tapped the strawberry blonde named Cammie on the shoulder as Ulma began to recite the words of some sort of ritual.

“Rech te i hathran roost...” And Ulma continued from there as Cammie turned to see who was trying to get her attention.

“Hello,” she said to the cleric of Selune, more curious than anything. “If you don’t mind, we’re mourning our losses here. If you need assistance from us in some way, we can be with you shortly.”

“It’s not that,” said Tav firmly. “We’re here because we’re concerned about your children.”

“Our children,” said the woman. Her eyes nearly bugged out of her head. “Why? Do you know something? Has something else happened?”

Tav pointed to the girl with the doll. “Us, is that one of the children?”

“She is,” said Us. “But we don’t see the others around here. She is the only one.”

Tav addressed Cammie. “A maniac has laced children’s toys with smokepowder and has distributed a few throughout Baldur’s Gate. That girl has a doll that is one of those toys.”

The woman looked at the girl. “That toy was a gift from one of the Flaming Fist,” she replied. “Why would they...”

“Doppelgangers are replacing people,” said Izar’la. “Please get her away from the fire now. Thank you.”

Cammie did as she was told, rushing up to the girl. She snatched the doll away swiftly. “Hey!” the girl cried, angrily.

“Sorry, Neeva, but you’re in danger,” said Cammie. She hurried away from the fire.

“What is this?” asked Ulma. “What’s going on here?”

Tav quickly explained to everyone present. “Open it up. See for yourselves.”

Cammie did just that, and those gathered were both alarmed and outraged. Ulma’s sharp eyes locked with Tav’s. “And who is responsible for this?” she asked. “Is it Cazador? Is it his spawn? Resorting to THIS now?”

“Doppelgangers,” said Izar’la. “They work for Orin the Red, Chosen of Bhaal.”

“So basically another group of monsters,” Ulma snapped bitterly. “As if there ain’t enough roaming about. Baldur’s Gate is haunted by many things, but one of its most insidious is the vampire Cazador. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if he was somehow connected to this. For years, his foul spawn have stolen away innocents at night, whisking them back to his palace. Recently, they struck our camp. They took our children, all but Neeva here. And now THIS! They’re trying to steal our future.”

Cammie then added, “We are monster hunters. Our purpose is to kill beasts like these. But in our haste to save our little ones, we were rash. We charged straight into an ambush.” She lowered her head in shame.

Ulma then took over. “They tore us to pieces - vampire spawn and werewolves. I have never seen a vampire’s lair so heavily guarded. What’s left of my tribe is wounded and broken. We cannot stand against him to save our children. But perhaps...” She sized up Tav and her companions. Her eyes fell on Izar’la. “Wait. Aren’t you... Are you the ones who slew Ketheric Thorm at Moonrise Towers? Tiefling refugees that just arrived described you in full. In particular, there was a bard girl who was singing your praises. ‘A gith,’ she said. Well, actually, three of you, I believe. Yes? You’re the Afflicted?”

“We are,” said Tav. She didn’t even hesitate.

‘Smart move,’ Izar’la thought after a moment of consideration. ‘At this point, who flipping cares about anonymity. If people think we’re heroes, we might just be able to gain some support against our enemies. We can use all the help we can get.’

Ulma was pleased and more than a little relieved. “Well, then. Perhaps the slayers of Ketheric can help us save our young ones,” she said, hope glistening in her eyes. All around, the other Gur closed in, the same look in their eyes as well.

“We’ll do whatever we can,” Tav semi-promised.

“But perhaps you can help us in return,” Izar’la cut in. “First of all, you’ve been to his lair. You’ve tested his defenses. If you were to assault the place again, how would you do so?”

Ulma took a moment to ponder this. “The main entrance is blockaded,” she told them. “But we did spot another way. Of course, at that point, it was too late. We were simply fleeing for our lives.”

“It was near Bloomridge Park. There you will find a broken tower, mid-repair. Climb the scaffolding and it looked like you could enter his palace from there. Yes, his home is just on the other side of the wall; just inside Manorborn. It may be watched, but you will not walk into the slaughter that we did. I’m fairly certain of that.”

“If you do this,” Ulma continued, her heart crying out to them, “our entire tribe will be in your debt. On our honor, it will be repaid. Even if the children are dead, this monster MUST be destroyed before he preys upon any others. May the gods keep you and \$#@ your enemies.”

“Wait,” said Sharayla who sensed that the conversation was coming to its end. “Aren’t you going to help us? Or are you expecting us to go in alone?”

Ulma met her fierce gaze with her own. "We'll be ready to back you up, make no mistake," she replied. "But we are still recovering from the previous night's horrors. We haven't even fully rested, and it would be best to assault his lair by day. The sun is your advocate, and he won't be able to pursue you outside his home should you need to retreat."

"We're not ready for a second assault," Cammie added. "And if we wait until tomorrow... Our children may already be..." She shook her head and fell silent.

"And to succeed, it may require someone to slip in the back door, if you will," said Ulma. "As soon as we're able, we'll make our way to Bloomridge and hide nearby, watching for you. After you go in, we'll follow carefully behind you. If you run into trouble, we'll rush in and help support you. As long as you lead the charge, we should be able to effectively cover your backs."

Izar'la shook her head. "We need your help sooner rather than later. If you and your people are serious about this, we need you to help us get through the tunnels that go under the river from here to Baldur's Gate. If we all take those paths - and Us here knows the way - we can go together into the city without the Fist and Cazador even knowing it. Well, hopefully. Either way, there are supposedly more doppelgangers down there, and with you as backup, we should be able to work our way into Baldur's Gate and to Bloomridge together. Sound good?"

"Seems reasonable," said Ulma, and she received numerous confirmations from those gathered. "We'll leave Neeva at the Temple of the Open Hand. The priests there have been good to us in the past. She should be safe there, at least. Then we'll meet you wherever you'd like. Just name it."

"Meet us by the well across the street from the Temple of the Open Hand," said Us. "That way leads down into the tunnels."

"That we will," said Ulma. It was clear by the look on her face. Hope had returned.

"We have a few more toys to find and acquire," said Tav, "and we have some companions to reunite with. After that, we'll meet you there."

"One last thing," said Izar'la, another thought springing into her mind. "Did the vampires take your children WITH their toys?"

The Gur exchanged inquisitive looks. "I believe so. Yes," said Cammie. "Why is that important?"

"The children were so happy to receive toys," said one of the men. "They were keeping them close."

"They're not thinking," Izar'la thought with a smile. "Explosives," she explained. "Unwittingly, the maniac who was hoping to blow up your kids has potentially supplied us with explosives that we can use against Cazador and his spawn. We'll have to be on the lookout for those toys when we're in his lair."

She turned towards Us. "How many toys were handed out to the Gur children?"

"Six," said Us, "including that one." He pointed to Neeva's doll which was now resting on a bench far away from the fire.

"We'll take that one," said Izar'la. "I can make a bomb out of it. In fact, we'll check with Manip Nestor. Maybe he'll allow us to use some of the others as well to blow the crap out of Cazador."

"If we hurry back to the barn," said Sharayla with a devious expression on her face, "the Fist may not be there yet. Remember, Nestor was going to get reinforcements. The barn is probably unguarded right now. We can take as many toys as we think we'll need. That way, they can't stop us."

Izar'la couldn't help but like that idea. "With your help," she said, turning to Ulma, "we can collect them all. Can we go now?"

Ulma was full of excitement. "\$#@ yes! I LOVE the way you people think. We'll blow that \$#@\$ all the way to the Hells."

"Wait," said another of the Gur females. "Suzanna dropped her toy. So that's two out of the six. Here." She handed a stuffed bear to Izar'la, and another woman handed Neeva's doll over as well. Izar'la stuffed both in a smaller sack she kept in her pack.

"Lead the way," said Cammie, eager to get her revenge on Cazador and his minions.

Back to the barn they went, and sure enough, it was empty. The Flaming Fist were nowhere around. A few people were standing outside, gossiping and pointing at the doorway. When they saw Us, they hurried over. "Oh, thank Heavens! We came to make donations, but there are dead bodies inside."

"And there are no soldiers around," added a blonde half-elf woman. She looked truly frightened.

"Fear not, Citizens," said Us in the soldier's original voice. "We have the situation now totally under control. Everyone please step back away from the barn. We have to move some of the donations to a safer location. Thank you."

"What's happening?" asked one of the people as Tav, Izar'la, Sharayla, Gorm, and the Gur all filtered into the building.

Us patted the air with its host's hands. "We're unmasking treachery, is all. There's been foul play. But rest assured, the Flaming Fist have everything under control."

"There's a wagon over here," one of the Gur pointed out. "We can load the crates of toys onto the wagon and wheel it right out."

"Good thinking," said Ulma. "It'll take too much work to move it back uphill to our camp, but we should be able to move it along the main road towards Wyrms Crossing."

"The Fist will likely come from that direction, though," said Cammie. "Won't they stop us from taking it?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking," said Ulma. "I know we wanted to confiscate this stuff without them knowing, but there are simply too many witnesses around. When the Fist show up, people will start talking. The next thing you know, we'll be arrested for stealing a bunch of explosives from the barn. But if we're seen trying to work with the Fist, bringing the explosives to them so they don't have as much work to do, we might just be able to get their help against the doppelgangers below and Cazador. In other words, they might work with us instead of against us if we're straightforward with them."

"Still," said Sharayla as she checked one of the toys for smokepowder, "we don't necessarily have to give them ALL of the toys, now do we? I doubt they've done an inventory of them."

Ulma grinned ear to ear. "Once again, I LOVE the way you think." She turned to her people. "Grab smokepowder toys - as many as you can stuff in your packs. Get the rest on the wagon. Some of us will take the packs back to camp while the rest of us deliver the toys in the wagon to the Fist."

"Done and done," said another Gur, and they quickly set to work.

Izar'la then said, "Looks like you've got everything handled here. My companions and I should now hurry to find the other toys here in Rivington and confiscate them. As we planned previously, we'll meet you by the well across from the temple." Ulma nodded, and with that, the Afflicted collected Us and hurried through the streets of Rivington, searching for the remaining children with suspicious toys.

Just before they left, Sharayla collected a number of non-explosive toys. "Replacements," she explained. "Can't take toys away from kids and not give them new ones." Izar'la smiled. She was finding that she rather liked the half-orc druid.

Fortunately, they collected them all, eight more in total, and they stuffed the explosives in Izar'la's pack. This took them a few hours, but in the end, they were pleased that at least Rivington was safe. Afterwards, they decided to hurry to Sharness' Caress in the hopes of confronting Arfur Gregorio, and much to their surprise and great relief, it was then that they found themselves reunited with a vast majority of their friends.

Ben Golewits



Cinta Golewits



Marpha Golewits



Manip Nestor



Ulma



Cammie Odell



Chapter 10 - Consuming Wildfire

Dritar found him. He was sure of it. He found the hideout of the dreaded Dark Urge. Rina had been wrong. She hadn't been the only survivor of the hunt. Dritar had used his initial githyanki host to find a Flaming Fist soldier who he then subdued and took over. Afterwards, he integrated himself into the midst of the soldiers on Wyrms Crossing, and he had joined in on pursuing the nasty murderer. Down in the sewers, Dritar had fallen back, hiding in the shadows while the rest went into the trap-infested passage that blew to smithereens. He had seen Rina and Orin the Red escape with their lives. Both had fled.

But Dritar had not. Instead, he wandered the darkness of the sewers in a fearless manner. He was fresh for the fight that would come. He was ready to consume Ikraim with his savage power. 'The Dark Urge has NO idea who is hunting him. This will be just like it was in Grymforge. From one host to another until I don't need them anymore. I'll find this Ikraim, and I'll tear him to shreds and claim the Netherstone for myself.'

Wandering the sewers, however, took too long. He had been forced to revert to dragonborn form. Thus, he abandoned the Flaming Fist soldier and left his carcass on one of the sewer paths. Not long after, he found a roaming male human street rat, transformed into an intellect devourer again, and took him over as his new host.

And so, he found the hidden entrance. It had taken him a few hours, but he knew it had to be in the relative vicinity of where Ikraim had boobytrapped the tunnel. Sure enough, there it was. A moss-covered wall was crumbling in the lower left corner. There was a space to crawl through that was roughly two feet in diameter. Crouching down, Dritar saw that it continued on into darkness; a natural cavern beyond the brickwork of Baldur's Gate's sewers.

Expecting traps, Dritar carefully slid inside. He couldn't see in the dark, and he had the Flaming Fist's lantern. However, he didn't want to tip Ikraim off that he was approaching. And so, he cast Darkvision upon himself instead, quietly whispering the incantation so that it was barely audible.

He froze as soon as he was within. Almost immediately, he spotted the first trap. He frowned. He typically had no knowledge of disarming traps. It would be highly likely that he would accidentally set it off if he tried to do so.

But wait! His host knew how to do such things. He was even carrying thieves' tools. 'How fortuitous,' he thought. Then he pulled out the kit and began to work. Quietly and carefully, he disarmed trap after trap, working his way into the Dark Urge's domain.

Ikraim was sleeping, nestled against a back wall of the natural cavern he had turned into his den. All his weapons and equipment were within easy reach. The Netherstone was clearly able to be seen, for the Dark Urge held it tightly gripped in his hand.

Dritar smiled. 'Too easy.' He began to approach, moving as silent as a serpent.

"MASTER!" A voice suddenly cried out, booming loudly in the small six foot by ten foot by ten foot chamber. Turning to his right, Dritar spotted an undead, goblin-like creature in tattered butler's clothes wearing a top hat of sorts with the skeleton of a serpent snaking around its brim. He had a hooked beak for a nose, pointy ears jutting out the sides of his head, and blood red eyes. "Intruder! Danger!"

Dritar had no idea who the creature was or how dangerous he might be, but he decided to chance it that he was about as deadly as a familiar. And so, he sprang upon Ikraim before the white dragonborn had the opportunity to properly defend himself. Daggers flashed. He attempted to stab them into the Dark Urge's chest, but at the last second, Ikraim threw his right hand up.

Dritar flew backward, struck the ceiling, and tumbled to the floor. Rolling to his feet, he readied himself for another attack. 'How did he react so quickly. I...'

Dark tentacles, like shadows, snaked around Ikraim as he leapt to his feet, pack already on his back and weapons in hand. He snarled at Dritar as the goblin-like creature rushed to his side. Dritar then realized what had happened. The Dark Urge had called upon his illithid powers. They had shoved Dritar away with psionic force. 'But wasn't that an ability of one of the other classes?' thought the golden dragonborn. 'Fighter or warlock or something. Right? How...'

"I don't know who you are," said Ikraim as a sadistic smile touched the corners of his mouth, "but you have definitely chosen the wrong hole to crawl in."

'Ah. Classic mistake of most people,' thought the shadow druid. 'They talk too much.'

He dropped his Darkvision and conjured an Azer, a medium-sized fire elemental. It looked almost like a fiery dwarf. It appeared near Ikraim and immediately attacked him with its flaming warhammer. The blow glanced off the dodging white dragonborn's left hip, causing him no pain whatsoever. Dritar cursed inwardly. He could see that his enemy's scales had resisted the brunt of the attack. Still, the heat of the Azer's body alone seemed to affect him somewhat.

Ikrain retaliated unexpectedly. He shoved the goblin-like creature to the side and positioned himself so that both the Azer and Dritar were in his direct attack zone. He inhaled and exhaled, and a blast of cold tore into both. Fortunately, Dritar had realized what was about to happen, and so he had shielded his face and braced himself, staving off the worst effects.

‘Two can play that game, \$#@,’ Dritar thought, ‘and my Azer is immune to fire.’ He then cast Burning Hands, blasting everything in his view with a raging inferno. At the same time, the Azer struck hard, pounding the Dark Urge in the chest and pinning him against the wall.

When the flames cleared, the goblin-like butler was gone. Ikrain was alone. However, he completed his own spell, and a ray of sickness shot Dritar, tearing into his left shoulder. Poison lanced through his system. He lost his concentration, and the Azer vanished in a puff. The whole chamber went pitch black.

This lasted but a moment. Dritar recovered and summoned a flaming scimitar into his hand. The room lit back up. Ikrain was on the ceiling, upside down and to Dritar’s left. He closed the distance and took a swing. The Dark Urge easily dodged, slipped out a potion, and guzzled it down. His wounds closed.

Dritar swung again and missed. Ikrain cast Chill Touch. Dritar screamed as his host body died, and he sprang out as an intellect devourer. His flaming scimitar was snuffed out. Again, the chamber was pitch black, but at least he could detect his enemy with his blindsight. He slashed out with his claws, raking the side of the Dark Urge’s face. Ikrain roared in pain and anger. Then Dritar attempted to devour his enemy’s intellect.

Ikrain resisted. In reply, he cast Slow. Dritar could feel his body become sluggish. He cursed inwardly again. Slashing out, he drew blood, but he could no longer attempt to devour Ikrain’s intellect and use his claws at the same time. Besides that, the Dark Urge sped away towards the chamber’s only exit. Dritar tried to swipe at him as he retreated, but he couldn’t move fast enough.

‘You \$#@!’ Dritar thought. ‘\$#@Sing COWARD!’ He tried to pursue, but Ikrain managed to maintain a solid distance from his adversary. Out into the sewers they went. Ikrain went down the passage a short distance. Dritar guessed that he was totally blind, and yet he knew the way well enough that he was able to remain a good fifteen to twenty feet ahead long enough to drink another healing potion.

Fire flared to life. Ikrain cast Chromatic Orb, and it slammed into Dritar. It wasn’t a terrible blow, but it had illuminated the passage enough for the Dark Urge to get his bearings. He sped to a railing and used it to guide him along a metal bridge spanning a sewer river below. Dritar was furious. He couldn’t quite get close enough to use either his devour intellect or his claws. He was at the Dark Urge’s mercy. His enemy cast the spell again and retreated. This time, it hit harder and seared Dritar’s intellect devourer’s form painfully. He squealed as he fought to reach his foe. ‘I’m just too \$#@Sing slow!’

Then, realizing he wouldn’t last much longer anyway in that form, he decided to revert to his true self. As soon as he did, he started to cast Fireball, but because he was slowed down by Ikrain’s spell, he couldn’t clip it off fast enough.

Ikrain drank another healing potion. ‘Son of a \$#@!’ Dritar growled inwardly. ‘Survive THIS, \$#@!’ he thought as the fiery explosion consumed Ikrain and everything at the far end of the passage.

But Dritar was disappointed by the results. Not only did the Dark Urge survive the blast, but he was speeding up the wall and racing over the river back towards the other side. As he went, he cast Chromatic Orb yet again, this time blasting Dritar with a sphere of pure cold. Following that, as the last of the flames from the fireball died - for it had ignited multiple flammable objects on fire - he unfurled a scroll and cast Misty Step. In a flash, he bounded back into the hole leading into his lair.

‘He can’t have gone far into the hole,’ Dritar thought. ‘Another fireball should end him.’ He cast the spell. Ikrain used a scroll to cast Counterspell. A moment later, he popped out once more and cast Chill Touch. Finally, he retreated.

Dritar felt the icy touch of death on him, but it wasn’t enough by far to kill him. Still, it was harsh enough to prevent him from healing himself even if he used Cure Wounds; at least for a few seconds. He was running out of options. He had to keep Ikrain trapped within his hole until he could get there, but he was too slow. And so, he cast Flaming Sphere right inside the opening. That would certainly bar any escape.

It did not. After drinking a potion, Ikrain pulled out another Misty Step scroll and teleported beyond the hole, past the flaming sphere, and out into the sewer passage right next to Dritar just as he came within range. Before Dritar could respond, Ikrain extended his hand, and a spray of noxious green gas hit him right in the face. It even forced its way up into his nostrils.

Dritar panicked, choked and gagged as he staggered away by a pace. He found himself barely standing, and so he cast Cure Wounds, using as much magic as he could muster at one time. He knew he wouldn’t be able to cast another fireball, but at that point he was genuinely no longer confident that he was going to survive the encounter. As long as he remained slowed, Ikrain had quite the upper hand.

And the white dragonborn retreated, just as before, keeping well beyond Dritar's melee range. He then cast Chill Touch again in an attempt to try to keep Dritar from healing himself. This time, however, he failed to connect, giving Dritar the opportunity to retaliate.

'He might not expect what I have in store next for him,' the gold dragonborn thought as he let go of his concentration on his flaming sphere. Just within fifteen feet of Ikrain, Dritar transferred his wild shape energy into summoning his wildfire spirit. It lit up the passage, appearing right next to Ikrain and burning him. The spirit took the form of a flaming lizard, and it roared at him. It then teleported away in a burst of flames, appearing directly behind him. Ikrain wasn't fast enough to avoid the fiery teleportation, and once again he was scorched.

And yet, he maintained his concentration. Dritar remained slowed. Not only that, but Ikrain unleashed his final spell in his arsenal. It was literally all he had left in him besides the scrolls in his pack. He channeled what remained of his inner magic font, and he cast one last Chromatic Orb. The sphere of pure ice tore into Dritar's body. It hit him square in the chest, sucking all life out of his lungs and instantly disconnecting his brain from the rest of his flesh. His wildfire spirit snuffed out of existence, and he fell into a heap in the midst of the sewers.

Dritar's body lay twitching on the ground as the Dark Urge slowly approached. 'He's not dead,' Ikrain thought. 'I would have gone invisible if he was. He's holding on for dear life. Even now, he's hoping to recover and fight me.'

He sneered down at his golden scaled attacker. Then, without a word, he dropped onto his right knee, drew out his dagger, and he plunged it into Dritar's heart. Blood spewed all over him and the walkway, but he reveled in it. He then turned invisible as the blood continued to gush from the wound even as he withdrew his blade. 'Best to ensure he never comes back to life,' Ikrain thought, and he proceeded to carve out Dritar's vitals, displaying them in a bloody circle that he fashioned into a symbol of Bhaal, God of Murder.

But before he completed this task, he removed Dritar's brain. In particular, he extracted and captured the mind flayer parasite beneath the dragonborn's skull. He had learned how to acquire the tadpole's powers. He had extracted such from other True Souls in Baldur's Gate since his arrival. There hadn't been many, but it had been enough for him to acquire all new "Gifts of the Absolute".

'This one will be particularly useful,' he thought with a grin. 'It has the power to allow me to wild shape into an intellect devourer. How interesting. Such a useful ability, and one I will put to far better use than he did. Such a pity your soul is trapped within this creature, True Soul. Now your essence is mine, and you are my slave. I now dominate your will, and your knowledge is my knowledge.'

And with that, he channeled his will into the parasite, forcing it to become his thrall. Then he stuck it into his eye and felt it squirm up into his skull. Once there, it bored into his brain, connecting its soul and powers to his. And just as with the others before it, Ikrain dominated it. He controlled it. It was now HIS. He had consumed Dritar's wildshape abilities including his ability to summon a wildfire spirit. And Dritar was thus truly dead. His soul was now Ikrain's.

He stood, staring down at his handiwork. The carcass lay amidst the bloody symbol of Bhaal. His insides were removed. His brain was extracted. His soul was no longer free to be resurrected. It was done. Dritar was no more, and Ikrain had successfully killed yet another potential threat. It had been a close call at certain points. The first fireball had nearly ended him. If he hadn't managed to react in time to shield himself from the worst of the flames, he'd certainly have been Dritar's victim instead of the other way around.

But as usual, Ikrain had overcome even the deadliest of adversaries. He'd outsmarted him. He'd played against his opponent's weaknesses, and he'd thought outside the box. Even after all he'd been through that day, even after all the resources he'd expended already while fleeing Rina, Pona, and even Orin, he'd still managed to triumph in this deadly duel.

That's when he realized, 'This hideout is no longer secret or safe. Orin will certainly find me here. I need to find another, more suitable location. And I need to purchase more resources. I need to sleep and recover my spells.'

He checked his things. 'Three potions of invisibility. I'll use one. That should help me maneuver about hopefully without anyone noticing. Can't see, though. Maybe I should test out my new abilities.' Then he summoned a wildfire spirit, drank the potion, tossed the empty vial into the sewage below, and left the scene with his new fiery lizard leading the way.

As he went, he began to ponder his actions. 'I've now consumed the powers of six True Souls. I robbed a ranger of their ability to charge and push all creatures and objects in my path ten feet away. I've acquired a mind blast field from - I'm not even sure what that person was - which allows me to stun all creatures within five feet of me after emitting a shockwave of psionic energy around me. I've stolen the psionic pull ability away from a dead True Soul fighter. I've killed a True Soul wizard and acquired her reflective shell that deflects projectiles back to their source. I've even gained the power to repulse everything around me back twenty feet.'

‘And now... Wildfire! The ability to transform into an intellect devourer AND summon a wildfire spirit. Two for the price of one. With each new True Soul I hunt and kill, my powers increase. My chances of surviving and winning also increase.’

‘And it’s all thanks to you.’ He directed this thought towards the Emperor. ‘You taught me how to consume the abilities of these parasites.’

‘You are most welcome,’ the Emperor replied, his thoughts melding with Ikraïn’s. ‘Didn’t I tell you? The others would not listen. They would not be persuaded. They continue to fight me every step of the way. But you... You show true potential as maybe the only one who could actually defeat the Absolute and its Chosen. And if you continue along this path, it may even be possible that you could obliterate once and for all the cults of Bane and especially Bhaal. YOU may become the new God of Murder; even God of Death.’

‘Let’s face it,’ said Ikraïn. ‘If I succeed, I will become the new God Supreme. Nothing will stop me. I will BE the Absolute.’

‘ONLY if you can become powerful enough and are willing to embrace your FULL potential,’ said the Emperor.

Ikraïn paused for a moment. ‘And what do you gain by helping me? You have to know what I intend to do. Surely, you are hoping to make a grab for the Netherstones to take possession of the Absolute.’

The Emperor was silent for a few moments. Then he answered, ‘I will not hide my intentions from you. That would insult both of our intelligences. I desire the same thing that you do. I want to acquire the Netherstones and take possession of the Absolute. Alone. I do not wish to share this power with anyone. I want to rule MY way.’

‘I want to control it all, and I would see that the Grand Design of the Illithid comes to pass with ME as its Emperor. I would spread my kingdom throughout all the realms, enthralling and enslaving everything so that NONE could escape my rule.’

‘Just think of it. The entire universe under one united mind and one united authority. No more lawlessness. No more chaos. No more mindless fools causing rebellion and needless bloodshed. No more gods demanding worship and praise. No more systems of death and souls passing from one realm to another. All souls would be harvested and consumed by ME and all who serve as my extensions.’

‘So naturally, there will come a moment when I will try to kill you. I will try to take the Netherstones from you, consume your power, and use it all to take control of the Absolute. You must suspect that I will do this. You must suspect that I have thought this all through to its logical conclusion. My brain is far superior to yours and all of you who are infected. You are all pawns in my master scheme. This is real life chess, and I am the chessmaster. I know every move you will make long before you make it, and I have prepared it all so that I will come out on top.’

He fell silent for a few moments, allowing Ikraïn to process this. Then he added, ‘I already know when and where is the perfect moment to kill you and take it all away from you. I’ve already predicted it. I can see it in my mind’s eye. You and all the Afflicted will die, and I will harvest every last one of your tadpoles to grant me the strength to defeat the Absolute. It is unavoidable. It is inevitable. Even now, everything is proceeding exactly the way I planned it.’

Ikraïn laughed lightly. ‘Oh what a game we’re playing, eh? You and me and Bhaal and Bane and the Absolute... Who else has thrown their lot into this? Hmmm? I mean, I know Orin and Gortash are, as you say, pawns. They and Ketheric have played their parts so very perfectly. Haven’t they? But who else am I missing? Eh? Surely, you know. Won’t you let me in on it?’

The Emperor was silent again for a few more moments. ‘Revealing all secrets would be foolish, now wouldn’t it?’ he replied at last. ‘Controlling knowledge is like controlling a forest fire. Let the fire slip beyond the borders you have set for it, and it could rage beyond control.’

‘Wildfire,’ said Ikraïn, enjoying the imagery and finding it incredibly appropriate after having killed Dritar.

‘Precisely,’ said the Emperor. ‘And that’s when the fire can become truly destructive. You are becoming more and more powerful. Therefore, I need to ensure that you only learn what I want you to learn and when I want you to learn it. Otherwise, you might just slip your leash and become too powerful to control.’

‘Only fools think they can control wildfires,’ the Dark Urge told him.

‘You are not wrong,’ said the Emperor. ‘The question is, who is the fool who thinks they can control a wildfire? I am fully aware of your powers and abilities. I am also fully aware of ALL the enemies that seek to kill you and me and claim this power for their own. I know their abilities; strengths and weaknesses. You, on the other hand, do not. You have not factored any of it into your plans. Yet you somehow think that YOU can control the Absolute and ascend to godhood. I find that MOST amusing, especially because you think I’M the one who requires this advice.’

Ikraïn continued on, winding his way through the dark passages. The fiery lizard remained roughly fifteen feet ahead of him, floating above the walkways like a ghost. 'Well,' he finally said in reply to the Emperor's lecture, 'I suppose there's no need to continue that conversation. Either you're right or wrong. We won't know until everything plays out.'

'But you think you've outsmarted everyone. Good. In my experience - as far as I can remember, anyway - those who believe they've foreseen everything are usually the ones who overlook something very small that can undermine all they've worked so hard for. So you keep on believing you've got it all worked out. Meanwhile, I'm going to keep doing what I'm doing.'

The Emperor didn't reply after that.

Ikraïn reached a section of the sewers that was in Brampton, and once there he decided to make his way up and out. 'Best to find an abandoned shack to hide in for now,' he thought. 'Everyone is searching for me in the sewers.' And so, he clambered up the rusted ladder, shoved aside the manhole cover, and slid out into an alley. Nearby, a wretched-smelling bum rested against the wall of a business that formed the north side.

The Dark Urge shoved the manhole back into place and paused. Staring at the bum, he considered murdering him just to purge the Realms of his stench. 'Best not. I'd turn visible again much sooner. I'd rather stay invisible until I find my next refuge.' He then spun on his heel and hurried away, entering into the bustling streets of Baldur's Gate.

It wasn't long before he found what he was looking for. Boarded up windows and a massive padlock on the door indicated that whoever had lived there had been evicted. Overgrown bushes and vines twisting up the sides to the shutters let Ikraïn know that no one had been there for some time. Few would even give the small shack on the nondescript street a second thought. And so, he easily scaled the walls with his Boots of Spider Climb, and he dropped in through the chimney.

He froze as soon as his feet landed upon the base of the hearth. He could smell it. The air reeked of death; of a decaying corpse that had been left unattended for far too long. He crouched and surveyed the scene. Sure enough, there were trails and streaks of blood all over the living room. All of it was dried, but he followed the trail regardless to a bedroom just off the main room.

And there it was. A dwarf male had been horrifically and mercilessly butchered by some insane maniac who obviously enjoyed such psychotic activities. Ikraïn sneered. 'The killer enjoyed toying with her victim,' he thought, guessing correctly exactly who had committed this crime. 'Orin. No doubt she ambushed him and slit his vocal cords first so he couldn't make a lot of noise to alert someone of what was happening. Then she stabbed him with a debilitating wound to the knee to prevent him from running. The hamstring on the other foot was next so he'd be forced to crawl. Also quite painful.'

He could see her evil grin in his mind's eye as she stared with bloodlust down at the dwarf. He noted a hole in the floor in the living area near where she had obviously started the process. 'Next, she pinned him to the floor by stabbing his right leg all the way through. Sheer terror and agony - she drank it all in as she watched him squirm. Following that, she slashed his flailing hands so he would recoil and nurse them. No head injuries. She wanted him fully alert as she slowly tortured him to death.'

He shuttered. 'Dear Sister... Bhaal has taught you much since you have become his Chosen. You've learned. You've become better at the craft.'

But that's when he saw the frantic, clawing marks on the floor near where the knife hole was. He shook his head. 'And yet, you still haven't mastered the art. You couldn't help yourself. The thrill of his life snuffed out and the warmth of his blood on you, these things are like drugs to you. You needed your fix. You couldn't control yourself anymore. You couldn't slowly and meticulously see it through for the ultimate experience; the slow and prolonged ecstasy of it all. You had to end it - too quickly. Too quickly.'

Then, when she was finished, she dragged his body into the bedroom and displayed it in ritual fashion unto Bhaal. And that was the end of it. Afterwards, she simply boarded up the windows, stepped outside into the pitch blackness of the deepest moments of night, and she put a padlock on the door. That way, everyone would assume, as he had, that the previous tenant had been evicted. By the time the owner of the residence came around looking for the man - by the time the body was discovered - all evidence would be pretty much eliminated. The body would be so decayed that it would be too difficult to ascertain exactly what had happened, and there would be no raising of the dead or interrogating his corpse.

'Well, if this place belonged to one of her victims, she won't be back,' he thought. 'Therefore, it's perfect. I should be able to rest here without being disturbed by anyone. Of course, if anyone else like that dwarf huntress has a spell to hone in on the Netherstone, that could be a problem for me, but I can set up a few failsafes to ensure no one sneaks up on me while I sleep. I also have a few potions and scrolls left just in case.'

And with that, he grabbed knives and other items from the kitchen, and he set up traps at the base of the fireplace so that if anyone came down the chimney, like he did, they'd be in for a real surprise. He made it look like he was in the bedroom with the body so that if anyone managed to break in, they would assume he was in there. Meanwhile, he found the privy and wedged the door shut with several smaller knives.

Finally, he slid into the wash tub and made himself as comfortable as possible. He was just about to fall asleep when Sceleritas returned, materializing out of thin air. "Master, so good to see you alive and well. I was afraid for a moment that that golden dragonborn would be the death of you. Then where would we be?"

"In the Hells," Ikrain remarked, his tone making it clear he was annoyed.

"But he's dead," said the foul butler. "Once again, the Blood of Bhaal has triumphed."

"Is there something you want? I'm tired. I need to sleep to recover my spells. If you don't have anything productive to say or do, shut up and go away."

"Oh, but you WILL want to hear this. I HAVE come to grant you something you absolutely will not want to pass up," said the sniveling, undead-looking, goblin-like creature.

Ikrain opened an eye and narrowed it on him. "Don't beat around the bush. Out with it. What is it?"

Sceleritas beamed at him. "You have done it. You have redeemed yourself in the eyes of Bhaal. You have ascended to the next level, if you will. His favor shines upon you."

"I warned you," said Ikrain. "Spit it out."

"The Slayer!" Sceleritas announced with barely contained excitement. "Your escaping with the Netherstone, the murdering of all those Flaming Fists, nearly killing the halfling monk and dwarf ranger - as well as Orin herself, I might add - AND the victory over that golden dragonborn... All these have won you the right to once again possess the ability to transform into HIS glorious avatar. Yes, Master! Yes! I have been given permission and the privilege to bestow upon you the Avatar of Bhaal himself!"

This did cause Ikrain to sit bolt upright. "THE Slayer?" "Not only do I have all these illithid powers, but now I will have Bhaal's Avatar Form as well? If I learn to harness all this just right, I could literally become invincible."

"Yes, Master," said Sceleritas.

"What about Orin?"

"She can also use this ability," the butler replied. "Most regrettably. She IS still considered his Chosen. She will be rather difficult to kill even with this power."

"But it puts me on more of a level playing field with her," he said, thinking out loud. "Once I've rested and regained my spells and other abilities, I might even be able to face her and kill her without anyone else's help."

"Perhaps," said Sceleritas. "But there are many who are loyal to her, especially the doppelgangers."

"And what about you?" the dragonborn asked, watching carefully to see how the butler would respond.

Sceleritas was instantly full of hatred and disdain. It actually surprised Ikrain to see just how severe the creature's emotions became. "I have NO love for her. She... kills me frequently, up to three times a day, and she views me as absolutely worthless." He brightened. "I'd much prefer to be killed by you, Master. Oh please, Master. Kill me as often as you like."

Ikrain glowered at him. "If I find out you're lying, and you're actually setting me up, you will certainly wish for me to end your miserable existence. But I won't. I'll make sure I pin you up so you simply bleed out and suffer unspeakably forever."

Sceleritas giggled at this. "Oh, Master. You certainly do know how to treat your servant. Now you make me WANT to sabotage you, just so that you'll do exactly that."

"Well," said Ikrain, boring holes through him with his eyes. "Enough about that. Let's just do this so I can get some sleep."

"As you wish, Master," said the butler with delight, and he began to wave his hands in the air, move about as if in a dance, and chant.

A few moments later, power coursed into Ikrain's body. It surged through him like acid burning in his veins. He couldn't help himself, he gripped the sides of the tub with both hands, clenching it tightly as he let out a hellish roar. He knew he should have expected it, but he didn't. He thought he would simply receive the gift. He didn't think he would transform right then and there.

The tub cracked and shattered. His body stretched and grew. Two more arms tore out of his sides along with spikes and claws and a tail and horns. He became the size of a troll. His face split and reshaped. Blood sprayed the walls, ceiling, floor, tub and all. And then, as the transformation came to its end, he found himself standing there staring at a cracked, bloody mirror set into the wall five feet away.

He looked like a massive quasit with four arms, razor-sharp clawed hands, devil horns jutting out and back and two more angling out past his mouth like scimitars. Long, needle-like spikes ran along his spine down to the tip

of his tail like a mane of death. Horns like those atop his head jutted out backward from his elbows. His legs and feet were like that of a large hairless dog, but the claws on his toes were massive, like long knives or stilettos. His body was mostly red with a bone white underbelly which was only accentuated by the fact that he was covered in his own blood.

But it was his face that was truly horrifying. He had a semi-triangular snout with more teeth jutting inward from all sides than he could count. In particular, there were three large ones jutting upward from his lower jaw, sticking out beyond all the others. He also had two smaller horns, one from each cheek, that pointed in towards his nose. His eyes were like beady, black orbs set within dark sockets, and in the darkness of the small room, they seemed to vanish altogether.

He hungered for blood and carnage. He desired to bite people's heads off. He craved death and murder; the blood of his victims pouring down his body. It was bursting forth from within him. He simply could not contain it. He could not control it.

Sceleritas died in a flash with a scream. Ikraïn then forsook his new sanctuary and tore out of the bathroom and into the primary living area. From there, he burst through the wall facing the street, and in broad daylight, he savagely tore several horrified civilians into pieces. 'Gods!' he thought wildly. 'I have to get control over this. I have to somehow stop this. I'll have the entire city coming after me. \$#@ you, Sceleritas! You should have warned me.'

Several more citizens of Baldur's Gate died in a few seconds. There was blood everywhere, and the thrill of it was consuming Ikraïn from the inside out. Several Flaming Fist came to stop him. They died in moments. There was one of those mechanized units barreling down the street towards him. 'The Steel Watch!' he realized. 'Far more formidable.' But also not something with blood and guts. He sped away from it. He craved bloodshed, not simple mayhem and destruction.

More people died, and many more injured. Their screams and shrieks were like a symphony expertly composed and performed. 'A sewer grate!' he thought as he spotted one nearby. 'Escape into the sewers. You can kill whatever you want down there.'

No. There were more warm bodies above. A jolting crossbow bolt struck him. He convulsed in pain and roared in fury. The Steel Watcher was drawing closer, and its magical crossbow was not something to ignore. 'Well,' thought the Dark Urge. 'Time to put the fear of the Slayer into the citizens of Baldur's Gate. Not even their precious Steel Watch can save them.'

He bounded suddenly over a dozen feet, landed, and bounded again right onto the Steel Watch. Claws and teeth tore into the mechanized knight. In reply, the automaton pulled out a sword of some kind and began to stab at him and slash him. But the Slayer's body was thick and hard to injure. Even the Steel Watch's best strikes did little to weaken him.

And Ikraïn bit the head off the steel watch as well and spat it onto the ground. Then he reached into the neck hole and tore out its insides by the fistful. Sparks whirled. Everything sizzled. And then, without warning, the Steel Watcher exploded.

That did damage. Ikraïn found himself flying through the air down the street and up over a railing. The next thing he knew, he was plummeting head first towards the Chionthar. He didn't realize it, but he'd headed towards the southern edge of the district which was built high upon the clefts overlooking the river. When the Steel Watcher exploded, it sent him careening the last few feet over the side.

He splashed down. The cool waves engulfed him. At last, he was able to come to his senses. He managed to seize control of himself, and he forced himself to painfully return to his dragonborn form. Then he swam as hard as he could away from the area, heading west straight for the nearest dock. 'Idiot! Fool!' he thought as he struggled to hold his breath. He was exhausted, and his lungs were screaming for air. But he didn't want anyone to see him when he surfaced. He simply had to find a good location to hide.

Finally, he did. Not too far away, he came up out of the river between two fishing boats that were tethered to a pier. He gasped and choked, struggling just to hold on. For several moments, he thought he might lose consciousness. In the end, however, he managed to calm himself and regain his strength. As he looked up towards where he'd been at the top of the cliff, he spotted Flaming Fist moving about along with civilian witnesses.

He growled quietly. 'Orin and Gortash will certainly hear about this. They will know that I transformed into the Slayer. \$#@ it! I won't surprise them with it now.' Then he cursed Sceleritas again as he carefully pulled himself up and out onto the pier. Looking around, he was glad to see everyone was hard at work. No one seemed to notice what had transpired just east and above. They were going about their morning as if nothing was amiss.

Soaked and spent, Ikraïn sauntered back towards the city, acting as if he belonged there. He only acquired a few glances. Nothing more. One good thing had come from being tossed into the river. He was no longer covered in blood. 'But I need to find yet another hiding place,' he thought dismally.

“Ah, there you are,” a childish female voice said, capturing his attention. He stopped and looked to his right. There was a tiefling girl there, sitting on a crate and kicking her feet. Ikraïn thought he recognized her, but he couldn’t place where. She had strawberry blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail with twin braids framing her face. Her skin was pale with a purplish hue. She wore a light blue tunic with a lime green scarf around her neck, and she had smaller horns that jutted back and slightly to the sides.

“Do I know you?” he asked her.

She smiled. “Bone Man was right, as usual. He said you’d be coming this way this morning. I’m Arabella. My parents were Locke and Komira.” She grew sad at this. “They died in the Shadow Cursed Lands. I miss them.”

“I don’t have time for this.” He set out past her, hoping to get away from her and the docks as fast as he could.

She jumped down from the crate she’d been sitting on, and she followed on his heels. “Bone Man said you’d say that too. ‘Fate spins along as it should.’ That’s one of the things he likes to say.”

“Go away or die,” he snapped. “Or do both.”

She laughed. “Another perfectly predicted statement. But you know who the Emperor didn’t predict?” This caused Ikraïn to stop dead in his tracks. “Me.”

He spun and looked down at her, eyes piercing through to her soul. “Who is this Bone Man?”

“Bone Man is Bone Man,” said Arabella with a shrug. “He’s the one who brings people back from the dead for the Afflicted. You know them, right? Kaedyn, Vexir, Ryth-Shan...”

“I know them,” he snapped. “How do you know about the Emperor?”

“Bone Man,” she answered. “He knows a LOT of things. He also told me you’re SUPER dangerous. Said you’d kill some other dragonborn this morning and consume his powers. He was a shadow druid or something, I think. It’s hard to remember everything, but I’m working on it. Concentration and memory are important when learning how to harness my magic. I’m a sorceress, you know.”

Ikraïn leaned over so that he was face to face with her. His snout was only a few inches from her nose. She didn’t flinch. “If you know I’m dangerous, why are you bothering me?”

“Because Bone Man also said that even the most psychotic murderer CAN be redeemed,” she explained, completely unafraid of him. Ikraïn couldn’t help but marvel at her for a moment. He literally didn’t detect a shred of fear in her. “All they have to do is come to their senses and begin to fight back against the Urge.”

“Tell me, Durge, are you happy?” she asked after a moment.

“Durge? That’s not my name,” he replied as he righted himself. “Where did you come up with that?”

“Dark Urge,” she replied with a giggle. “It’s a play on words. Get it? You’re a murderer. Right? And what do people play when someone dies? A dirge. Thought it was fitting. You know? You are consumed by this dark urge that makes you want to murder people all because your grandfather or something was a psychopath. So you’ve left a trail of dirges behind you all because of your dark urge. Take the ‘D’ off of Dark and add it to Urge. Durge. See?”

“Don’t call me that,” he growled, but oddly enough, he couldn’t figure out why he didn’t just outright kill her.

She seemed put out by this. “Why not? It’s clever. Don’t you think? It’s certainly better than whatever it is you call yourself now. Bone Man said that’s not even your original name anyway.” She paused as if trying to remember something. “Was it one of your victim’s names? Crane, the bearded elf? Maybe? Or was Crane the hobgoblin?” She waved it aside. “I can’t remember. Anyway, shouldn’t you have a new name if you’re going to become someone new?”

“I’m not going to be someone new,” he said. “I’m going to be the same person I am now.”

“Hah!” she barked out a laugh. “That’s funny. You’ve been undergoing changes and mutations for weeks or months, ever since you got that thing put in your head. Bone Man said you’re just letting others lead you around by the nose like a dumb ox. Bhaal, the Emperor, some butler guy, your own murderous urges... When are you going to actually stop letting other things and people control you? When are you going to start ACTUALLY deciding for yourself; choosing your own path?”

“I AM deciding for myself.” He was getting angrier by the moment. “I have everything all worked out. Bah! I shouldn’t even be wasting my time with you. I have to get off the streets. I...”

“You need a place to hide and sleep so that creepy red lady doesn’t find you,” Arabella finished for him. “Right? You also don’t want the Afflicted finding you because you stole their stone. See? I told you. Bone Man knows all.” She gave the last statement a bit of drama and flare as she waved her hands out in front of her.

He grabbed her by the scarf and yanked her close to him once more. This, he realized too late, drew some unwanted attention to him. Others who were milling about were a bit outraged to see a large, white-scaled

dragonborn accosting a small tiefling girl. Nevertheless, he said, "Listen. I don't know what you're after, but leave me alone. Understand?"

"But I can help you," she said, once again unnerving him by her lack of fear. "My friends and I have a place for you to hide and get some sleep. They're a mercenary group - my friends, that is. Well, truth is, they are NOW a mercenary group. They call themselves the Four Masks. They were once mentally enslaved by Ethel, the hag of Moonhaven Swamp. They were saved by the Afflicted, and they helped us during the goblin attack on the druid grove. When we left that area, the Four Masks went with us, but when we were attacked by the cult in the Shadow Cursed Lands, they managed to escape and survive. They're here now, and Bone Man helped me find them. They're helping me, and we can help you."

"But why? Why are you wanting to help me?" he asked, releasing her. "If it's for the Netherstone..."

"I told you," she said, cutting him off. "It's really not about the stone or what not. It's about your redemption. Bone Man says that every person deserves an offer for redemption. Accept the offer and your past sins are forgiven. Reject the offer and your past sins remain and will only destroy you. Not only will you ruin your life here on the Material Plane, but you'll ruin your eternal life afterwards. No hope here and no hope forever, and all because you refuse to accept the offer of redemption."

"Sins are relative," he growled. "A sin to Bhaal, for example, is allowing someone like you to live. A sin to Helm would be to murder you."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Only evil people say such things. Sins are sins, stupid. Evil people sin without remorse. Good people strive to fight sin and to do good. Everyone knows that, deep down inside. You don't have to tell most people that murder is evil. Even evil people know murder is wrong, but they do it anyway and strive to convince people that it isn't wrong. 'It's all relative.' Yeah, right. They themselves know it is bad. Come on. Look me in the eye and tell me you ACTUALLY think murdering someone is good."

He blinked at her, stupefied that he was still having this conversation with her. Seeing that he wasn't answering, she continued. "Redemption is all about accepting that you are doing evil, and you stop doing it. Start doing good instead. Fight down the urges to do evil, and make yourself start doing good things even if you don't feel like it. You know, the more good you do, the easier it gets. I've been learning that a lot since... well... since my parents died."

"Bone Man said to follow the Weave. So that's what I'm doing. I'm following the Weave and it is taking me to all sorts of crazy places to experience all sorts of amazing things. And now, here YOU are. You're a sorcerer too. Right? I could learn a lot from you, if you'd teach me."

"I'm not taking you on as an apprentice," he told her firmly.

She shrugged. "Fine then. How 'bout this? I help you find a resting place, and me and the Four Masks protect you while you sleep. In return, I learn from you during the time we're together. See? I'm not asking much."

Ikraïn found himself actually considering it. 'But she has even admitted that she's friends with the Afflicted. She and these Four Masks are likely just going to steal the Netherstone and return it to my enemies as soon as I fall asleep. Best to keep going it alone. I should ditch her.'

'But she seems genuine. I don't know why, but I actually believe her. She doesn't seem to want the Netherstone at all.'

'But that makes no sense. She's manipulating you, fool! She's a tiefling thief. Remember? She told you who she was. The grove. The tiefling kids from the grove were a band of thieves. That's what the memories of the Afflicted revealed to me when we connected. You can't trust her. And why would you even want to? She's just some stupid tiefling girl. The ONLY person you can trust is yourself. That's how it has always been, and that's how it will always be.'

Arabella's expression grew soft. "Are you really happy, Durge? All this that you're doing, at the end of it all, what good does it do you? You have no friends to share life with. You have no fun. You have no joy. You have no peace. You're always running and hiding in fear. You're always striving and working yourself to death to gain more power - and for what? At the end of it all, even if you achieve everything you've ever hoped for, what good will it REALLY do you?"

'Kill her,' the urge within him commanded. 'End her now. Shut her up permanently. Annoying little \$#@\$!'

But he didn't. Instead, he considered her words; especially the part about 'letting other things and people control' him. After the conversation he'd had with the Emperor that very same morning, he couldn't help but find that her words resonated within him.

'Wildfire,' he thought. 'All this time, have I simply been a controlled fire? I'm thinking I'm in control and no one can stop me, but the truth is that I'm being led around by the nose like an ox? What if this IS my chance to break free? What if by going with this girl, I WILL be breaking through the boundaries others have set up for me?

Surely, none of them could have seen this coming. Surely, this girl is unexpected. The Emperor and Bhaal could not have foreseen her. Could they?’

‘Fool,’ he argued within himself. ‘Idiot fool. Did you not catch it? The girl is working for this Bone Man person - probably Withers, the Guardian of Tombs. She is HIS pawn. He is the same as the Emperor and Bhaal and everyone else who is vying for the Crown of Karsus and the Netherstones. He is using her to try to lull you into a false sense of security with different tactics.’

‘Redemption? Hah! I don’t NEED redemption. I will be THE God. I will ascend and rule over ALL, and every other god will die. I will murder them; every last one. Then I will make up the rules as to what is sin and what it means to be redeemed. Those who hold the power make all the rules. If I’m the One True God, I will determine what is “right and wrong” in this universe, and if anyone opposes MY version of right and wrong, I will utterly destroy them. No mercy. No second chances. What I say goes, and I will do whatever I want to whoever I want and whenever I want. If someone doesn’t like it, they die. Total obliteration. No hope of recovery or chances for “redemption.” No life after death. Just gone.’

‘THAT is how an “evil” supreme god is. I will call evil good and good evil. Love? Not needed. Consideration? Stupid. Respect? All respect will be given to me. Everyone else? Fend for yourselves. I don’t need anyone. I don’t need anything.’

‘That’s the problem with “good” people. They all think that everyone wants the same things. I don’t WANT love and companionship. I HATE people. I want them ALL to die. And when I’m God, I will take great delight in the suffering of all as I watch them dance around their miserable lives. And I will encourage my worshipers to utterly abuse and mistreat and murder everyone who dares to even consider love and compassion good.’

‘Oh yes! All the Realms will be worse than the Hells once I am God, and I will enjoy every last moment of it. No good. No hope. No love. No future. No joy. \$#@! I won’t even allow death to be an end to their pain. I will make it so people get murdered, brought back to life, and murdered again - forever and ever. Endless suffering for all but me.’

CRACK! Ikraim lost consciousness from a severe blow to the back of the head. Behind him stood Vengeance, the half-drow member of the Four Masks. She had a powerful looking warhammer in her hands that was now covered in blood. Her skin was gray, but she had an array of scars all over her face that were clearly visible. Her eyes were completely white, including her irises, which made it seem like she was blind. On the left side of her face and neck she had black tattoos that looked like birds in flight. Her white-blonde hair was parted to the left with a single long bang trailing down and braided in the front then pulled back into a low ponytail. She wore studded leather complete with gauntlets and boots that matched.

Arabella frowned at the unconscious form of Durge that lay at her feet. “Well, I tried,” she said sadly.

“You did,” said Vengeance as she looked around at those who were present in their area of the docks. No one was particularly caring that she’d just rendered the dragonborn unconscious. In fact, a few were nodding in approval. “But you could tell, couldn’t you? He was going to kill you. He’s beyond redemption. He’s too dangerous alive. One strike. I could finish him here. Let’s take the Netherstone and whatever else he has and get back to the hideout.” She gestured around her towards those on the docks. “As you can see, no one is really caring here. I think they’d actually give me a medal of valor for this.”

Arabella shook her head. “Bone Man said to plant the seeds of redemption in his head. Whether they take root and he accepts it or not, that’s up to him. Either way, we let him go and do what he’s going to do. It’s all a part of the bigger picture of fate, or something like that. Let’s take him back to the hideout and let Servitude close his wounds. We’ll then let him sleep and recover, and we’ll leave him with all his things including the stone. What he does next is all up to him. ‘Let the wildfire rage, if need be,’ Bone Man said.”

“As for us, if you and your friends are still willing, we need to find a different stone; the one the Weave is leading me to. It’s in the sewers. Are you still up for it?”

Vengeance nodded. “It’s the least we can do since we couldn’t protect your parents and people back in the Shadow Cursed Lands. And what does this stone do again?”

Arabella shrugged. “Beats me. Bone Man just said to follow the Weave and let it guide me. So that’s what I’m doing. I’ll find out what it does when I find it.”

Vengeance shrugged. “Well, the day’s awasting.” She stooped down, scooped up Durge, and slung him over her shoulder. “Let’s dump this creep, grab the others, and go find us a stone. Shall we?”

Arabella grinned. “Thank you. This really means a lot to me.”

Vengeance smiled back. “My pleasure.” Then the pair departed, making their way casually through the streets of Baldur’s Gate. In spite of the half-drow carrying a comatose white dragonborn sorcerer on her back, not a single person stopped them or questioned them.

Sceleritas Fel



Azer



Slayer Form



Arabella



Mask of Vengeance

