

Chapter 68 - Treachery on Spacedock

Lae'zel was the first to speak as she glared at Shadowheart who was sitting across from her in the gateway of the Emerald Grove. "You treacherous istik! How dare you keep secrets from us like that? That weapon you have in your pouch. Give it to me at once!"

Shadowheart was instantly defensive. "Why don't you shove it, Gith! I'm sick and tired of you. You nearly got us all killed." Then she turned towards Kaedyn and Vexir. "Didn't I try to warn you? NEVER trust a Gith. NEVER!"

"She's not wrong that you almost got us all killed," said Gale. He was no longer his usual upbeat self. "Like it or not, Lae'zel, you were totally wrong, and your mistake was almost the death of us. The gith have no intention of curing us other than by killing us."

Lae'zel was about to speak, but Wyll cut her off. "Why in all the Hells would you tell them where we were? A DRAGON came for us, Lae'zel. A DRAGON! You did the unthinkable. There is no forgiveness for what you did. You betrayed your companions. You betrayed your party members, and because of it, we were all very lucky to survive."

Ryth-Shan then took over. "Hey! Enough! There was no way we could have known that was going to happen."

"Who here knew that was going to happen?" asked Astarion with a hand raised. "Come on. This isn't a hard one. You know you all knew."

Ryth-Shan shot him a dirty look. "This was totally against githyanki protocol," he explained. "They were supposed to bring us to a creche for purification. They weren't supposed to try to smash our skulls in. It would be like trusting in a Tyrite precept and then having a bunch of Tyrites break that precept. It was completely out of line, and we couldn't have predicted it. The only reason you did was because you don't trust our kind." Then he looked at Vexir. "If it had been a group of dark elves, you would have been equally stunned."

"No I wouldn't, and I don't care," said Vexir. She stood, and her face portrayed her feelings more than her words. "Wyll is right. A FLIPPING DRAGON tried to eat me and smash me with its claws! It nearly did! And why? Because Lae'zel decided to tell it where we were."

"So, I am to blame for this?" asked Lae'zel, utterly appalled. "She steals a weapon of my people and hides it from us, and you are all attacking ME right now?" She gestured at Shadowheart crisply as she said this. "At least we know, now, why my people were chasing the nautiloid in the first place all over the bloody Hells! NONE of this would have happened if she hadn't stolen it in the first place. The ONLY way we can fix this now is for her to give me the weapon and for me to return it to my people. NOW! Vlaakith demands it, and I will NOT let you live if you keep it from me."

"Vlaakith can take a flying leap into the Hells herself," said Shadowheart as she prepared to fight tooth and nail against her. "I hope someone rams a githyanki silver sword through her \$#@ \$ phylactery so she can never respawn. I'll die a thousand deaths before I let you have this thing."

"Stand down, the both of you!" said Kaedyn sharply. "Everyone stop. Just stop. Like it or not, we're all bonded by these stupid tadpoles. We CAN'T let this tear us apart or we're all doomed."

Lae'zel fell silent, but she didn't stop glaring at Shadowheart with absolute hatred. She was really close to attacking. In fact, if it wasn't for the fact that she felt like she was going to fall over at any moment, she would have. Also, in the back of her mind, she knew there was a dragon still circling the skies looking for them. What good would it do to kill her and take the weapon? Voss and the dragon would just find her and kill her and take it for themselves, gaining all the glory. The sheer thought of that sickened her to no end. Everyone else fell silent too, for they all knew Kaedyn was right. As damaged as all their relationships were at that moment, for better or worse, they were stuck together. They were bonded and linked.

And so, Kaedyn continued. "Listen. Yes, it is true. Shadowheart took an obviously incredibly powerful githyanki weapon from the mind flayer ship. In my mind, no offense, but yay Shadowheart. Good for you." Lae'zel looked at him as if she was about to bite his head off literally. Shadowheart was shocked by his praise. He continued before either could say a word. "But! It would have been good for you to have told us about it. Lae'zel has a right to be upset about that. We all do. That's a major secret to keep that affects us all. Who knows what that thing does? Do you?"

He looked at Shadowheart who hung her head and avoided his eye contact. That was all the answer he needed. He looked at Lae'zel then, making it clear the question was directed at her too. She was much more abrasive. "No. I do not. That's exactly my point. She should have told us and..."

Kaedyn sharply cut her off. "So you are taking the kith'rak's word for it that it's a githy weapon. Yes?" he asked. "You are taking a kith'rak's word for it when that same kith'rak broke githyanki protocol and tried to kill you? Just think about that for a second."

Lae'zel then found herself unable to answer. He was right, and she knew it. She could not argue with him on that point.

"So, you are assuming that it is, in fact, a githyanki weapon when it could be the weapon of a mind flayer or an artifact of some god or goddess," said Kaedyn. "Who knows what the kith'rak would have done with it? Maybe he'd have even tried to kill Vlaakith with it."

This really hit home for Lae'zel. Her eyes went wide at the realization that Kaedyn was speaking all too true. If Kith'rak Voss had gotten his hands on the weapon, it would have been because of her. If he had used that weapon to even attack Vlaakith, it would have been her fault. Since he wasn't to be trusted, having broken githyanki protocol, it was a serious possibility. Why else would he go against Vlaakith's protocols unless he was going to betray Vlaakith herself!

"Shka'keth!" she cursed angrily. "This weapon must be powerful indeed for a kith'rak to betray his own queen's children. You are right. I have made a grave tactical error."

"He was acting ON Vlaakith's orders," said Shadowheart venomously. She was no longer hiding her pure hatred for Lae'zel and all githyanki in general. "Don't you get it? He said so himself. Fool!"

Lae'zel brandished her weapon, making it clear she was about to strike. "Bite your tongue, Istik, or I will bite it for you!"

Shadowheart had her weapons ready as well. "Go die in a hole, Toad!"

Kaedyn and Ryth-Shan put themselves between them. Vexir was on her feet to back up Shadowheart. The others tensed but held back, not involving themselves with either.

Lae'zel roared at Shadowheart but held back. "I will gut you endlessly for this insult," she told her, and she was shaking violently from the emotional stress.

Shadowheart gave her a sneer. "Try it and watch what happens."

"Stop!" Kaedyn snapped in her face.

At the same time, Ryth-Shan grabbed Lae'zel's and made her look at him. "Lae'zel! Lae'zel! Listen to me! We have to stop this right now. Please! I can't do this without you, and the last thing we need right now is the both of you trying to kill each other. We will all take sides, and the next thing you know we'll all be lying dead on the ground."

Wynari then drew their attention, helping to diffuse hostilities. "I heard it too," she said, absent-mindedly. She was reliving the moment. "Voss did say it. Didn't he? Somehow, it was like I was there. It was like I could hear his voice in my head. Did I not hear him say, 'If she has the weapon, collect it and report to me at once, on Vlaakith's command?'"

"He lies!" snapped Lae'zel, tears now running down her face. "I have devoted my LIFE to my queen. I WILL be her chosen. It is my due!"

And that was when she let it slip. In the heat of her anger, a buried memory was resurrected. Her deep, dark secret, or at least one of them, coursed into the minds of everyone gathered. They were looking through her eyes. This was not the flash of a single moment. An entire drama played out before them all.

They stood on the dock and watched as the astral ship came to port. It was githyanki-made, powered by a spelljamming helm which converted psionic energy into motion. This particular vessel was a large, astral brig that was heavily armed and could carry up to fifty or sixty passengers. "What are we receiving today?" they asked, but it was not them. It was Lae'zel.

Tekoran, her closest companion and friend, stood next to her. He was a powerful githyanki male; a battlemaster. He was of equal skill to her, and they were often rivals. They had grown up together, competing always. They would share their dreams with one another. Both wanted to be kith'rak and to ride on a red dragon someday. Each swore that they would get there before the other.

"The usual," said Tekoran, running his fingers through his brown hair which stood up like it had a mind of its own. "Aartuk tongues, H'Cathan doom radishes, some puffer steaks, and giant space hamster hocks."

"Ah," said Lae'zel. "My favorite. I shall have to acquire some of that for sure. There is nothing like giant space hamster hocks."

Then Lae'zel noticed something that didn't seem quite right. There was a red dragon that was escorting the ship, but it came in for a landing. That was against protocol. Standard procedure was that the dragon would continue to fly about beyond the docks to continue to protect the ship as it slid into port. Lae'zel was a strict, by-the-books woman. If someone didn't follow procedure, she noticed it at once. That was one of the reasons she was posted at the docks. She was good at spotting these kinds of things.

Lae'zel brought this to her partner's attention. "The dragon has landed. Odd. Don't you think?"

Tekoran shrugged. "He's probably tired from a long flight."

Lae'zel was not content, and she started off towards the beast and its rider. As she came up on its right side, she said, "Rider. Why do you not follow standard protocol? You should be out there, guarding the ship while it docks. You are leaving it exposed to potential attack."

The rider turned his head towards her. What she saw was another detail that twisted her gut into knots. It wasn't right. The rider had a helmet on that was not standard. It was metal with a faceplate that completely hid the individual's features. She instinctively put her hand on her sword as the male said, "Forgive me. My mount is tired. We ran into trouble near Dragon Rock."

The vessel drew ever closer to docking. Lae'zel continued to eye the dragon and rider suspiciously while Tekoran seemed to be looking around as if bored. "What happened?" asked Lae'zel.

"Sha'sal Khou," he replied. This was the name of a secret organization of renegade gith. They sought to reunite the race by overthrowing Vlaakith and setting up their leader, Zetch'r'r, as warlord. They believed that the gith's legacy was of conquest. "They attacked us."

Lae'zel cocked her head to the side. "Attacked? They are not usually so bold. They typically work with stealth and subterfuge, working undercover to defuse tensions between the githyanki and githzerai. This doesn't make sense."

That was when the red dragon's wing fanned out a bit, and all at once Lae'zel recognized the ghaik device attached to it, just under the fold. "Ghaik!" she cried, and her sword flashed into her hand. "Sound the alarm!"

The dragon's wing swung out at her and Tekoran, bashing them and sending them flying. They crashed into some crates, dazed and confused. Then, the dragon roared and began to breathe fire at the nearest gith. All chaos broke loose.

Lae'zel and Tekoran were on their feet. "We have to stop that thing," said Tekoran. Then he ran towards it with greatsword in hand. There were many others now that were attempting to charge the beast, and alarms were sounding everywhere.

Lae'zel, however, was more concerned about the ship coming to port. "If the dragon is being controlled by a ghaik device clipped to his wing, then that ship must be crawling with them as well. Tsk'va! It's an invasion. We absolutely cannot allow that ship to dock."

Then an idea came to her. Tekoran and others were running to attack the dragon. They were not aware of the device on the wing. If she could get it off, the dragon's mind would likely be free. "What new devilish device is that anyway?" she wondered as she ran towards the dragon's right flank. "I swear, they are coming up with new devices daily. How is it controlling the mind by being clipped on the right wing - and a DRAGON no less?" It took a great deal to control the mind of a dragon.

Those answers would have to come later. At that moment, she had to focus on the task at hand. She raced along the dragon's side as it torched and bashed those on the dock. Even with their combined strength, the monster was more than a match for them. It's rider was also aiding it, healing it at every turn. Obviously, the person was not a ghaik. He didn't have any room for tentacles. No. He must have been a thrall or someone who was infected who hadn't turned yet.

Lae'zel reached the area where the device was attached. She used Misty Step to spring up to the wing. She then brought her sword down on the device before the dragon even knew she was there. It spun its head around to bite her, but with a second swing of her sword with both hands, the device split in two.

It sparked, and magical energy sprayed out of it, temporarily engulfing her. She screamed in pain as everything went black. The last thing she remembered was Tekoran jumping up on the wing to join her. He barely caught her as she fell towards the ground. Then the dragon thundered over them and charged at the ghaik ship. She barely remembered it in flames as the dragon tore it apart in its rage.

The scene shifted. Lae'zel was kneeling before Lokratha, a kith'rak of considerable power and one of Vlaakith's generals. Tekoran was kneeling next to her. "For the service you have done," said Lokratha, holding out a silver sword before him, "I grant to you the title of Kith'rak. You are now considered the chosen of Vlaakith, Tekoran. Rise and accept your silver sword. Today, you will be bonded to a red dragon as your mount."

Lae'zel looked up in shock and disbelief. "What? Honored Kith'rak. Why has Tekoran received this honor? Why have I not earned it?"

Lokratha glared down at her with contempt. "How dare you ask such a question, Child? And what, exactly, did YOU do during the ghaik raid? If not for Tekoran, who requested that you should have the honor of joining him during this moment, you would not even be here right now. He destroyed the ghaik mind control device on the dragon's wing. You were rendered unconscious almost immediately. If Tekoran had not freed the red dragon and had not led the attack against the astral ship, Spacedock would have been doomed. You'd be dead."

Lae'zel was outraged. "Who told you such lies? I was the one who spotted the ghaik device. I destroyed it. It was MY victory. Tekoran would not have even approached the dragon. I was the one who noticed the deception."

Tekoran drew his new blade and slashed her across the chest with the tip. She fell backward to the floor, grimacing in pain. "How DARE you take credit for something I did?" he said. "This is a great offense. If not for me showing you mercy right now, you'd be dead. I should have you cut to pieces."

Then he turned to those present. "Was I not seen rescuing her from the dragon's wing as the device fell to the ground? All of the witnesses saw that it was I who did it, not her. The dragon went into a rage and would have killed her had it not been for me. I swear on Vlaakith herself that I destroyed the device and guided the dragon to kill his rider and then attack the ship. She did nothing but faint."

Lae'zel had never felt so betrayed. She had never felt so wronged. "Liar!" She charged at him to kill him, but she was struck from behind by Lokratha. When she awoke, she found that she was disgraced. Everyone praised Tekoran for his actions; HER actions. No one believed her. They all thought that she was just jealous of his deeds and trying to hide her own failures.

Every one of her companions could feel the pain in her soul from that event. They all felt her bitterness. Lae'zel was so full of hate that she plotted her revenge. She would become a kith'rak. She would prove she was better than all of them. She would do it the right way. She would not lie. She would not claim someone else's deeds as her own. And Tekoran would die by her hand.

And so he did. It was the most vile and despicable act she had ever committed. She set a trap for him. Then she murdered him in cold blood. She came at him from behind and ran her blade into his back before he even knew she was there. "For your treachery, Tekoran, may you rot in the Nine Hells forever!" she hissed in his ear. Then she tossed his body off the asteroid and out into space.

After that, she stowed away aboard an astral ship. It was one bound for a raid on a mind flayer vessel. She would prove herself. She was determined. Little did she know, but it was THE nautiloid. She boarded with the others. Many died around her as she fought her way through. She had no idea why it was so special, but there were so many githyanki fighting their way through it. There were so many ghaik and their loyal minions. She could hardly believe it.

But she made a careless mistake. They captured her... just as they captured all of them... and infected her... and them...

Chapter 69 - Starting From Scratch

The memory ended just as quickly as it had taken over. Lae'zel shook herself and blinked rapidly, as they all did. "I used to be so much stronger; so much more skilled," she told them as she held her head. "Whatever they did to me on that ship, it's like I had all my skills and abilities stripped from me. I was good enough to become kith'rak. Now..." She looked at her hands as if she could hardly believe how weak they were.

"Back to square one," Gale finished for her. "I think we were all reluctant to talk about it before. I certainly didn't want anyone to know I'd been utterly stripped of my power. I am the same. I was a powerful mage. After the tadpole, now I am back to being like a young apprentice barely able to cast Firebolt."

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Seems true for all of us. I just recently had a skill return to me that I used to use all the time; simple tricks to help coordinate with my animal companions."

"I was able to transform into a polar bear," said Wynari sadly. "I could also become a bird and fly."

"I was the Blade of Frontiers," said Wyll. "I became a renowned hero."

Vexir now looked wistful. "Starting over has sucked," she said. "But we will get back to where we were in no time. I already feel much stronger than when we crashed on the beach, and we seem to be sharing experiences. As you increase in strength and knowledge and such, so do I; so do we all."

"But now that we're being totally open," said Gale, "has anyone considered the possibility that we are not even ourselves anymore?" Everyone fell silent around him. The weight of his question was simply too heavy. He, however, continued. "What if we ARE the tadpoles? We were all once powerful people. Now, after the infection, we are not. It is as if we are newborn adventurers starting over from scratch; as if we ARE the thing inside us; newborns."

"No," said Vexir. "Doesn't fully make sense. The thing inside us has taken the form of the Dream Lover. It was courting us. So, why would it be the Dream Lover AND us if it IS us? I think it must be something else."

Gale nodded. "Well, I guess that does make sense. That actually is a relief to me. I was growing more and more worried that this theory of mine might be true. I suddenly found myself asking the question, 'Who am I?'"

"This whole thing could be about that stupid weapon," Lae'zel muttered, changing the subject back to the device Shadowheart still had in her pouch.

Vexir closed her eyes, struggling to respond. She was still upset about what had happened; particularly how Lae'zel had betrayed their location to the kith'rak. This was only made worse by the fact that her body was still quite sore from when the dragon had smacked her around. "We can work on trying to figure that out later. Right now, Lae'zel, I need to know that you aren't going to do what you did today ever again. We need to know that we can trust you to protect us, not turn on us. You can't be giving away our secrets and such to others; even your own kin. You can't even be sure you can trust any of them at this point. They tried to kill you."

Lae'zel looked at her for a moment and then looked away. There was guilt there, but her anger and bitterness pushed it down. "What choice do we have?" she muttered.

"Unfortunately, we have no choice. Do we?" said Vexir. "Think about it, all of you. Let's say we tell Lae'zel here to leave our party and go it alone. Wherever she goes, she will still know where we are; just as she knew where Shadowheart was when she was talking to the gith. The same is true for all of us. Wherever we go, everyone else in the party will know where we went."

"So, whether we trust one another or not, and whether we share all of our secrets with one another or not, it is better for us to remain as a party than to let anyone roam about alone," Vexir concluded. "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer. Right?"

The silence was deafening. Finally, Kaedyn said, "Okay. So, what do we do now? Where do we go from here?"

"I have found this on Baretha, the leader of the githyanki who the kith'rak left to kill us," said Ryth-Shan as he held up a disc of some kind with gemstones and runes. "I don't recognize it. Do you?" He held it out for Lae'zel to see.

"A githyanki slate!" she cried. She was both excited and elated. "Give it here." She snatched it from him and examined it feverishly. "Tir'su markings. Could this be?" Magical energy suddenly coursed through the slate to her. Everyone's bodies buzzed in resonance. A diagram glowed before them. Its meaning was beyond comprehension to all but Lae'zel. "It is a map. Zorru did not lie. A creche lies beyond the mountain pass."

"Oh yay!" said Astarion sarcastically. "Let's hurry there now and get purified. I'm sure the gith knight will be perfectly fine with it... and all the others too... AND the dragon. Let's not forget him. Mustn't forget him."

Lae'zel shot him a dirty look but said nothing.

"I say we wait for the dragon to give up on his search for us," said Wyll. "Then we return to the camp and call it a day. I, for one, am done. We can always pick up where we left off tomorrow."

Vexir grunted. "Sazza will likely have returned to the goblin camp by now. It is highly unlikely I will be able to use her like I intended. She'll inform Minthara about us, and our easy way into the camp will be taken from us."

"And the goblins will now know about the grove and the secret tunnels," added Wynari. "That sucks."

"We'll just have to stealth it, I guess," said Astarion. "Well. Some of us anyway."

"I agree with Wyll," said Kaedyn. "That encounter with the githyanki has left me exhausted. I don't think we have a choice. Like it or not, we need to rest."

And with that, the decision was made. No one argued. Tadpole or no, Minthara knowing about the grove's location or not, they needed some serious rest. So, they spent most of the day at the Emerald Grove. They sold all of their equipment that they picked up along the way and equipped some of the better gear they had taken from the githyanki. Kaedyn now had Baretha's Psionic Greatsword. Ryth-Shan took the gith archer's Psionic Longbow. Shadowheart took the healer's Psionic Mace, and Wynari took the Poisoned Scimitar.

With the money they acquired from selling all the excess gear, they managed to buy a few more greater healing potions. That was all they could afford. Then they checked with the tiefling lookouts and learned that the dragon was no longer in the skies. So they risked heading back to their camp.

When they arrived, they found the Guardian of Tombs still there. Most of the party ignored him, but Ryth-Shan approached him quietly when no one was looking. "Tell me," he said to the undead lich. "Can you bring an animal back to life? You said that you could bring one of our comrades back to life if they died; for a price. You said it was a matter of coin. I believe it was two hundred. Yes?"

The Guardian of Tombs regarded him without emotion. "Indeed. I can resurrect even the life of an animal companion."

Ryth-Shan then took out two hundred gold. "I have an animal companion who died. I ordered him to help me in battle, and he did. He was slain. His name is Scratch. Please. Bring him back." He then handed the Guardian of Tombs the two hundred gold.

The Guardian took it. "Where is the animal?"

Ryth-Shan reached into his magic pocket and pulled out Scratch. While they were looting the githyanki corpses, Ryth-Shan decided to take the dog with him. He discovered that the magic pockets could even hold something as large as a body. He had remembered the Guardian's words, and he hoped it would be true for his new friend. He thought about Bomrush, but it was probably too late for him by that point. He also didn't have the money to resurrect two animals. As it was, he feared his companions would be angry with him for bringing the dog back. He only hoped Scratch wouldn't be some sort of zombie dog. He also hoped the dog wouldn't be mad for bringing him back. He knew Scratch wanted to go be with his master, but he couldn't bring himself to just let the animal go. Something inside him demanded that he at least try to bring him back.

The Guardian took Scratch and walked over to a flat stone nearby. He then performed a strange ritual. As he did, the others at the camp took notice. They approached to observe. The Guardian danced about, magic swirling about him. Then, all at once, after about ten minutes went by, the magic poured into Scratch. The bloody dog suddenly sat up, totally unaware that he had died.

Ryth-Shan was totally relieved. Scratch was alive and well. He was not some zombie dog. He rushed up to him and petted him happily. Scratch wagged his tail happily. He seemed totally fine now. "I'm so sorry," said Ryth-Shan to him. "I never should have ordered you to attack her. I'll have to be more careful from now on."

"I don't even know what you're talking about," said Scratch in reply, "but I'm happy you're happy." After all, Ryth-Shan did not have Speak with Animals enabled, so neither dog nor person could understand one another.

Then, a thought came to Ryth-Shan. He turned to Wynari. "Can you ask him how he's doing? I just want to make sure he's okay and all."

Wynari did so, and she learned that Scratch was, in fact, completely well. He also had no idea what had happened to him. In his mind, he'd simply been sleeping. He barely remembered fighting the gith at all. To him, it was just a nightmare that he vaguely remembered. Ryth-Shan was beyond relieved to hear it. He thanked the Guardian of Tombs and Wynari, and then he led Scratch around the camp so he could get familiar with it. Wynari joined him, helping to communicate between them so they could be better acquainted.

And so it was that the fourth day came to an end as the party rested at camp. They asked Zriek to remain perched on the ruins above them to keep watch for the dragon, and so they were able to relax a bit. Even if the dragon showed up, they felt that they could probably make it to the rune near the crypt's lower entrance before it got them. Then they could do as they did before and port around from place to place to escape.

This gave them peace of mind, and for the remainder of the evening, they decided to forget their troubles and enjoy one another's company.

Chapter 70 - Controlling Emotions

During the evening, as everyone was relaxing at camp, there was a point when they all wandered off to be alone with their own thoughts. Kaedyn saw Vexir standing down by the river off to the south near the entranceway. She was staring across the horizon seemingly lost in thought. So, he decided to check on her to see how she was doing.

"You all right?" he asked as he approached.

She didn't even look at him. "I feel different," she confessed. "I don't know if it's this headband that increases my intelligence or if it's the tadpole or just everything we've been through in just a few days. Who knows? Maybe it's everything combined."

She looked at him as he stood next to her. "Gale making that comment about us no longer even being us but the tadpole is messing with my head," she said. "I don't FEEL like my old self, so I FEEL like I'm no longer me. Does that make sense?"

"Having a dragon trying to eat you can change a person," he replied. "And we've been through a lot in just the last few days. But more than that, we're all connected. Naturally, that's going to also mess with your mind. You are connected to quite the range of people. You have Ryth-Shan in your head now, caring almost more about animals than us. You have Lae'zel in your head, obsessed with a lich woman and with proving herself to it. There's Shadowheart, a woman who worships a goddess of darkness and trickery who has been keeping a secret weapon from us. Astarion is a vampire spawn who sucks blood and loves chaos. He's a thief who steals more than he breathes. I'm not even sure how I know that. Gale is an intellectual who is constantly assessing and plotting and scheming and, well, frankly, manipulating. He seems good, but I sense something darker and more sinister about him beneath the surface. I like Wyll, and I can feel it in my soul. He wants to be a hero and wants to save lives and do good, but he's bound to a demoness."

She nodded. "Mizora. We are even bound to a devil already because we are bound to Wyll."

"Or did they implant her with a parasite as well?" asked Kaedyn. "It could be that she is also one of us. In fact, I think she is."

"She is desperate and afraid," said Vexir. "Can you feel it?"

Kaedyn nodded. "I wonder where she is."

Vexir glanced over at where Wyll was. He sat alone away from the main campfire where Gale was.

"Maybe you should talk to him; see if you can find out more about her. It might be good for us to know more about the demoness that we could all be tied to. But you are right. Being connected to all of these people, it has to have a substantial impact on our individuality. We are going to have to fight to retain some semblance of ourselves. Hells! I can feel it. Everything we say, they're listening."

He fell silent, his mind working to process it all. "You and I should talk to the others and learn more about them. You are closer to Astarion and Shadowheart than anyone else, I think."

She laughed lightly at this. "You have definitely done a better job making friends than I have. So, now I have to ask, 'Who has it better; you or me?'"

He smiled. "You know? You're right. I've worked really hard to try to keep this group together while you've just not cared. Now, I have to be the one to talk to everyone. You only have to talk to two. That's not fair."

She laughed again. It was nice to hear her laugh. "No good deed goes unpunished, you know. That's a fact. Well. Good luck." She then turned with a pleasant smile on her face, and she headed off towards Astarion who was hidden from view in his new, favorite spot in the remnant of the room.

Kaedyn stood there a moment longer. Then, he turned and headed towards where Gale was. He decided he'd talk to him first. He was the only one left standing in front of the campfire. As he approached, Gale said, "Go to Hell." He didn't even turn around as he said this, but he just kept looking into the fire.

Kaedyn stopped short. "Pardon me?" he said, a bit caught off guard.

Gale looked over his shoulder with a grin and then turned to face him. "'Go to Hell'. An everyday expression; so trivial it's almost meaningless. But we've seen Hell. It's real, and it isn't trivial." He shook his head as he said this. There was a deep concern that weighed on him. Kaedyn could feel it.

"What's on your mind, Gale?" he asked.

"Devils, dragons, mind flayers - oh my!" he replied. "They used to be abstracts; pictures on a piece of paper. What a difference a day makes! Now, we have tadpoles slithering through our heads like carnivorous foeti. That's not abstract, and we're running out of options for a cure. The githyanki can no longer be trusted to help us. We've found the creche, but they'll likely kill us if we go there. The druids can't help us at all. This Halsin fellow is our only hope there, and it is a slim one. He's been captured by goblins for over a month now. He's probably been turned into ogre food."

"So what options do we have left?" he asked. "Some old woman we met in the tiefling camp? Maybe. There're wizards and healers in Baldur's Gate. They MIGHT help us. But again, that's only a maybe. Our situation is looking rather bleak."

Kaedyn took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm not too worried. I have faith that Tyr will not abandon us. We'll find someone who can help us."

Gale grinned knowingly. "You can't hide things from us now, you know," he replied. "And you shouldn't lie to yourself either. Look deep within yourself, Kaedyn. You have faith in Tyr, but you also have doubts. It's okay to admit it. You have doubts and fears that Tyr will continue to save you and protect you; that he'll bring you through this. Who wouldn't; especially after everything we've been through?"

Kaedyn looked down at his feet and nodded. "You're right, of course." Then he looked back up at Gale. "Still, I have learned that it doesn't do any good to admit such things. I don't say that I have faith in Tyr because I have no doubts. I say that I have faith because I choose to have faith in Tyr in spite of my doubts. If I confess my doubts, I begin to doubt more. If I proclaim my faith, it builds me up and strengthens my faith."

"Words are powerful," said Kaedyn. "If we beat ourselves up with our words, we begin to feel beat up and discouraged. If we build ourselves up with our words, we begin to feel empowered and capable of handling just about anything. Feelings are fickle. If we let them rule us and dictate to us who we are, we will be fickle also. One minute, we feel happy and the next sad. We are like waves in the ocean. If we just let the waves carry us, we will be tossed about and ruled by our emotions. However, if we determine that we aren't going to let our emotions rule us, we can be like a sea-going vessel, navigating the waters and going wherever WE decide to go."

"So, I can either let fear and doubt, which I feel, rule what I say and do," said Kaedyn, "or I can proclaim what I want to say and do and set my mind to follow through. I can fight against the waves of my emotions and be who I decide to be. That is courage. Courage isn't an absence of fear. It is acting in spite of it."

"Therefore, I am not lying when I say I have faith in Tyr," Kaedyn concluded. "I am proclaiming it so that it will be true regardless of doubt. Like courage, I can have faith in spite of doubt and fear. I am stating it so that I have a banner to follow. I might have doubts, but I will say I have faith so that I can see my faith before me and I can follow it."

Gale seemed impressed by this. "Hmmm. Once again, I'm impressed. You are rather wise, My Friend. Perhaps you are the wisest of all of us... Perhaps."

Then, all at once, it seemed that his mind had jumped onto an entirely different train. "Speaking of being impressed..." he said with a wide grin. "How did you enjoy my deer stew this evening? Old family recipe."

Kaedyn was taken aback. "I'm sorry. What?"

Gale chuckled. "Sorry. My mind is always switching directions. It is like the wind; here one moment and gone the next. I have a valid reason for asking. I promise. So, tell me. How was dinner?"

Kaedyn shrugged. "It was delicious."

Gale chuckled again. "You didn't sound too convincing, but good. I tend to season it with spices from Kara-Tur, but given what's available to us, good old rosemary had to see us through. Not that I mean to regale you with my culinary exploits. There's er... Well, there's actually something quite different I'd like to discuss."

"By all means," said Kaedyn.

Gale now seemed reluctant to continue. Nevertheless, he forced himself. "It's like you said just a few moments ago. I am deciding to act in spite of my fears. We've been travelling together for a while now, and during those travels I've been observing you. I want you to know that I like what I see. The way you have handled our party, how you defused conflicts, how you defused the tension between Zevlor and Aradin, how you saved Arabella... In short: I've grown to trust you."

Kaedyn felt honored, and it showed. "That's very gratifying to hear," he replied.

Worry plagued Gale's features then. "Now I need you to place your trust in me. Our journey together is bound to last a while still. As such, I feel compelled to speak; especially after our most recent encounter and near-death experiences at the hands of the githyanki. I say this because there's something I desperately need, but while I'll tell you what that something is, I won't tell you why. Not yet. Hopefully, the wee one won't betray me and share it all with you." He pointed to his head.

Then he folded his arms and looked off into the night. He was lost once more in his own thoughts. "I have to ask you to agree to this before carrying on with this conversation. Hopefully, the others will as well."

Kaedyn was eager to discover what he felt he needed to share. So, he agreed to it without hesitation. "Very well. I agree."

Gale was visibly relieved. "Thank you! I see I did well to trust you. Now, to the matter at hand. You see, I have a... condition; a condition different from the tadpole, but just as deadly. Maybe even more so. The only way

to 'appease' said condition is for me to take powerful magical artifacts and absorb the Weave inside. It's been days since I last consumed an artifact, before we were abducted. It is time."

Kaedyn tilted his head back, a sign that he had just received a revelation. "THAT'S what happened back there during the githyanki fight," he said. "You said that if you died, it would be catastrophic. You were dying, and that magical energy was rippling out of you."

"Correct," said Gale. He was quite serious now. It was clear to Kaedyn that this was no laughing matter at all. Gale's usual, joking self was gone. "The longer I go without consuming an artifact, the more unstable I become. The more injury I sustain, the more unstable I become. Put those together and..."

"And we all die," Kaedyn concluded. "I must say, I didn't fully believe you before. I'm sorry. I thought you were maybe exaggerating. I can see, now, that you were not."

Gale nodded. "Indeed. So, as I said. It is time. And by that, I mean it's imperative that I find and consume powerful strands of Weave at the earliest possible juncture."

"Where are we supposed to find the kinds of artifacts you need?" asked Kaedyn.

He forced a grin on his face. "As luck would have it, Faerun is full of them, though I do feel obliged to point out that items of power tend to be in the hands of the powerful. There will be danger involved, or great cost."

Kaedyn snorted. "Danger? Hah! After everything we've been through? I can't imagine it could get much more dangerous."

Again, Gale seemed relieved and pleased. "Good. A bit of boldness and levity will serve us well. I know the allure these artifacts hold. I understand their value and their power. I obtained this condition in Waterdeep. Nothing there comes cheap. All this to say: I understand the sacrifice I ask of you; of everyone here. I hope I can count on you."

Kaedyn nodded. Then, he decided to draw out his Dragon's Grasp Handaxe. Now that he had the Psionic Greatsword, he wasn't sure he'd need the handaxe anymore. "Would this work?" he asked.

Gale was thoroughly pleased. "My friend, you have no idea what this means to me. May I?"

Kaedyn handed it to him. Then Gale pressed the weapon to his chest. Suddenly, a swirling vortex of purple energy lit up his entire torso. He looked like he was experiencing great pain. Everyone in the camp looked over at him, curious to see for themselves what was happening. The purple magic consumed the axe, and it completely vanished. Then, it was over.

Gale staggered. "Thank you," he gasped. "I can feel the storm abating." He then returned to his usual self. He seemed to be more at ease. "Yes, this will keep my condition in check - for a precious while."

"How long will that precious while last?" asked Kaedyn.

"It's hard to predict the effect any given artifact has," said Gale, "but my condition is hardly a patient one. Rather soon, I will likely feel it stir again - like a distant thunder sending tremors through the soul. I will need to consume another artifact before the lightning strikes. There's no choice but to find more."

He then changed his tone and stance, signalling he was quite done with their conversation. It was obvious he wanted to be alone. "In the meantime, my thanks again." And with that, he bowed and walked away down to the river.

Chapter 71 - Heroes Own Their Mistakes

Wyll saw Gale leave, and he chose to approach Kaedyn first. "I know you've got questions, but let me ask you one first," he said. As was typical with Wyll, he was not afraid to take a direct approach.

Kaedyn nodded. "All right. Go ahead."

"You ever want something so bad, you'd stop at nothing to get it?" he asked.

Kaedyn smiled. "Of course. Haven't we all?"

Wyll nodded. "Then I reckon you'll understand. Just keep that in mind as we discuss everything. Okay?"

"Sure," said Kaedyn. "So, what's all this about with Spike and your hatred for goblins?" Although he hadn't been there, he still knew everything that had happened. It was as if he had the memory of being there, even though he hadn't actually experienced it.

Wyll became Dark Wyll again. It was the first time Kaedyn saw it for himself. "Spike and his goblin cronies torched a whole village," he said. "I rushed to the front to stop him. The bugger gouged out my eye and left us all to burn. I vowed to the Hells and Heavens that I'd make him pay, even as I lay there in my own blood."

"So rose a woman from the town's ashes. She called herself Mizora," he continued. This seemed to cause him severe pain. It was as if his heart was bleeding. "My soul shivered as soon as her lips touched my ears. She promised I'd have my revenge. Her words were so sweet; so tantalizing."

Then, it was clear that Wyll was desperately trying to convey to him his experience. He wanted Kaedyn to truly understand what he had been through. He wanted his approval. He wanted him to accept him, even though he knew he'd done something so terribly foolish. He knew he had committed a sin. He knew that what he'd done was wrong. He didn't need Kaedyn to tell him that.

"Mizora would forge me into a hero," he said. "I'd have the power to slay my every enemy, save their every victim. All in exchange for my endless devotion. It seemed like such a small price to pay for something so great. She was like an angel; so beautiful and fair. She seemed so good."

"She only revealed her true form after I'd said 'yes.' A cambion - half human, half devil." At this, he sneered. "She gave me a new eye - a spell focus and sending stone to connect us, for calling on me whenever she so wished. Raphael, Mizora - the devil's game has but one end. My soul is now hers in this life and beyond."

"What power did she grant you?" Kaedyn asked. "I mean, besides the usual warlock powers."

"The flames and fury of the Nine Hells themselves," he answered. "She showed me how to conjure fire and to command beasts. The more I craved, the more she promised. Balls of fire, festering clouds, I went from spoiled brat to savior. My way of avenging every blameless life taken. Slay enough monsters, save enough villages, and there could be... peace." He said this last bit with a sad smile and longing.

"Do you regret it?" asked Kaedyn. "Do you regret giving in to her?"

Wyll's brows furrowed. "I reckon you know the answer. Look. I know I messed up. I know it was wrong. That's why I am trying to correct it. Heroes own their mistakes, ya know? I may not confess it to every single person I meet, but I am owning this mistake. I will do what I can to escape this contract with Mizora, and I will right every wrong I find along the way while I'm at it."

"There is no path to peace through the Hells, though I searched long for it. Finally, more recently, I told Mizora I wanted out. We were still arguing when the squiddies snatched us both. After the crash, goblins plucked her from her pod and - well, I reckon you know the rest. She's in their camp, which is another reason I'm so desperate to get there. I don't know what the drow might want with Mizora, but she promised to break our bond if I save her. I free her, and she frees me."

Just then, a vision consumed Kaedyn. He looked at his hand to see it burning with flame. Then he turned his head upward to see the face of a young boy, his eyes wide with fear.

Wyll scowled as he forced the image from their minds. "Enough," he said with a growl. "Some ghosts belong to the past. Please. Let them remain there."

Kaedyn shook his head. "It was the parasite, I think," he said, feeling guilty. "I'm sorry, Wyll. I never meant to pry."

Wyll looked crestfallen, and he said nothing more. He looked about to walk away, but Kaedyn stopped him. "Wait. Can I at least know what would happen if Mizora died? If we're going to resolve this, I need to know all of our options."

Wyll's disgust was evident. "The bargain is void if she's killed, near as I can tell. A nigh impossible task, even for the Blade. If the drow slayed her, they'd do me a great favor, or so I think on the darkest days. But she still lives. They want something from her. Gods know what."

"Can I know what was it that changed your mind exactly?" asked Kaedyn. "What was the moment you decided you had to get out of the agreement?"

Wyll closed his eyes in pain. It was truly a difficult topic for him. "Mizora demanded a price I was unwilling to pay; one I won't speak of. Not now, and not here."

Kaedyn nodded. "Thank you for telling me all of this. I think it's important we are open and honest with each other as much as possible. It's the only way we're going to succeed in freeing each other from our own pasts. It's time we find Mizora and end this pact once and for all."

Wyll seemed to genuinely appreciate him. "Thank you. Your loyalty means more than the whole of the realm's riches, Kaedyn. I mean that." Then, he brightened. His usual courageous self returning. "Onward then, and may we be free from the devils that might bind us..." Then Wyll took on a strange expression that reminded Kaedyn of Raphael's infernal smirk; his goading voice. It sent a shiver down his spine as Wyll concluded by saying, "... and the devils that already do."

Kaedyn forced a smile. "Here! Here!" Then the Blade walked away to be alone, just as Gale did. He left Kaedyn by the fire to mull over everything he'd just learned.

Chapter 72 - Preying On Weakness

As Kaedyn was chatting with Gale and Wyll, Vexir went to check on Astarion. She crossed the log over the fast-moving stream that emptied into the river, and she came through the ruined entranceway. As she did, Astarion came out of the shadows behind her. His fangs were bared, and his eyes were flaring with hunger. Vexir looked around for him, but she didn't see him. Something within her triggered a warning. Something told her to turn at just that moment.

She spotted Astarion and his fangs just moments before he bit into her neck. He withdrew immediately and cursed. Guilt was written all over him, and he seemed quite afraid. Vexir was both stunned and angry as her eyes narrowed to slits. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"No. No," said Astarion quickly. "It's not what it looks like. I swear!" Then, he looked truly upset, as if he was disappointed in himself for being weak. He also seemed to be squirming as well, as if he was desperately trying to determine how he was going to explain this to her. "I... ugh! I wasn't going to hurt you! I just... I just needed... well... blood."

There, in the dim moonlight, Vexir saw him for what he really was; a vampire spawn and a slave to sanguine hunger. Though she had known this previously, she had not truly seen him as one. She had viewed him as many other things, but never as a vampire spawn. He was a High Elf who was devious and cunning. He seemed more like a drow, in fact. He was a rogue who was stealthy and swift and agile. She had seen him as a valuable member of the team. She had seen him, though she didn't really want to admit it, as a friend and possibly the only person who really understood her. Now, like everything else, that image suddenly changed.

"Were you... Were you going to kill me?" she asked. She was deeply hurt, slightly afraid, and oddly curious.

He shook his head, his expression still conveying that he was quite sorry for what he had been about to do. "It's not what you think," he said, his voice pleading. "I'm not some monster! I usually feed on animals; boars, deer, kobolds - whatever I can get."

She was like a statue. "Bomrush," she said. "That's right. I seem to recall Ryth-Shan discovering him earlier this morning. So, was his blood not enough?"

"I'm just too slow right now; too weak," he confessed to her. He seemed truly miserable. "If I just had a little blood, I could think clearer, fight better, etc. After that encounter with the dragon, I realized that I needed something more. As we were fleeing, I felt so weak and tired. I wasn't sure I was actually going to make it." He paused a moment before adding, "Please." He was practically begging her.

Vexir gave him a sideways look. It was clear trust had been damaged by his action. "When did you first start feeling weak?"

"It's been weighing on me for some time," he told her. "I just didn't know how to bring this up? Who would be willing to let me have at least a little blood?"

"Why didn't you try to drink the blood of some of the goblins or something we came up on?" asked Vexir.

Astarion sneered. "Filthy beasts! I'd rather drain the blood of animals. Gah!" he snarled. "Nothing satisfies, Vexir." He didn't bother to hide his frustration. "Nothing strengthens me. I'm always driven to suck the blood of those with more pure blood; humans, elves, dwarves, halflings. I've never bitten a person. Cazador never let me. But I can feel it in my soul. It courses through my veins. The only way I will truly be strong is if I am able to suck the blood of something more... potent."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked. "You should have said that you were feeling this way. You need to trust me, Astarion. I can't help you if you don't trust me."

"Come on, Vexir," he said. "At best, I was sure you'd say no. More likely, you'd ram a stake through my ribs. No. I needed you to trust me. I was sure that if I'd even asked, if I told you I was needing someone's blood, you'd no longer trust me at all. You'd think I was losing my fight to keep my vampirism at bay. It is always best, in my experience, to ask for forgiveness rather than permission. If I bit you, and then stopped, you'd see that I can control it; that you can trust me." Then he paused and hardened his expression. He wanted her to see that he was determined. "And you CAN trust me."

Vexir sighed, closing her eyes as she did so. She needed to alleviate some of the stress that had flooded through her. She then looked at him and nodded. "I do. I believe you."

"Thank you," said Astarion, relieved. "Do you think you could trust me just a little further? I only need a taste. I swear."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You're seriously asking me to let you bite my neck and drink some of my blood?"

Astarion grit his teeth. "Just a little," he replied, even indicating how much with his thumb and forefinger. "I promise. I'll be as gentle as possible."

Surprisingly, Vexir was frozen with indecision. Part of her screamed, "Are you mad? No!" Another part, however, felt truly sorry for him. That part was also concerning. If he didn't get better blood, would he be a detriment to their party? Would he wind up passing out because he wasn't receiving the nutrients he required as a vampire spawn?

And who else would be willing to offer their blood to him? Who else would let him bite them? Should she advise that he go hunting tieflings or druids in the grove? If he did, not only would he risk getting caught and killed, but he would also trigger a manhunt. Even if he didn't kill the person, they would report being attacked by a vampire. That would cause nothing but trouble, and they REALLY didn't need anymore trouble.

She rubbed her temples as if he'd already bitten her. "By all the shadows of Throrgar!" She couldn't look at him for several moments. Back in Eryndlyn, her home, she had endured many things. Any time she had failed, she endured harsh, physical punishment. A bite from Astarion would pale in comparison. It was evening, and she could rest and recover before the next day's events, so a little loss of blood would not hurt her. It would be a small price to pay if it meant Astarion would be stronger and more capable.

Or was it simply that weaker part of her, the one who cared about him, that was trying to drum up excuses? Was she just coming up with all those reasons because she wanted to ease some of his suffering; because she considered him a friend?

That same weakness had almost been the end of her. In fact, if her sins were ever uncovered, it WOULD certainly be over. Her people would hunt for her relentlessly. They would track her down for her treachery, and they would punish her for all eternity in unspeakable ways.

She cast the memories from her mind. "I can't believe I'm going to do this," she said. "Fine, but not a drop more than you need."

"Really?" said Astarion. He was both surprised and delighted at the same time. "I - of course. Not a drop more."

Vexir braced herself and held her hair out of the way. "Make it quick. Hopefully the others won't detect that you're doing this and get the wrong idea."

Astarion paused for a moment as if considering something. "Well," he said, "you know... We can hide our thoughts and actions from them. I've tested it out several times now, and it worked. You have to will it to happen. You have to put up a mental block and concentrate on it, but it works."

"Really?" asked Vexir. She was pleased to hear it. "When did you discover this?"

"Yesterday," he told her. "I wanted to make sure I could do it before I told you. I'm hoping, though, to keep this a bit of a secret from the others. I'd rather they not be able to hide anything from us. Agreed?"

Vexir smiled slyly. It was as if, just like that, their relationship was restored. "Agreed," she said. "But are they listening to us right now?"

He grinned devilishly. "No. I'm hiding both of us from them. Seems you can do that. If you don't want any of the others to know what you and others are saying and thinking, just block them out. It actually doesn't take that much."

Vexir was pleased. "Well. Now. Let's do this." She braced herself again, and she willed that no one would detect what was about to transpire between them. She knew he was blocking them, but once they started to go through with what they were about to do, either one could drop their guard for a moment. They increased their chances of successfully blocking the others out if they both willed it.

And so, he held her carefully, delicately - until he struck. Vexir's eyes shot wide open. It was like a shard of ice in her neck; a quick, sharp pain that faded to throbbing numbness. Her breath caught and her pulse quickened.

Immediately, she tried to pull away. "All right. That's enough," she told him.

She was relieved, for Astarion pulled away. He had respected her enough to stop when she told him to. "Mhh? Oh! Of course." And he withdrew, wiping the leftover blood from his chin and then sucking it up so that he didn't let a drop fall to the ground. "That - That was amazing!" He looked wild and almost savage, but he caught himself and reigned it in. "My mind is finally clear. I feel strong. I feel... happy!"

Vexir took in a deep breath as she held her neck to stop the bleeding. "I'm... I'm looking forward to seeing you fight," she replied, not knowing what else to say. She was shaking. Something in her told her that she had not made the right decision. She had been a fool. He would now crave more 'pure' blood. She had given a starving man a small taste of a delicacy. Certainly, he would want more.

"Shouldn't take long," he replied. "So many people need killing." He said it in jest, but she detected the truth. "Now, if you'll excuse me, you're invigorating, but I need something more filling."

She was unable to respond. She was too stunned by what had just occurred. And so, she just watched as he stalked towards the exit to the camp and off towards the forest. He was stronger, more confident... and ready to hunt. He paused then and said over his shoulder, "This is a gift, you know. I won't forget it." And just like that, he was gone.

For some time, she just stood there, in the dark. She suddenly felt very alone and vulnerable and foolish. She was also riddled with doubts and uncertainty. Had she just been played? Had he only pretended to need blood from her just so he could satisfy his true hunger? Would he come back for more from her later? Would he take more from her next time? Would he be able to stop himself? Would he prey upon the others?

She kicked the stone wall with her boot and cursed. No. She wouldn't let him do it a second time. She would resist. She would NOT allow her weakness to defeat her. She had to stop caring. She had to stop liking the fools in her party; especially Astarion... and Kaedyn.

She growled, she was so angry with herself. Now Kaedyn was at the forefront of her mind. "Stupid half-drow!" she hissed. Then she considered just how frightened she had been when the githyanki and the dragon were trying to kill them. What troubled her the most was that the thing she had feared more than any other was not the raging red titan trying to eat her. As she stared into the depths of her own heart, she was mortified to discover that what she had been most afraid of was that Kaedyn had almost died.

Images of that moment came to her, as if she had been there to witness it firsthand. The githyanki's arrow struck true, piercing Kaedyn's chest near his heart. She felt the pain as blood gushed out. Her own heart leapt into her throat as he fell to the ground. Her stomach had twisted into knots. She felt that she couldn't get to him fast enough to save him. She was going to lose him.

She hated herself for feeling that way. Somehow, the soft, weak, idiot cleric had won her affections. In some way, his smile had charmed her. His laugh made her happy. She enjoyed fighting with him. She liked that he was strong and yet cared about her; about them all. Most of all, she liked that he was honest. She liked that she didn't have to worry about him deceiving her. She could feel it. He genuinely tried to be as open and sincere as he could, and it was such a relief to her. She didn't have to worry about him stabbing her in the back or manipulating her. If he did something stupid, it was with the best of intentions.

She slapped the side of her head to clear her mind. She even took the circlet off her head to try to feel more like herself. "What am I going to do?" she wondered to herself. "I'm losing myself, somehow. Suck it up, Vexir. Steel yourself! You can't give in to these things. Lloth would never approve. If I continue down this path, I can never go home. It will be the final betrayal; the greatest of sins to Lloth. You've already done enough, haven't you?"

"But why do you WANT to go back?" asked that voice in her head. "What do you really have back there that is worth the trouble? Did serving your mother make you happy? Did serving Lolth fill you with joy? Here is happiness. Here is joy. You have people who care about you now. You have people who love you."

Vexir grit her teeth. The tadpole. It was talking to her again. It was confusing everything. "I have to walk away," she told herself. "Now." Then she hurried across the fallen log-bridge and back into the main part of the camp. She searched for a distraction to take her mind off of her feelings. There, not far away, hiding from all others in the shadows, was Shadowheart, and she was playing with a little polyhedric box.

Chapter 73 - The Deepest Shadows

"Darn thing. It has to open, surely. It has to do SOMETHing," said Shadowheart as Vexir approached. Shadowheart's attention was consumed by the strange box that she turned over in her hands; the same box that she had hidden in one of her personal pouches.

Vexir slipped her circlet back on her head and took a closer look from a reasonable distance. At that moment, Shadowheart didn't know she was there. The box was inscribed with glyphs similar to those used by the githyanki. Indeed, though they had tried to convince Lae'zel that maybe it wasn't, it was quite clearly made by her people. "So it IS a githyanki artifact," said Vexir, making her presence known.

Shadowheart jumped and tried to hide the box. Then she realized how foolish that was, and she gave up with a heavy sigh. "Keep out of it," she snapped angrily.

Vexir nodded to the box. "Can I at least see it? Maybe I can help make sense of it. You know you can't do this alone. You're going to have to trust someone."

Shadowheart hesitated a moment, but then she handed it to her. Vexir turned it over a bit herself. It was a curious, ornate box. Its many sides were engraved with indecipherable glyphs. She found that there were no openings that could be seen. She, however, sensed something inside it. She tried to then pry it open, but it didn't yield in the slightest.

"Well," she said, handing it back to Shadowheart who then slid it back into the pouch she'd been carrying it in. "Can't blame me for trying. Perhaps Lae'zel or Ryth-Shan might have a better understanding of it."

Shadowheart grunted. "I'd rather figure it out on my own."

"So what, exactly, do you have against the gith anyway?" asked Vexir. "Did they do something in particular to you?"

Shadowheart shrugged. "Not that I'd like to discuss, anyway. Besides, I mostly didn't want them around because I knew they'd freak out if they saw I had the box. Now that it's out in the open, I still don't want them around and I don't trust them, but I'll put up with it. I'm just afraid they're both going to try to kill me now to get the dumb thing."

"You could always give it to someone else for safe keeping," Vexir suggested.

"Like who?" said Shadowheart. "You? I don't think so. Look, I like you better than any of the others, but I don't trust you enough. As it is, I'm not particularly happy that you found out about me being a cleric of Shar."

"Speaking of which," said Vexir, "I was wondering if you could tell me more about Shar and about yourself. I think after everything we've been through, it's probably a good idea to know more about one another. Don't you?"

Shadowheart considered this a moment. Then, she said, "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me about what Shar means to you," said Vexir.

"What? Shar's tenets?" she asked. "If you like." She seemed more than happy to discuss this. When she spoke next, it was with passion. "Most fear the dark, like children, because in darkness they see their fears reflected. But Shar teaches us to step beyond fear, beyond loss, in darkness we do not hide - we act. Pain. Hope. The promise of better days. THEY are illusions that the fools of the light cling to. All of these are heavy cloaks that bend our backs and burden our hearts. They are not the truth. The truth is harsh and hard and dark."

"We shed our cloaks. Before Shar, we stand gloriously naked, beyond the vanities of mortals," Shadowheart continued. "We tear down the lies the world is drunk on; the institutions they trust and the so-called gods they worship. We tear down the lies they cling to. We destroy false idols, topple corrupt organizations, and fight heretics wherever they're found. There's often suffering - death even. Many people break before they embrace Shar's truths."

Vexir considered everything she had to say. She carefully hid her own thoughts, even as Astarion had taught her. She didn't want Shadowheart to know that she didn't agree with her about so many things. Deciding she didn't want to press anything too much, she decided to shift directions. "So, tell me something about yourself besides Shar and the tadpoles."

"What?" said Shadowheart, amused. "Besides my life's calling and the greatest problem I've ever faced?" Then she paused to think. After a moment, she said, "Well, I like night orchids and can't swim. Is that the sort of thing you mean?"

Vexir chuckled. "Yes. I guess. Anything else?"

Shadowheart rolled her eyes. "No. I can't. I mean, I literally can't. There's certain things I can't remember right now. Secrets are incredibly important to Shar and her followers. In order to protect them, I have willingly allowed certain memories to be suppressed so that I can serve Shar without compromising her. If I manage to return to Baldur's Gate and fulfill Shar's mission, then my memories will be restored."

"Good to know," said Vexir. "So, your top priority, other than getting these tadpoles out, is to get to Baldur's Gate to complete your mission. Anything else you can tell me about it?"

She shook her head. "That is not for you to know. Let's leave it at that."

"You pay a high price to serve the Dark Lady," said Vexir. "That is most admirable."

Shadowheart appreciated the praise. "I do as Shar asks of me. You would have done the same, I'm sure, for Lolth. Yes?"

Vexir cringed. Was that a jab at her? Had Shadowheart somehow learned what she'd done? She decided to switch topics again. "That strange magic you displayed before, what was it?" Was it Shar?"

Shadowheart's expression grew dark. "I... I don't know. Something to do with the tadpole. Who's to say? Another mystery to add to the pile, I suppose. But no, it was no Sharran magic. The Dark Lady would never be so... vulgar in her gifts."

"Do you think it's dangerous?" asked Vexir.

"Very," said Shadowheart. "It wanted to lash out at you."

"Me?" asked Vexir, alarmed.

Shadowheart smiled sweetly. "Luckily, I was there to stop it and save your life. Anything else you want to know?" She was making it clear she wanted Vexir to go away.

"It seemed different from the other activities of the tadpole," Vexir pointed out.

"We don't know how this works; not really," she replied. "Maybe it varies a little, person to person. Don't worry. It won't matter once we find a cure, and if we don't find one, well... we'll be past our worries then anyway. Right?"

Vexir nodded. "True."

She was trying to consider how else to break through Shadowheart's defensive barriers when the cleric said, "As much fun as I'm having with our little chit-chat, can we be done? I'd like to turn in after such a hard day. I'm exhausted. Maybe we can chat more later. Eh?" Then she turned and swiftly walked away. Vexir watched her until she found a nice, dark little nook at the back of the camp where she could be alone.

With that being finished, she worked her way back over to the river and sat down on a stone to collect her own thoughts. She wasn't there long, but it felt like an eternity. Her head was spinning off in so many directions. She had to remove the circlet again in hopes that it might slow her thoughts down a bit.

Kaedyn joined her shortly after. "You okay?" he asked, sensing her struggle.

She gestured for him to sit next to her. Odd. She was no longer even trying to push him away. She first asked him about what he'd learned about the others, and he told her about Gale and Wyll. She asked about if he'd talked to Ryth-Shan, Lae'zel and Wynari, but he said that they obviously didn't want to be bothered. He'd have to check on them another day.

She then told him everything that had happened with Astarion and Shadowheart. She even told Kaedyn what Astarion had told her about hiding thoughts and feelings from others, for she decided to actually trust him with everything since she felt like he was perhaps the only person she really could trust. Besides, she found herself quite tired of keeping secrets. It was wearing on her, especially after her little episode with Astarion.

"We'll have to watch him more closely," she told Kaedyn. "And please don't tell anyone about the hiding thoughts thing. I'm only telling you because I want your help keeping an eye on him." Their eyes met, and she let her feelings be known. "I'm trusting you, Kaedyn, more than anyone. Do you understand how hard that is for me to even say?"

At that moment, he could see her weariness. She was tired of everything. The stress of all they had been through had broken her. She didn't have the strength to put on her tough exterior. She needed someone to talk to. She needed to unload some of the weight she was carrying.

He nodded, captured in that moment by her beauty and vulnerability. "I won't betray that trust," he assured her.

"I like Astarion a lot, but he frightens me. I don't think I can trust him entirely," she said. Then she put her hand on his knee. "You are the only person I feel like I can truly trust. I... I NEED to trust someone. There is a great deal of conflict raging inside me. This whole situation - or maybe it was almost getting eaten by the dragon - I don't know. I just..."

"Confession is good for the soul," said Kaedyn. "It helps bring clarity. What's happened to you today has shaken you up badly. Talk to me. What you're going through is difficult because you are trying to hide in the deepest shadows. The more things you strive to hide, the harder it is to stay in the shadows. The more lies you tell, the harder it is to find the truth buried beneath."

"Truth is like buried treasure at the bottom of the sea. You have to swim through an ocean of lies to get to it. Then you have to dig hard beneath the sand until you painstakingly dig it up. However, if you don't bury treasure, it is much easier to find, and you can actually enjoy it."

"You are a treasure, Vexir," he told her, putting his hand on hers. Suddenly and unexpectedly, her pulse increased. Her breath caught in her throat. She felt flushed. "Don't allow yourself to be buried under the lies of false identities; either those you create for yourself or the ones others try to create for you."

Idiot! he told himself. What kind of cheesy pickup line did you just sprout off to her? "You are a treasure, Vexir?" Really? I'd be utterly surprised if she didn't just haul off and punch you in the face right now and then mock you most profusely.

But she didn't, and he was totally surprised. Instead, she found herself staring down at his hand on hers. Her expression hardened. "Do you... really think of me as a treasure?" She looked up at him again to try to see if she could detect the truth. "Is that for real? After everything - all the times that we've fought and the ways I've treated you - are you really telling me that you feel that way about me?"

Kaedyn swallowed hard. She was putting him on the spot. He felt his insides tightening. He could barely breathe. "I... I do," he admitted.

She tried to read him, and she could see he was being genuine and that he felt rather foolish for saying the things he'd said. He was totally nervous, and he was trying to sound smart and impress her. She couldn't help but grin. "You're an idiot," she said. "I think you're a masochist. You have absolutely no idea who I really am."

"So who are you, Vexir?" he asked, growing more confident again. Yes. Turn it back on her. That would take the spotlight off of him and make him more comfortable. Besides, he was dying to know about her more than anyone else. "Tell me more about YOU. Who are you really? Sharing with me who you really are will only help you remember who you are yourself."

She read his thoughts. She fully understood what he was doing and why. "I... I'm not sure I can." She was being totally honest. As memories started to well up within her, the immediate instinct was to shove them right back down.

He squeezed her hand tenderly. "You don't have to," he said, gently. "You can take all the time you need. There's no rush. I'm not going anywhere."

She squeezed his knee in return. Their eyes met once more. "You'd better not," she told him seriously. "I... I mean... You almost died today. You need to be more careful. I almost had to come and save your butt."

He nodded, smiled even more, and looked down again at their hands. "I will. I promise. But you do too - need to be careful, I mean," he said, looking back into her eyes. "You almost died as well."

She pulled away at last. "Don't remind me," she said, staring off again into the horizon. "I've been close to death before, and it's not like we haven't run into dragons; like on the nautiloid. This was different, somehow. I was more afraid than I've ever been."

"It's because you have something to care about," he told her. "Can you at least admit now that you care about us?"

She didn't look at him. "I've cared about others before, Kaedyn, but it didn't end well."

"It'll be different this time," he told her.

She still didn't look at him. "You don't know that, and you can't promise that. You have no control over the future. The gods can't even control the future. Nothing is certain."

"That's not true," he told her. "Some things are certain. I care about you. I like you, whether you like me or not. That's for certain."

Finally, she looked at him, a memory haunting her. "I thought I was in love once. It made me question everything I believed in. It was the most euphoric drug. It was a possessing spirit that took control over my senses. I wanted it more than anything else. I cared and loved and gave and sacrificed... and I almost lost it all. I might STILL lose it all."

"Did you want to tell me about him?" Kaedyn asked. He was obviously unsure how best to proceed. He didn't know if he should ask or just let it drop.

She let him hang there for a few moments, sweating. Meanwhile, she continued to look at him as if she was examining every facet of his face. After a few moments, she turned away and said, "He had been captured by Lloth's elite. Some of our kind had found a way to invade the realm he was dwelling in at the time. It had been a raid. They rushed in and out, taking as many prisoners as they could to offer as pleasing sacrifices to our Dark Queen. It was one of Eryndlyn's finest moments. Eryndlyn is the city I lived in, if you don't know. OUR elite had opened the portal. OUR elite had performed the raid. WE had captured some of Corellon's finest." Corellon was the chief deity of the elves.

"And he was one of them. I didn't know who he was at the time. I just knew that he was a special prisoner that they had brought back. I was much younger and more naive at the time. I thought I could take on any challenge and win. I was one of the best. I excelled in every way; at least in my own mind."

"I was involved in the interrogations of some of them. That's when it started. I didn't have a problem so much with the adults, but they had captured children. They tortured the children in front of their parents and siblings; small ones as young as five. They didn't even have questions to ask them. They were just doing it for fun; just to be cruel."

"I... I couldn't handle it," she told him. "At one point, I made an excuse and left. That's when I met him. He was locked in a cell, and yet he was so kind to me, even though I was one of his captors. He was charming and unpredictable and fun. He enjoyed games and pranks. In some ways, Astarion reminds me of him when he makes his little comments. But he wasn't as dark and brooding as Astarion. No. He was light hearted and... and like a leaf in the wind. He was unable to stay still or keep his focus on one thing for too long."

"And he utterly tricked me." As she said this, her face became hateful and spiteful. "He pretended to care about me, and he tricked me into caring about him and all of those my people had captured. He convinced me to free him, and all of them, and he even helped me develop the plan. I thought he loved me as I thought I loved him. I was ready to abandon everyone and everything for him. I was ready to run off with him to whatever realm he wanted to go to."

"But he was a lying, deceiving, backstabbing, piece of troll dung. As we were leading everyone out through the last tunnel, he turned to me and said, 'Thank you so much for all you have done for us, Love. I shall never forget it. Your sacrifice this day shall not go unrewarded.' Then he drew his sword, one I helped him acquire, and with one fluid motion he slashed me across the stomach." She lifted her shirt up to show off her midriff (for she did not wear her armor while relaxing at camp). There, plain as day, Kaedyn saw a nasty, jagged scar that was at least a foot in length and probably about an inch deep. She let him gently run a finger along it. This sent shivers through him.

"In Tyr's name!" he gasped. "That's..."

She put her shirt back down. "That was nothing compared to the agony I felt as I lay there dying. He stood over me and laughed and mocked me. He then told me his real name. He said, 'Did you honestly think I was in love with you, Drow?'" As she repeated his words, her jaw was so clenched that he thought she might crack a tooth. "'Allow me to properly introduce myself. I may have told you a slight fib as to who I am. I am no mere elf. My name is Erevan Ilesere, elven god of mischief and rogues. Perhaps you've heard of me? After the Spellplague, I became an exarch of Corellon. I mean, I lost a good deal of my power because of that event, so I am no longer technically a god but still a being of extraordinary power.'"

"Long story short, My Dear, I am ferociously loyal to the Seldarine," he said to me with such contempt I... How I'd love to cut his tongue out! 'You know who they are, don't you? The Seldarine? Pantheon of elven gods? You know, right? You aren't that stupid, are you? The pantheon that Lloth was cast out of because she's a whore and cheated on her husband Corellon? Come on. You know. She's the same whore you serve; the one you try so hard to emulate. You're just the same as her, you know. All drow are. You are a nasty, vile, evil, wicked, vicious, dirty little whore.'"

"And you are SO stupid and naive," he said. 'Sometimes I amaze even myself with how capable I am of tricking people. Now I can add a drow female to my list of gullible suckers.' Then the sounds of pursuit echoed up through the chamber. 'Ah well,' he said. 'I'd love to stay and chat - not really - but it seems my time has run out. Hope you die before they reach you. It'd probably be better for you anyway in the long run, right? You should thank me for this. After all, Lloth's elite aren't going to be very forgiving, now are they? Once they learn that you set free one of Lloth's most hated enemies...? Yeah. I can only imagine the torment you're going to face.' And he ran off with his people, laughing the entire way."

"I was saved just in time," she told him. "It turned out that my people weren't far behind. They assumed I had discovered the prisoners escaping and I had tried to stop them by myself. I went with it. I lied through my teeth and told them that I had been tracking the prisoners' movements for a bit. I hadn't been sure who they were, so I followed them. I said I thought they were slaves, going about their tasks, but they were acting strangely. Thus, I was suspicious enough to follow. By the time I did figure out the truth, there was nothing I could do but try to stop them myself. If I went back for help, I'd have lost them."

"The worst I received was ridicule," she said. "They laughed at me and called me a simple child and dumber than a svirfneblin." Svirfneblin were more commonly known as deep gnomes. "However, I was praised for my bravery and willingness to try to stop even a being as powerful as Erevan Ilesere."

Then she faced him again. "Don't you see, Kaedyn? If the truth is ever revealed to my people and family, it will be worse for me than you can imagine. So, I must keep this secret from ever being discovered, and I have to

live with it for the rest of my life. I am an absolute fraud. I say I serve Lloth and I am devoted to her, but am I? Am I really? Especially now, am I really Llothsworn? Was I ever really? I fought hard to serve my people and my family well, and I still do today; or I did before all this happened."

"You need to stop defining yourself like this," said Kaedyn, and he took her hand in his. "You do not have to define yourself as Llothsworn. You aren't just a devoted servant of Lloth, and you aren't just a member of some drow family in Eryndlyn. You don't have to live up to anyone's expectations, and you don't have to let anyone define who you are."

"To me, you are Vexir, a powerful drow battlemaster. You are fierce and intimidating and aggressive and dominating. You are an extremely necessary member of this party. We would not still be here right now, any of us, if not for you. You are a leader, and you are..." He paused, for he wasn't sure if he should continue with what he wanted to say. Deciding to throw caution to the wind, he completed his thought. "... and you are beautiful and very important to me. I know we haven't known each other long, but you have quickly become one of the, if not THE, most important person in my life."

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she withdrew back into her shell. He'd pushed it too far. Feeling awkward, she then stood. "I... This is... This is all too much; too fast. I... I think it's probably best if I'm just alone right now."

Kaedyn stood and tried to take her hand again. "Wait, Vexir. I..."

She pulled away again, becoming angry. "I said, 'I need to be alone right now.' What part of that don't you understand? How stupid are you? Just go! Leave me. I've already told you too much. I pray to Lloth no one else overheard us. I must indeed be foolish to have talked about all this with you." Then she saw the dumbfounded look on his face, and it made her angrier. "Well? Why are you still standing there, Male? Go!"

Then, not knowing what else to do, Kaedyn obeyed. He turned and walked away, leaving her alone by the river; lost in her thoughts and feeling totally miserable. Now miserable himself, and feeling like he botched everything in the end, he beat himself up and decided to turn in for the night. At that point, the last thing he wanted to do was see or talk to anyone. All he wanted to do was somehow take back those last few moments with Vexir. If he hadn't said that last bit... Everything was going so perfectly until then.

As soon as he was beyond sight, Vexir turned and walked away herself. She needed to get away from all of them. She needed to be sure she was totally alone. And so, she left the camp for a few hours. Not sure where she should go, she wound up in the Dank Crypt, alone in the darkness. There, she sat with her back against the wall in silence as she processed all of her raw emotions.

She did not cry. She never cried. She just brooded and stewed over what she was feeling and thinking. She considered Kaedyn's words; all of them. She pondered what he'd said about her defining herself. There was something she liked about that. There was something freeing about it. Why was she so shackled to what her people thought and believed and wanted? Why was she imprisoning herself to try to make her people, and especially her mother, proud of her?

"Hah!" she said to herself at one point. "They probably think I'm dead. So, who says I have to go back to Eryndlyn anyway? I could be like Astarion and just be 'conveniently lost.' I could be whoever I want to be." Then she dwelled on that for a time, fantasizing about what that might truly mean.

Chapter 74 - Revenge Served Cold

While Kaedyn and Vexir went around chatting with the rest of the party, Ryth-Shan and Wynari started out the evening after dinner with Scratch. He needed a bit of cheering up. After being revived, he remembered his fallen friend, and he started grieving again. To help him, Ryth-Shan and Wynari sat and let him talk. Ryth-Shan was exhausted, so he couldn't cast Speak with Animals, but Wynari could. She sat there at length listening to the dog and letting him share all of his memories. She translated for Ryth-Shan so that he'd understand. He greatly appreciated it, and he very much enjoyed that evening.

When Scratch was finally finished talking about his friend, Ryth-Shan and Wynari advised him to get some sleep. He'd probably feel better in the morning. He agreed, and he trotted over to a nice little cluster of bushes. Then he curled up and drifted off.

Wynari then turned to Ryth-Shan. "You really do care a lot about animals," she said with a smile. "That's one thing I really like about you. You have a very kind and compassionate heart." Then she seemed a bit nervous having said all that, and she looked down at her feet and shifted uncomfortably.

Ryth-Shan didn't know what to think of this. Was she trying to imply she had feelings for him, or was she just being friendly? She was an awkward woman around people, so it was hard for him to be sure. He decided it best to keep it light. "So, tell me about yourself, Wynari," he said. "I mean, I barely know anything about you, really. You're from a hundred years ago, and you're a druid. That's about all I know."

Wynari smiled again and shifted uncomfortably. She really hated being the center of anyone's attention. She looked away, off across the river. "There's not much to tell, really. That's mostly all there is."

"Well, tell me about Icewind Dale at least," he said.

She shrugged. "Not much to tell there either," she told him. "I was born and raised in the Silver Marches; in the Moonwood near Claw Hollow. I never knew my biological parents. My adopted mother was a druid named Asha. She was also of the Circle of the Moon. She was great. She taught me everything I know. She said that the people she assumed were my parents were killed by an owlbear. She came upon the gruesome scene because she heard me screaming at the top of my lungs. I guess I was maybe five at the time."

"She attacked the already injured owlbear. It was a juvenile, and my parents supposedly injured it already. Fortunately for me, my parents must have shoved me down into a gap beneath the roots of a tree to protect me from the creature, so I was unharmed." Then she drifted off for a moment before she added, "Asha was more than a mother to me. She was my closest friend."

"What happened to her?" asked Ryth-Shan. "Sounds like she passed."

Wynari nodded. She forced a smile at him, and then looked away once more. "That's what led me to Kuldahar and then on to Icewind Dale, actually. Some sort of evil was festering in the Spine of the World mountains. Asha wanted to go check it out, so we went to explore the area where the rumors told us to go. Sure enough, undead everywhere. They ambushed us. Asha did what mentors often do. She sacrificed her life so I could get away. I was so scared, I just fled." There was intense pain and guilt there. "I wish I had been stronger and braver. I wish I had helped fight at her side even to the end. After all she did for me..."

She broke off, tears flowing unbidden. She wiped them away. "When I finally recovered from the loss, I vowed I would avenge her. I followed the trail of evil to Akar Kessell. The undead were minions of someone who was loosely allied to the evil mage. He was a vampire named Zeryph who wanted to ride on the coat tails of Kessell. He promised to lead his undead into the Silver Marches in the hopes that by the time Kessell made his move on Ten-Towns, no allies would be able to come from there to aid them. Kessell and Zeryph didn't see eye-to-eye, however, so the alliance was never fully solidified."

"But he still played with the idea of sending his undead into those lands just to be a butt," Wynari continued. Her voice was strained. "So Asha died simply because it amused Zeryph. I was so full of hate and anger. I would have done anything to destroy him." Then she looked around to make sure no one else was near enough to hear her, and she spoke in quieter, harsh tones. "I HATE vampires and undead." Though she didn't want anyone to hear her, Wynari knew nothing about keeping her thoughts and feelings from the others.

Then, her expression shifted. She became more distant, and her voice lacked emotion. "In fact, I DID do something to destroy him." She then looked at him, her eyes full of guilt and shame. "Can I tell you something, and you won't tell anyone else?" she asked. It was clear she needed to confess what she'd done to someone, and she trusted Ryth-Shan more than the others.

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Of course," he told her. "Whatever you tell me stays with me." Or so they both believed.

Her eyes shimmered with tears. She fought to continue. "I was given an ancient magic relic in the Spine of the World mountains near Dark Arrow Keep. That was the area Zeryph made his base of operations. I used it

against him. That's what caused him to flee to the lands north of Kuldahar. I pursued him with a vengeance. Slowly, I was destroying his undead army."

"Then chaos broke loose in Icewind Dale. I had finally cornered Zeryph. He had nowhere else to go. He had holed up in some ancient ruins east of Ten-Towns. Suddenly, all these enemies came flooding into the lands. Kessell was defeated, and they were after the Crystal Shard. Zeryph used this to his advantage. He tried to escape by putting those forces between me and him. He and a few of his remaining spawn had taken up their coffins in the dead of night, and they were getting away."

She lost her voice for a moment. It was clear she was struggling with the next part. "I... I didn't care what destruction I caused, Ryth-Shan," she told him. "I didn't care what it would do to me. I did the only thing I knew to do to kill him once and for all. I used the relic, and..."

Ryth-Shan was on the edge of his seat. He really wanted to know what the weapon was that she had used and what it did. Did it have anything to do with them or the weapon Shadowheart had? "And what?" he asked, no longer able to contain his curiosity.

She suddenly became as cold as ice. "I froze everything for miles around. EVERYthing, Ryth-Shan. The relic was known as the Heart of Auril. It allowed its user to cast all sorts of ice magic; for a price. It was the antithesis of Silvanus, but I ignored that. I was too bent on revenge; on stopping Zeryph from ever preying upon others again. Each time I used the relic, something would freeze over somewhere. The more powerful the spell, the more impact it would have on the nature in the area; the more it would kill life."

"The spell I used that day was the ultimate spell that the Heart of Auril could wield. It was called 'Flash Freeze.' Basically, anything within a ten-mile radius of the user would be immediately and suddenly frozen solid. I changed form into a bird and flew above the enemy armies that were between me and Zeryph. They spotted me and tried to bring me down. I just needed to be within that ten-mile radius of him. That was all that matters to me."

"I succeeded. In mid-flight, I changed back to myself, pulled out the Heart of Auril, and I cast Flash Freeze. That army never made it to Ten-Towns to try to fight for the Crystal Shard. It was encased in ice. Not a single creature, Zeryph included, escaped. I used wild shape again and glided to the ground. Then I found Zeryph encased in ice, and I set his frozen tomb on fire; the ice that encased him. I melted him out until I was able to ram a stake through his miserable heart. Then I torched his coffin and did the same to each and every one of his minions. Finally, I waited until the dawn, and I watched them burn."

"That's when I realized that the Heart of Auril was gone," she told him. "It had left me dazed and confused and I hadn't been totally sure what had happened. I was so bent on revenge that I didn't stop to think until I had destroyed Zeryph and his spawn. But when I stopped and examined myself and everything else around me, I suddenly realized that the relic was missing."

She held Ryth-Shan's gaze firmly as she continued. "It... it was inside me, I think. Instead of freezing over nature, I... I somehow absorbed the artifact myself. It was the ultimate price for using Flash Freeze, I think. Once vengeance died within me, I began to realize that I was freezing over from within. My revenge was the last part of who I was. It was as if I was becoming an avatar of Auril herself. I was losing myself."

"To stop me from becoming such a vile and wicked entity, I used my newfound powers to Flash Freeze myself," she concluded. "I knew I wouldn't die, for I was now immune to ice and cold. However, I would at least imprison myself so I would not harm others by being Auril in the flesh. I thought I was the only one left alive in that frozen tundra. I was wrong."

She gestured for Ziva to come out of hiding. The flying snake unraveled herself and slithered up onto Wynari's shoulder for Ryth-Shan to see more fully. The githyanki was taken aback. "A... Is that a flying snake?" he asked, amazed.

She nodded. "Ziva is from the Jungles of Chult," she told him. "She was taken along with her clutch by merchants selling flying snakes all over the Sword Coast. Asha and I rescued her when we were visiting the High Forest in the Silver Marches when I was young. We've been like sisters ever since she hatched. She was with me when I absorbed the Heart of Auril, and apparently it protected her because she was coiled around me when I froze myself."

"How could I not have seen her until now?" he asked, truly amazed. "She's been with you the whole time?"

Wynari smiled at her companion. "She's quite stealthy. Whenever I change shape, she slips away into bushes and such. When we were fighting the harpies, for example, she slid into the foliage and slithered amongst the rocks. She said that she even bit one of the harpies at one point to distract it long enough for us to kill her. Her poison may or may not have helped. I don't know."

"Why hide her from us?" asked Ryth-Shan.

Wynari blushed. "Trust, or lack thereof," she replied. "Ziva is my best friend and closest companion. I guard her with my life, and she does the same. She's been, well, spying on everyone since I joined you, and she tells me everything. After today, though, I think it's probably best to be open and honest about her. Like you were all saying earlier, we need to work together and trust one another or we're never going to survive this. For better or worse, we're in this together. So, I figure it's probably time to let you all meet her; you, first and foremost. I knew you'd appreciate her most."

Ryth-Shan shook his head. "I do. And that was an incredible story, Wynari," he told her. "Thank you for telling me. There's just one thing I'm wondering, though. How'd you get captured by the mind flayers, then? Do you know? Did they just find your frozen body in Icewind Dale?"

"I only have a vague recollection," she told him. "I remember their ship descending into the area. I remember them surrounding me. It was like a dream. They picked me up and carried me aboard their ship. Then they placed me in this chamber and melted me. I think the chamber inhibited my powers. I couldn't do anything. I was too weak. I barely remember them entering the chamber and dragging me into one of the pods with their mind powers. Ziva was still wrapped around me. She was also too weak to do anything. There was gas and then... that was it."

"Who knows how long I was frozen there before they acquired me? Who knows how long I was in that pod? In the Astral Plane, beings don't age, right? So, I could have been there for a hundred years on that ship traveling about the Astral Plane."

"And they did something to me. I know they did. I'm not sure how, but I can only assume they removed the Heart of Auril from me. I can't feel it anymore. I can't use any of its powers. I suppose I should be grateful, but who knows what they did with it. It frightens me to think about it. What evil have I unleashed because of my desire for revenge? How many people will suffer for it?"

Ryth-Shan felt badly for her, and so he pulled her close to him, embracing her to comfort her. "Try not to worry," he said softly. "You can't ever take back the mistakes you've made. You can only learn from them. I can totally understand how you feel. I hate the ghaik... er... mind flayers. They killed everyone I knew when I was young. I have always desired to destroy them. If given a powerful relic, I might have done the same as you."

Then he pulled away and gave her a smile. "Let's agree to work together to try to find out the truth about what happened to that relic. Sound good?"

She was happy for the first time in what seemed like forever. "Thank you! You have no idea how much that means to me."

"And I swear," he added. "I won't tell anyone what you just told me. We'll keep this between us until you're ready to tell the others; if you ever do."

She nodded. "Thanks again." Then she awkwardly hugged him again for several seconds and then withdrew. "Well, I do feel better now. I... It's getting late. I should probably let you get some rest." Then before he could say anything further, she and Ziva hurried off towards her bedroll and tent.

Chapter 75 - The Best for Last

Meanwhile, not far from them, Lae'zel listened and observed through Shpri. She was brooding as she watched everyone in the camp. Her thoughts were in turmoil over all that had happened. She was angry at everyone and everything. There was so much hatred burning within her that she could hardly contain it.

And Wynari spending so much one-on-one time with Ryth-Shan was not helping. She didn't know why, but it was like a spearhead jabbing her in the back. Was it jealousy? She couldn't believe that. No. Well, maybe, but not necessarily in the jealous lover sense. It was more like Ryth-Shan was her kin. He was a gith. He was the only one who she could potentially relate to. And there he was giving all his attention to a tree-hugging human druid wench.

So, who did she have? No one. As usual. She could only ever trust herself anyway. Still. What made her the most angry was that she was beginning to feel that she and Ryth-Shan were at least potential friends. He had stood by her a number of times. Even when she'd messed up and she'd told the kith'rak where the others were, Ryth-Shan had defended her. He had understood why she had done it.

Now, there he was, hugging some stupid, airheaded human girl who liked to play with animals. And where was Lae'zel? Sitting off by herself in the shadows brooding and hating everyone and everything. She hated the kith'rak. She hated the rest of her kin for obeying him instead of doing what was right. She hated Shadowheart for taking the weapon. She hated everyone else for defending Shadowheart instead of taking her side. She hated the tadpole in her head, and she hated Ryth-Shan at that moment for not noticing her in the darkness brooding.

But then, he spotted her after Wynari hurried away. He smiled and came over to sit down next to her, so she severed her connection with Shpri. She said nothing. She didn't even look at him. "Can I ask you something?" he asked. She didn't give him a response, so he asked anyway. "What do you really think of me?"

She knew he was baiting her into talking to him, but she couldn't resist answering that question. "You are githyanki in name only. You have no true loyalty to Vlaakith. You are devoted more to animals and plants than to our queen, and you know very little, really, about our ways. I barely view you as a githyanki at all, so why are you even speaking to me?"

He smiled at her. "Because you are githyanki." Then he stared up at the stars. "Do you know how long I dreamed of being with our people? Do you have any idea what I would have given to have been found; to have been taken to a creche and taught more of our ways. I would have cut off my right arm if it meant I could have been taken to some place like Creche K'liir."

"Then you came along," he told her as he continued to stare up at the night sky. "My blood raced the moment I saw you. There was this absolutely gorgeous githyanki female strapped in one of those pods fighting to escape with all the fiery spirit I could feel within myself; the fiery spirit of our people. You are strong and straight-to-the-point, and you are bold. You don't care what anyone thinks of you, even our own kin. You are proud and noble and honorable. I truly admire your devotion to Vlaakith."

She looked at him as if he had somehow turned into a mind flayer right before her eyes. "Have you lost your senses? I just told you that you are githyanki in name only and that I barely view you as one of our race at all, and you are saying all these things? Do you think I'm some silly human druid girl who you can speak sweet things to and suddenly I'll ravage you?"

Ryth-Shan laughed lightly. "I think you may have been reading a bit too much into my relationship with Wynari," he told her. "We connect in some ways because we both love animals and nature. We are both..." He took a moment to get up his courage to finish that statement. "We are both followers of Silvanus. Therefore, we have our own kinship."

"So you admit it, then," said Lae'zel. "You do not serve Vlaakith at all. You serve the nature god."

Ryth-Shan sighed deeply and nodded. "Yes," he admitted. "I barely know anything about Vlaakith. I was so young when I lost everything. Silvanus is all I know. I had to survive out in nature for most of my life. That's why it means more to me than some undead lich who rules over a good portion of our people. But that doesn't mean I don't want to reconnect with our people, Lae'zel. I want to know them. I want to learn everything I can about them. They are a part of me in many ways, even if I have been separated from them."

"I will say, though," he added almost as an afterthought. "They have not been impressing me so far. You have, but they have not."

She was again surprised by his comments. "I have impressed you?" she asked.

"Yes," said Ryth-Shan, and she could feel that he meant it. "I know where you stand. As I said, you are straight-forward. If you tell me something about our people or Vlaakith or ghaik or whatever, I know that you aren't pretending to know. You truly know. You've done the work. You've researched it or you have learned it by

experience. If you don't know something, you say so. You are black-and-white. There is no gray with you, and that's comforting. You are like a solid rock. You aren't some shifting quicksand."

"And to me, you are the embodiment of the githyanki way." This he said while looking right into her eyes. He could see that she was totally caught off guard. Her usual hard expression was shattered. It was replaced with confusion. "In many ways, I find myself wanting to be more like you. I find myself wanting to emulate you. And more than that, Lae'zel, I find myself undeniably attracted to you."

She was not prepared for this. "Why are you saying all this?" she asked. "What do you hope to accomplish?"

Ryth-Shan couldn't help but smile. "See? Straight to the point. No games. And see? I am going to now try to emulate you. I was hoping you would ravage me, but I'd settle for you relaxing a bit and not being so angry and bitter and spiteful all the time. We can work ourselves up to the ravaging part later, perhaps."

"Chk!" she said as she turned away from him. "I highly doubt that you could win my favor so easily. It's not like you've done anything worthy of my attention."

"It's only been a few days," he replied. "Maybe I'll surprise you yet."

She looked back at him again. "What is the point of this conversation? Why are you wasting our time? I will not sleep with you, so if that is what you're trying..."

He covered her mouth with his palm, and she froze. No one had ever done such a thing before. Again, she didn't know how to respond, but he spoke first anyway. "I'm just trying to get you to relax with me; to enjoy yourself a bit instead of always being so stressed."

She pulled back so she could speak. "How can you relax at all with the parasites in us; when our kin is hunting us to kill us?"

He did not budge. He did not buckle under her hard gaze. "I had to learn to relax even in the midst of stressful situations. Believe it or not, Lae'zel, nature is a harsh and terrible creature. It is unforgiving and untamed. It shows no favoritism. If you want to survive, you need to fight hard. You need to be careful with every resource at your disposal, and you need to think before you act. You misjudge me. You think because I wasn't raised in a creche that my life was somehow easy and that I'm soft? You know nothing of what it is like to survive in the wilds of Faerun as a child barely knowing how to hold a knife, let alone use it. I had no teachers. I had no friends. I had no one to guide me. All I had was nature; harsh, vicious nature."

"Yet here I am. I'd say I've done pretty well for myself, all things considered. Even still, my life has been quite stressful, and I learned that if you don't relax during such situations, you will burn yourself out. In the wild, you can NEVER afford to be burnt out. If you do, you die."

"So your entire point of coming over here was really to try to get me to relax?" she said, still not fully believing him.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. Then he looked eyes with her again. "I wouldn't say it's my entire point, no," he replied. "We ate with the others, I chatted with Wynari and Scratch and made sure they were okay, and now I'd like to relax with YOU. I'd like to connect with you and enjoy your company. Lae'zel, I was saving you for last because you're the one I want to be around most. Why do you think I insisted on going with you to meet our people?" he asked. "Did you think I really wanted to meet them? No. Not really. I was afraid, just like the others, that they were going to do exactly what they tried to do. I didn't grow up with other githyanki, so naturally I don't trust them like you do. But, I trust YOU, though. That's why I went. I trust you and I wanted to stay by your side and support you. I also wanted to see your face light up when we found our kin and they led us to a creche to be healed."

She sat there, pondering, for several moments. Then, she said, "And you have no desire to mate with the human girl? You want to mate with me?" She seemed rather shocked.

He laughed lightly once more. "I don't know how she feels, but I have no desire for her. From the moment I met you, I'm telling you, I was attracted to you. I was TOTALLY attracted to you. I've been wanting to get close to you the whole time."

She looked away again, unsure what to think of it all. "You are certainly not like other males I've known," she admitted. "I have been drawn to you, though it is likely only because you are githyanki and I feel very alone. Naturally, we are the only ones similar to one another, so we will be drawn to each other. We can relate more to one another. So, your attraction is likely only there because I am the only githyanki female you've seen since you were a child who hasn't tried to kill you."

Ryth-Shan chuckled. "That is a plus. I do appreciate that you haven't tried to kill me... yet." He nudged her with his elbow. "That was a joke, you know."

She sighed. "I know. You are always joking."

"So can you stop scowling and smile like you did when we found the map to the creche nearby?" he asked.
"You lit up so brightly when you saw I had it. I really liked seeing you like that."

"Stop it!" she snapped.

"Stop what? What did I say?"

"Your endless compliments," she explained. "You keep trying to flatter me, and you keep telling me you liked what you saw and so forth. Those things do not excite me, Ryth-Shan. If you want to mate with me, you need to do something to get my blood boiling."

"Like what?" he asked.

"If I have to tell you, it will only lessen the experience," she replied. "I will admit, though, that I have never had a male try to court me so strongly before. It is not altogether unpleasant."

"You find it 'unpleasant' at all?" asked Ryth-Shan, not happy to hear that.

"It is uncomfortable," she replied. "I am not used to it. I don't know how to respond. So yes, it is not exactly enjoyable. The fact that you desire me and admire me is acceptable. That I DO like."

He was relieved. "That is also acceptable to me," he replied. "Fine. Then I shall stop telling you the absolute truth because you can't handle it. I shall only tell you that I desire you instead of how and when and why and where."

"Because I can't... HANDLE it?" she asked. She was appalled that he would even suggest that she could not handle something.

He laughed. "I was only teasing. I'm fairly certain you can handle anything."

"Tsk'va! I am going to have to get used to this, aren't I?" she muttered in exasperation.

"I hope you do," he replied. "I hope you do."

Chapter 76 - The Two New Parties

Finally, they all drifted off to sleep. Once again, their familiars and animal companions kept watch so they could get some rest. Of course, some didn't really sleep. Vexir, for example, was a drow, and they only meditated for a few hours every night to rest. Astarion was the same. But, even they dreamed. Thankfully, they did not involve the Dream Lover. However, they were fitful and full of emotion. The near death encounter with the githyanki patrol and the kith'rak and red dragon left them all feeling a bit restless.

Finally, morning came, and the party woke one or two at a time, prepared a meal, and chatted about their objectives for the day. They came to the decision quickly that their number one priority was now to get out of the region. With the githyanki searching for them, and at least one red dragon, remaining in the area was no longer a viable option. Lae'zel, in particular, was certain that it wouldn't take long before the entire landscape was crawling with githyanki searching for their mysterious weapon.

"The Risen Road is our best bet for getting out of here," said Gale.

"But the way west towards Baldur's Gate is pretty much impossible for us now," replied Ryth-Shan. "The dragon completely devastated the bridge at the crossing. There was a path on the south side of the river. It ran through the mountains further. However, I believe those lands are even more dangerous. That elf lady from Baldur's Gate mentioned the lands west of here being cloaked in shadow before you reach Moonrise Towers. It is likely that the path might lead into those lands."

"And our kin will likely expect us to go that way," added Lae'zel. She was still quite moody. "Without many places to hide, up on the sides of the cliffs, the dragon could pick us off easily."

"I was thinking east along the Risen Road," said Gale. "We don't have to go to Baldur's Gate. I mean. Don't get me wrong. I'd love to go there, but I'd rather avoid a dragon more."

"The east branch of the road had dead bodies lying all about, and lots of blood," said Kaedyn. "I do seem to recall several individuals mentioning gnolls as well in the area, including Scratch."

"That's right," said Ryth-Shan. "That way is likely the way Scratch and his friend were coming from. He was returning to Baldur's Gate when the gnolls attacked him."

"And don't forget that the tieflings came from the east and were also attacked by gnolls," said Wyll.

"We aren't just going to abandon everyone around here, are we?" asked Wynari. "Aren't we going to at least try to rescue Halsin?"

"And what about the tieflings and the druid ritual?" asked Wyll. "That note that we found in Kagha's chest. Aren't we going to investigate that at least before we leave?"

"The entire place is going to be crawling with githyanki," said Lae'zel. "I wouldn't at all be surprised if we find them out there already. We don't have time for that kind of thing."

"But, again, there is no guarantee of safety on the road," said Kaedyn. "The githyanki may be watching no matter which way we go."

"True," said Shadowheart. Then she sighed. "There seems to be no way out of this."

"We could go by river," suggested Wyll.

"Won't work," said Gale. "Even if we had a worthy vessel to take us, we'd be just as exposed as we would be on the road."

"So," said Shadowheart, "like I said, there is no way to go."

"Not true," said Vexir, her mind once again processing things at much faster speeds than usual since she was wearing the circlet. "Remember the Nightsong? It's supposed to be under the Temple of Selune, if I recall correctly. I think there's a way into the Underdark down there." Everyone was looking at her then. They were speechless, for it wasn't exactly their idea of a wise choice to travel anywhere close to the Underdark; any part of it.

She continued. "Several things imply that there is a way into the Underdark from there. First, there is a heavy drow presence in the area. They attacked the inn. They went to Moonrise Towers. Minthara leads them from the Temple of Selune, and she's a drow. Then there's the mention of the Nightsong and how it is under the temple. The deep gnome we rescued mentioned that he was on his way to his friend's home in the Underdark when the goblins jumped him. That's why he was in the area."

"So, let me get this straight," said Lae'zel. "You think it's a better idea to try to get out of this region through the Underdark?"

"Would the githyanki and the dragon be able to maneuver as well down there after us?" answered Vexir. "Would they be able to find us as easily?"

"She does have a valid point," said Kaedyn. "Traveling through the Underdark would leave us much less exposed to the dragon flying around."

"Makes sense to me," said Wyll. "We need to go to the goblin camp anyway to kill the gobbo leaders and free Halsin. We could do what needs to be done and get out of here all at the same time if we could find our way into the Underdark from there."

"We should at least check out the east road," suggested Gale. "The Underdark is a terrible place full of many other types of dangers. We might be escaping out of the frying pan only to drop into the fire, if you catch my meaning. I know the road east may be a long shot, but I'd almost rather take my chances there than invade drow territory."

"Spoken like a true cowardly mage," said Vexir heatedly. She still didn't like Gale in the slightest.

"We also need to stop Kagha and the druids," said Wynari.

"Freeing Halsin would do that," said Wyll. "I still say we need to focus on the goblin camp. All roads lead there."

"I'd also like to go back to the Necromancer's Lab," said Astarion. "We could swing by there and just check it out on the way. We already took out the fool's guardians. It's just waiting for us now to loot it. Might be something useful there that we can use. Who knows, he had undead and such, and there seemed to be a lot of caves and so forth. Maybe there's a way into the Underdark from there, too."

"Not a bad idea," said Gale. "I'd also be interested in the Necromancer's Lab."

"Perhaps we should split up again," said Kaedyn. "I'm also curious about the road east. All those dead bodies, there could be others who need help. Also, like Gale, I am a bit leary of heading into the Underdark."

Vexir laughed. "A drow afraid of the Underdark. That's definitely something you don't see everyday. Maybe it's because of your weak human side." He gave her a dirty look, and she returned it.

The group voted on this idea, and they agreed. They would once again split up into two parties. However, this time, different members were interested in different things. The plan was to have everyone remain together until they reached Moonhaven; Bogrot or the Blighted Village as it was now called by different people. They would all investigate the Necromancer's Lair, for they all wanted to see if there was something of interest there. Besides, who knew what other strange things might attack them. It would be good to return with all their strength.

After that, the plan was to have Kaedyn and Vexir lead a party north to check out the Risen Road taking the eastern branch. This would admittedly be a dangerous venture, for who knew when the githyanki might return and with what numbers. It was likely that they would be on the Risen Road first and foremost. Still, they felt it was at least worth it to have them sneak around a bit to try to find out. With Kaedyn and Vexir would be Astarion and Shadowheart. Both were stealthier, for they learned that Shadowheart had cleric spells that were more stealth based. It would help them all avoid detection even if the githyanki were lurking about.

The other group would be led by Ryth-Shan and Wynari. They would head south into the bog. After all, the note to Kagha mentioned something called "the Swamp-docks" and a tree. Kagha was supposed to meet Olodan there. The only place they knew of that would fit such a description was the bog to the south. They figured that Ryth-Shan and Wynari were nature people, so they would make the best leaders for that team.

Searching the bog and finding the evidence against Kagha was important to Ryth-Shan, Wynari, and even to Wyll. Putting a stop to Kagha's Ritual of Thorns would save the grove and the tieflings from being kicked out, and it would continue to provide them with a safe haven should the dragon and githyanki return. Even if it wasn't a permanent place of safety, it was at least something more than their camp and the Dank Crypt.

They would each search their prospective locations and then meet back at Moonhaven. Then they would head on their way into the goblin camp together to put an end to the goblin leaders. At that point, without Sazza and the ogres, it would likely take everything they had to accomplish this goal. After all, sneaking in and assassinating the leaders was going to be much more difficult, they figured.

So, the parties were: Kaedyn, Vexir, Astarion and Shadowheart heading north and Ryth-Shan, Wynari, Lae'zel, Gale and Wyll heading south. With this decided, the group finished their breakfast, washed up and used the Netherese Rune to port into Bogrot. The goblins were back out, combing the town again. It was a good sign that the githyanki and dragon hadn't been seen for awhile. They were searching for something, per their orders, but they didn't seem to know what; just something unique and special. Vexir questioned a few of them, and they gave her the same respect as before.

The group was surprised by this. Had something happened to Sazza? Had she not reported back? When Vexir asked them, the goblins shrugged and said they hadn't seen her since she ran off when the dragon showed up. "She and the ogres run'd off east and never returned," one female goblin told her.

"We'll have to maybe go look for her," said Vexir to her companions after some thought. "We might still be able to use her after all. If the dragon scared her and the ogres enough, they could be hiding somewhere still afraid to come out."

"The owlbear cave," said Gale. "No doubt. She knew we'd cleared it out, and it was the closest place to flee to."

"Let's search the Necromancer's Lair, the Risen Road and the Bog first," Vexir suggested. "Then, when we're ready to go to the goblin camp, we'll go look for Sazza first. Agreed?"

"Hopefully, the ogres haven't eaten her yet," said Astarion with a sadistic grin.

Vexir shrugged. "We'll cross that bridge, I guess, when we get to it." And with that, they made their way back down into the apothecary cellar and into the secret lair of the Necromancer, Ilyn Toth.