

## Chapter 40 - The Doom of Grymforge

Tav returned to where Philomeen had died. She brought with her an old rag she had taken from the dock area. She knew it'd be treacherous to try to run and jump back across with the ground so slick with blood, so she brought something with her to dry the path. When she was done, she tossed the rag to the side, ran and made it across. Then she hurried back into the Contemplation Chamber to rejoin her friends. Omelum watched as Morghal followed from a safe distance. When Tav entered the room, she jumped across and silently made her way to the door to eavesdrop.

The others were still not doing well, so after Tav reported her findings, she cast Prayer of Healing upon everyone. It took ten minutes, but afterwards, they were all feeling much better. They had gathered near the front of the platform where the campfire was. The explosion and resulting cave-in had put out the fire, but they had cleared the debris and relit it.

While Tav was gone, the others had searched the room for valuables. There was a Sharran journal near the skeleton by the altar. It had a red leather cover. It was a dusty old prayer-book, scripture hastily overwritten by scrawled diary entries. On the altar, there were three tablet fragments. They were moral commandments and dogmatic prayers inscribed upon stone slabs. It appeared that they were all one tablet at one point. The bottom of one, and the top of another, was obviously broken off. The top and bottom of a third were jagged, and they all fit together to form one long text.

On a bookshelf nearby, they found a book called "Grymforge: A History." A layer of soot coated the tome's thick hide binding. Near this, they also found a collection of scrolls: Fire Bolt, Flame Blade, Heat Metal and Detect Thoughts. Izar'la took these, though she could not use Flame Blade or Heat Metal, for she was not a druid, artificer or bard.

In the alcove on the left, where there was a skeleton fallen upon an altar, they found a key. It was gripped in the skeleton's hand, and it was pitted from use. The grip was stained with something organic. Pona took this. She was the party's "locksmith" after all. The skeleton also had a dagger, and Izar'la took that.

In one of the backpacks around the camp, the party found a map, drafted with a careful hand. Pona also took that, for she was the scout of the group. "At last," she said. "A map to replace the one Zrathentil took." Then she unrolled it and examined it. "It's a map of Grymforge, all right, drawn by hand yet highly detailed. Points of interest are marked with black 'X's, aside from two, which are identified by bold red circles; one on each level of the fortress. The words 'Hiding Spot' are written within the upper-level circle. Looks like that's where we are presently. The lower-level circle is identified as 'Smokepowder Reserve.' Guess where that was?"

Rina chuckled. "Detention Block Double A-Twenty-Three maybe?"

Pona laughed. "Detention Block Double A-Twenty-Three? Where did you get that? Did you see it on some sort of plaque or something?"

"Nope," said Rina. "Just came to me. Whipped it out my bum. No idea where that came from. It was like some mystical force dropped it in my brain."

"Well," said Pona, not sure what to think of her at times. "Yes. 'Smokepowder Reserve' indicates the prison area, in that secret one we found. Obviously, this was drawn up by the gnomes. Thank you Philomeen for leaving it here. We'll put it to good use. She doesn't have the entire fortress mapped out, of course, but she's got a good portion of things drawn up for us. Maybe we should explore some of these other places. Might find something useful."

"Why not?" said Izar'la. "As far as I'm concerned, we've got all the time in the world. The longer we take, the more likely Nere is dead."

"One thing I thought of, though," said Tav. "There were gnomes trapped with Nere. They'll die too."

Izar'la looked a bit callous about it. "And? Sorry, but the gnomes dropped to the bottom of my objectives list. Philomeen nearly killed us for that runepowder crap, and now we don't even know where it is. Is the keg broken open? Has the runepowder spilled into the lake? Is it floating out there somewhere for some OTHER crazy people to find and use?"

"They ALL came down here for it. They ALL were planning on using it for the same reason. In other words, all these deep gnomes are crazy extremists. They may seem nice, but that doesn't mean they ARE nice. As far as I'm concerned, saving them isn't good. It's potentially unleashing havoc upon the citizens of Baldur's Gate."

"Think about it, Tav. If they get their hands on explosives, and they return to the city, do you think they won't use those explosives on people? Suddenly, there will be bombings in Baldur's Gate, and do you think their enemies will be the ONLY ones who get hurt by them? Smokepowder or runepowder, I don't want them getting any of it. And even if they don't get any of that, do you think they'll stop? No. They're crazy fanatics who are going to find SOME way to create death and destruction."

“So, I’m sorry, but I don’t care now. We’ve seen their true colors, and they aren’t pretty,” she concluded. “Let them die with Nere. Maybe the duergar will kill the others off for us too. Then we won’t have to worry about them massacring a lot of people later.”

“Wow,” said Tav. “That’s pretty cold. Not everyone in a group like that is bad. Aren’t you also being a bit extremist?”

“Nope,” said Izar’la. “Think about it, Tav. Let’s say it’s the Flaming Fist that they’re after. They’re not exactly the most wholesome lot, you know. The Flaming Fist might ‘keep the peace,’ but it is often through bullying tactics, bribery, extortion, and violence. What if the whole reason these gnomes are here is because the Flaming Fist killed one of their clan leaders; a beloved member of the clan. Now they’re all out for blood. So, they come here, get smokepowder or - GODS! Runepowder! Stuff to blow up cities! - Then they set some near the headquarters of the Flaming Fist - oh, but they use too much.”

“Boom! Baldur’s Gate is a shattered ruin; a crater. Countless lives gone in a moment because they used a bit too much. Was it just the Fist that were blown up? Nope. Now thousands upon thousands of lives are gone or destroyed. Jonny Merchant was in the city selling his wares. Gone. Leaves his wife and ten kids without a father back in the small town he’s from. Why are they without a father? Because WE helped some stupid, crazy, explosive-happy gnomes.”

“Gotta say,” said Rina sympathetically to Tav, “she’s got a point. She’s not wrong. If those gnomes survive because of us and return and kill a bunch of people, WE’LL be the ones who feel super guilty about it. We could have prevented it simply by not getting involved.”

“Still,” said Pona. “NOT helping the gnomes seems wrong too. As Tav said before, it isn’t on us if we do the right thing and in turn someone does the wrong thing. We would do the right thing out of hope that in turn they will then go and do right. You can’t control people. If we free them and they do evil, that’s on them. That’s not on us.”

“Sorry, but again I disagree,” said Izar’la. “If I know that these people are out to kill other people, and I free them - and they go kill other people as a result - the deaths of those people are on my head. I knowingly let crazy murderers go free.”

“Imagine you have a cultist of Cyric locked up behind bars instead. You encounter the person and she’s all sweet and friendly and nice. She begs you to set her free. You’re about to do so when you discover she’s a cultist of Cyric. She is crazy and loves to murder people, but she assures you she’s changed her ways. Should you let her go just because she’s acting all nice and says she’s changed? No. She’s a crazy psychopath who is going to go free and kill people. If I let her go not knowing she is a Cyric-ite, or whatever you call them, then I’m innocent due to ignorance. I should still try to make it right later, but at least I didn’t know better. If I let her go knowing she’s a murderous witch who’s killed countless people, that’s on me; ALL on me.”

“Stop,” said Tav, holding up her hand. “Okay. Let’s not fight over this. It’s true. It’s impossible for us to really know whether someone is going to change their ways or not. We can’t read minds or hearts. We can only go based on their actions. It is true that IF Philomeen was telling the truth, they ALL are down here for the same reason - to find explosives to blow people up.”

“However, it was only Philomeen who said this. We can’t be sure they ALL were down here for the same reason. It may be that some were here leading innocent, naive others who thought they were here merely for precious stones or adamantite or whatever. I’d like to not judge everyone simply because of the word of one crazy extremist who tried to kill us.”

“Think of the ones trying to dig Nere out. One was desperate about his sister. Another was desperately scared for Philomeen’s life. Did she care about the runepowder? Did she even know about it? Didn’t seem like it to me. The one with her seemed like he maybe knew about it, but I don’t think Laridda did. And even IF she knew about it, many people don’t really follow things through to their logical conclusions. They blindly follow and trust, thinking they’re doing a good thing. Then, in the end, they are blindsided by those they trusted.”

“All that to say, I agree that the gnomes might be bad. I agree that they should no longer be our top priority, per se. However, I do not want to just leisurely wander around and take forever so that all the gnomes die just so we can easily kill Nere. If we can save the gnomes while killing Nere and his followers, I’d like to at least try to give them the benefit of the doubt. If, after we’ve saved them, we get the impression that they all knew about the runepowder and they were all planning on using it, and we think they are seriously bad, then we do something about it. Otherwise, I don’t want to just write them all off as extremists who are out to kill a bunch of innocent people.”

Izar’la looked away, still upset, but she relented. “Fine,” she replied, and she said nothing more.

“Why don’t we focus on something else?” said Pona with haste. “Why don’t we see what these say?” She gestured to the stone tablets and the red leather bound book that they’d already arranged on the floor. “We waited for you to return to read them.” She said this to Tav as she dropped down on hands and knees to begin reading.

“I’ll read the tablets first,” said the halfling. “I think they have some information about who the paladin is that this place was dedicated to. Might give us some more insights on things.”

“So said Shar to me, Ketheric Thorm: ‘It was Lord Ao who created chaos; it was from chaos that I formed; and it is I who anoint you my paladin. From this day forth, let My Laws be known.’”

“The Law of Secrets: What is a secret, but truth cast into darkness? Lurk in the shadows and listen for hushed words. The softer a thought spoken, the more scars it may carve. If a man brags of affairs, carry his words to his wife. If a daughter steals from her father, whisper the truth. The deceived turn to Shar. Cuckolds find solace in shadow. Do this o...’ Oh. The inscription ends here, but it starts on the next tablet. ‘...once a tenday,’ it says, ‘Do this once a tenday, and the Lady of Loss shall know you.’”

“Do what exactly?” asked Rina.

“Um,” said Pona, rereading. “Oh. Whisper the truth and tell of words spoken in hushed tones and such. So, apparently, servants of Shar were supposed to tattle on people? Hmmm. That’s kinda a contradiction, isn’t it? If she’s a goddess of loss, or whatever, and goddess of forgetfulness, then shouldn’t things spoken in secret be kept secret or even just plain forgotten?”

Tav shook her head. “Shar’s a witch with a capital ‘B’. What can I say? People are supposed to forget whenever it’s convenient for THEM. Other people’s sins, now that’s another story. Use them whenever you can. It’s part of their devotions to gossip and spread rumors to try to destroy people’s lives. After all, not everything that is spoken with ‘hushed words’ is true, but that tablet sure did twist it to sound good, didn’t it?”

“No. MOST things spoken in such a way are just made up, hurtful, and destructive with maybe a peppering of the truth. A person should find out the truth first or completely stay out of it. IF they discover the truth, they need to handle the truth in the right way. The truth is dangerous if not handled right. It can inadvertently destroy countless lives. Sometimes talking to the offender is the best way to go. Get them to see the error of their ways. Sometimes going to the authorities is the best way to go. It takes wisdom to properly handle such situations.”

“One of the worst things a person can do when they hear a ‘secret truth’ is to go around telling it. So many foul gossips use this ideology as an excuse to spread nasty lies. ‘I’m just trying to tell someone the truth,’ they say, and ‘I’m really just trying to look out for them.’ Bah! They don’t have anyone’s best interests at heart but their own. They like telling juicy stories and being viewed as someone ‘in the know,’ and they like to use gossip and rumors to make themselves look and feel better. It’s disgusting.”

“What else is there?” asked Izar’la. She was hoping to stop Tav from preaching at them further.

Pona went back to reading. “The Law of Nightfall: From the moon falls the foulest of lights. It peeks through cracks and fissures, illuminating the most remote recesses of the Underdark. Light bestows hope, a pernicious notion which must be extinguished. At the darkest hour, pray to your Lady and feast in Her honor. The second day after, slay a...’ Oh. Um. Maybe I should stop there.” She looked up at Tav. “Sorry, Tav. I didn’t realize what this was saying at first.”

Tav closed her eyes and shook her head. Then she opened them again and said, “Don’t worry about it. You can keep going. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure?” asked Pona who now looked like a puppy that had been swatted on the rump by its master.

Tav nodded, and her jaw was set firmly. This was not exactly pleasant for her, but she did seem to have a determination in her. It was as if she wanted Pona to read it so she could face her past yet again and conquer it.

Guessing this was the case, she continued. “At the darkest hour, pray to your Lady and feast in Her honor. The second day after, slay a disciple of Selune. If none may be found, a Lathanderian or Mystran are an acceptable offering. Do this once a tenday, and the Lady of Loss shall know you.”

“The L...’ Again, the inscription ends here and starts on the last slab. ‘The Law of Obedience: The Word of Ketheric Thorm is the Word of Shar. You shall put no god nor mortal before him; you shall question him in neither word nor deed. When the sun has fallen and the moon is new, bow your head in prayer. Proclaim your devotion to Shar and Her paladin, Ketheric Thorm. Promise your soul and flesh, and seek no fortune nor favor. When your prayer is finished, speak thus: ‘Mistress Shar. I have glorified Your name! Master Thorm. I have cried out your Word! I am Your servant, forevermore!’”

“So said Shar to me, Ketheric Thorm: ‘So it is decreed, and so it is done. Wield the power of secret. Where light shines, extinguish it. Heed the Word of your Mistress and Master. Do this, and the Lady of Loss shall know you.’”

“Rubbish!” said Rina with a wave of her hand. “Bet that Ketheric Thorm guy was a pompous, arrogant \$#@\$. ”

“What does the history book say?” asked Tav. She was happy the tablets were done, and she wanted to move on quickly.

“‘Grymforge: A History,’” read Pona. “Wow! The binding of this book is thicker than its combined pages, which are surprisingly devoid of detail. It reads, ‘We know little of the ones that came before, but we know they worshiped the Lady of Loss. We know they constructed the great fortress, and named...’ Hmmm. The next few words are smeared and illegible. Guess we don’t get to know the original name of this place.”

“Probably something dumb,” said Rina. “Hah! Bet it was called, ‘Wazoo. Where the Sun Don’t Shine.’” She laughed.

Pona shook her head, decided not to respond to Rina’s bad joke, and continued. “‘But from whence they came, and why they departed - this is a mystery even to Ketheric Thorm himself. What we do know is that Shar’s chosen has heard Her call. Just as Grymforge served our Mistress eight-hundred years nigh, so it would again.’”

“Eight hundred years ago?” said Izar’la. Then she whistled. “That’s a WHOLE lot older than I thought it was. So, it was originally built eight hundred years ago - No. NINE hundred years ago-ish, because we’re a hundred-ish years after this was written - and for whatever reason, the inhabitants abandoned it. Then, like a hundred years ago, or whatever, this Ketheric guy came along and rebuilt it.”

“No wonder the place is falling apart,” said Tav. “If this is true, then Grymforge was originally built in roughly 560-something. Does it say anything else?”

“‘Here, Thorm’s Dark Justiciars shall rise,’” read Pona. “‘Here, we will fulfill our Goddess’ pact.’ Her pact? Wonder what pact they’re referring to.”

“Who knows?” said Rina. “Maybe a deal with a devil or one of the other gods.”

Pona shrugged. “‘Here, we will rebuild the lost city of Grymforge. So far will our shadows spread, and so dark will they be, that Selune’s light may be forever extinguished.’”

“What a surprise,” said Tav sarcastically. Then she grew very serious. “I’m getting a bad feeling about this place, and I don’t mean that I’m upset because Shar’s my enemy. What I mean is that something bad happened here twice. Shar’s people dwelled here and built a fortress and city and temple and loaded it with Dark Justiciars, and both times it was vacated. Something bad dwells here, I’m thinking, and it’s dwelled here for nine hundred years - something with the capability to destroy whole armies.”

Pona set the history book down and picked up the Sharran journal. “Well, that’s a pleasant thought,” she said. “Now I’m wondering if I should keep reading or if we should just stop. Have we had enough scary stories for one day?”

“Best if we learn all that we can at this point,” said Izar’la. “Who knows what might be lurking out there. I say we keep reading.” Tav and Rina nodded in agreement.

Pona sighed. Then she opened the red leather bound book. “‘Day 1: Never saw a beast like it. Bloated with muscle, tusks as long as my arms. Scent of charred flesh, but I saw no flames. The stone might have been parchment, so quick did the creature charge through it. The other Justiciars are dead - or close to it.’”

“‘It wasn’t alone,’” she continued. “‘Hellknights, too. Masks bolted to their faces, like plaques to a keep wall.’” Then she flipped a page. “‘Dang. A lot of it’s obscured.’” She flipped another page. “‘Ah. Here. ‘Day 3: Trapped. Another rampage, and down the walls came. Started to dig. Not sure...’ Urgh! Can’t make out anymore.’” She flipped a few more pages. “‘Day 7: It’s done. May Shar’s shadows keep me.’”

“Done?” said Rina. “What’s done?”

“Don’t know,” said Pona. She flipped page after page. “The rest is illegible.” She closed the book. “Well, one thing’s for sure. Looks like your bloody theory is correct. Some massive demon from the Hells rampaged through this place. Did you hear? Hellknights. I think those are minions of Asmodeus, aren’t they?”

“Minions from the Hells, yes,” said Rina. “They’re called narzugons. If I remember correctly, they are powerful baatezu; elite cavalry. Never encountered any, thankfully, when I was in Avernus, but I heard about them. They mostly serve Asmodeus, but I think most powerful demons have a few under their command. They ride about usually on their flaming hell-horses called ‘nightmares.’ They’re about human height, and they are fully encased in spiked, plated armor with trophies of past victories on them. It is said that they are identical, but their eyes hold immense sadness in them.”

“Well, what about the beast?” asked Pona. “Any idea what it could have been? I mean, it certainly fits the scene that some massive hell-beast came plowing through here. I just don’t know what it could have been based on that description. Some sort of hell-elephant maybe?”

“Zariel had an elephant mount,” said Rina. “She’s now the Archfiend of Avernus; the upper plane of the Hells. That’s the plane we passed through on the mind flayer ship, and it was to that plane that Elturel went. Zariel was an angel originally. Back in like the 1350’s, Elturgard was plagued by fiends and such. Zariel defied her

superiors and came to the Material Plane. To save Elturel and the surrounding lands, she led the Hellriders - not to be confused with the Hellknights - into Avernus."

"And the Hellriders are Elturel's soldiers or something, right?" said Pona.

"That's kinda the gist of it," said Rina. "Anyway, they were defeated, and Zariel was captured and corrupted by Asmodeus. He basically made her his champion and set her loose to fight in the Blood War. Now, I heard she had a mastodon that could shrink to miniature size or grow to massive size to be her mount. It's entirely possible that this mount was the massive beast plowing through this place."

"However, I'm not totally sure. Lulu was intelligent, and if I remember correctly, she didn't get corrupted like Zariel did. I think Lulu was separated from her. Plus, I don't think Zariel and Lulu would have come to the Material Plane to this place. Doesn't seem quite right."

"Any other ideas, then, what it could have been?" asked Izar'la. "We might actually run into this thing if it's sleeping around here."

"Or out in that lava lake just waiting for us," said Pona, a chill running down her spine.

"Maybe it's a nalfashnee," said Rina. "That's my best guess."

"What in the Hells is that?" asked Pona. "Pun intended." She wasn't grinning. She was scared. They all were.

"Pretty much fits the description," said Rina with some thought. "Bloated but muscular. Long tusks. Nasty smell. No flames. Yeah. I'd say it fits." She then launched into more details. "So, these I've met - well, I met one - and I can tell you, they're a soil-yourself sight to be seen; and that's downplaying it. Imagine a twenty-ish foot tall, maybe ten thousand pound, hulking, bipedal mass. It is like a cross between a boar and an ape standing on two legs but with small, feathered wings that look WAY too small for its tubby bulk. Yeah, it's got like cloven feet, a big butt and belly, huge boobies, massive gorilla arms with claws, and an ape-like head. The tusks protrude out of the lower jaw, and its teeth are like blades. It also has hair like a gorilla, and it smells like - well, like charred flesh."

"Nalfashnees can fly, in spite of their wings being so small. You'd think it'd look utterly ridiculous, but let me tell you that you would not think so if you saw one. It almost makes them look MORE frightening. It's just unnatural, and that messes with your head. If they walk, they waddle, so they prefer to fly, and they have glowing red eyes that look at you hungrily as if you are the tastiest morsel the creature has ever seen."

"And then, as if all that wasn't unsettling enough, you'd think these things had no intelligence. You'd think they were just huge, dumb thugs. Nope. They put on airs as if they are above brawling and smashing things. But don't be fooled. They are demons with a near irresistible bloodlust. When they get into a fight, they have this nimbus ability. They magically emit a scintillating, multicolored light about fifteen feet around them that scares the \$#@\$ out of you. They can teleport up to like a hundred and twenty feet, and they can summon other demons. They have telepathic powers, are as strong as giants, are immune to poison, and they are resistant to just about everything under the sun that isn't magical. Hells! They're even resistant to cold, fire and lightning, so even some magic attacks are useless against them. And, just to put the cherry on it, they have truesight, so you can't even turn invisible to escape them."

"So, I'd say it fits. They are judges of the Abyss, and they process damned souls from the Mountain of Woe. They sit atop flaming thrones, and they are the ones who turn the newly deceased into manes or other lesser demons. I could see one of them leading an assault on a place like this, if given the chance. It'd gladly do so to gain favor and maybe a promotion from one of the demon lords."

And with that, a paralyzing silence fell between them. After a few moments, Pona decided to try to lighten the mood by saying, "Well. Who's up for going to find Kethryn and raising him from the dead now? Anyone?" She was only half joking.

Izar'la forced a chuckle. "You know, it's not a bad idea. Nere's trapped and dying, and the duergar are already ready to kill one another and the gnomes. We could probably walk away and everything would work itself out here. And, on top of that, we wouldn't potentially run into a monstrous, bloated, pig-gorilla demon lord thing."

"I wonder how it all ended," said Tav. "I mean, whatever it was that was unleashed here, why didn't it continue beyond Grymforge? Where did it go? Where did all of the Hellknights go? Are they still down here somewhere? Did the same thing happen twice? Are they guarding something special?"

The silence returned once more. No one particularly had an answer. They weren't sure, anymore, how they should proceed. Finally, Tav said, "We should, at least, use the runepowder to destroy the forge. Don't you think?"

Izar'la couldn't argue with that. "Probably," she replied. "I mean, this whole place is dangerous. What if there is more runepowder down here somewhere? What if someone discovers how to make massive quantities of adamantine armor, weapons and equipment? This place should be destroyed, and we potentially have the means to

do it. We have the vial of runepowder. If it is as powerful as Philomeen said it is, then the container Rina has will blow the whole forge to pieces if we detonate it in the right place.”

“Especially if there’s more runepowder somewhere around,” added Pona. “How WE’RE going to get out alive and blow this place up, now THAT’S what I’m most concerned about right now.”

“You know,” said Tav, shaking her head grimly. “I hate to say it, but the more we’re talking, the more I’m caving. I don’t know. Should we just find the forge, blow it up, and get out of here? I mean, learning that there is either a gateway to Hell somewhere in this place, or that some - what did you call it? - massive pig-gorilla demon thing might be lurking around...”

Pona put her hand on Tav’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Let’s just take one step at a time. Our plan actually hasn’t changed. Right? We found Philomeen, and we have the runepowder and smokepowder reserves. We can use some to blow open the temple entrance and try to save some of the gnomes and free Nere, if we decide that’s the right thing to do. We still have time to think it over. First, we need to find the forge. One way or another. That’s our objective right now. Even if we’re going to decide to try to save the gnomes and kill Nere ourselves, the forge comes first so we can make Izar’la’s anti-magic daggers.”

“True,” said Rina. “Whether we’re just going to destroy the forge or free the gnomes, kill Nere and then destroy the forge, we have to find the forge first.”

“Then it’s settled,” said Tav. She stood to her feet. Though they had at least arrived at a decision, she was still quite jittery. They all were. “Shall we?” And with that, the party collected their things and headed out.

Morghal didn’t need to find a particularly great hiding spot. She easily slouched amongst the barrels near where she’d stashed the barrel of runepowder. The party didn’t look in her direction. They exited the chamber and quickly headed for the gap, just as she planned.

“So,” she said softly to herself as soon as they were out of sight. “I was right. Our objectives are roughly the same. Maybe I won’t have to do it all myself. The question is, will the sample of runepowder you have be enough to really destroy this place - I mean, REALLY destroy it. I don’t want it to just be partially buried. I want it obliterated. This powder keg would certainly be enough, but what if what they have is sufficient? I could reserve this for something else; maybe MANY something elses - maybe for whatever evil lurks below...”

Deciding that it wasn’t the right time to make that decision, she popped the keg open. Carrying it around was rather inconvenient and conspicuous, but if she had a bunch of smaller containers, she’d be able to conceal them. While Tav had been searching for Philomeen, Morghal had pondered this. And so, she went to the duergar stores in both prisons and gathered up as many canisters as she could find. With them, and a pack to carry them in, she set to work. When she was done, she carefully placed them in her new pack, put it on her back, and set out to follow her new “companions.” She made sure not a single grain of runepowder was left in the barrel.

## Chapter 41 - Only One Way Out

Tav and her companions went back down through the kitchen and into the dock area. As they made their way past the lift, they noticed that no one was there. So, they decided to investigate it to see if the lift was still functional. After all, they'd just learned that the place was quite old. There was no guarantee that anything still worked. Besides that, they were even more eager to leave.

The lift was within a chamber that was about twenty feet by twenty feet with a rather tall archway. Under the front part of the lift, dead center in the room, there was a large purple circle with four smaller circles along the circumference at the north, south, east and west positions. It looked like a compass with two pointed crossbars connecting the circles and intersecting in the middle.

The lift was against the east wall and took over the entire length of it. The front, facing west, was open, allowing passengers to board easily. The sides and back of the rectangular, iron elevator had criss-crossing beams that provided safety so individuals couldn't tumble out. There was a track running up into the darkness of the shaft with many teeth on it. The lift would use this track to slowly climb. The top of the lift had an arched roof constructed of solid, iron plates. A gate could be pulled down, providing passengers with additional security. The floor was grated atop six solid iron supports.

Upon their arrival, they were surprised to find a gnome huddling fearfully within the lift chamber. It was Skickpit, the gnome who'd been serving Magmar and Pistle. As they approached, he cried out in alarm. "Wait! Please! Don't hurt me. I... I can explain everything." He was holding a broken lantern of sorts, and he looked as guilty as sin.

Rina held up her hands. "Relax. We're not here to hurt you. We're just checking out the lift."

"Why are you here?" asked Tav. "And where are the duergar that were here?"

"Magmar and Pistle are dead," said Skickpit. "Craziest thing. The duergar are turning on one another, or something. Probably has to do with the Cult of the Absolute." Then he eyed them curiously. "Aren't you members of the cult?"

"No," said Tav firmly. "We certainly are not, but don't go blabbing that. THEY think we are." She jabbed a finger in the direction of Thrinn. "So, tell us more. What happened?"

Sickpit looked around nervously. It was as if he was expecting to see a murderer loom out of the shadows at any moment. "Greymon came. He's the one who escorted you on the boat when you first arrived. He walked up and started a fight with Magmar and Pistle. No idea why, but it was obvious he was purposely starting something. He then ran down the stairs. They chased him. Next thing I know, spiders are swarming them - Magmar and Pistle that is."

"Then Morghal shows up. She's the one who was running the dock - bald head. She and her partner - I forget his name - start duking it out with Greymon. Spiders kill Magmar and drag him off. Pistle jumps in the lake and starts swimming away. Then..." He fell silent, turning pale. "I don't know what happened. I couldn't see well from here, but I swear to you they killed Greymon. And... I... AFTER Greymon fell, Morghal's partner died too. I could swear something ELSE killed him. I don't even know what. All I know is Morghal starts swinging at something. It attacks her. Then... Nothing. She heals herself and walks off to the dock. She gets on the boat, helps Pistle up, and clubs her to death with her mace."

"What in bloody blazes is happening?" Skickpit asked. "I don't know, but I don't want to know. I'm getting out of here, if I can. Problem is, there's only one way that I know of to get out of here." He jerked a finger at the lift. "But I can't go up."

"Why?" asked Rina. "Is the lift busted?"

Sickpit shook his head. "Lift still works. Duergar got it back up and running per Nere's command. Makes going surface-side more convenient. Problem is, if you go up there, you need a special lantern, I think. Magmar had one." He held up the broken lantern. "During the fight, it got knocked off the crate and damaged. Now, it doesn't work." He tossed the lantern into a corner near the lift.

"What happens if you don't have one of those special lanterns?" asked Izar'la.

Sickpit shrugged. "Not sure, to be honest. Sounded bad, though - like ya won't make it anywhere without one. I wasn't about to risk it, so I was trying to see if I could get the dumb thing working. I know Nere has one, but I don't think anyone else."

"Is there any other way out of Grymforge?" asked Pona.

"Your boat," said Skickpit. "I could take it, provided you let me, but I probably wouldn't get far there either. Gate's down. I'd have to somehow sneak to the gate release, hurry back to the boat amidst a thunderous ruckus, steal it, guide it out, and hope to the Hells that I don't get caught by one of the patrolling duergar boats out there in the Ebonlake passages. I could pull a Thulla and risk swimming across the lake, but that's even more risky."

Flesh-eating fish, kuo-toas, and who knows what else could be lurking out there, and there's STILL a risk I could get caught by one of the patrols."

The companions looked at one another. "So, what you're saying is, the land above is extremely deadly unless you have one of those lanterns," said Tav. "There's no way out of Grymforge except via our boat or into that dangerous land above."

Izar'la then cleared a few things up. "I think I know where the lift leads."

The others looked at her. "You do?" asked Rina. "Where?"

"The Shadow Cursed Land," the gith replied with a haunted expression. "I've heard terrible things about it. Everything is shrouded in shadow. Nothing is natural there. There is no real life or light. Those who try to pass through it are - transformed into shadows. They are tortured souls bent on harming anything that attempts to pass through the land."

"And the lanterns make travel through it possible?" asked Pona.

Skickpit shrugged. "I guess. I know they've gone up and down that way, and each time they had a lantern. I've also heard them talking about it, and I've heard warnings about going up there without one. So, I guess you could naturally assume the lanterns are essential to not dying up there."

Tav rubbed the bridge of her nose with the fingers of her left hand to try to alleviate some of the stress building up there. "Which means we only have one way out."

"We do?" asked Skickpit. "What way is that? It looks to me like we have no real way out, unless you're going to escort me across the lake on your boat."

"Well, going back by boat and trying to find another way to the surface IS a viable option," said Tav. "However, who knows how long that could take? Who knows what else we might run into on the way? We know that the behir was lurking around the area where Izar'la, here, entered the Underdark, for she was pursued by it. So, although we COULD take that way out, there is a good chance we might run into the stupid thing. As you said," she said to Skickpit, "we also might run into more of the duergar patrols who may or may not see us as enemies. I mean, we've been fortunate so far that they see us as allies, but there's no guarantee they all will. Again, like you said, the duergar seem to be fighting with one another. Some may try to kill us on sight."

"We COULD try to go up through the stupid spider lair," said Rina. "After all, we're planning on going there to see if we can bring Kethryn back, right? So, we could just keep going and try to finish off what's left of the matriarch and her minions."

"True," said Pona. "That matriarch seemed pretty tough, though. I liked the idea of just finding Kethryn, dragging him away to some safe place, and THEN raising him from the dead."

Tav sighed. "You know what we have to do. Doesn't your gut tell you? We have to blow the stupid entrance open to that temple and free Nere. This guy," she gestured to the gnome, "just got done telling us there's only one other person who has a stupid lantern. Nere."

"So it's back to the original plan," said Izar'la. "Nice. We're so close to the surface, and yet we run into another roadblock."

"You're going to free Nere?" said Skickpit. "That sucks. Isn't there another way?"

"You have clansmen stuck in there with that maniac," said Pona, "and you DON'T want us to blow it open?" She switched to sarcasm. "Man! You all ARE a close-knit bunch, ain't ya?"

Skickpit shrugged. "It's been a nightmare. We're all looking to just get away at this point. If I could get out of here right now, I wouldn't hesitate - especially after seeing that scene earlier. We all knew the risks. We were all willing to take them."

Izar'la met Tav's gaze with an "I told you so" look. Then she said, "Well, you can't have our boat. So, if I were you, I'd go find somewhere to hide - wait for things to cool down."

"I know a place," said Skickpit. "We all knew about it. Secret. Safe."

"Contemplation Chamber?" asked Izar'la. "Yeah. It's safe - well, now maybe. Had to clear the way of oozes first and a mad gnome sorcerer who tried to blow us up. We just came from there."

"You did?" asked Skickpit, more than a little frightened. "You... FOUND it? You met Phil?"

"We were told about it," said Tav, a bit put out that Izar'la had told him all that. "And yes, it wasn't totally safe. Three oozes tried to kill us, and your clanmate, Phil, nearly blew us up. We didn't kill her, though. I want to make that clear. She did it to herself, trying to make a jump across the gap and falling to her death. So, if you go there, I'd be careful. Maybe don't go all the way. Top of the stairs should be safe enough."

"Provided no more jellies are lurking around," said Rina, somewhat under her breath.

"Oh thank you!" he said, totally relieved. "I don't know what to say. You're the kindest people I've met in a long time." Then he rushed out the door and to his tray of drinks. Taking a bottle of something he held it up for Tav to take. "Here. This is the least I can do. Won't be needing this poison, now that those pricks have been offed."



Bet you'll find it handy, though. It's wyvern poison." Tav took it, and he smiled. "You're a good one. I won't forget it." And with that, he was gone.

Rina waited until he was out of sight. Then she shook her head. "Duergar are resistant to poison," she commented. "I mean, don't get me wrong. Wyvern poison is pretty strong stuff, but it's like trying to kill a grown-butt man with a chocolate laxative milkshake. Might give 'im the runs, but not likely to succeed."

"What do you make of that whole duergar-killing-duergar situation?" asked Pona.

"I don't like it," said Izar'la. "I thought they were going to wait for us to free Nere before they started any kind of hostilities. If the cultists are killing off the non-cultists, we may be left with very few to assist us against Nere."

Tav nodded. "I was thinking the same thing. We'd better hurry."

"The part that puzzles me is that I thought the dock duergar lady was a non-cultist," said Izar'la.

"Gods!" said Rina, exasperated. "I feel like we're all over the place. 'Let's take our time. We got all the time in the world.' 'Wait what? Quick! Let's hurry!' Can we make up our minds?"

Tav closed her eyes, shutting out the world for a moment. Her head was now pounding from the stress. "I wish it wasn't like this," she replied. "This whole situation is so freaking volatile."

"Probably best not to think too hard about it," said Pona. "Come on. Let's just get moving. The forge is still our objective." Then they left the lift and set out to find a way into the area where the forge was on the map - the area cut off by the fuming lava lake.

Omeluum spotted Morghal and paused. She watched them go, Skickpit at her feet in a bloody heap just inside the kitchen doorway. She'd ambushed him on her way out. He was, in her mind, like all the others, better off dead; one less unknown to keep track of - one less potential threat to her plans. She dragged him to the edge of the dock and soundly dropped him into the lake. Then she made her way casually around to pursue. Tav and the others were going to the forge. She didn't know how to get there, but perhaps they would figure it out and show her the way.

## Chapter 42 - If Walls Could Talk

They made their way to the top of the stairs just beyond the dock area. To the left was the stairway back towards where Elder Brithvar was; the way back to the temple entrance. To the right, there were two additional ways to go. Heading north along the border of the dock, there was a walkway with a railing on the right. Two duergar were about a third of the way along, examining the devastated west wall. It looked like a few rothe were tethered to something near the shattered wall, and there were baskets, crates and barrels of various kinds.

Heading south, there was a staircase leading to an area above where Brithvar and his companion were. It looked like it had once been a full second level, but most of it was destroyed. Only fragments of the level remained with few or no walls. A duergar sentry was making her way along down the staircase as they stood there observing.

Further west, past the stairs, the wall was gone. The cavern opened up to reveal a yawning chasm. The party couldn't be sure, but they thought they saw dimly lit structures on the far side. There was some sort of lighting, like the soft glow of a fireplace, but they couldn't quite make out what the source was.

"Oh boy," said Tav sarcastically as she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. "Look. Another plaque." It was labeled "Docks" and it was bolted to the face of the ten-foot wide pillar at the top of the stairs on the right. "Come into Her shadow. Let all that is past be forgotten," she read.

"Unless it's juicy gossip," said Pona with a smirk. "Then spread it like wildfire, Baby." Rina smacked her in the shoulder. Tav chuckled lightly.

Just then, the duergar coming down the stairs spotted them and came up to them. She was wearing a leather suit of armor with a spiked leather cap on her head. On her back was a heavy crossbow, and she had a dagger at each hip. Her eyes were like black pools, and her skin was a pallid gray.

As soon as she saw them, her eyes narrowed, and she got a mischievous look on her face. "Shh!" she hissed, putting a finger to her lips. "I can't focus with you breathin' so close." She thought this was funny, and she giggled a bit.

"Who are you?" asked Tav.

"Mirthis," she replied. "I'm on patrol. You know? Because we get thieves and cutthroats breaking into this place ALL the time. Never know when one might pop up on you out of nowhere." It was obvious that she was being totally sarcastic. A broad grin spread across her face.

Tav kind of liked her, though she didn't know why. On a whim, she decided to ask, "Nice to meet you, Mirthis. We're trying to find our way to the forge. Any idea how to get there?"

Mirthis laughed. "Across the lava lake. The way's cut off, to be honest. Clan's been trying to figure out how to get over there the entire time we've been here - I mean, besides trying to dig out that stupid temple place." She then looked them over more closely. "There's a walkway up there." She gestured behind her towards the top of the stairs and off in the direction of the temple entrance. "I was watching you when you were talking to Thrinn and the others. You really a True Soul?"

"Depends," said Rina suspiciously. "You on the side of the cult or the clan?"

Mirthis laughed again. "Both," she said. "Neither. Honestly, we're all Flameshade. We shouldn't be fighting like this. Irony is, the cult sprouts off all these ideals that they are creating a unified world under the wise leadership of their supreme goddess, the Absolute. 'We'll destroy all other gods and tear down all the social barriers between everyone,' they say. 'Imagine a world where everyone lives together in unity with everyone else.'"

"Bah! Stupid \$#@," she continued. "Just another deity suckering people into following 'em. Nothing new like they claim." Then she paused. "But that didn't answer my question. Either you are a True Soul, or you ain't. Doesn't matter what side I'm on."

"We are," said Tav. "Jemna here," she gestured at Rina, "is always like that." Rina gave her a look as if to say, "Jemna?"

"So," said Izar'la, trying to bring it back to their objective. "No clue as to how to get across the lava lake?"

Mirthis shrugged. "Obviously used to be a way both by a stone pathway and a catwalk," she replied. "They cut right between the two Shar statues just beyond the temple entrance area. Lava lake seems to have obliterated the lower pathway, and the catwalk looks heavily damaged. I think there was a series of levers and such that could move sections of the catwalk around, but there's no way to reach some of the levers now. Even if you did, who knows if the catwalks would still connect to anything if you moved them any."

Then she glanced down the hallway towards the two duergar studying the shattered wall. "Stonemason Kith might have a better idea, or you can ask Headmaster Skarjall. They've been doing more exploring than most. Kith's really into this place, and Skarjall is a greedy \$#@. I think he's constantly looking for buried treasure. Kith's right there looking at the wall with his apprentice, Gergerann. Skarjall's further along, far end of the pathway,

and off to the left. He took some rothes with him and a few others. I think they were trying to dig out another passage or something just at the edge of the chasm.”

“Thanks for your help,” said Tav. It was the friendliest conversation she’d had in a long time with a stranger. “I can’t tell you how much of a pleasure it’s been.”

Mirthis laughed again, but then her smile turned sinister. “Me too,” she replied, and she walked off, back up the stairs the way she’d come.

Sudden realization dawned on Pona. “Quick. Everyone check your things.” They did so, and all at once Tav pursed her lips in frustration. “Son of a... I’ve been robbed. All my money’s gone.”

“Pickpocket,” said Pona, shaking her head. “I thought she was being a bit too nice. How much did she take?”

“All of it,” said Tav. “Eighty-one gold.”

“Let’s kill her,” said Rina with finality.

“She wasn’t a member of the cult,” Izar’la pointed out. “She wasn’t wearing one of the amulets. She might come in handy later. Best to let the money go. We don’t need it anyway right now. Who we gonna buy things from?”

Tav nodded, but she was in a foul mood. Her head was pounding even more. “I hate this place,” she replied. “Let’s just get going. At least that seems to be all she took.”

“And,” said Pona, “she gave us information that might help us get to the forge.”

“At least we have that,” said Rina sourly.

They left the stairway and walked up to the two dark dwarves studying the stonework. There was an older one with his white hair pulled back into a knot. A small ponytail curled out and bounced as he moved. The back of his neck and the base of his skull were shaved. He had a full beard that came to a point about four inches from his chin, and he had a bushy mustache. His blue eyes were warm and friendly, and he had a dragon tattoo on his left cheek. He did not wear an amulet of the Absolute, and he was dressed in brown leather coveralls over a light brown tunic and beige shirt. On his hands he wore fingerless leather gloves, and on his back was a nice looking warhammer. His apprentice had his back to them and didn’t turn to meet them. He was studying the remains of a statue that was mingled in the debris. He wore a plain leather cap, a beige tunic and toeless shoes.

Stonemason Kith greeted them with a smile and was about to speak when one of the long-horned, cow-like rothe moo’d loudly. He paused, waited a moment, and then tried again. As he spoke, he gestured to the broken wall. “How peculiar, don’t you think? Smooth face. Cobbled edges. They’re a sign - they must be.” Then he looked them over. “Sundwellers in these parts? Look here, my top-side friends. I need fresh eyes, and I doubt I’ll find fresher.”

“A friendly welcome?” said Tav, and she immediately guarded her belongings in the most subtle way that she could. “A rarity in the Underdark.”

“As rare as a smile in Sschindylryn, you might say,” he replied warmly, and she relaxed a bit. He seemed genuinely nice. Maybe he wasn’t out to kill or rob her - or both. “But I’ve no skill for slaving. I prefer chisel to cane. Now these learned eyes reach their limits, and so I must humbly request yours.” He gestured at Rina. “Well, that is, I’m assuming you’re the most knowledgeable in stonework since you’re a dwarf.” He looked at the others in turn. “If any of you can help, I’d greatly appreciate it. Shouldn’t assume, I suppose.” His smile lit up the room, he seemed so friendly.

Pona was lost. “What should we be looking at?” she asked.

Kith gestured at the wall. “The rock. The rubble. All of it, if I may be so bold. Take a look. Tell me what you see, and be thorough.” They all turned their attention to the scene.

The first thing that jumped out at Tav was the statue the apprentice was examining. It looked like it was probably of the paladin, Ketheric. It was in many pieces, lying amidst the rubble and debris. Only its legs from the shins down were still standing against the wall. She assessed it for technique and composition. Then, she said, “The statue’s meandering curves and golden edges stand out against the weathered masonry behind it. Wait. Yes. Two styles. Two eras. The statue was carved from newer stone and erected by late-comers to this ancient fortress.”

Kith nodded. “Good. Okay. Anything standing out?”

They surveyed the area for unseen curiosities. Rina was then the one to notice. “Several glassy stones stand out in the debris,” she said. “See there?” She pointed. “It’s like a trail of the stuff all along the top of the heap. Their borders are coated with tiny, yellow crystals. The hottest of flames smoothed the stone and left sulfuric crystals behind. It just confirms what we were already thinking. The fires of the Hells have touched Grymforge.”

“And look at the rubble,” said Pona, pointing to a pile in front of a very tall archway shrouded in darkness. “Boulders and stone bricks of various sizes clutter the corridor, many split cleanly in two. Yet some walls remain

fully intact. No quake brought these rocks down. They were smashed through in an instant. Something big charged through here. Something very big.” They all looked from the archway to the gaping hole in what once was a wall.

“Nalfashnee,” Tav muttered. A shiver once again ran down her spine as she stared at the wake of the monster’s passing. She was only imagining just how massive it must have been. The gap in the wall was easily fifteen feet at the base but close to a hundred higher up.

“Quite possibly,” said Rina. “Certainly lends credibility to the whole thing, doesn’t it? If it was a nalfashnee, it must have been a HUGE one by the looks of this. They can grow to even larger sizes than what I mentioned.”

“Incredible,” said Kith, shaking his head. “An entire history, risen from dirt and debris! Picture it: An ancient city, hewn from the stone by disciples of Shar, later abandoned.” He gestured off through the gap in the wall towards the west. “Untold centuries later, a new tribe revives it. Fresh walls, fresh sculptures...”

“... until a great hellbeast charges through, toppling the walls and crushing the people! Heh. That explains the infernal plate I found.” He rummaged through a backpack near him and pulled out an iron-like plate that looked like it could have once been a pauldron on some warrior’s shoulder. It was a dented piece of black metal, and it had a red shine to it, no matter the lighting. “Perhaps you might have use of it.” Then he handed it to Rina who took it gingerly and held it as if it might bite her. Faint screams echoed through Rina’s mind as soon as she touched it.

“Thank you,” she replied, though she wasn’t sure she meant it. She immediately slid it into her pack.

He smiled again. “No. Thank you,” he told them. “Now if you’ll excuse me. My work has only begun. There is more still to find. I must get to it!” Then he turned from them and headed over to join his apprentice.

They continued on down the path to the north, past the rothe and Rina paused just beyond them. “You know, after examining the walls, it does seem that the - I’m assuming nalfashnee - was only responsible for the destruction of the Ketheric Thorm Grymforge. Kith’s right. The older stonework doesn’t have the same telltale signs. It shows more signs of age and decay from nine hundred years of neglect rather than savage brutality. So, it is likely that the nalfashnee wasn’t responsible for the original abandonment of the forge. That’s at least somewhat encouraging. Don’t you think?”

“If it was reversed, then yes,” said Izar’la. “If the nalfashnee was responsible for the destruction of the forge nine hundred years ago, I’d wonder if it was gone now. But since it was what destroyed Ketheric’s Crew, I’d say it was likely that the monster might still be around. We still have to operate under the assumption that it is potentially lurking somewhere in these caverns.”

“Agreed,” said Tav. “I do appreciate you trying to encourage us, though. Honestly, all we did was confirm what we already knew. Grymforge was built a long time ago, abandoned, and rebuilt by Thorm. Then it was destroyed by a hellbeast and its minions. I’m glad to at least confirm that the story is true, for at least we can try to be smart about things. I’d rather know that it wasn’t just some ghost story concocted by idiots so that we can be careful and not stupid.”

“Right,” said Pona. “Let’s be careful and not explore places that no one else has explored.” Then she smiled and dusted herself off. “So, who’s up for forging our way to the forge that no one’s been able to get to in over a hundred years?”

Everyone shot her mean looks. Then they walked off further north towards the far end of the hall.

“What?” asked Pona, chuckling. “What?” Then she hurried to catch up to them.

## Chapter 43 - The City of Darkness

The walkway ended at the feet of two staircases; one north and one west. Both were broken and rubble-strewn, but the one to the west was far worse off than the northern one. Up the stairs to the north, the wall was broken down on the west side, creating a ten foot gap which allowed individuals to pass beyond. To the east, there was one of the massive chains that lifted the water gate. As for the stairway to the west, it led to what once had been a training area. There were practice dummies and lots of crossbows and other weapons. Beyond that area, the walls were broken down providing access to a yawning chasm and something beyond. They couldn't quite make it out.

Off to the right from the foot of the stairs, beyond a support beam and tucked in a corner, there was a makeshift campsite complete with torch on pole, campfire, hammocks, packs and cooking gear. This was clearly put up by the duergar. However, what was odd about the scene was that there was a skeleton rather close to the fire. It was as if the corpse was enjoying a restful respite at the duergar rest area.

And it was not alone. Many had died in that place. There were some skeletons at the top of the northern stairs, some off to the west, and some even further beyond that. They were scattered throughout, and they all looked to have died horribly.

Tav stooped down to examine the one near the campfire. As she looked at it, she realized that they were all clad in the same dark armor - decorative silver half plate with a purple fabric underlay complete with skirt. The skirt was made up of long strips of fabric with a silver border that flowed down from the waist, under the plated hip guard and down to the ankles. There was about a half inch between each strip. Each corpse had silver gauntlets and pauldrons, a breastplate and backplate. The pauldrons had what looked like circles with curved rays angling away from them, like a sun's rays, and there was a similar pattern on the breastplate with three circles instead; one center and the other two directly right and left of it. Each of the circles looked as if a stone had once been placed within them; an onyx, no doubt. These stones were nowhere to be seen.

"Dark Justiciar uniforms," she said grimly. "Definitely Shar worshippers." She stood and shook her head.

"You know, one thing I was thinking that does provide me at least some small comfort," said Izar'la.

"What's that?" asked Tav.

"Whatever killed them made an enemy of a powerful goddess," she answered. "An enemy of my enemy is my ally. Right? Maybe there's a way to pit Shar against the nalfashnee. Maybe."

"I wouldn't count on it," said Rina. "It'll be more likely that they'll both work together against US."

"Still," said Tav, "if whatever managed to murder a group of Sharrans is still around, we had better watch our step. I don't care who is on our side or what else we find."

"No one's arguing there," said Rina.

Then Tav spotted a book under one of the skeletal remains on the stairs. It was half sticking out of a small pack. She picked it up and dusted it off. Flipping through the pages, she finally found something legible. "'Cycle Forty,'" she read. "'I know it is forbidden to enter the inquisitor's chambers, but I could not help myself. Has Master Ketheric not commanded us to use every possible tool to best Shar's rivals? Besides, if Sybil meant to keep the amulet a secret, she would have hidden it better.'"

"Well," said Izar'la, "we now have another leader's name, it seems. Inquisitor Sybil."

Tav flipped a page. "'Cycle Forty and Two. The amulet has gifted me a power, an energy, heretofore unknown to me. I've never known such might - and such... cheer! I can barely keep myself from smiling, much to the others' chagrin.'"

"Smiling? Cheer?" said Pona. "Odd."

"Sounds cursed," said Izar'la.

"I think you're right," said Tav. "The next entry just says, 'Cy...Ff...n! Ha! I c... Ha. HAHABA!... hBGM...'"

"What the..." said Pona. "Wait. He actually WROTE that? Who does that? You don't write a laugh. You just express it. That makes no sense. It's like carving 'Aaaargh!' in the back of a cave as if carving it while dying. Nobody would take the time to carve 'Aaaaargh!' on a wall. They'd just scream it out. 'Aaaaaargh!' You know? Like in the back of the throat. 'Aaaaaargh!'"

"Maybe the writer was taking dictation," suggested Rina with a laugh of her own. "Now shut up. You sound like a pirate." She gestured to Tav. "Does it say anything else?"

"'Cycle Forty and Five,'" she read. "'It is done, thank the Dark Lady. Sybil ripped the amulet from my throat and cast it into the lava, having found me wracked by laughter. The madness has lifted, but I do not yet know my penance. Sybil is not known to take pity on thieves.'"

She flipped through the rest of the book. "That's it," she said as she closed it and dropped it on the floor next to the corpse. "Now that was an interesting read, to say the least."

"Some sort of cursed amulet," said Izar'la with some thought. "Good to know. Sounds powerful and hazardous to our sanity. Yet another thing to watch out for."

"Well, come on," said Tav as she started up the stairs to the west. "I figure we should at least check this way out. Looks like the duergar probably have been over here, but maybe they missed a secret entrance or tunnel or walkway or something that could lead us to the forge."

At the top of the stairs, the duergar had put a huge number of stacked crates with coverings over them set in the northwest corner. This was obviously one of their primary storage locations. To the left the corridor turned back south, and there was a makeshift tent-like structure with netting all over it. To the left of the tent, the floor was gone, dropping into a black chasm. There was only about ten feet of floor space between what remained of the wall on the east side and the gap on the west.

Another sixty feet beyond that area, there were archery targets and practice dummies for soldiers to use to train with. Crates and such lay behind the targets and dummies. Just past them, the floor was gone. There was a gaping hole. From the archery targets, one could peer over the hole, through the shattered wall on the far side, and down to where Kith and his apprentice were. The gap was nearly a hundred and fifty feet wide, and the rubble heap was so extensive, it would take a while to climb over, if someone actually felt the need to.

To the west of the training area, as one continued along around the huge gap in the floor near the tent, there were no more walls. They were completely gone. Now that they were closer to it, they could see the source of the lighting in that part of the cavern beyond the chasm. A lava fall was emptying from the lava lake on the far side. It poured down over the walls on the south side of the chasm into a huge ravine hundreds of feet below.

That's when they saw it. They came to the edge, as far west as they could go while still standing on the floor tiles of Grymforge, and they peered down into the enormous western section of the cavern. Near where they were standing, the duergar had set up yet another small encampment complete with campfires and bedrolls and the like. It commanded an impressive view of the grandeur of the ancient Sharran city.

All along the western walls of the canyon, the multi-tiered structure was like a collage of walkways, entrances, windows, hallways, twists and turns, stairs, fountains, statues of Shar, balconies, massive doors, symbols of Shar, darkened braziers, torches and lamps, archways, pillars and columns, waterfalls - off to the north - and so much more. Everything was incredibly crafted out of the very black stones of the cavern, and the face of the city extended from the very foot of the chasm all the way up to the ceiling. It stretched from north to south, as far as the eye could see, from misty waterfalls, emptying into a massive pool, to the lava below and even beyond the lava falls. It was so grand and magnificent that even Tav marveled at the sight.

"Now that's what I call impressive," said Izar'la.

"Impressive abomination," Tav corrected. "I'm even more frightened by this place than before. I can't even contemplate what is more terrifying right now. To think that this place has existed in secrecy for over nine hundred years... To think that it was FILLED by Sharrans... Twice! To think that some beast from the Hells and its minions tore through here and killed them all..."

She turned to look at them. "Can you imagine what they could have done on the surface if the hell-beast HADN'T killed them all? Selune's Light! I... I think I need to sit down a moment." Then she did find a crate to sit on. She leaned over, staring at the floor and breathing deeply; her back to the city.

"It is terrifying," said Rina as she continued to stare at the sheer magnitude of the City of Darkness. "You know, part of me is screaming to run and never look back. Another part is luring me towards it. It's almost like I WANT to go romp around and play in that place. Why? Why do I want to explore it?"

Pona shrugged. "It's freaking cool looking, that's why," she replied. "Terrifying or not, it's super well-built, amazing, awesome, incredible, and spectacular; all wrapped into one monumental package. The best part about it is that it's no longer inhabited by Dark Justiciars, so at least THAT threat isn't looming in our minds. Then, to top it all off, there's a mystery about it that is demanding that we try to solve it. Who were the original Sharrans? How many were there? Why did they leave? Who really WERE Ketheric Thorm and Inquisitor Sybil? Where did the nalfashnee, or whatever, come from? And most of all, what secrets, treasures, relics, and wonders does that place contain?"

"It's how Shar works," said Tav, getting a grip on herself and standing again. "She entices you with hidden promises of greatness and power and wealth. It's a common misconception that only beauty can capture the heart. Even a hideous monster of untold horror can tempt a man if it wears a veil. The veil conceals so that the imagination constructs wild and seductive fantasies beyond reality. The person gets all worked up and excited about the dreams they fashion; the delusions they make for themselves. They give false hopes and false joy and false

exhilaration. The anticipation builds. The person is willing to do just about anything to satisfy it. Then they pull the veil open, and evil engulfs them and consumes them.”

“Yeah,” said Pona distantly, “but it looks awesome.”

“Come on,” said Tav. “Let’s not linger here. There doesn’t appear to be a way to the forge from this location. Let’s...”

“Wait,” said Pona. She had snapped out of her reverie, and she noticed a book sitting on a short table near the northern duergar campfire - there was a north campfire and a south campfire in that campsite. Pona went to the table and grabbed the book. “Every book could contain a piece of the puzzle. Let’s see.” She turned it over. “‘On Sloth, Gluttony, and Vice,’” she read. “Weird title. There’s a summary on the inside page. ‘This protracted screed by author Fynris Flatrock preaches abstinence and industry, and warns against fleshly desires.’ Sharran or duergar? Place your bets.”

“Duergar,” said Rina. “Obviously. So what’s it say?”

“‘ENDURE! ENDURE! ENDURE! So commands Laduguer the Taskmaster,’” read Pona.

“See?” said Rina. “Told you.”

Pona continued. “‘ENDURE! Cry it out as your hammer strikes rock. ‘ENDURE!’ Shout it as your axe splits your enemies’ skulls. ‘ENDURE!’ Holler as your cane strikes your slaves’ backs. Toil is our duty and our blessing! Toil is the reward we grant our sons and servants!’”

“‘Yet beware the great enemy of toil, the scourge that wounds us and ours: the tankard. It is not only ale that pours forth from it, but indolence, gluttony, and a wandering mind. The drunkard is a clan’s millstone; too heavy to carry, too idle to contribute. Cast him into the Darklake! Let him sink to the bottom! And once more, call out: ‘ENDURE! ENDURE! ENDURE!’”

She closed the book. “Ah! Good read. No? I feel better for having read it.”

“I feel better for this,” said Izar’la, and she pulled a money pouch out of a pack near the southern campfire. She dangled it with a smile. “Looks like Tav got her money back and more. I counted a hundred and forty-two gold in here.”

“Nice!” said Rina. “Exponential giving strikes again, Tav. Haha!”

Izar’la handed it to Tav who took it. “Leave a note,” said Tav, but it was obvious she was kidding. “Tell them they can get their money back from Mirthis, or whatever her name was.”

“Hey,” said Rina. “Looks like a path down there. I think we can get to it.” She headed west over the edge of the flooring that was the end of Grymforge, down a steep, rocky slope and to the northwestern edge of a ridge below. The rock wall leading further down had many handholds, and she pointed to a path some twenty feet in that direction. “Should we?”

The others joined her. “I think we should,” said Tav. “Who knows what path potentially leads to the forge? I’m willing to give it a go.”

They descended. The path then went north about thirty feet and came to an end. There was a ten-foot jump to the other side. “Is that another room, maybe?” asked Tav.

“I think so,” said Rina. “The only wall standing is the north one, but it looks like it used to be part of Grymforge. I see the remnants of floor tiles.”

“I wonder if this chasm actually existed originally, or if it was created later by the nalfashnee,” said Izar’la as she peered once more off towards the city. “If that used to be another room, but now it’s only got one wall and a few floor tiles, maybe ALL this was connected all the way across.”

“Could be,” said Rina. “Unless we find an original map, though, we’ll never know.”

“Jumping across does not seem smart,” said Tav. “One slip and we’re not coming back.”

“We could do like last time,” said Pona. “I’ll go across with the rope.”

“Why don’t we have you scout it first?” said Rina. “It actually doesn’t look like there’s any other way to go from there.”

“Okay,” said Pona. “Tie the rope to my waist, just in case, and if I fall, pull me back up.”

“That’s much better,” said Tav.

“Of course it is,” said Pona. “You’re not the one doing the jumping.” She smiled. Then she took the rope’s end from Rina and tied it around her waist. With that, she got a good running start and jumped.

She did not make it, and she fell through the gap. The rope was the only thing that saved her life. They pulled her back up, and after she recovered, she tried again. This time she succeeded. “Piece of cake,” she said. Then she untied the rope, stuck it under a heavy rock nearby, and said, “Toss me a torch, would you?” They did, she lit it, and then she continued on to the devastated room.

There really wasn’t much to it. It was a broken and shattered place with only a few remnants that said that it was once a chamber. As she made her way west towards the edge, the floor tiles came to an end, and she froze.

“Stay vigilant, Pona,” she told herself softly. “There are traps here.” Then she pulled out her thieves’ tools, stooped down, set the torch against a dislodged wall brick, and carefully pulled up the floor tile in front of her. Sure enough, it was a pressure plate. If she’d stepped on it, she might have gotten blown up or gassed or gods only knew what. She set the floor tile to the side, and she stepped around the spot.

That’s when she spotted the heavy chest amidst the debris in the only standing corner, the northwest corner. Even it wasn’t technically a full corner. A heap of bricks were all that remained. The floor was gone on the west and south sides. She had to be extremely careful. Stepping up to the chest, she stooped down to examine it. Trapped. “Careful now, Pona,” she said, and she was. The poison dart trap was disabled in less than six seconds. Then she worked the lock. Click! “Thank Selune!” She didn’t break her picks. She only had two sets.

Carefully, she opened the chest and peered inside. There was a money pouch and a silver necklace. “Hmmm,” she thought aloud. “Sapphire gemstones. Sapphire necklaces are popular among Baldur’s Gate’s patriars,” the leaders and nobles of the city, “as mourning garb. Heavy teardrop-shaped stones represent the weight of their loss. Probably worth almost a hundred gold.” Then she counted up the gold in the money pouch. “Fifty-four. Not bad.”

Then she paused, looking out from the edge of the chamber at the City of Darkness. It was still way too far away. There were no other paths. The only thing before her was the chasm. Two waterfalls, emptying from circular portals, were gushing out of the wall just off to the northwest of her position. Broken statues of Shar stood on either side of each. There was a walkway that was built over them, but it was too dark to make out any details. “If only we could get over there,” she thought. Then she followed the face of the city along to the south. “It really looks like there might be access from there into the lava lake area. Might be a small climb up from one of those balconies, but...”

She paused, a sudden thought coming to her. “How is it that there’s a lava lake spewing out all that heat and toxic fumes, and nobody’s dead? How did/does anyone live in this place?”

“Darkness protects.”

Pona jumped with fright. Had she imagined that whispered female voice? Had it been real? She could have sworn it came from the city - from across the chasm. But it was so soft - had she fabricated it? She looked around, searching the shadows of the city for any movement. Nothing. “Forget this,” she then said, and she turned and hurried back to the gap as if she’d just seen a ghost. Tying the rope around herself, she tried to make the jump even before she was sure they had the other end.

She made it easily. “You okay?” Rina asked, noticing her friend’s demeanor.

“Yep,” said Pona, hurrying back towards Grymforge. “I’m good. Let’s just go. Basically, just a dumb chest over there. Nothing important. Money and a necklace. Yay! Glad we could investigate.” The others hurried after her. They weren’t sure what to think about her behavior. She eventually told them what happened, but only after they were sitting around one of the campfires. No one knew what to say, and so they decided to get moving. They’d had quite enough of the whole scene.



## Chapter 44 - Thinning The Herd

They returned to the training area. Behind the targets, amidst the crates and other supplies, Rina noticed a chest. So, they decided to check it out. It was, of course, locked, but Pona once again picked the lock and it was open in no time. Within was a beautiful crossbow. It was as filthy as sin, but it was powerful looking. "I could ask for no more from a crossbow," said Tav as they handed it to her. She, after all, had a light crossbow already, but its quality paled greatly in comparison. She turned it over to examine it. It was not damaged and was, in fact, in excellent condition. "Are the duergar so capable?" she wondered.

Then she spotted the symbol of Shar on the handle. "Bah! Figures. It's a sleek, well-made crossbow that is plain but for the stinking symbol of Shar. Why'd they have to ruin it?"

Izar'la took it from her, pulled out one of her daggers, and soundly put jagged lines through the symbol until she obscured the entire image on both sides. She handed it back. "There. Fixed," she said.

Tav smiled. "You guys are the best." Then she took her old one and tossed it into the chest, replacing it with her new one. "I bless this crossbow with Selune's light," she added. "May it purge the world of Shar's night."

And with that, they made their way back to the walkway and up the northern stairs. As they came to the top, they saw through the gap in the wall on their left. Three duergar were caning two rothe that were chained to a rubble heap along the north wall. They were standing on some sort of grated walkway. It looked like maybe a lift existed at the edge leading down into the cavern at one point, but there was nothing there now.

The leader was somewhat like Kith in that they had pretty much the same style of beard and mustache. Unlike Kith, he was bald on top with a bushy rim of white hair around. He had darker skin, and his expression was harder. Besides that, he had scars on his face, particularly a nasty horizontal one under his left eye. He wore scale armor and metal gauntlets, and he carried a very nasty looking cane.

The other two members of his team were more nondescript. The male was wearing padded armor, and the female leather. Both had longbows on their backs. They were younger, and they had amulets of the Absolute around their necks. The male had short hair and a shaggy beard, and the female had long, straight hair pulled back in a ponytail that trailed down to the small of her back. The male had pale gray skin, and the female had more of a purple hue.

The leader saw the party as soon as they appeared in the gap. "Hey! You! Grab a cane and whip these drugnin' beasts into shape," he barked in a loud, obnoxious voice. Then he caned one of the rothe a few times. "That rubble needs clearing, and my patience is hanging on by an \$#@ \$ whisker."

Rina looked at the others. "Well, we've been spotted at this point. Shall we?"

"Must be the other one the thief recommended," said Tav as she led the way. "You want me to cane these poor beasts?" she called back to him.

"\$#@ \$ right I do. Gettin' cramps in my arm from trying to whip the drugnin' beasts back to work," the duergar leader replied. "Now get to the canin', before I thrash you instead."

"And who are you again? Who put YOU in charge?" asked Rina, ready to beat the tar out of the man.

"Headmaster Skarjall," he replied. "And I put me in charge. I don't like your attitude, \$#@ \$. Ask Grundril or Morgya here." He pointed at the male novice of the Absolute and then the female. "Ask 'em what happens when someone gives me attitude."

"What's behind the rubble?" asked Tav, trying to divert the conversation.

"You got no need to know, and I got no need to tell. So get to caning, or to leaving. I ain't got time for this \$#@ \$."

While they were talking, Rina examined the rubble for anything unusual. A slight glint caught her eye. She focused on it, and she saw the source of the gleam. It was a small mote of black metal. "Adamantine!" she breathed in awe. "I know what you're after. There's adamantine back there, isn't there?"

Skarjall cursed. "Stuff's no joke. Stronger than steel, rarer than mithral. It ain't mined. It's MADE. There's an adamantine forge back there, sure as \$#@ \$." He poked a thumb off in the direction of the lava lake. "Don't get any smart ideas, though. That forge is clan property. Problem is, we can't seem to get to it, and I'm hoping there's maybe a way through this collapsed passage. There're some catwalks we can't reach, and levers and such. If I'm right, this way will lead to the upper levels where we can finally maybe get to them. But get the beasts moving, and I'll toss some coin your way."

Tav eyed the rubble heap. "That'll take them forever," she replied. "Hold on." Then she gestured for her companions to move away from the duergar a considerable distance back towards the way they'd come in. When she was sure they were beyond earshot, she said, "What do you think about using one of the sacks of smokepowder? We have two."

"Placed right," said Rina, "that would probably do it."

“Shouldn’t we save those for Nere?” asked Pona.

“We’ve got the runepowder for that,” said Tav, “but that’s only IF the other sack of smokepowder isn’t enough to clear at least some sort of path to Nere.”

“Could be wasting the smokepowder on something unimportant,” said Izar’la.

“Ah, but this passage COULD lead us to the forge,” said Tav. “He even said so. I’m just thinking that it might be worth it.”

“I agree,” said Rina.

“Same,” said Pona.

Izar’la shrugged. “Sure. Why not?” Then she thought of something else. “You know, if we play our cards right, we might just take a few of the duergar out at the same time.”

“How so?” asked Tav.

“They don’t know we have this stuff,” Izar’la explained. “They’re working pretty close to the rubble pile and the rothes. If we distract the duergar while maybe Rina plants the sack in the right spot, then Rina moves away, I hurl a Fire Bolt, the sack explodes, and hopefully the duergar are caught in the explosion with the rothe. Even if they survive, they’ll probably be wounded enough for us to finish them off.”

“Do we WANT to kill them right now?” asked Pona.

“There are two cultists there and only one non-cultist,” said Izar’la. “Two less cultists in the upcoming fight against Nere, and one less jerk duergar. Three total less to worry about. Seems wise to me. I wouldn’t trust this Skarjall in a fight at all. He’ll likely come at us even IF we’re going for Nere.”

“No arguments here,” said Rina.

“Same,” said Pona.

“Okay,” said Tav. “Let’s do this, I guess.” Then she took out one of the sacks of smokepowder and handed it to Rina. She accepted it and followed behind, making sure to keep the others in front of her so no one could see her and what she was holding.

Tav walked up behind Skarjall and tapped him on the shoulder. “Okay,” she said sharply and loudly. “We’ll help.”

Skarjall turned completely around to look at her, and Rina immediately went into action. Sure enough, none of the duergar noticed her slip over to the rubble pile and place the sack amidst the stones at a location she thought would be most effective. Then she returned to the others and gave the signal.

Meanwhile, Tav kept the duergar’s attention. “Where can I get a cane?” She was playing dumb rather well.

Skarjall gestured with his own at a crate not far away. There were a number of canes sticking out. “Now grab one and let’s do this.”

Tav stopped him. “What’s the best way to do it? I mean, you must have some sort of best practice as to how you should strike them. Can you show me?”

“By all the...” Skarjall growled. Then he stormed over to the crate and grabbed a fresh cane out. He slapped it in Tav’s hand. “Here.”

Tav dropped it. “Oh! Sorry!” Skarjall threatened to beat her with his own, but she quickly snatched it up. “Okay. Got it.”

Rina returned to join them just then, and she gave the signal. Izar’la waited, however. “Can you three show us how it’s done?” the gith asked. “Show us ON the rothe.”

Skarjall fumed. “Idiots! Incompetant \$#@\$ \$#@\$ \$#@\$\$. I should have known surface-dwellers don’t know a \$#@\$ about beating something.” He gestured to the other two who joined him. “Let’s show ‘em how it’s done.” Then he raised his cane...

Izar’la cast Fire Bolt and hit the sack of smokepowder perfectly. The party threw themselves to the floor, shielding themselves from the resulting explosion. Morgya went flying backward. She was closer to the edge of the chasm, and she went sailing right off. She screamed the whole way down. Grundil was hit by stones and debris, but he managed to throw himself to the floor in time to avoid being totally pummeled. Skarjall was hit from behind and tossed forward, landing hard on his chest.

But the rothe had also survived, and they were insane with fear and rage. Their chains were also snapped. Immediately, they picked themselves up and charged at the closest living creatures. These were Skarjall and Grundil. Grundil was gored as he got to his feet, and the rothe kept going right to the edge. Once there, it shook him violently and tossed him into the canyon to join Morgya. Skarjall, however, managed to dodge the one attacking him, and he rolled to his feet and prepared to fight back.

Just then, Izar’la rushed up and attacked the rothe battling with Skarjall. She cast Green-Flame Blade just before striking, and when she hit the rothe with one of her daggers, the emerald flames jumped off of her weapon

and struck Skarjall. Then she followed up with another swipe, using the dagger in her other hand. This strike was also aimed at the rothe.

Tav went for Skarjall, attacking him from behind. He tried to dodge out of the way, but she still clipped him in the left shoulder. At the same time, Rina pulled out her greataxe and went for the rothe closest to the edge. Her hope was to finish the creature off and prevent it from charging. She took a swing, but the animal managed to dodge out of the way. Pona joined her, though, and she landed a drop kick in the beast's face. Then she rolled to her feet and soundly punched it in the eye. The creature staggered and collapsed right there, a few feet from tumbling over. It had simply had enough. Between the whippings, the explosion and now the abuse from the halfling, it was done.

"Bloody, traitorous wenches!" Skarjall cried, and he enlarged himself. Next, he took a swing at Tav, but she blocked it and shoved the weapon to the side. Next, she followed up with a jab of Phalar Aluve. The weapon gave off a faint glow, for it recognized that this was a denizen of the Underdark; its favorite target. The tip pierced Skarjall in the chest, puncturing his lung. He fell to one knee, gasping for breath as he clutched the wound. His eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he collapsed to the floor.

At the same time, Izar'la focused on the rothe. She stabbed at it with her dagger, but she only scraped it. It wasn't even enough to phase the beast. The second dagger, however, pierced its right, front leg. The cow-like animal dropped to the floor with a scream. Then it flailed about as it tried to recover.

"Poor beasts," said Tav as they regrouped a short distance from the one Izar'la had just stabbed. "It wasn't their doing. I... Should I try healing them?"

Rina shook her head firmly. "Don't be dumb. That's fresh meat, right there. Survival, Tav. We're not exactly rich with food supplies." Then she strode up to the wounded animal, took her greataxe, and she put it out of its misery with a single, merciful stroke. She didn't even hesitate. She walked over to the other that Pona had rendered unconscious, and she did the same to it.

Tav was somewhat grieved by this. "It just feels wrong," she told them. "I..."

"Softhearted," said Rina, turning towards her. "And you said we didn't know who you really are. Tav. Let it go. Trust me when I say that this was a favor to them. Think of the alternative. We let them live. We leave them here. What then? They starve to death because nothing grows here. The best case scenario for them is that we kill them. And, if we kill them, what good is it to waste their meat? Best if we carve them up and make rations out of them that'll last us awhile. We can take a bit of time right here and now to do so. Doesn't seem like the explosion or the fighting has drawn attention. One good thing about Grymforge is that it's loud and massive. Drowns out the sound of just about everything quite nicely."

"She's got a point," said Izar'la. "Several, actually." Then she joined Rina by the rothe she'd just killed. "I'll take this side. You take that one." Rina nodded, and the two went to work. Both were skilled survivalists. They knew how to carve up and prepare meat to last as long as possible.

Pona joined Tav. "Come on. Let's keep watch. Though I think Rina is right and we're far enough away from the other duergar, they could still come check on the commotion." Tav nodded, and the two went off to the gap in the wall. Peering down the walkway, they saw only Kith and his apprentice, still examining the stonework. They were oblivious to everything else.

Tav sighed. "So far so good. No alarm sounded."

"Thank the gods," said Pona. "We're getting closer and closer to being done with all this, you know. It won't be much longer. I can feel it. Grymforge is just around the corner. I noticed that the explosion did collapse part of the rock pile. I think we can squeeze through it at the top where Rina set the explosives. If that way really does lead to the upper catwalks and such, we might just be able to navigate our way through. I've got a good feeling about it, Tav. Selune is with us, and soon, she'll use us to purge this place of Shar's stench once and for all."

"I hope so," said Tav in reply. "I hope so."

## Chapter 45 - Remnants Of The Past - Part One

The only thing of real value on Skarjall was a healing potion of higher quality. Pona took this, adding to the one she already had. "Now if only we could find a few more of these, I'd feel a whole lot better."

"Hah. No kidding," said Rina. "I'd like a satchel of them, please."

"What did you do with all the meat?" asked Tav, looking around. It had been hours, and Tav and Pona had kept watch in the shadows of the walkway the entire time. Now that they had gathered again where they'd left Rina and Izar'la, Tav was amazed to find no sign of Skarjall or the rothe; except for the blood on the grated flooring.

"Packed the meat in jars with lots of salt and then put them in crates," said Izar'la, gesturing to some wooden crates nearby. "Kicked the rest over the edge. We can't possibly carry all that rothe meat wherever we go, so we decided to pack it away in there. We can always come back for it later."

"Makes sense," said Pona. "So, are we good?"

Rina gestured to the gap in the rock pile which was no longer blocking the upper portion of the twenty foot tall archway. "After you," she said.

"I get to go first?" asked Pona with sarcastic delight. "Yay me!"

"That's how this works, you know," said Rina. "You're the up close grunt who draws all the attention, and I shoot at them from behind and clean up your messes."

Pona smirked. "I like making messes, and I DO hate cleaning up after myself." She then made her way to the gap and started crawling over the remaining boulders. The others followed close behind.

Once inside, they found themselves, sure enough, at the base of a staircase that was about twenty feet wide. It extended up into the darkness from the northeast corner of the chamber. The northwest corner was collapsed, and there was a skeleton lying at the foot of the rubble heap. Like so many others, it was wearing a Dark Justiciar suit of armor. Near it, there was a cloth pouch covered in dust.

Pona grabbed the pouch and opened it. After peering inside, using her once again lit torch, she spotted fragments of metal. She showed them to Rina whose face then lit up. "Adamantine," she breathed in awe. "These are fragments of adamantine." She then pulled them out to show everyone.

Three jet-black fragments tumbled into Rina's hand. In the light of the torch, there was a green sheen to them. If in magical light, like Tav's Light spell, they would appear purple-white. "This stuff can only be found in veins of ore in the Underdark," the dwarf told them, "though small meteorites can consist of some adamantine. When smelted, it's super hard. Strike an adamantine shield or armor, and the weapon that hits it is usually damaged instead. It's supposed to be nearly impenetrable to normal weapons. It's almost always seen in use by drow, for the magical strength and sharpness fades if brought into direct sunlight."

Izar'la then spoke up. "Githzerai once used their knowledge of Limbo to bring some here to the Material Plan, if I recall correctly. It was said that a group of anarchs molded it into huge adamantine citadels used as bases from which they would attack enemies."

"It's extremely hard to produce," said Rina. "It requires super high forging temperatures, and it's a very delicate procedure. Most smiths that specialized in it were dwarves from Ammarindar, one of our ancient kingdoms. It is also possible to produce adamantine as an alloy of mithral and steel, but that is only through the application of a number of magical procedures. This process, I think, is even MORE complex and difficult, and even fewer people know how to do it."

"Magma," said Pona as her eyes glazed over.

"What?" asked Tav, unsure why she'd said that.

"Magma. Hot," said Pona as if reciting something. "Remember? The instructions on how to destroy Grym, the guardian of the forge. 'From magma rose, only in magma destroyed.' That's what it said."

"Magma. Hot. Magma. Made. Magma. Destroy," said Rina. "The adamantine golem. There was mention of a hammer. Do you suppose there's some sort of massive hammer we can use?"

"How would we use a massive hammer?" asked Pona. "Who would lift it?"

"Maybe some sort of device or mechanism," suggested Izar'la. "So, what, we have to get Grym, the adamantine golem, hot with magma and then crush him with a big hammer?"

"That, actually, makes a ton of sense," said Rina. "Magma would superheat the adamantine and make it softer. Then a giant hammer could batter the metal flat and make the golem unable to function."

"Protector... of the Adamantine Forge... Born in Hellish heat... in Hellish heat... destroyed," said Tav. "Remember the note Izar'la had read off to us? Remember? The forgotten drow guy. He had it."

"Flippin!" said Rina. "That's right. I'll never forget that name."

"Hellish heat," repeated Tav. "By the Nine! If that doesn't just solidify things. I'd forgotten all about those notes and things we found. It seems pretty obvious to me. How could it be anything else? Nine hundred

years ago, the stupid Sharrans who first built this place created the forge, and the only way they could actually smelt the adamantine was to open a portal to the Hells and draw in the magma. Pissed off at the invasion, I'll wager, devils and fiends found their way into Grymforge. The original creators panicked and fled. Content, the demons withdrew to the Hells."

"Years later, Ketheric's group returned, not realizing there was a portal to Avernus, or whatever other Hell it might link to, and he started trying to use the place too, for his own purposes. By doing so, he pissed off demons once again, and they came plowing through in retribution, wiping them all out."

"Gods!" said Pona. "So, should WE even try to use the forge at all, even to make those daggers? I mean, are we going to get too close to the portal?"

Tav shook her head. "I have no idea, but it certainly seems possible."

"Can we take Nere out without them?" asked Rina.

Izar'la shrugged. "Together, maybe. He is poisoned and such, or so we're told. I just... I know he's pretty powerful. I'm honestly not sure we can pull it off. The antimagic daggers might be the only hope we have. Keep him without his magic, and maybe, just maybe, we can win."

"We might have to risk it," said Tav. "Maybe if we just use a smaller forge or part of the forge or something... Maybe if we don't use the adamantine forge part."

"That was the original plan, right?" said Pona. "So, it's just another warning to us. Right? No matter what, don't get greedy and try to use THE forge."

"Fine," said Tav. "Let's keep going." Then she gestured to the stairs, and Pona started up.

... and stopped. She spotted something golden, and she stooped down to see what it was. She jumped in fright. Everyone jumped with her, weapons ready. Realizing the object wasn't alive or dangerous, Pona carefully picked it up and held it for everyone to see.

It was a mask. Faded bloodstains belied the mask's child-like serenity. An innocent smile and wide, searching eyes sought its own kind. It was a truly unnerving visage with cat-like, slitted vertical pupils amidst light, golden eyeballs. The forehead had ridges; one center, one above each brow, and one along each temple.

"A merregon," said Rina. "Legion devils. Used as foot soldiers in the Nine Hells. They are the most common soldiers. They obey without question even to their own destruction. Golden face masks, armor and usually halberds, they are humanoids with rippling muscles and broad shoulders. They usually have gray skin, if you can see skin at all."

"Great," said Tav. "Wonderful."

"Let's just keep moving," said Izar'la. She seemed to be growing more and more nervous as well.

And so, they started up the seemingly endless stairs, leaving the mask where they'd found it. By the time they reached the top, each of them felt as if they'd ascended at least a hundred or more steps. Several gaps in the wall on the left, the north wall, allowed them to see out into the caverns of the Underdark. They were obviously on the north edge of Grymforge. There was nothing but caverns beyond.

The first thing they noticed at the top was that there were two skeletons on the right, hanging from chains which were pulled tight around their necks. Dead ahead, there was another skeleton lying near a weapons rack which had polearms that looked like they might crumble to dust if touched. Beyond was the main gate. To the left was a walkway that stopped just before the massive statues of Shar that guarded the lake outside the gate. It looked as if the walkway had battlements around the border, but most of them were broken and gone. Still, archers could easily fend off enemies who approached by the canal from that point.

In the other direction, heading south, there were more skeletons and a smaller chamber with the symbol of Shar on the floor; the one with the four smaller circles at the four points, like a compass. Beyond that small, twenty-foot by twenty-foot chamber, there was another twenty-foot wide staircase leading to yet another walkway past the mechanisms and giant chains that lifted the gate.

This brought them to yet another twenty-by-twenty chamber with three ways to go; east, south and west. South led to a balcony with many cobwebs and a skeleton dangling half over the battlement. A quick search revealed a Scroll of Invisibility which was given to Izar'la. The view from there was of the catwalks, the docks, and pretty much every area of Grymforge that they'd explored north of the temple entrance area. It was quite an impressive sight.

Off to their right, to the west, there was a long wall with battlements on each side. It looked like giant symbols of Shar were set upright on massive stands at intervals along that walkway. They faced inward, like huge rings of gold. About halfway, a ladder led down to an upper platform on the same level as the catwalks, and much to their relief, they saw that on that platform were levers.

"Catwalk operating mechanism?" said Izar'la.

"No doubt," said Rina. "Let's get down there."

Before they went in that direction, through the west archway, they took a moment to glance off through the east. It looked as if there once had been a bridge there that spanned the canal, about a hundred feet from the gate and at about the same level as the bottom rim of the gate's massive open portal. The beginning of the catwalk was about another hundred feet from where the bridge would have been, indicating that it probably originally connected. However, the bridge was broken away, and those portions of the catwalk missing, probably sitting at the bottom of the canal, leaving only about twenty-five feet on each side jutting out into the dark. Izar'la noticed a purple sphere in a pedestal of gold sitting on the left side of the shattered bridge, and she pointed it out. "I wonder how many of those once existed in this place."

"What do they do?" asked Pona. "Do you know?"

Tav shook her head. "I don't like it. Something's off. Pure shadow - around me, inside me. I can feel it just by looking at it."

"No doubt," said Izar'la. "They're used to give those who touch them darkvision. Shar's power probably flows through it."

Pona looked at Izar'la. "So you and I could have darkvision if we touch it? Won't Shar curse us or something because we're her enemies?"

Izar'la shrugged. "I'm not suggesting we touch it."

"Come on," said Tav. "Let's keep moving." She didn't wait for them to respond. She just set out through the west archway.

Almost immediately, she found herself staring at a rather frightening gargoyle on her right. She jumped, threw her shield up, and prepared to swing with her sword. The others rushed up behind her, believing she was in danger. But the gargoyle didn't move. It just remained crouched there, mouth gaping open and wings outspread. Tav relaxed a bit. "Sorry," she told the others. "Just a bit jumpy. I keep expecting this place to suddenly come to life with fiends."

"Totally understandable," said Rina. "We're right there with ya."

This was the northwestern-most section of the fifteen-foot wide walkway atop the wall. From there, it extended south. Against the west battlements, there was another decrepit weapons rack full of polearms; half of which were on the floor. On the right side of the walkway, just south of their position, they spotted a skeleton.

Pona set out first, guiding the way with her torch. She went about sixty feet when she stepped upon a metal plate that extended the width of the path. As soon as she did, she felt it shift under her, and her heart leapt into her throat. Immediately, she realized what she'd done. She spun. "DOWN! NOW!" she cried. Then she tackled Tav who was the slowest one to move. Just in time, a ball of fire shot out of the gargoyle's mouth, and it was coming right for Tav's back. If Pona hadn't knocked her to the ground, she'd have been hit hard; possibly killed.

They scrambled to the side and lay there for a moment, trying to figure out what to do. The gargoyle continued to spit balls of fire down the walkway to the far side. As if that wasn't enough, the trap had activated the symbols of Shar. They were now rings of fire, and they spewed fire across the path from both sides. Some of the rings had been destroyed by the calamity that had come to the fortress, so the fires were shooting up out of the broken sections in various directions.

Then, it finally stopped. "Must be on some sort of timer reset switch," said Pona as she got to her feet. "Dang! That was close. Everyone okay?"

They all stood. "Sure," said Tav. "Thanks, by the way."

"Don't sweat it," said Pona. Then she strode down to the gargoyle, picked up a small loose stone, and she soundly smashed it a few times in its open mouth. When she was done, she tossed the stone to the floor. "There. Shouldn't be a problem anymore. I smashed the nozzle thing sticking out of the back of its throat. Shouldn't spit fireballs ever again."

Tav brushed herself off. "And here I thought it was going to come to life part way down the walkway. Instead, it just shoots fire at us."

"Yeah," said Pona. "Sorry. I missed that one. I shouldn't have. I should have known. It had 'trap' written all over it. Rookie mistake."

"You're not really a rogue, you know," said Rina. "You're a monk. Right?"

Pona shrugged. Then she did her best Zrathentil impersonation. "I am what I need to be at the time." She chuckled.

"Just get moving," said Rina with a look like she wanted to give her a swift kick in the rear.

Pona once again led them along. This time, she was mindful. There were more of the plates that spanned the width of the walkway, and she jumped over them. The others did too. They reached the ladder that went down to the platform with the levers on it, but Pona stopped them from going. "Could be booby-trapped also," she told them. "I'll wager there's a lever or switch at the far end of the walkway." She pointed to the south.

There were two metal gates that were latched together. They sealed off what looked like some sort of guardhouse. Another gargoyle was behind the gate. Lots of metal plates spanned the path, and there were yet more of the giant symbols of Shar/rings-of-fire on either side. "I'll head down there and try to disarm the traps. You stay here. Probably best if just one of us goes."

"That makes me really nervous," said Tav. "Be super careful."

Pona winked. "You know me." Then she set out. Each time she came to one of the metal floor plates, she jumped over until she was near the gate on the far south side. As she jumped over the last floor plate, she landed on a regular tile...

... and it depressed under her. Pona instinctively dove backwards and rolled across the metal plate just as a massive jet of fire shot out of the gargoyle's mouth, through the gate bars, and about sixty feet across the path all the way to the closest set of symbols of Shar. Pona barely escaped this, but because she rolled on the metal plate, she activated the symbols of Shar which then also shot jets of fire across the path at her. She continued to roll, narrowly avoiding these as she came to her feet in between two metal plates.

She was safe. She'd somehow kept herself from even getting singed. From down the path, Rina cried out, "You okay?" Pona gave her a thumbs-up. Shaken and sweating like a pig - but quite pleased that she wasn't on fire or incinerated - Pona turned back towards the gate. She watched as the fires spat outward and then died down over and over again.

There was a pattern to them. They erupted at certain intervals, and they weren't aligned with one another. Left, right, center. Left... right... center. Left... right... center, left... Pona took the chance, kicking her boots into full gear - for she'd taken them back from Tav. She reached the gate with thieves' tools already in hand. She worked the lock more swiftly than she'd ever worked a lock before.

Snap! The tools broke. The right Sharran symbol flared. It wouldn't be long now before the gargoyle statue spat fire again. She tossed the broken tools to the floor and pulled out her other set. Time was running out. She was fighting panic. She jammed the tools into the lock, picked the remnants of the broken set out, and tried again.

Click! She threw the gate open and rushed in. The gargoyle was right in front of her. She dove to the left just in time. The flames burst forth, engulfing the walkway she'd just been on. The heat was intense, but at least she was not directly in its path.

She got to her feet, taking a moment to collect herself. She was in a small chamber about twenty feet from north to south and forty feet east to west with the gargoyle and gate at the western corner. A lever was in the upright position just to the east of the gate, and not far from it, sitting against the north wall, there was a skeleton with many polearms lying under it. Cobwebs blanketed the northeast corner, and near them, along the east wall, there was a small idol of Shar. Carved from black marble, the effigy was as terrible and perfect as the Lady of Loss herself.

To the south was an archway leading out to a balcony. This was directly above the docks plaque, commanding a view of the stairs towards the temple entrance area as well as the stairs that Mirthis was patrolling. Pona noticed a gilded chest just around the corner to the left. It was made of precious stone and covered in gold plating. It looked both sturdy and pleasing to the eye, even though it was covered with decades of dust.

Pona grabbed the lever near the gate, and she yanked it several times. It was corroded from age, and it didn't want to budge. She was forced to put all of her weight into it. Finally, it gave, and she was able to throw it into the down position. The flames instantly stopped, and all was silent - well, as silent as the roaring caverns of Grymforge could be.

With this accomplished, she looked at the idol of Shar. It was a mini-version of the massive statues seen near the gate and in various other places. "Hmmm," she said, thinking out loud. "The idol could wind up being needed to unlock certain doors or to activate the forge or something. Tav might not like it, but it's probably a good idea to bring it with." And with that, she stuffed it in her pack. Then she hurried to the gilded chest to check it out. It wasn't locked, and there were ninety-four gold pieces inside and a silver ring with an onyx stone. She took both, for she figured the ring might also be needed for something special later. Who knew? Seeing nothing else of value in the area, she hurried back out through the gate, expecting a trap just in case.

The others were just starting to come in her direction when she exited the guard area. They were growing concerned that something had happened to her. Seeing her emerge, they stopped. "You okay?" asked Tav.

"You people worry too much," said Pona with false confidence. She was still shaking from the incident with the traps. "I'm perfectly fine. Not a scratch or hair singed. Just some stupid guard room. Nothing special. Found some gold in a chest, and a few other things that are probably unimportant. I just put them in my pack in case."

She spotted a ladder near the gate on the east side of the walkway that she hadn't seen previously. "Hey! Look. There's another ladder here." She did this partially to avoid anyone asking about the additional items she'd

found and packed away. "Looks like it leads down to another partial level area. I think I see a heavy chest down there by a support pillar. I'm gonna check it out."

The others looked over the edge as well, surveying the scene. The platform with the levers looked as if it was once a full walkway that connected to the partial level that Pona had just pointed out. A massive chunk was missing between the two, creating a twenty-ish foot gap.

"We'll scope out the platform with the levers, then," said Rina. "You disabled the traps?"

"Of course," said Pona, and she started down the ladder.

The heavy chest just had fifty-six gold and a bottle of holy water. As Pona put them into her pack, she considered just how holy the water probably was. "Probably blessed by Shar," she muttered to herself. "Not exactly what I'd call 'holy.'" But she took it nonetheless, for holy water was harmful to fiends and undead. Knowing they might be running into fiends soon - potentially, but hopefully not - she thought it best to pocket it. Blessed by Shar or whoever, it would still likely do the job.

The ladder to the lever platform was big enough for two to three people to use at the same time, and it was still in rather good condition. Made of metal, there were sixteen total steps. Tav and Izar'la went first with Rina close behind. As they made their way to the lever mechanism, Rina spotted a chest tucked away to the north of the ladder amidst rubble and cobwebs. It contained forty-four gold and a silver necklace with rubies. She took everything, stuffed it in her bag, and joined her friends at the mechanism.

There were two black levers set atop a five-foot long, three-foot wide, and three-foot tall casing. They examined them carefully and found no signs of traps. "What do you think?" asked Tav. "Right or left? Which lever shall we mess with?"

Izar'la shrugged. "Let's just play with them and see what happens. Aren't they supposed to maybe move the catwalk sections or something?" She gestured to the catwalks just to the east of the platform, suspended over the docks.

And this they did. Indeed, the levers worked in moving a section of the catwalks. It was obviously used to make it so people could pass from one side of the docks to the other. One lever moved the catwalk east or west, and the other spun it so that it would either face east and west or north and south.

"Interesting," said Pona as she joined them. "Doesn't look like there's any way to operate it from the other side. One of us will have to stay here, or something." The platform was presently facing east and west and was connected to the platform they were on.

"I could use my psionics to operate it from the catwalk, but once we're more than thirty feet away, that won't work," said Izar'la. "I can't trigger it to bring us back."

"I've got rope we could tie to it, but that'll only go fifty feet," said Rina. "It's pretty far from here even to the center to align with the other sections of the catwalk."

"Always complications," said Tav. "And are we attempting to go along the catwalks, or are we going to the far side to explore the rest of the upper levels of the east side there?"

"I think upper levels," said Izar'la. "We know the catwalks are damaged beyond the temple entrance area. So taking the catwalks is probably not going to lead us anywhere. There might be a way to the forge on the other side."

"Yeah, maybe," said Rina, but she wasn't so sure. "The catwalks could also give us a better view of the area. Maybe if we take the catwalks as far as we can go, we'll see something that we can use to continue on to the forge from there."

"I vote other side," said Pona. "We can always come back to the catwalk if we find nothing on the other side. Since no one has made it to where we are right now in who knows how long, I'll wager the other side is the same. It's likely no one's been there in forever. Who knows what passages we may find?"

"I have to say," said Tav after a moment. "You're right. The other side seems best to me too. We saw the catwalk from the temple entrance area. It looked pretty bad over the lava lake; sections just dangling there precariously. I'd rather try to find a safer way to the forge, if at all possible."

"So, that just leaves one problem," said Pona. "Who is staying here to operate the controls so when the rest are finished exploring they can bring the walkway back?"

Izar'la replied, "I say we all go, and I'll use my psionics to operate it. The way to here is clear. We can always use Rina's rope to drop back down to the lower level docks area and work our way back around at any time. We don't need someone to stay to operate this thing."

"Ooooh," said Pona, feeling a bit foolish. "Now, see? That's smart. Izar'la's got the big brain." And with that, they boarded the catwalk.



Izar'la was just about to summon her Mage Hand when a voice called to them. "Hold up!" Alarmed, they looked to the top of the wall with the symbols of Shar and the gargoyles, and there was a duergar descending swiftly to the platform. It was Morghal with a big pack on her back, and she was hurrying to catch up to them.

They looked at one another. "What should we do?" asked Tav. This caught her completely off guard.

Izar'la was apprehensive, to say the least. "She's not one of the cultists, but do we want her with us?"

"If we don't see what she wants, she may turn the other non-cultists against us," said Pona.

"We could just kill her," said Rina. "She's alone."

"But that's one less non-cultist to help us against Nere," said Izar'la.

"Can't hurt to see what she wants," replied Tav.

Morghal joined them a moment later, hopping up onto the catwalk. She was breathing heavily. "Ah! Good. You didn't leave without me. I was afraid you would." She grinned. "I must say, you've been awfully busy since you got here. How you likin' the place?"

"It sucks," said Rina bluntly. She made it clear Morghal was not welcome. "So, what can we do for ya?"

Morghal gave her a slightly sinister smile. "I noticed you cleared the way to this area. Been wantin' ta explore it myself for some time. You goin' along the catwalks?"

"No," said Tav. "To the other side."

"Ah," said Morghal. "I must admit, that side's not been very thoroughly explored. Door to the dormitory is locked good. No one's found a key, and no one's been able to pick it."

"You've been to that side?" asked Izar'la.

"Aye," said Morghal. "Sure have. Know the staircase Mirthis' been patrollin'? It leads up to an area where you can kind of hop your way along to get to that side. It's a bit hectic, but you can get there. That \$#@ \$ gnome, Thulla, made her way along there, up the ladder, past the gate and dove into the lake. We chased her, but she was too fast. As far as I know, unless you can get into the dorm, there's nothing over there but a bunch of shabby weapons that are pretty much useless as \$#@ \$."

"But you've never been able to access the catwalks?" asked Tav.

Morghal shook her head. "Couldn't really find a way to get to them. Too high up and too far away from both sides. None of us knows the Fly spell or anything similar, so..."

"And how can we help you?" asked Rina.

"I'm comin' with," said Morghal. "Thought I made that plain as \$#@ \$. You got a problem with that?"

"Kinda," said Rina. "You're not exactly friendly, and..."

Morghal cut her off. "Look. We can either bicker about this, or we can get movin'. I'm not goin' nowhere, and I REALLY suggest that you don't even consider trying to kill me. I'm tougher than I look. Trust me. And I'm on your side, whether you believe it or not. So, I'm comin' with you because I have a vested interest in what you're doin'. So, let's just cut the \$#@ \$ and get a move on. Time's a-wastin'."

Tav sighed. "Vested interest? What do you know about what we're doing here?"

Morghal laughed. "Come on," she said. "It's obvious. You're out ta kill Nere. You're tryin' ta get to the forge. That's plain as \$#@ \$. Both of these things are on my Ta-Do List. I'm also tryin' ta get there, but before ya start assumin' nothin'... No. It's not what you might think. I'm not out to make money off some stupid adamantine \$#@ \$ or nothin'. Let's just say, we might be more alike than you think, and I'm interested in seein' the \$#@ \$ \$#@ \$ forge and everything down here gone for good. It's been nothin' but trouble, and it'll continue to be nothin' but trouble until this whole stinkin' place is gone."

Tav exchanged glances with her friends. "Well, I must say, that is unexpected. I guess you do know what we're up to. You been following us - spying on us?"

Morghal never stopped grinning as if she knew something they didn't. "Of course. You think you can waltz around here without someone keepin' an eye on ya? I've been here and there, and I've been helpin' ya thin out the numbers. Took care of the ones around the docks. Now, there's just a small handful of them cultist buggars near the temple entrance - hardest ones, mind, but only a handful. If we work together, we'll finish 'em off and Nere, and then we can make sure this place is buried. Eh? Come on. Let's stop wastin' time. Can we just get movin'?"

Rina was about to pull them aside when, all of a sudden, their minds connected with hers. Flashes of images passed between them. There was a shadowy grove, a fiery lizard, and cloaked people of various races gathered in a circle with corrupted animals; some with glowing eyes. Then flames burst forth from a golden dragon's maw as its wings spread wide. And, just like that, the vision ended.

"You okay?" Izar'la asked. She was quite ready to kill Morghal.

Tav nodded. "Yeah," she said, her headache even more pronounced. "We just... connected to her... again. It was different this time. I..."

Morghal seemed quite put out. "I wasn't expecting that," she said, and she was clearly not happy. "What just happened?"

"You... connected with us," said Rina, her suspicions mounting. "But we connected to you on the docks. This time, it was different."

"Who are you?" asked Pona, her fists clenched. "WHAT are you? I saw... I don't even know what I saw."

Morghal sneered viciously. "I'm not going to tell you," she replied with a growl. "That's for me to know and you to find out when I feel like letting you know. Now, we can either be friends and work together to accomplish the same goals, or we can fight and see who survives. My wager is that I'll kill you all, but in the end, it'll wind up being a huge hindrance to me. You MIGHT kill me, but then you'll likely be in just as bad a shape. So, let's not be stupid. Let's just move on and work together."

"Are we really gonna take her with us?" asked Rina as she pulled the others to the side.

"What choice do we have?" asked Tav in low tones. "You wanna try to push her off or something? Right now, she's got a point. She's our ally."

"I don't trust her as far as I can throw her," said Rina, "especially after THAT."

"I don't either, but I'm also thinking that it'd be bad to fight with her right now," said Tav. "Like Pona said, we don't even know what she is. I say we bring her with but watch our backs constantly. First chance we get, we ditch her or take her out."

"I can agree to that," said Izar'la.

"Same," said Pona.

"Grrr," said Rina. "I hope she's not a freaking fire demon or poltergeist possessing people. Fine."

Then they turned back to Morghal. "We're good," said Tav, and as she said this, Izar'la was already summoning her Mage Hand. "But we're a team. Majority rules. No making decisions without us."

"Good," said Morghal, her demeanor softening. "I kinda thought you might see reason." Then she grabbed the closest support chain and held on. A few moments later, the lever was thrown into place, and the catwalk was gliding slowly across the docks to the far side. No one spoke. Everyone was on edge.

## Chapter 46 - Remnants Of The Past - Part Two

They stood before the dormitory doors. They were almost identical to the kitchen doors. On the wall just to the right, there was a plaque that read, "Come all who are weary. Sleep, and forget." No one read it aloud. They were tired of the plaques. To the north of the door, the walkway went only about twenty feet to a wide ladder. This led up to the broken bridge that used to span the canal. "Beyond that is just the balcony on the far side of the gate," Morghal explained. "You'll find some bloody footprints there, and that's about it. No one cleaned up after that Thulla girl made her escape."

"I'll check it out, just to be sure," said Rina.

"I'll join you," said Izar'la, and the two were off in a flash while Pona stepped up to the door to examine the lock. Tav was watching Morghal carefully, standing guardedly between her and Pona with shield and sword ready.

Morghal wasn't lying. At the top of the ladder, there was a chamber with a skeleton lying in a corner, a rusted dagger stuck in its chest. To the left was the broken bridge just on the inside of the gate; the one that used to connect to the catwalks. Straight ahead, it was identical to the other side of the canal. Stairs led down with the massive gate chain on the right. The wall was missing in that direction, and they could see into the darkness to some degree. Far off, light from the Contemplation Chamber entrance was illuminating the surroundings just enough for them to make out the faint outline of the gap where Philomeen had died.

They continued on to the balcony overlooking the canal from beyond the gate. There were bloody tracks there - or footprints, cobwebs, and lots and lots of really old, useless weapons. The tracks were quite small, too, indicating a gnome had found some trouble there.

The two returned and gave their report. Morghal gave them an, "I told you so," look, and Pona announced. "No traps on the door or lock that I can see. I only have one set of thieves' tools now, so I'm a bit nervous."

"Hey," said Rina. "Didn't we find a pitted key in the Contemplation Chamber? Maybe it will unlock the dorm doors. You never know."

Sure enough, it worked. Pona was pleased. "Thank Heavens. I really am getting tired of picking every lock."

They shoved the doors open to reveal a multi-tiered chamber that had suffered heavy damage. There was a wide stairway on the north side which was half buried by rubble and debris. This led to a landing that wrapped around to an identical stairway to the south. There once was a central gathering area between, but it no longer existed. In its place was a gaping hole leading to the floor below.

The north wall was gone, and they could see down to the staircase where they'd fought the jellies directly below. "So the kitchen must be directly beneath us," said Tav as they peered over the edge. "That means the jellies probably came from up here."

"Eek," said Rina. "Good point." She started looking around for movement, expecting to see jellies creeping up on them.

Pona went to the gap in the floor and peered down. "Yep," she confirmed. "The kitchen is right through there. That's a sizable drop, though." Then she looked back at her companions as a thought came to her. "Um. You know... Now that I'm thinking about this... from up here... Philomeen could have locked the kitchen door, and probably did. I mean, she had to have gone through that area. So, chances are, the giant hellbeast probably came through the kitchen and punched this hole in the floor to get up here to the dorms."

"Or vice versa," said Rina, seeing where she was going. "Whatever the case, it was most likely the one that did this destruction."

"Which means, we were wrong to assume it was a closed door mystery thing," said Pona. "Our assessment of the situation was probably inaccurate. Either way, it could still be lurking around here, in this general area. We might be moving towards it instead of away."

The darkness closed in on them. Tav shuddered. "Let's just search the room and get out of here."

They checked skeletons, old crates, and even a few weapons racks, but they found nothing particularly useful. At the top of the stairs, along the south wall, there was a solid, iron door that was closed and locked. On a granite table closer to the southern staircase, there was a book. The title was, "Canticles of the Dark Mistress." Skeletons hung from chains from sections of the ceiling that were still there.

Another, single staircase off to the east led up to another landing. It was smaller and mostly covered in rubble, and there were only a few skeletons and granite tables. One skeleton hung from the ceiling by a chain, and there was a heavy, old, rusted, silver key, marked with a purple ring - Shar's symbol, found in its hand. One more staircase led up to yet another level, but this was almost totally buried. It was clear that the dormitory went on much

further in that direction, but it was no longer accessible because of the heavy damage it had sustained once upon a time.

But there was one thing they found at the topmost portion of the final staircase. It was a heavy slab of metal; a mold which seemed tailored for use at a particular forge. It was clear that it could be used to shape a unique piece of equipment. Rina picked it up, and as she turned it over, she said, "As hefty as the mold seems, the shield it outlines promises to be all the more stalwart." She looked up at the others. "Adamantine. This was meant to be used with the forge to make an adamantine shield."

"I say we leave it," said Izar'la. "We're not planning on using the forge to make adamantine weapons. Right?"

Rina looked back at it, a hint of disappointment washing over her. "I guess," she said. Then she set it back down.

Tav went back down the stairs and picked up the book. The others joined her. At the last second, seeing their backs turned and no one watching her, Rina couldn't help herself. She picked up the shield mold and wrestled to get it into her pack. She managed to succeed and hurried down the stairs, acting like she'd done nothing suspicious. No one noticed except Omelum.

Tav flipped the book open. After a few moments of skimming through it, she read, "'Let shadow fall where the light doth creep, and silence cloak the din. Let blackness into lost hearts seep, and bid our Lady in. Behold! Shar, who shades our path. Behold! Shar, from Ao born. Behold! Shar, the primal dark. Our Goddess of Night, behold!'" She slapped the book closed and tossed it back on the table. "That's the only thing I could read. Useless."

"Should we check the door?" asked Morghal.

"There's another area south of the southern stairs," observed Izar'la as she leaned over the southern staircase railing. "Looks like a good portion of the floor there is shattered away as well, but you can still reach some bookshelves and such in the nook."

They decided to investigate this first. Down the southern stairs, they went. Sure enough, there was an area about fifty feet north to south and thirty feet east to west - though the floor used to extend much further than thirty feet. It was obvious that the section of the room had once been MUCH larger, but most of it was now gone. Only the outer walls remained and a five foot path hugging the staircase on the north.

This path was how they reached the area, and immediately they noticed a bookshelf in the northeast and southeast corners, an altar complete with standing symbol of Shar along the east wall between them, a granite table similar to the kitchen table near to the massive hole in the floor, books lying scattered around, and a skeleton lying across the table with another against the altar. Among the items they found in this area, they took a Potion of Fire Resistance, a key and note - taken from the skeleton lying against the altar - and various scrolls including Chill Touch, Flaming Sphere, Detect Thoughts, Entangle and Misty Step. Izar'la took the Chill Touch, Detect Thoughts and Misty Step scrolls while Rina took Entangle and Flaming Sphere.

Tav then opened the note and read it. "'Master Ketheric: My whip has finally coaxed some particulars from the captive Harper. To wit: she revealed the location of her stockpile, on a rocky overlook. I investigated, but found the chest in question is trapped. Any attempt to open it might break its contents completely. The spy refuses to reveal how to open the chest, even under threat of death, only crying, 'Lux Splenda!' with every lash. Some type of watchword, no doubt.'"

"The interrogation continues. And again, please accept my most humble apologies for my earlier oversights. Rest assured, I will not to misidentify any more of my fellow Sharrans as spies - may they walk forever in shadow.' It's signed, 'Justiciar Sybil.'"

Everyone looked at Izar'la who shook her head. "Harper stockpile," she said, not knowing how to react. "Could come in handy." Then, feeling uncomfortable, she added, "What? It's not like I knew the Harper in question here. I'm not that sensitive. I mean, it sucks. I feel bad for the person, but it's not like I'm all broken up by it just because she was a Harper."

"Overlook," said Morghal. "I think I know where that is."

Rina was curious. "Where?"

"West of the temple entrance area, there's a ridge that leads to this craggy cliffside that you can climb down. I seem to recall several chests being down there, but no one dared to try to open them. They had traps all over. Didn't seem worth it, so we left it."

"Might be good to check out," said Rina. "Maybe the Harper lady had discovered a way to the forge."

"Maybe," said Tav. "So, are we done here?"

"There's that door at the top of the stairs," said Pona. "Should we check it first?"

"Probably," said Izar'la. "It's on the south side. Anything heading south could lead us to the forge."

Up the stairs they returned, and they came to the door. For several moments, they just looked at it. None of them really wanted to open it. They felt like they were on the trail of the giant hell-beast, and for all they knew it could be on the other side.

Pona checked for traps, and found none. "But the door is locked," she told them.

"Got a couple more keys," said Rina, and Pona tried them both. One did not work. The other did.

The lock clicked, and they shoved it. Tav stepped into the doorway protectively, shield up. The door creaked like the door of a haunted house. The first thing they noticed was a foul, sulphuric odor which was so potent that they choked and gagged. The second thing was a golden, child-like face with an innocent smile and wide, searching eyes. It was hovering approximately six feet off the floor, and it was staring right at them out of the dark. The torch Pona held only served to enhance the ominous sight as a merregon legionnaire materialized out of the shadows.

"Close the door!" Izar'la cried, but it was too late. The merregon rushed into the entranceway faster than expected. There was no way to safely reach for the door handle to pull it closed. The merregon took a swipe at Tav with its halberd, but she threw up her shield just in time. Deflecting that to the side, it followed up with a jab from the butt end of its weapon. Fortunately, it didn't hit hard enough, and Tav's armor sustained it.

Morghal was quick to react. She swung with her mace, but the creature tilted itself so it blocked her attack with its shoulder plating. This left it exposed to Tav's counter-attack. The elf stabbed it in the chest, thinking she would finish it off easily. However, she was stunned to see that the creature's thick skin was enough to keep the blade from digging too deeply. The tip only went in about an eighth of an inch.

She withdrew and sidestepped to allow Pona some room. "How do you kill these things?" she cried. "Skin's as thick as..." She couldn't think of a good comparison.

"Silver and magic," said Rina. "Not ice, fire or poison. Your sword did just fine. They're just freaking tough. Keep at it." Then she fired an arrow after she cast Hunter's Mark. Bullseye! She shot it in the face. It stuck through the mask, but it hardly seemed to slow the monster.

Izar'la thought fast. Not ice, fire or poison. Chaos bolt! She had a decent chance that it wouldn't be one of those three. Lightning shot from her hand and struck the merregon in the chest, but still it didn't seem phased. Pona then joined in, launching two radiant sun bolts which tore into its left shoulder. Then she tried punching it, but her fist just bounced right off.

The merregon suddenly shoved Pona backwards and entered the space where she had been. It was then that the party realized that it was not alone. There were hellish boars right behind; three of them, and they were fighting to get through the doorway to join the fight. Once it was through the door, the merregon then tried to take a swing at Pona with its halberd, but she narrowly escaped.

Morghal tried again to smash the merregon with her mace, but it did no good. Tav's sword also bounced right off as did another arrow from Rina. Izar'la, however, managed to blast it with a psychic Chaos Bolt which blew its mask right off. The creature fell backward screaming as it held its head. Then it fell on its back, dead.

And all at once, unexpectedly, Izar'la's wild magic surged. In an instant, she was like a duergar, growing to the height of an ogre along with all of her clothes and equipment. Fortunately, she was at the back of the group, so she had plenty of space to do this without knocking anyone over or shoving them out of the way.

With the merregon out of the way, the hellsboars rushed through the doorway. The first one came at Pona and shoved her back yet again. She staggered, and the boar filled the space where she'd been. This allowed the boar behind to also make it through. It attacked Morghal and managed to knock the wind out of her as it headbutted her in the chest. As for Pona, she tried to retaliate against the one that had pushed her back, but she was off balance. She was like a child trying to beat against an adult's back. Morghal failed to connect for the same reason. The beast had momentarily incapacitated her.

Tav swung at the one on Pona, but it moved at the last second. Rina cast Hunter's Mark on the same one and managed to severely weaken it with a shot to the left flank. This gave Izar'la the ability to take out Mourning Frost and crack its skull wide open. Pona then danced around it as it fell, and she pounded the one on Morghal with her fists. The creature was considerably larger than the others, and it endured her punches in spite of how powerful she struck.

Angry, the hellsboar attacked Pona, but she dove backward in time. Then both Morghal and Tav finished it off. As the creature fell, the last boar leapt onto its carcass and came at Tav. She brought her shield up and batted its face away. Then Rina fired, Izar'la struck with her staff, and Pona punched and kicked a few more times right in the face. Together, they brought the hellish monster down, dark blood oozing from several places on its carcass.

Everyone spun to face the doorway, expecting another nightmare from Avernus to come barreling out. What had they unleashed? Was it the nalfashnee? Was that why the door had been locked? Had some surviving member of the Grymforge somehow locked the fiends within before they died?

But nothing happened. All was quiet. For several moments, they didn't move, for they were too afraid to. Then, finally, Tav reluctantly entered the chamber. The others followed close behind. Pona's torch lit up the plus-shaped room. It was roughly fifty feet by fifty feet. A hundred foot tall statue of Shar stood in each corner along the south wall. Two other, fifty-foot statues were center along the east and west walls, and they were more finely crafted with darker stone and brighter gold trim. At the feet of the one along the west wall, there was an opulent chest.

Between the two along the south wall, there was an altar to Shar similar to the others they'd seen except that the circular symbol was hung on the wall, and it was twenty feet in diameter. It looked like a massive portal with a black center, purple border, and gold outer border. There was a golden merregon's mask resting on the right side near candles and incense sticks. Two notches on the interior seemed to signify the rank of officer. Some blow had buckled the mask above the wide, searching eyes which, like the others, seemed to be seeking its own kind.

Besides these things, there were two unlit braziers and two caldrons, all broken. The decorative floor was covered in blood and there were cobwebs everywhere. As Rina passed one of the caldrons, she glanced inside. "Gah!" she grimaced. "Dead ochre jellies just boiling in the pot. Those are live coals under them. It's like they were cooking them for dinner."

"Doesn't seem like much of anything important in here," said Morghal. "Maybe we should get moving."

Pona went to the chest. "Let's see what's in the box," she said, and she examined it for traps. No danger in sight, but it was locked. And so, she used the other key they'd just found. It didn't work, so she set to work on picking it. A few seconds later, she was pulling out a hundred gold and a REALLY fine looking hand crossbow.

Rina joined her. "Nice," she said. "I mean, I like my longbow, but that's a mighty fine weapon. Almost makes me want to ditch the bow."

"Well," said Morghal, "if I were you, I'd certainly take it and use it over that bow. The bow is not magical. The hand crossbow there is. I've seen it before in a book. It's called 'Firestoker'." Then she gestured to the bolts that came with it. She loaded one. It seemed to superheat, all at once. "Though they look burning hot, they are pleasantly warm to the touch." She touched the one she loaded with her bare hand. "When it hits an enemy that is within about five feet of a fire, or they are on fire or holding an open fire, whether magical flames or not, it causes the fire to flare and burst."

"Done," said Rina, and she took it and the bolts that came with it. She didn't discard her longbow, just in case, for it had greater range.

Then Tav found yet another letter on the altar, and she read it. "'Sybil. My scouts bring me troubling word that Moonhaven yet stands. Have you forgotten the Three Laws? Would you turn your back on Mistress Shar? Tonight, you will beg Shar's forgiveness. Tomorrow, I depart Moonrise Towers for Grymforge. A tenday hence, I shall march the Dark Justiciars to Moonhaven myself. By the time the first star trembles that night, the Selunites shall be slain and their allies routed.'"

"'Speak your prayer thrice nightly, Sybil: once at nightfall, once at moon's zenith, and once before sunrise. I shall remind you the words, let you've forgotten: 'Mistress Shar. I have glorified Your name! Master Thorm. I have cried out your Word! I am your servant, forevermore!' Demonstrate your devotion, and Shar may still know you. Fail, you are naught but dust, unknown and unremembered. Your Master, Ketheric Thorm.'"

"Sounds like Sybil was wavering in the faith," said Pona.

"I don't know," said Izar'la. "She was writing a letter back to him about tormenting the Harper woman. It could just be that she was running into a lot of issues."

"Maybe," said Tav. "This letter from Thorm does make it sound like Sybil might have been wavering; like maybe she was changing her mind about destroying Moonhaven. Thorm even felt the need to remind her of the Three Laws, and it sounded like he was pretty ticked off that she was turning her 'back on Mistress Shar.' He was even threatening to punish her physically when he arrived."

"Hmmm," said Pona. "An inquisitor of Shar who had devoted herself to all this, and at the end, she was likely killed here by fiends. Was she forgotten? Did Shar forget her and not claim her from Kelemvor's hall? Probably. Gods. What a waste. Unclaimed."

"Well," said Izar'la. "I agree with the duergar here. Doesn't look like there's anything else here. No secret passages either, from what I can tell. Let's go."

"Sounds good to me," said Tav, and they left. As they went, Tav came last. She paused for a moment and said a small prayer for Sybil, for she had pity on her. She wasn't sure why. She just felt that it was the right thing to do. "May she be forgotten no more, and may Selune guide her soul to find redemption at last."