

Chapter 28 - The Song of Boool

The scrying eye of Omeluum withdrew from Tav and her companions, content that they weren't going anywhere for the night. He then sent it off after Kethryn to see what he and Zrathentil were doing. When he found the folk hero turned Winter Guardian, the man had returned to the tower grounds. The scrying eye was just in time for Zrathentil to join him.

"What is the situation?" asked Zrathentil.

Kethryn dismissed Bernard and the animated armors, directing them to return to their patrol of the tower grounds. When the two were alone, he said, "I cannot confirm whether they're dead or alive. I was attacked by the bulette as soon as I came out to intercept them. I thought they went up towards the Selunite Outpost, for I saw flashes of magic and heard fighting. By the time I arrived, the battle was over. All I found were drow and the spectator. All of them were dead. I also found a pack with a few scrolls." He handed Zrathentil the scrolls.

"Thought you might put them to good use tomorrow."

Zrathentil took them and examined them. "Indeed," he replied. Then, after a moment, he tucked the scrolls under his belt and looked off in the direction of the spectator's domain. "Strange. The spectator was dead, and there were dead drow as well. So, the question is, 'Who killed them?' Either it was Tav and the others, or we have another group of invaders down here. Zhentarim? Drow? Hag minions? Spiders?"

"I saw no spider webs," said Kethryn. "Well, that is, there were no spider webs up by the spectator. I think I found where we need to go in the morning. There were many spider webs lacing all around the pillars heading up to the ceiling. It will be challenging to make the climb."

"Good to know. Perhaps we can set fire to the webbing or something to make quicker work of them," said Zrathentil. "So not spiders. Only drow and the spectator." He pondered it further. "The spectator was supposed to have turned drow to stone including the drow who knew the way to Grymforge. We learned that from the conjurer drow in the myconid grotto. So, did someone somehow turn them back to flesh?"

"Didn't we pick up something that would turn stone to flesh?" asked Kethryn.

"Yes," said Zrathentil, "but I still have it. Maybe our former companions found another flask of basilisk oil, or maybe, if they weren't Tav and the others, maybe someone else brought some with them. We must accept the possibility that we have additional unknown threats in the area. We'll have to stay vigilant."

Then, after a moment, he said, "So, no sign of Tav or the others? I'm certain it was them in the village."

"No sign," said Kethryn. "I'm also fairly certain it was them. But I looked all over. I even went into the Selunite Outpost. There were some shattered windows, and I climbed and went inside. I even used a ladder at the back. It led all the way up, probably close to the surface, but it ended at a magically sealed doorway. No matter what I did, I couldn't get through. Also, the statues outside the outpost on the north side are dead. They tried to kill me as soon as I stepped into their view. There's no way they could have gone that way."

"Even if they did," said Zrathentil, "there's no way to go from there. They could run into the minotaurs or the myconids. There's literally nothing else over there - at least according to the map. Both will likely try to kill them. I can't imagine they can handle much more."

"Do we even need to bother with them anymore?" Kethryn asked. "Can they hinder us at this point?"

Zrathentil weighed everything carefully. "Doubtful. Bernard is the brains behind the other automatons and animated armors. He views me as Lenore now, and I have changed the phrase so that Tav and the others cannot cause him to view any of them as Lenore. So, there is literally nothing they can do to take Bernard and our little army away from us. The most they can do is be a thorn in our sides, but we're setting out in the morning. So, we watch our backs, and we should be fine."

Kethryn nodded. "Perfect. Then I am turning in for the night. I need to get some rest."

Zrathentil stopped him. "Wait," he said, and he gestured to the east out through the main entrance of the tower grounds.

Kethryn turned and looked, but he saw nothing. "What is it?"

The drow's eyes narrowed. "We're being watched, and I'm not at all certain we should ignore it."

Kethryn met his gaze. "What are we dealing with?"

"Kuo-toas," said Zrathentil. They were shorter, fish-headed humanoids with webbed feet and hands. They were common denizens of the Underdark. "I've seen a few of them moving about just since you went out in search of Tav and the others. I think they're trying to determine our strength, and they may attempt to attack us. They're coming out of that vertical shaft off in the east corner. I say we take Bernard and some of the armors and we go see just how many there are. Could be an army of them, for all we know."

"Bernard and the armors aren't exactly stealthy," said Kethryn. "Maybe we should leave them if we're just talking about going on a scouting mission."

"Aren't you afraid we'll accidentally take on more than we can handle?" asked Zrathentil. "We aren't exactly in peak condition. I say we keep Bernard and the armors back while you and I scout ahead. We have them close enough that we can call on them for help, but they'll be far enough away that they shouldn't alert the kuo-toas. We slip in and out."

"Fine," said Kethryn. Then they commanded Bernard and a handful of animated armors to follow them.

They made their way to the vertical shaft. In order to get to it, they had to hop onto a giant mushroom and then down onto a ledge. They ordered Bernard and the armors to wait at the top as they scaled the rocky wall down a hundred and fifty or so feet until they reached a lower cavernous area. The smell of lake water and fish and stinking, disgusting death and refuse wafted through the air. Waves crashed into cavern walls and even onto a beach off to the far right. Most of the enormous chamber was filled with water with only maybe a fifth of it able to be walked on.

The path before them was wide and sloped down to an open area that was illuminated by torches. This was obviously the focal point of the kuo-toa village and their central place of worship. On the right and left, rocky steps led up to a high ridge which looped around, providing natural battlements for warriors to perch on. Further on the right, several branches of the path led down to the beach which was also lit by torches, and all about the festering cove, there were kuo-toas. The ones in the place of worship were chanting and bowing, performing some ceremonial dance before a raised altar with blood and bones on it. The ones down by the beach and swimming in the water appeared to be mostly women and children.

And the ones by the altar were singing, "Blood in my heart, blood on my hands. Raised to you, Lord, raised to you! Skin under my nails, hair in my teeth. At your altar, Lord, your altar! Speak his name and feel the hunger! Speak his name and feel the call! Bash, scrape, claw, catch, Lord! Cut, shoot, curse, rip, Lord! At your altar, Lord, your altar!" Then they repeated it over and over again with ever increasing fervor.

"Twisted, warped tune," Kethryn commented in low tones. "Any ideas who they're worshipping?"

Zrathentil shrugged. "Sounds like worship to..."

The singing stopped. The high priest stepped forward. "Oh great Boooal! Hear your servant, Pooldripp, the Zealous. Speak to us. Our blood to fill your oceans, oh blessed BOOOAL! Our bones to build your temple in the deep!"

A wave of pure devotion washed over Kethryn and Zrathentil - and with every surge, they felt a presence grow in response as they dared to creep closer. The whole time, they eyed the guards near the main path. Every male kuo-toa's attention was on the ceremony, so they didn't notice the pair.

Then, much to Zrathentil's shock and dismay, a deep and powerful voice emanated from the altar as the ghostly image of some fearsome monster appeared. It looked like a short humanoid with a human skull for a head. Blood was painted over the forehead and feathers were attached on either side. And yet, the drow sorcerer could see fleshy eyes gleaming in the torchlight and a tongue flapping behind the teeth. There was also a white beard that flowed down to the creature's navel, and long, pointy ears were jutting out on either side.

"WORDS, PRIEST. PROMISES," said the monstrous skull being. "YOUR GOD WANTS PROOF, WANTS BLOOD!" The voice was deep, and the words thundered throughout the cavern powerfully.

It was Kethryn who saw through the illusion first. "It's the redcap," he told his companion. "It's the one that had been on the toad. Remember? It was chased down here."

Zrathentil groaned. He hadn't thought it through yet. He'd been focused on determining who they were worshipping. "They believe he's Bhaal, God of Murder. Boooal. Fools! He's convinced these brainless fish-heads that he's their god, because... why not? He's probably looking to use them to hunt us down. THAT's why they've been spying on us. He's planning on using them to kill us."

Just then, one of the scouts spotted them. "AH! Intruders!" It screamed in a gurgly voice. Then it bounded, grabbed a low hanging vine, swung, and dropped onto the path behind them, blocking off their escape. A second one did the same. Both Kethryn and Zrathentil, who were crouching, jumped upright, put their backs together, and had their weapons up and ready.

Pooldripp's attention was immediately drawn to them. There was a chorus of gargling cries and whispers, but he spoke over them. "AH! Behold! Boooal has provided us with a sacrifice. YOU! Do not move. Our Lord of Murder demands sacrifice! You will be an offering for the great god BOOOAL!"

"This is good," said Zrathentil over his shoulder. "I count two dozen kuo-toa warriors at the most. When they attack, we hit these two on the path hard and fast, and we climb out of here. They'll surely follow us up to Bernard and the armors. We draw them back to the tower and pick them off. We don't need to kill many - just enough to make them think twice about attacking us again."

"Done," said Kethryn with finality.

"WELL, PRIEST?" cried the redcap. "BOOOAL WANTS A SACRIFICE! BOOOAL WANTS BLOOD!"

Zrathentil spun so he was facing the altar and Kethryn was facing the two guards who were blocking the path. "Wait!" he cried. His hope was to taunt the redcap and incite his wrath. "If it's blood you want, I can make another offer."

"OH? WHAT'S THAT, THEN?" asked Boooal. His voice was booming, but he was genuinely curious. "WHAT YOU GOT FOR BLESSED BOOOAL?"

Zrathentil laughed as if he thought the entire situation was a complete joke. Then, all at once, he cut his laughter short and he became utterly serious. "The mercy of a quick death." Then he cast Fire Bolt and launched it at Boooal's face. The redcap dodged off the platform, and the bolt struck the backdrop of nets and animal skins behind the altar, igniting it on fire.

Zrathentil's plan worked. Boooal was beyond furious. "GONNA BREAK YOU UNDER MY BOOTS! GONNA BATHE IN YOUR BLOOD!"

"BLOOD! BOOOAL DEMANDS BLOOD!" cried Pooldripp, and he pointed his shaman's rod, complete with skull on top, at them.

Immediately, before any of the kuo-toa could respond, Zrathentil cast Shadow Blade, and he wove together threads of shadow to create a sword of solidified gloom in his hand. Then he attacked the kuo-toa on the left while Kethryn attacked the one on the right. The dark blade cut through the primitive bone armor and gouged the guard while Kethryn made a swift slash and jab, running his through the stomach and out the back. Then Kethryn ran for the exit. The surviving kuo-toa tried to hack at him as he fled, but its weapon only bounced off his armor. Zrathentil seized the moment as well and followed before the kuo-toa could take a swipe at him.

The two reached the back of the cavern and began to climb, but the kuo-toas were not about to let them get away so easily. Primitive crossbow bolts rained at them, but only one managed to stick. It punched through Kethryn's armor. Even that one did very little to slow him, for his skin was now resistant to physical injuries since it was more like ice. The surviving guard who had tried to block their path then ran up and attempted to ensnare them with a net, but it fell short. The remainder of the kuo-toa warriors, and the priest, charged, flailing and crying out in a gurgling symphony of warcries.

Up the cliff wall they went, as fast as they could. Within a few seconds, they were high enough that they were within the vertical shaft and unable to be fired upon by the archers. However, the guard who had tried to stop them was right behind. It was determined to pull them back down for its tribe to finish off. The rest continued to charge for the shaft. It wouldn't be long before they were also ascending, just as Zrathentil hoped.

About a minute later, Kethryn and Zrathentil pulled themselves up onto the ledge at the top of the shaft. Nearby, Bernard was waiting. "Fall back," ordered Zrathentil. "Wait around the bend off to the left. Kill everything that comes up out of the shaft."

Then they did as commanded. They jumped back to the other side and made their way towards the mushroom wall which led up to the hag's portal. The kuo-toa that had been right on their tail pursued by itself, and it met a very swift and grizzly end. Bernard and the animated armors pounced, hacking it down in moments. Then Kethryn grabbed the body and dragged it behind a stalagmite.

There was a brief reprieve as the remaining kuo-toa host worked to catch up to them. As they stood there near the mushroom wall, Zrathentil suddenly noticed a dead drow lying on his back in a dried pool of his own blood. He was a mage, by the looks of him, complete with tattered blue robes and quarterstaff. However, he had splatted quite badly and was mostly unrecognizable. Even if he was someone they'd known, they wouldn't have been able to tell. It was obvious that he'd dropped from a considerable height.

"Mage of low standing, from the looks of him," Zrathentil commented. "His robes and quarterstaff are relatively plain. His boots are also worn out. I'd say he'd been wandering for a long time on foot by himself. Strange. An exile, maybe?"

The sounds of the kuo-toa were getting louder. They were fanatically charged, for they were determined to bring their beloved Boooal a blood sacrifice. But Zrathentil was no longer concerned. His automaton and animated armors would now make short work of his enemies. And so, he searched the corpse for answers. He just wanted to make sure the drow had been alone and hadn't had any friends who could be lurking about.

It didn't take him long to find a note sticking out of the man's pocket, and he took it and unfolded it. They could hear the kuo-toas coming. The fighting would start back up in less than fifteen seconds, but he read it nonetheless as if they were on holiday.

"One favor. One faithful servant. That is all I summoned - no more and no less than Malice Do'Urden ever had - or indeed the Mother of Lusts herself. The yochlol was quite a sight in all its forms. I'd read of its foul odor, but I found it intoxicating, like rosewater."

That was when the fighting resumed. The first of the kuo-toas came around the corner, and Bernard and the armors attacked. Zrathentil and Kethryn ignored the fighting as the drow continued to read. "So it smashed a few

artifacts, hissed at a master. The Archmage should have revered me for such a conjuring. Instead, he threatened to curse me - to make me a drider. Yet my time will come. Soon, I will return to Menzoberranzan and Sorcere. Then, the Archmage will worship me. I will be served!”

“What do you think?” asked Kethryn, also unconcerned about the kuo-toa force that was being slaughtered by Bernard and the animated armors. He only gave the battle a glance. “One of the crazy drow looking for Grymforge?”

Zrathentil shook his head. “They seemed like they were sent here on a mission. This person seems exiled because of his accident with the yochlol.”

Just then, the kuo-toa priest cast Spirit Guardians. Immediately, fiendish spirits flitted around him to a distance of up to fifteen feet. He charged into the midst of the animated armors, and the spirits attacked them. A foolish move, to be sure, for he made himself a big target. Immediately, Bernard and the armors retaliated.

Still, Kethryn and Zrathentil were unconcerned. The automaton and its minions seemed hardly phased by the priest’s attack, and it looked like nothing was getting through them. Therefore, Zrathentil continued to ponder the fate of the drow near the mushroom wall. “You know what I find most curious about this? If I recall correctly, Malice Do’Urden died in something like 1330 or 1340. My guess is that this guy was an exile around that time.”

“What makes you say that?” asked Kethryn.

“Why mention Malice Do’Urden if he didn’t know her or know of her? In more recent years, she wouldn’t be a name that people would likely recall too quickly or too often. There’d be someone else, I’d assume, that would come more readily to his mind. I mean, Quentel Baenre became the Chosen of Lolth in the 1480s and has been Matron Mother in Menzoberranzan for ages, so I’d assume she’d be the one he’d mention if he’d been exiled more recently. Fool’s been out of touch with drow society for some time, it seems.”

“The timing could still fit with the drow looking for Grymforge,” said Kethryn. “If they were looking for the forge like a hundred and thirty years ago, that’s what? - 1360-ish.”

“It’s true the timing fits,” said Zrathentil. “However, like I said, this sounds more like an exile than someone sent on a mission. There’s a victim mentality in the tone of the note. His yochlol smashed artifacts and hissed at a master. In drow culture, exile was the master going easy on whoever this was. Besides, he died fairly recently. His body’s not decayed enough. Must have taken him a long time to get here. Menzoberranzan is a LONG way from here. It’s all the way in the Northdark beneath Icewind Dale. If he traveled the entire way in the Underdark, it literally could have taken him a hundred and thirty years. It’s not like the surface, you know. It’s like a labyrinth that is not only horizontal but vertical.”

“So, what? Do you think he was coming to talk to the hag?” asked Kethryn. “Isn’t that where this leads?” He pointed to the top of the wall.

Zrathentil looked up. “Hmmm. Could be. That makes sense, actually. After wandering for a long time, he winds up in this area and hears about Ethel and decides to try to seek her aid in getting his revenge. He tries to climb the mushroom wall here, slips, and falls to his death.”

Kethryn then pondered something else. “I thought drow loved spiders,” he said. “Isn’t a drider like a half-spider/half-drow - you know, like the lower half of a spider but the upper half of a drow? Wouldn’t it be an honor, then, to be a drider? Why did he note say it would be a curse?”

Zrathentil chuckled. “No one likes to have their body transformed, at least permanently. You might really love horses, but if I turned you into a centaur, I’m fairly certain you’d think it was a curse.” Just then, Bernard and the armors hacked down the kuo-toa priest, bluish-green blood splattering everywhere.

The kuo-toas were now panicking, but Boool arrived just then. “Keep attacking, or I’ll rip you apart myself! I want their BLOOD! \$#@ killed my brother!” he screamed at them.

“Looks like the redcap decided to join us after all,” said Kethryn. “He could potentially be a problem for our forces. Should we assist?”

“Time to lure them back to the arcane turrets,” said Zrathentil. Then he set off towards the tower. “Bernard. Retreat!”

“Ah,” said Kethryn, following even as Bernard and the armors did. “Right. He’ll probably try to run for it once he sees us cutting down the rest of his troops at the tower.”

“Let him,” said Zrathentil. “Where’s he gonna go? If he tries to make his way up the mushroom wall back to the hag’s portal, we’ll peg him while he climbs. It’s a long way up, hopping from one mushroom to another.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Kethryn, and they reached the tower grounds, the kuo-toas screaming and gurgling in rage as they followed.

And by the time they realized that it was a trap, it was too late. The first of the arcane turrets fired. A kuo-toa lost its head. “Attack!” cried Zrathentil, and Bernard and the armors turned and began cutting down others.

The redcap came charging in, drop kicking Bernard, but the automaton sustained the blow without being knocked over. The battle was joined, kuo-toas squaring off with animated armors, but the kuo-toas were obviously losing.

Then Zrathentil cast Fire Bolt at the redcap, and Kethryn wove around behind him to block his escape. He then jabbed at the little brute, but he was just a bit too slow. Bernard and the animated armors were not, however. They joined in, and like the priest before him, Boool was cut down amidst blood-curdling screams and curses, hacked into pieces in moments. The arcane turret blasted another kuo-toa, and the rest saw their god fall and fled in terror.

“Let them go,” Zrathentil commanded. “There is no need to follow them now. Their leaders are dead. They won’t be bothering us again.”

“As you wish, Lenore,” said Bernard. “Shall I resume my patrol?”

“Yes,” said Zrathentil. “We’re done here.” He nudged Kethryn. “Let’s get some rest. I wish to leave as early as possible tomorrow. We have a lot of spider killing to do, I’m sure.”

“Sounds good to me,” said the folk hero. Then Bernard and the armors returned to their patrol while Kethryn and Zrathentil went up to the tower for the remainder of the night.

Then the scrying eye detected something spying on them from above. Unlike everyone else, Omelum could see into the Ethereal Plane with his scrying eye. He could see that the invaders of the Underdark had not gone unnoticed. Indeed, Tav and her companions had disturbed the spider webs at the drow shrine. This had, in turn, drawn someone’s attention.

Eliette, the Spider Matriarch, had been alerted within minutes. One of her hybrid phase spider children had been prowling around and had felt the vibrations. Unsure just how dangerous the intruders were, he scrambled back, all the way up to his mother’s lair near the well in the ruined town of Moonhaven. Not long after, she was gliding down on her own webbing, observing these new enemies and listening to everything they said.

“Spider killing?” she said to her children who had joined her. She was trembling with outrage. “How interesting. So, are we to receive some unwanted guests tomorrow morning? Well. Let’s not be rude, My Lovelies. Come. Let’s prepare a nice little welcoming party in their honor.”

Chapter 29 - The Slaughter

Hours passed. It was likely the morning of the fourth day since the nautiloid had crashed, but it was impossible to tell in the Underdark. The scrying eye hovered over Lenore's Tower the entire time. Kethryn awoke, and Zrathentil was already moving about, preparing for the ascent into the Phase Spider Matriarch's Lair. The small army of automatons and animated armors were assembled in the area where Boool had died. His body had been removed; tossed over the wall on the north side and into the lake along with his kuo-toa minions.

Kethryn approached and assessed the strength of their troops. His mind was immediately calculating their probability of success. "Five automatons including Bernard. Fifteen animated armors," he said to Zrathentil. "A few are damaged and have not been repaired. Unfortunately, there are too many unknowns to determine if this will be enough."

"It'll be enough," said Zrathentil. "I am confident of our chances. They're certainly better, I'll wager, than trying to sail across the lake to Grymforge. Unless, of course, you have changed your mind."

Kethryn shook his head. "I suggest a delta formation with us at the center. Bernard leads at the point with the other automatons. The animated armors we position around us on all sides to ensure that no matter what direction they come at us, we are protected."

"They might come from above," said Zrathentil. "I thought our plan was to let them go before us and we follow a considerable distance behind. Basically, we let them clear the way and we only need to kill off the stragglers."

"I've given it some additional thought," said Kethryn. "The automatons and armors are not adaptable or highly intelligent. They could wind up getting lured into traps or tricked by the spiders. We may also come from behind only to find that the spiders have cut us off from our forces. We have no idea how many we are up against."

"Fair enough," said Zrathentil. "You're the military strategist. I'll let you take the lead on this. I'm ready to do my part."

"Good," said Kethryn. Then he paused. Something about Zrathentil seemed different. "You seem in high spirits this morning. Did something happen?"

Zrathentil smiled. "I feel amazing, actually. I think that the 'vision/dream' thing we had last night coupled by a bit of rest has done me a tremendous amount of good. I can also feel it. I've acquired some sort of new ability. Whatever entity connected with us last night when you connected with Wynari, it has granted me a gift. It is called 'Horrific Visage,' and with it I may make an enemy I can see bleed. It lets me leech power from them so I can cast even more spells or use more metamagic than before. I don't exactly like being messed with, but I'll accept this gift gladly."

Then he asked, "Did you not receive a gift also?"

Kethryn pondered it for a moment. "If I did, I cannot feel it. The tadpole seems remote to me. I feel neither good nor bad. I can sense no new power besides those of the Winter Guardian."

"Hmmm. Perhaps that IS your gift," said Zrathentil.

Kethryn shrugged. He no longer cared. And so, he headed to the front of the five lines that Zrathentil had formed. He gave them instructions, and they formed a triangle with Bernard and the automatons at the point. He and Zrathentil then stepped into the middle. "Hold this formation. Move out."

They made their way along, Kethryn guiding and directing the entire time. After a bit, they arrived at the shrine to Lolth, and Kethryn had to issue some complex orders to get them to understand that they needed to break formation and climb while hacking down webs. Up and up they went, for what seemed like an eternity. Frequently, they were forced to pause while Bernard and his minions struggled to proceed. At several points, Zrathentil was forced to hurl Fire Bolts to burn away the sticky interwoven threads, for they were so thick that the automatons became utterly entangled.

At last, they reached the top and left the Underdark cavern behind. They found themselves in a horizontal shaft approximately fifteen feet high and ten feet wide. Kethryn reorganized them into a semi-delta formation, and he ordered them to continue. On they went for a couple hundred feet before Zrathentil asked, "Can you see?"

Kethryn nodded. "Not as well as you, I'm sure," he replied. "My transformation has given me dark vision."

"Good," said the drow with a grin. "I thought that was the case, but I wanted to make sure. I was just thinking how challenging it might be to provide you with light without potentially melting you."

Kethryn glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Are you attempting to joke with me? If so, it is pointless. I no longer find anything humorous."

Zrathentil shrugged. "Yes. Well. I do. The joke was meant to amuse me."

"Did it?" asked Kethryn.

“Meh,” said Zrathentil. “Slightly. Actually, I’m partially probing to see if there really isn’t any part of Kethryn in you. Are you completely and totally a Winter Guardian? Do you not have any emotional attachments or desires other than to find this Wynari person? And don’t give me the immediate, surface answer I know you’re about to give me. I’m asking you if deep down there really isn’t any part of Kethryn left within you; any emotional or moral part. I mean, I know you have his memories and such. I’m talking personality.”

Kethryn kept walking without the slightest hint of a pause, but he fell silent as he considered the question. The scrying eye could not detect what he was thinking, for the ring made it impossible to connect, especially stealthily. Omelum, however, was fairly certain that Kethryn was, in fact, delving deep into his own conscious self to determine the answer to Zrathentil’s question.

Finally, he said, “Kethryn is dormant, it seems. He still exists, but it is as if he is numb; encased in a frozen tomb. I cannot feel him, but my mind tells me what I should be feeling even though I cannot feel anything. Even my ‘desire’ to find Wynari is not really a desire as I used to know the feeling. It is more like my brain is telling me that it is my absolute desire.”

“An interesting condition,” said Zrathentil. “Is there a potential that Kethryn could override the Winter Guardian?”

“Not a chance,” said Kethryn. “As long as I wear the ring, the tadpole is dormant and the Winter Guardian has overtaken me. I...”

He fell short, for it was at that moment that they left the tunnel behind and entered a larger cavern. The ceiling was some two hundred feet high, so even Zrathentil couldn’t see it. Likewise, the walls on either side were beyond his dark vision range. Even if they weren’t, he wouldn’t have been able to see them, for the cavern’s walls and ceiling were coated in spider webs and hanging victims. The path they were on was clear, making it obvious that it was a main “road” the spiders used to maneuver through that section of the Underdark.

Zrathentil’s heart jumped into his throat. He was beginning to think that maybe they’d made a mistake. “This many spider webs,” he hissed softly. “How many spiders live in this place?”

“Couldn’t be that many,” said Kethryn in reply. “The more spiders, and the bigger they are, the more bellies to fill.”

“It’s the Underdark,” said Zrathentil, swallowing hard. “MANY things live in the dark places of the world.”

Kethryn reconsidered even as they continued into the cavern. The automatons and armors didn’t stop marching, for no command had been given. And so, they proceeded ahead until Kethryn said, “Stop!” The small force halted. The Winter Guardian turned to Zrathentil. “How many spiders do you think could be down here?”

A strange female voice chanted a quick incantation. A fiery missile launched from a large arachnid shape some hundred and twenty feet ahead. It glided swiftly through the air, exploding into a collection of webs directly above the invaders, lighting up the cavern for a few seconds as the sticky threads burned. The illumination answered Kethryn’s question. Above them, behind them, and on every side, they could see the silhouettes of spiders, some large and others larger. The smallest were the size of rats. The largest were as big as horse-drawn carts. They were surrounded. Slowly and quietly, the enemy had moved in around, blocking off all escape.

Then the Phase Spider Matriarch came forward, leading her kin. She stopped only about sixty feet from them. In the fading light of the burning webs, she was quite an ominous sight. She was fifteen to twenty feet in length with legs that looked like black blades. They were ten feet long each, and Zrathentil thought he saw tiny digits on at least the front two. Her coloring was primarily different shades of blue with blood red markings down the center of her back. Her eight glowing red eyes gleamed. She had black spider fangs on either side of her mouth, and she had sharp needle-like teeth.

“Welcome,” she said in Common, though it was clear that speaking the language was rather a challenge for her. Her voice was almost sweet and inviting, but Zrathentil detected the threatening undertone. “Thank you for coming. We’ve been ex-pecting you. Before the fest-ivities begin, I just want to know one thing. Why have you come to kill us?”

Zrathentil looked around him and saw the spiders on every side maneuvering closer. The net was closing. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. The scrying eye sensed what he was thinking. A talking spider that can cast spells? Perhaps he could talk his way out of their predicament.

And so, he stepped in front of Kethryn. “Great Matriarch,” he began with a pleasant tone. “Please forgive the intrusion. We honestly did not mean any harm. We are merely attempting to make our way to the surface, and we learned from others that this might be the only way.”

“Then you have been tr-icked,” she replied. “S-ome-one has sent you here to die.”

Zrathentil quickly replied, “No. Wait. Please, Great One. We mean you and yours no ill will. We desire a peaceful path to the surface. I...”

“LI-AR!” the Phase Spider Matriarch roared. “I heard you. I observed you. I heard you say you would come to kill spiders.”

Zrathentil felt panic threatening to overtake him. “No. That’s a misunderstanding. We thought you might be hostile. I...”

“I prayed to Lolth about you last night,” she interrupted, her voice now cool and deadly. “She warned me about you - and another. TRAITORS! Two traitors brought to me by fate, to bring to her. One freed Erevan Iles-ere. The other wormed his way into a matron’s bedchamber and stole the Holy Trysalis! But you will be a special sacrifice. You and her and those with you and her are not to be killed immediately. We will bring you to her. We will bring what is inside you to her. She wants what is in your heads. She will extract them, and you will die a slow and torturous death.”

Zrathentil then went dead inside. His past was thrown in his face, exposed to Kethryn. It wasn’t much to go on, of course, but it was potentially enough. If Kethryn bothered to look into it, he might find out who he really was; who he had been and what he possessed - what he had hidden away. And even if he didn’t, the Phase Spider Matriarch knew. That meant that no matter what, she had to die. Even if all he did was kill her, it had to be done. He had to make sure of it. And if Kethryn died as well, then that would be all the better. It. Was. HIS!

“A slow and torturous death?” asked Zrathentil, raising an eyebrow. “How nice.” Then, without even the slightest pause, he cried, “BERNARD! KILL!”

Chaos erupted. Spiders dropped and swarmed from every side. Webs were flying. Phase spiders jaunted into the Material Plane from the Ethereal. Animated armors and automatons began hacking and slashing at everything. Ettercaps, which were positioned near the Matriarch, charged into the fray. There were six in total. Within the first few seconds, two swarms of spiders took down one of the animated armors, but spiders were dropping like flies.

As for Zrathentil, he darted into the gap that was left by the fallen animated armor, and he cast Burning Hands. Four swarms of spiders were engulfed. A chorus of shrieks answered him, and when the flames died, more than two dozen were dead.

The Matriarch retaliated in kind. Almost as soon as the drow had completed his spell, she completed hers. There was a bright streak of fire that flashed from her. It lanced right into the middle of the invaders. Then it bloomed with a low roar into an explosion. Every last automaton and animated armor was caught in the fireball, as were Zrathentil and Kethryn.

And Kethryn was vulnerable to fire. Still, he survived, and in that moment, he knew there was only one way he could save them. “Get close to me! Now!” he commanded. Zrathentil, the automatons and the armors all pressed in. Then he cast Wall of Ice and created a hemispherical dome in a ten foot radius around himself and the remnant of their forces. Many more spiders died as they rushed in for the kill only to have the wall smash into them and send them flying.

“They’ll break through the dome soon,” Kethryn instructed. “Kill anything that breaks through.” Bernard and his forces made ready. Then the Winter Guardian turned to Zrathentil. “Here.” He handed him a greater healing potion. Then he took one for himself and guzzled it down.

A terrible squeal made the two jump with fright. Then they heard the spiders withdraw. All at once, there was chanting. Another fireball exploded into the dome, obliterating the front of it. Zrathentil stared through the gap in horror. The Matriarch was already preparing to cast another Fireball spell. “We’ve no place to run!” he cried. “Seal it back up! Quick!”

Kethryn didn’t quite do what he was told. Instead, he dropped the dome and created a second around the Matriarch, smashing the ettercaps near her. They went flying, but they got back up again. Fearing for their queen, they raced to the ice wall and began to pummel it. The nasty, hunched, gray-purple humanoids with bloated white bellies and spider-like faces went into a frenzy, striking it with their sharp, black chitinous claws.

Then the assault resumed. Within seconds, two more animated armors fell to sheer numbers, but they were dishing out more than they were taking. Among them, a phase spider was stabbed through the face by one of the automatons, and a giant spider was cut to ribbons by Bernard. Zrathentil cast Burning Hands once more, aiming it at a large bulk of assailants, and dozens more burnt to a crisp including several giant spiders and giant wolf spiders. A phase spider then appeared out of nowhere, catching an animated armor by surprise, and it tore its head off with its fangs. Then several armors ganged up on a swarm of smaller spiders and killed a dozen more.

Recognizing that he had no more walls of ice to conjure up, and knowing the Matriarch would soon be free of her prison to cast Fireball again, Kethryn charged out from the midst of his forces. He realized, in that moment, that his best hope of reaching the surface was to seize the opportunity and run for it. The enemy was distracted by everything that was happening. He saw his opening, and he took it.

He sped towards where his primary enemy and her ettercaps were. As he went, he wielded his longsword with both hands, and he hacked down two giant wolf spiders that were in his path. If he could just dart around the ettercaps and the Matriarch, he might make it. While they continued to focus on Zrathentil and the others, there was a good chance that he could escape behind them.

But the ettercaps shattered the icy dome with their claws, exposing a ten foot section. The Matriarch's gleaming red eyes saw Kethryn approaching, and she screamed. Three ettercaps moved to intercept, obeying her command. Two got close enough to bite at him and swipe at him with their claws, and they managed to injure him a little. Though his armor took most of the impact, he was left with a few minor gouges in his icy skin.

Behind him, the battle was still fairly even. The automatons and armors were hacking down spiders in droves, but the seemingly endless horde was slowly dwindling them down. For the most part, the armors had the advantage. The spiders couldn't seem to penetrate their defenses very often. Even the larger phase spiders and giant spiders were finding it challenging to damage them effectively. In fact, the smaller swarms proved more effective, finding chinks they could exploit. Two more animated armors went down amidst piles of dead smaller spiders.

Another ettercap came at Kethryn. He was quickly becoming surrounded. It, however, missed him both with its fangs and its claws. Then another appeared, blocking off any escape. It tried to lash out at him, but he dodged and deflected with his sword. Then yet another ettercap joined the fun, lashing out at him, but it could not penetrate his defenses.

A moment later, they were all surprised as Zrathentil exposed himself and ran up to attack. He positioned himself so that he could hit three of the ettercaps with his Burning Hands spell. Although he injured them, none of them fell, but he did manage to draw their attention. Then he cried out, "Bernard! Protect us! Now!" As he did, he smiled and slipped the Shadow of Menzoberranzan hood over his head. He spoke the command word, and instantly he turned invisible.

From behind, another animated armor fell, but Bernard and his automatons and remaining armors turned and surged towards the ettercaps. Bernard hacked down one that was about to attack the invisible Zrathentil before it could even try to swipe at him. Then, one of the animated armors, closest to the front, managed to draw the attention of another by putting a nice little slice in its backside.

Kethryn decided it was time to haul out the big weapons. He quickly consumed the haste spores that Spaw had given them. He then pulled out his shield to increase his defenses. He didn't have any ability to conjure up more walls of ice, but he could release an aura of ice around himself. Instantly, all ettercaps that had attacked him were hit by a blast of frigid air, like an icy fog that exploded out from him. The monsters screamed in pain, and one of them fell dead, coated in frost.

Then more animated armors and automatons joined the fight with the ettercaps, drawing their attention away from Kethryn. But swarms of spiders came with them. Another animated armor fell. Two dozen or more spiders died. Kethryn cut down an ettercap and an automaton hacked down an entire swarm of smaller spiders. Another automaton and animated armor slaughtered yet another swarm. Blood, guts and spider legs were raining on everything.

As for Zrathentil, now that the battle was focused once more on Kethryn and the rest of his forces, he decided to do what he knew Kethryn had been about to do. Invisible, he darted for the passage behind the icy dome and the Matriarch. He decided to abandon Kethryn to die. There were just too many enemies. It was better to escape and try to find another way to murder whoever survived than it was to take his chances and stay. Even if the Matriarch knew his secrets, so be it. He would be long gone before she managed to recover from the onslaught.

An ettercap destroyed a battered automaton; the first of its kind to fall. Its claws tore its head off. Then a phase spider jaunted into the Material Plane and bit a beleaguered animated armor in half. Bernard cut down two ettercaps as an animated armor put a gash into the phase spider that cut the armor in half.

That was when the Matriarch cast another Fireball from within the shattered dome right through the gap her ettercaps had made. She didn't even care that her own forces would be caught in the blast. In her outrage, she lost all reason and sanity. She had grossly underestimated the intruders. The nasty vermin had invaded her home, and they were slaughtering HER minions like they were hacking down tall grass.

And so, a fiery ball exploded into their midst, engulfing them. When the smoke and flames cleared, only four phase spiders, two ettercaps, three swarms of smaller spiders, three heavily burnt and wounded giant spiders, three automatons, Bernard, and the Matriarch were left standing. Zrathentil was nowhere to be seen, and Kethryn was among the fallen; charred and blackened by the explosion.

But the battle was not over. Bernard and three automatons were standing. They would keep on fighting to protect Kethryn, for Zrathentil had commanded them to protect them both, not just him. They could not comprehend that Kethryn was either dead or dying at their feet. And so, not detecting Zrathentil, they continued to fight. Another swarm of smaller spiders was hacked to ribbons. Then a giant spider. The four phase spiders

attacked and then jaunted into the Ethereal Plane. The two heavily wounded ettercaps fled towards the Matriarch's main lair above in the Whispering Depths. She would use healing potions later to restore them to full health. The final two giant spiders were then cut down. Only twenty-six smaller spiders remained swarming the four automatons.

Zrathentil was fleeing when he noticed that the battle was going his way after all. Kethryn was dying or dead. Most of the remaining spiders had fled. In moments, the automatons would likely finish the smaller ones off. Then they would attack the Matriarch but only IF she was unable to escape. That changed everything. He could kill her and snatch Kethryn's ring and use it for himself to better control his tadpole. Everyone who had learned or knew any part of his past would be dead, he'd have the ring, and he'd have a clear path to the surface.

And so, he became visible again as he activated the Amulet of Mass Animate Dead. He focused on a spot that appeared to have the most spider carcasses that were closest to the Matriarch. With Kethryn's defeat, the ice wall vanished, exposing the Matriarch to the undead host that quickly skittered towards her; zombie spiders bent on ending their former mistress' life.

But she was Eliette. She was not just a phase spider of untold strength and prowess. She was a powerful arachnomancer and spellcaster. She detected Zrathentil's reappearance, and she immediately noticed the glowing amulet. She assessed the situation in a flash. If she took him out, she could steal his power and control the undead. Thus, she would gain a new force to finish off the automatons with. And so, she phased into the Ethereal Plane and rushed into place unseen behind him.

Zrathentil hadn't expected that. For some reason, he had not considered her to be a phase spider. He wasn't sure what she was, but a phase spider wasn't one of the options he figured into his calculations. It didn't take him long to figure out what she was going to do. And so, he whipped out an invisibility potion and drank it as he bolted as fast as he could back to Bernard and the automatons.

A foolish move, to be sure. By doing so, he put himself in the midst of his allies, allowing her to cast Icingdeath's Frost and hit them all with a single blast. She jaunted back into the Material Plane, above and to the right of them, for she was dangling on spider webs only ten feet away. Then she cast the spell.

They all endured the attack, but Zrathentil was staggering. Bernard and the automatons were slowing down. The undead spider horde turned and moved towards the Matriarch, but they couldn't reach her fast enough. They were simply too far away at that point. Bernard and the automatons finished off the smaller spider swarms, but they turned to discover that they couldn't do anything further. Every enemy that they could see was climbing up on webs out of their reach. And so, they stood still, unsure how to proceed.

Zrathentil panicked. He stooped down, grabbed out a greater healing potion from Kethryn's pack, and he drank it as he sped, invisible, out from the midst of his automatons. He returned to his plan of just getting out of there. He'd flee and abandon his automatons and undead zombie spiders. If they killed the Matriarch, that was great. If not, he no longer cared. Survival instincts were kicking in, and he was getting out of there.

But invisible did not mean undetectable. Eliette heard him running past her. And so, she cast Icingdeath's Frost again, pummeling the automatons and destroying one. Then she phased out of the Material Plane, dropped down, and chased after her primary target. The zombie spiders didn't know what to do, and Bernard and the automatons, who thought that the zombie spiders were their enemies, just hovered around Kethryn to protect him from them. Neither group moved from where they were, for the zombie spiders' target vanished, and the automatons' targets were out of reach.

And Zrathentil fled as fast as his legs could carry him. Through the dark passage towards the Whispering Depths still a far way off, he ran. He hoped beyond hope that the Matriarch was still back in the passage, fighting off spider zombies and automatons. As he went, he fought to think. Was there anything else he had that could help him escape? False Life scroll. Hold Person. Ray of Sickness. He had Mystra's Grace that allowed him to walk on air, but what good would that do him there? On and on he continued, glancing over his shoulder constantly. Every step he took, he expected to see HER right behind him.

She was. He just couldn't detect her, for she was not invisible. She was in another plane. The Ethereal Plane was parallel to the Material Plane. From there, she could see into the Material Plane, and she could phase in and out of it. In a sense, she could make herself into a ghost at any time, completely incorporeal so that no magic or weapons could harm her and no sensory organs could detect her. It was as if she wasn't there, even though she was.

She waited for just the right moment to strike. He finally reached the base of the stalagmite that ascended up to the Whispering Depths where her primary lair was. Just as he started the climb, she decided to appear. In that moment, in a flash, she sprang into the Material Plane, and she attacked him with her fangs. She pounced on him before he even knew she was there. Her fangs sunk deep into his right shoulder. He screamed. She bit down harder, driving them further and injecting her poison into his bloodstream. Zrathentil saw red. Then everything went black.

With that, he dropped to the stone floor. The Matriarch quickly removed everything valuable from him, especially the amulet. Then she wove webbing around to mummify him. Finally, she left his things there and dragged him up to her lair where she hung him high above her nest as a trophy. "I will leave you dangling there for a bit," she said to his comatose form. Her wrath was appeased. She had lost so many minions and spawn, but in the end, she had won. "After you've had a chance to truly comprehend your plight, I will drag you to the portal. I will take you to her. I will give you to her so that SHE might have the pleasure of ending you."

Then she returned to the path where she'd left the automatons and undead spider zombies. She needed to finish the job and see if Kethryn had survived also. And so, she used the amulet to control the zombie spiders which attacked the automatons to weaken them further. After the undead died, she tossed the amulet like refuse and rained spells upon her foes to finish them.

Last to fall was Bernard who stood valiantly over Kethryn's body to the bitter end. Even after Eliette had exhausted herself, he stood, and she was forced to drop next to him, jaunt into the Material Plane, and snap his head off with her fangs from behind. Bernard let out a strangled cry as his head flew through the air. Then it bounced like a ball on the stony floor. As it came to a rest near a stalagmite, his voice issued out his final words as the light behind his eyes faded out. "I'm - so sorry... Lenooooore!"

At last, the Matriarch checked to see if Kethryn was alive. Much to her displeasure, he was not. "Lolth will be angry," she said to herself. "She wanted all who had the tadpoles in their heads to be brought to her. This one, however, did not survive. Will the tadpole crawl out? Shall I catch it when it does? Did it already crawl out? I must be sure."

Then she smashed open his face with her right front leg, cracking it like an eggshell. Peeling it open, she saw the tadpole still connected to his brain. It was embedded rather deep, and it appeared to be very dead. Oddly enough, both parasite and host seemed to be frozen solid, as if something had encased them in a thin layer of ice.

She sighed. "Not much can be done about this one. Perhaps she won't even know. Only the traitorous drow were essential. This one would have just been a bonus." Then, to make sure no one discovered his corpse, she stripped him of all of his belongings except his armor, the Ring of Guiding Light, and the Ring of Psionic Protection. None of which she could get off. They all seemed frozen to his body.

After that, she wound her way back into the Underdark, dragging him along with her. When she was above the lake, she dropped his body from the ceiling of the massive cavern and watched as it vanished beneath the surface. Then she returned to her lair to use some of the potions she'd taken off her victims to heal her surviving minions. All she had to do at that point was wait for the other traitor to arrive. She knew that she would, for Lolth had foreseen it and was willing for it to happen. It was only a matter of time before Vexir arrived.

Chapter 30 - Onward!

The scrying eye left the spider lair and returned to the Selunite Outpost. Seeing that Kethryn was dead and tossed into the lake and Zrathentil was now captured and likely spider food or worse, Omelum was no longer interested in them. As far as he was concerned, their story had ended. He could focus his attention on Tav and her companions.

They remained at the outpost for a good fourteen hours. Tav kept first watch while the others slept. They awoke one at a time. Rina was first, taking second watch after eight hours. This allowed Tav to get at least four hours of meditative rest. Pona was second, for she stirred almost immediately after Rina started making breakfast in a different room. The meal was meager. Rina had stored some of the food they'd acquired from the duergar in her pack. It wasn't much, but it was something. Then Izar'la joined them about forty minutes later.

The three talked quietly amongst themselves, sharing old stories about different events in their lives. Izar'la was in a decent mood, but Pona and Rina seemed particularly happy. To them, it was as if the dark cloud of their present circumstances had lifted. They couldn't quite place it, or so they said, but they felt as if they had just been given a new lease on life.

It was, of course, the tadpoles. Like Zrathentil, they'd been totally revived and given new gifts. Embarrassed, and unsure how their companions might respond, they kept it to themselves. And so, they pretended like they'd just had the best night's rest in ages, and they fervently avoided the topic.

All of a sudden, it happened. Rina was in the middle of a story about hunting down a half-elf criminal when an overwhelming feeling assailed her and Pona. It was as if they suffered a great loss. They had strange, disturbing visions that caused their heads to swim. Tav joined them almost as soon as the moment ended. "Did you feel that?" she asked in shock as she rushed into the room. "Kethryn's dead. Zrathentil's captured. The spiders won."

Rina nodded. Her demeanor was no longer pleasant. "Yeah. I felt it," she replied. "So, why am I feeling so crappy about it? Shouldn't I be happy Zrathentil's gotten his comeuppance?"

"I saw it too," said Pona. "Clear as day." She was also no longer chipper.

"What?" asked Izar'la who was totally in the dark. "Did you actually see your former companions die? Really?"

"Yeah," said Tav. "We felt it. We SAW it. We... We are connected to Zrathentil, I think. I could see it happening through his eyes. I could feel his fear. The tadpoles connect us for sure."

"So what happened?" asked Izar'la.

Tav was still in mourning. She could feel it deep inside. Kethryn was gone. That was why they were feeling such a sense of loss. She then told the gith what happened, and she concluded with, "I remember seeing Kethryn through Zrathentil's eyes. He was lying there amidst the spider corpses, at the feet of the automatons. The fireball had killed him. He was charred and blackened. There's no way he survived. Even if he did, the spiders would have taken him and would have strung him up to eat later. Zrathentil had abandoned him. He'd tried to save his own skin, but the Matriarch ambushed him and poisoned him. I can feel it. He's still alive - Zrathentil, that is - but he's bound and gagged. He's ensnared and hanging from the ceiling of her lair far above."

"Hah!" said Rina sharply, but it was forced. "Well, serves him right. At this point, even if we wanted to, we couldn't get to him. So, he gets what he deserves. That, at least, is comforting."

"Is it, though?" asked Pona, mourning. "Kethryn. I mean, we kinda knew he was dead to us, but now it's final. He didn't deserve that end. Ya know? And, I don't know. Did I REALLY want Zrathentil to have a bad end? Maybe I'm just soft too, but I guess I kinda, sorta wanted him to come back and apologize and rejoin us. I think I was hoping he'd be good after all."

Tav nodded. "But it's out of our hands," she replied. "There's nothing we can do." Then a lengthy silence fell between them. Tav sat with them. Rina handed her some food, and she ate. Tav said a quick prayer for Kethryn's soul. Then, after a time, she finally spoke. "Well, we could sit here and mourn all day, I suppose, but we have to consider how best to move forward. I had a lot of time to ponder it last night, and I think we just need to tweak our plan a bit."

"How so?" asked Rina.

"We really have no choice," said Tav. "The spiders won. We can't go that way. However, the automatons and animated armors are no longer in the Arcane Tower. It is open to us. Therefore, we can go to the tower and claim the boat without fear of being attacked."

"There are those arcane turrets," said Pona, "but I think you're right. We could probably either avoid them or take them out fairly quickly. So what then?"

“We head to Grymforge,” said Tav. “We know the way, thanks to the memory crystal. Across the lake, to the west, and then to the south. It’s actually not too far from Glut’s Grotto.”

“What about the horde of duergar?” asked Izar’la. “We have nothing, now, to bargain with.”

“Ah,” said Tav, “but they don’t know that. Our original plan was to tell them about Zrathentil and how he has the instructions for creating adamantine using the forge. We were initially going to tell them that he was at the tower. If they hurried, they might overpower him and claim it for themselves. We were going to pit the two sides against each other.”

“Well, now we just have to tell them that he’s made an attempt to flee to the surface, but the spiders caught him,” Tav explained. “It’s basically the truth. We happen to know that he and his minions wiped out a HUGE portion of the spider population. All they have to do is go and finish the job. With as many as they likely have, they should easily be able to overpower the remaining spiders and claim Zrathentil’s possessions. Adamantine could be theirs with little to no effort. But, you know, just to be safe, they should take a considerable force. Thus, they’ll likely clear out of Grymforge and leave it to us to use the forge to create the Sussur daggers, free the gnomes and kill Nere.”

“So,” she concluded, spreading her hands out at her sides with a shrug and a wince. “What do you think?” It was clear that she wasn’t sure they’d approve. “I know it’s a long shot, but...”

Rina was pleased. “Duergar are typically greedy,” she replied. “I actually think it could work. They’ll be suspicious, naturally, but they’ll probably jump at the chance. After all, they’ll reason that we’re not going to be able to hurt them if they leave us at Grymforge, and we certainly wouldn’t be able to hold it if we tried to claim it for ourselves. They might try to imprison us and keep us in a cell until they return with the instructions to the forge, but that’s a worse-case scenario. We’re not lying, so when they return from the spider lair, they should actually have the instructions as we will promise them. So, I’ll wager, we have a good chance of them not killing us. They’ll be in high spirits for sure once they get their hands on how to make adamantine.”

“Therefore,” said Izar’la, “even if we aren’t able to get close enough to Nere to kill him, we’d at least be able to get out of the Underdark, most likely. Is that what you’re suggesting?”

“Right,” said Tav. “But even if they lock us up, I’m fairly confident that Pona, here, can pick a lock and get us out. Security isn’t likely to be as tight if they send the bulk of their forces out. They’re still going to have a number of gnomes to keep in line, so we’ll likely be the least of their concerns. Pona picks a lock, we break out, find our equipment, forge the daggers, free the gnomes, and kill Nere. Either way, I think it’s our best shot. Sitting here and waiting for another option doesn’t seem wise.”

“I’ll just have to make sure I hide some thieves’ tools somewhere so that if they search us they don’t find them,” said Pona. “I can pick locks, but I’m no magician. I need something to work with.”

“If that doesn’t work,” said Izar’la, “We gith have certain psionic abilities that we can use. I should be able to cast Mage Hand and use it to grab keys off a hook or lock picks from within an unlocked chest or on a table or something. Either way, we do have a good chance of success.”

“Okay,” said Tav. “Then everyone agrees? This is our next course of action?”

They nodded. Rina even stood. She was feeling renewed again. Kethryn’s death still hung in the back of her mind, but she was filled with hope. “Onward! To Grymforge!” She raised her fist into the air.

And with that, the party cleaned up, packed up, and set out, leaving not a trace of their presence there. They were still cautious, for they had no idea what to expect. Who knew what might be lurking about in the Underdark that day? Nevertheless, the way was clear.

Soon, they were at the entranceway to the tower grounds. They carefully stepped inside, and when they came to the end of a wall on their left, they stopped. Having passed through that chamber upon exiting the tower, they knew the first of the turrets would be there waiting for them. Sure enough, Rina peeked around the corner and spotted it pointing in their direction. Since Zrathentil had taken over the tower, they figured it would no longer be friendly. As of yet, it didn’t seem to notice them, but it was glowing as if with ominous intent.

“Okay,” she said, pressing her back against the wall. The others did the same. “I can see one of them. I don’t think it detected me, but I can’t be sure. I’m going to take another peek.” Tav nodded. Rina slowly looked around the corner.

There it was, only about a hundred feet away. It had a square base with blue energy lines running through it. There was one line from each corner and one from each side; eight in all. The corner lines zigzagged at an almost ninety degree angle before lancing towards the center. They came together to form a smaller blue square near the raised center. Hovering above it was a black sphere, also with blue lines coursing through it. On one side of the sphere, the one facing towards them, there was a diamond semi-transparent curved shield. The border of the shield was traced with the blue energy lines. Where the sphere touched the shield, more lines glowed. They formed

eight wedge shapes with the points facing inward and their curved bases almost touching so that they formed a broken circle.

Behind it, glowing crystals helped to illuminate the area enough for her to see. She risked looking around a bit. The turret was just off to the left and ahead. A stairway beyond led up to a raised alcove on the far west side. She couldn't tell, but it might contain nothing more than mushrooms and other glowing crystals. Though they had passed through the approach from the east previously, they had not really explored it. To the right of the alcove was a straight stairway leading up to the tower. The second turret was on a higher elevation some twelve feet above and just off to the left of those stairs. To the right, on the same level as the second turret, the landing extended along the shattered outer wall on the north. However, the landing was broken on the east side. It crumbled and sloped downward, providing a path up from that direction. Between the landing and the wall they were hiding behind, there was a ten foot tall stalagmite with a base that was roughly five feet in diameter. It jutted up right in the middle of the central walkway as if in protest to whoever crafted the chamber.

She described the scene to the others. "If we could just sneak off to the right there," said Rina, pointing to the stalagmite, "we would have cover from the first turret. From there, we could make our way to the north wall where it slopes up to the level the second turret is on. If we keep low, the first turret shouldn't be able to hit us from there. If we can continue to find cover, we might be able to slip past the second turret. I think it's facing down this way, so it might not detect us if we come at it from that direction."

"Worth a shot," said Izar'la.

"I'll go first," said Pona. "Let's see if I can sneak my way over to that first stalagmite without it detecting me." And with that, she dropped low into a crouch and made her way slowly across the twenty foot gap between the wall they were hiding behind and the stalagmite. Sure enough, the turret didn't detect her. From there, it was only another ten feet to the corner of the upper platform shielding the path on the right from the turret. This she reached also without triggering the turret. Rina was next, and she had similar success.

Then Izar'la made her way out into the open. The turret powered up, glowing a brighter blue, almost immediately. The gith's eyes went wide, and she dashed to the stalagmite. Just as she dove behind, the turret fired a bolt of white light. Chunks of stone went flying. It stopped. She was out of its line of sight. Therefore, she didn't exist as far as it was concerned. She tried again to sneak to where Rina and Pona were, but once again it spotted her. She dove. It fired. She rolled beyond the wall of the landing, and the turret became lifeless again.

"Okay," said Rina. "So, they're a bit slow and likely motion sensitive. Good to know. Probably meant to surprise victims and for crowd control. If you move slow enough, you probably won't be detected by it. Or, I'll bet you can just run for it, Tav. You'll probably be able to make it."

Tav took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I hope you're right," she said. "I'm not exactly stealthy." Then she summoned up her courage and darted across the opening. The turret swiveled and fired, narrowly missing her. At the stalagmite, she didn't even pause. She just raced to the base of the landing where her companions were taking cover. The turret fired again, pegging the stalagmite. Then it fired once more, nearly taking her head off. Chunks of the wall went cascading around them.

"Well," said Pona. "That's certainly one way to do it. You okay?"

Tav was breathing heavily. "I'm... a bit shaken, but otherwise fine."

Pona nodded. "Okay. Let me scout up ahead. Wait here."

"Hold up," said Rina. Then she crept to the back corner. A corpse lay at the base of the outer wall. It was clear from the way he'd fallen that he'd tried entering by climbing from the beach below through the gap in the outer wall and had fallen on his head, breaking his neck. He was hidden in shadows, and he'd been dead for a very long time. His entire body was nothing but bone. Near him was an old, common longsword and a shield, but he wore a fine looking set of chainmail armor.

It was a full suit covering everything from boots to throat. The bottom layer was made of steel gray chain links. This covered the upper arms, shoulders and torso and fell all the way down to the shins, like a dress. It was open in the front near the legs so that it wouldn't hinder movement as much. A maroon leather scapular was therefore fastened over the top. This was like a sleeveless coat that ran down the front and back all the way to the edge of the chain skirt. In the front, there was a decorative, curvy golden pattern that covered the breasts and waist, and a similar pattern came up from the hem. A beige sectioned metal guard was fastened on top of the scapular which provided additional protection to the upper chest, the neck, and the tops of the shoulders. Light brown leather pauldrons were fastened to the chain on the upper arms, providing extra protection there. Leather bands also covered the elbow joints which protruded out from under plated gauntlets. A matching leather sash was then tied around the waist and fastened near the navel to hold it all in place.

When Tav saw the armor, her eyes lit up. "That's a much better looking suit than what I've got currently. Do any of you mind if I take it?"

Rina grinned. "It's about time you got something better for yourself. Up until now, I've been hogging everything."

"Have you, now?" asked Tav, tapping on her new longsword. She smiled as they saw it and realized it was not the sword she'd originally been using.

"Hey! Where'd you get that?" asked Pona. Tav then explained.

Rina gave her a dirty look, but it was only pretend. "You little minx. We'll have to keep a closer eye on you. Just takin' things without asking."

Tav chuckled. "I was going to see how long it took you to notice it, but I couldn't help myself. I had to tell." She unsheathed it. "Do you like?"

"It's a beautiful blade," said Rina. "It'll go nicely with your new armor." And with that, they waited while Tav donned the new, better chainmail.

When she was done, Pona carefully crept up the side of the hill leading to the level the other turret was on. Sure enough, the turret was facing down the stairs and into the more open area where it had been trying to peg kuo-toas the night before. So, although there was no real cover on that level, Pona was able to sneak around behind it.

At that point, she was trying to figure out how to either disable the thing or destroy it. When Rina poked her head up to see what was happening, Pona tried to communicate with her using hand signals. Should they just try to attack it and destroy it? Should they trust that somehow Tav and Izar'la would be able to sneak past it?

Rina told her to wait. Then she snuck up to join her after exchanging a few words with the other two. When Rina was next to the halfling, she whispered, "They're going to try to sneak past. If we see the turret activate, we attack with everything we've got. Maybe you and I can pummel the thing up close and damage it enough to keep it from blasting the other two. Both of them are going to come at the same time."

Pona shook her head. "Tav's armor's too noisy. She..."

Too late. The two were already starting up the slope in a low crouch. One step at a time, they painstakingly made their way ever so carefully towards the stairs. Each slight movement caused both Rina and Pona to grit their teeth. They were sure Tav, at least, would give them away.

But the turret did not activate. Instead, it remained completely inactive. Finally, they made their way up the stairs to the fourth floor landing, and from there they stayed below the windows to avoid the turrets inside from blowing their heads off. On the west side of the building, they peered over to see the pipes jutting out and the large mushroom shelves.

Rina gestured to Izar'la. "The boat we stole from the duergar is down on the lowest level of the tower in a private dock," she explained. "When we were here previously, we noticed that you can hop down these mushrooms to get to the lowest level and to the dock. We should be able to avoid the tower entirely."

"Nice," said Izar'la. "Seems like a terrible design. Who built this thing anyway, and why?"

Rina chuckled. "We were saying the same thing when we got here. Turns out, some cleric mage named Lenore built it about a decade ago or so. She abandoned it way back then when she was called to Baldur's Gate for something. So, we think these mushrooms grew up on the tower after she left, and without her to keep the place tidy..."

Izar'la nodded. "Got it. I think you mentioned her before in connection with the automatons and such. Well. Whatever. Thank you, God of Mushrooms."

Pona laughed. "At least we're going down and not up."

Then the four climbed over the railing and hopped down onto the first mushroom. Carefully, they made their way from one to the other until they were all the way down to the ground level. Fearing an automaton or two might be lurking about, they proceeded with caution, always ready for a fight.

But there was none. Kethryn and Zrathentil had felt that their chances of success were higher if they took all of their automatons and animated armors with them. If they did manage to get to the surface, as they hoped, they wouldn't ever need the boat again. So, they no longer cared about it. Therefore, the four found it sitting in the private dock, just where they'd left it. It wasn't long before they were sailing out onto the lake and leaving that portion of the Underdark behind.

Little did they know, but they were not alone. The scrying eye detected a stowaway clinging to the back of the raft, hiding in the shadows. He had been following them since they reached the shrine to Lolth. He had used the fight between Zrathentil, Kethryn and the spiders to slip down from the surface, through the Whispering Depths and into the Underdark. Tav and her friends had been so fearful of what might be in front of them that they didn't pay much attention to what was behind. And so, he was able to tail them and even slip onto the back of the craft without anyone but Omelum being the wiser.

Chapter 31 - True Souls Are Us

The vessel wobbled on the lake's murky waters as they sailed into the darkness across Ebonlake, magically propelled by some sort of rudder at the back. The craft was simple and crude in its overall design. It was like two longboats made of bones tethered together in the middle by a plank. Towards the back of each, stairs led up to a platform that also bound the vessel together. This was where the steering oar was located which jutted up from the center of the floor and extended down into the water at the rear. A sail of sorts was built behind this platform. Each pole was made from long bones with dried gray leather stretched between. It looked like dracolich wings flared out so that the wings met and were bound together directly behind the steering mechanism.

Ebonlake was pitch black. Though Izar'la and Pona were totally blind, they didn't dare cast the Light spell or ignite a torch for fear it would attract unwanted attention - namely the behir. Izar'la, in particular, seemed quite concerned about it, and rightly so. She had, after all, been pursued by the beast at one point during her journey into the Underdark. Since Tav and Rina could see to some degree, they were content - as much as they could be, anyway - with not having illumination.

Then, all at once, light penetrated the dark. It was produced by torches set in three-foot tall holders; two in the front and two in the rear of another boat. The craft was identical to the one they were on, but it was being piloted by duergar. With considerable speed, it came out of a narrow passage to the south. It was approaching them, gliding up to come along their port side.

Their leader had a rim of dark hair but was bald on top. He had a bushy beard that came to a point at his chin. This was no longer than three inches. His face was tattooed, making it look like he was forever wearing a mask. Thick, black lines arched from each ear to above his eyebrows. They came to points, touching his non-existing hairline. They looked almost like horns or the tips of black flames. From there, they sloped back to the bridge of his nose where they met. Then they followed his cheekbone lines along the roots of his beard and angled back to his ears. He carried a wicked looking greatclub on his back, and he wore a dark suit of finely crafted padded armor - or something that looked like padded armor. Besides these, he had a medallion around his neck. It was the symbol of the Absolute, just like Gekh had worn.

"\$#@!" hissed Rina. "Discovered already. We didn't even get to the forge."

"Try to remain calm," said Pona. "Act like we belong here. That's usually the best way to go. If we act suspicious, we'll never convince them we're friendly."

"Is that how you usually convince people you're innocent?" asked Rina. She was teasing, but it was poorly timed. Pona gave her a disapproving look.

"Who's taking the lead?" asked Izar'la.

Tav was nervous, but she said, "I will, I guess - unless anyone else wants to."

Pona shook her head. "I'm never usually a good spokesperson."

"Don't look at me," said Rina. "I'm always insulting people."

"Tav it is," said Izar'la. "I mean, I could, but my kind is never usually well received. Besides. I might be recognized. I could use Disguise Self, but it only lasts for one hour. Who knows how long we're going to be at Grymforge. I'd like to stay in the background."

The boat was coming closer. Tav looked over her shoulder from where she stood near the steering mechanism. Her eyes narrowed as if she was annoyed. She was giving the duergar leader her best "tough-woman" face. When her eyes met his cold, violent gaze, she almost faltered. He had a truly frightening visage.

"Elf!" he called out, his voice as hard as the stones around them. "What are you doing on Gekh's raft? Where's Gekh? Who are you?" He gestured to his crew to slide up next to their craft.

Tav fought down panic. There were three other duergar on the other boat. They were evenly matched, one-to-one. However, the duergar looked rather seasoned. She was shaking from fear, and so she was forced to concentrate on every word, her tone, and movements in order to mask it. As a result, her voice sounded darker, quieter, and deadlier. "I'm afraid Gekh is dead. He fell fighting the myconids."

The duergar leader cursed. "The sergeant'll be pissed 'bout her boots." The craft was now completely alongside theirs, and the duergar leader hopped across without warning. "Come on. Let's get you to shore. You're the one telling the sergeant what happened." He turned to the others. "The rest of you, keep patrolling. I'll be heading back with this one."

"Aye!" cried his crew, and the one steering it immediately drew it away. They glided off down another passage as if in search of something.

"Corsair Greymon," said the duergar as he slapped his chest. He didn't even look in their direction when he said this. Almost immediately, he set to work to light the torches on the boat. "What? You don't believe in light? You some of those Sharran types?"

Tav immediately slid her holy symbol under her armor and out of sight. "Something like that," she replied. She then decided that the truth was better than trying to make up a lie. "We're trying to avoid the behir."

Greymon struck his flint and sparked a light on the first torch near the port bow. Once it was going strong, he turned to face them. "Hah! That's part of the reason we're out here patrolling. Besides the ever-growing concern that someone might find out what we've claimed for ourselves, that behir has been nothing but trouble for us. Three boats been taken out just this week. Nasty piece of \$#@\$!" He made his way to the starboard bow.

"So, why do you want to light the torches?" asked Rina. "Won't that draw its attention?"

"Oh," said Greymon, "I'm hoping it draws the buggar out." He grinned over his shoulder at her. Then he winked. "I'm no whelp, Lass. I've fought devils before, and not the wee kind. I'm talkin' chain devils and horned devils. I even fought an arcanaloth once. You know, one of those jackals with human bodies. I've been lookin' ta tear into that beast for quite some time, but I think it's afraid o' me. It never shows up where I'm at." He lit another torch.

Tav was totally on edge. Why was he just accepting them and escorting them to Grymforge? The only answer? He didn't fear them. In fact, he was probably quite confident that he could kill them without breaking a sweat. If he was able to kill things like arcanaloths and devils, there was likely very little the four of them could do to defeat him.

And so, she decided to try to shift the conversation in another direction. "Unfortunate what happened to Gekh. I suppose, to say he fell to myconids, that is not quite the truth. He died because of a drow sorcerer named Zrathentil."

Greymon paused as he reached the top level to stand near her and light the next torch. "So why'd you say it was myconids?" he asked. He was gruff and to the point. He neither showed any indication that he believed them or doubted them. He was just asking a question.

Tav struggled. "He was allied with them," she replied, again deciding that the truth was her best response.

Greymon raised an eyebrow at her. "A drow allied with myconids? Odd."

"He was an odd one," said Pona. "I think he was using them."

Greymon shrugged. "I really don't care. It's actually the sergeant's business. I'm just a lackey. You can save your explanations for her." He finished lighting that torch and went to the last one. Then he paused and looked at them with a sly grin. "Or are you trying to figure out what story works best to save your \$#@\$?"

Tav couldn't help but reveal her fear. She looked like a child who'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "No. No. It's not like that. It's the truth. Zrathentil was an ally of the myconids. He helped to kill Gekh and the others on the shore."

Greymon laughed. "And what were YOU doing about it?" He returned to lighting the torches. "That's what Thrinn'll ask, so you'd better have your \$#@\$ straight. She'll flay you, heal you, and flay you again several times over just because you LOOK guilty."

"That Zrathentil prick tried to kill us," said Rina, interrupting. She let her anger drive her words. "He took stuff from us too."

"That's right," said Pona. "We found the secrets to creating adamantine at the forge. We were going to bring them to Nere, but he took off with them."

This got Greymon's attention. "You... you found the secrets to operating the forge?" There was intense greed in his eyes.

Tav resumed control of the conversation. "Yes, but Zrathentil took it and tried to escape up out of the Underdark to the surface. We were planning on telling the sergeant and Nere where they could find him."

Greymon no longer cared about the torches. "You know where he took it?"

Tav nodded. "But we can't give the information to anyone," she replied. "We were instructed to give it to Nere and/or Thrinn."

Greymon was pleased. "So, you ARE one of us. Sent by the General? I had a feeling. I can feel you - all except this one." He gestured at Izar'la.

Tav was a bit stunned by this. "You can FEEL us?" The question just came out. She didn't mean to ask it. Immediately, she regretted it. It made it sound like she was clueless about the cult that she was pretending to be a member of. IDIOT!

Greymon chuckled. "Green, ain't ya? Naturally. You True Souls have the ability to connect to one another and even to others. Every True Soul has the power. You don't need the mark to identify you. The power is within."

He then connected with them mentally; Tav, Rina and Pona. Just as they had bonded with one another and with Zrathentil and Kethryn, so they bonded with Greymon. Flashes of images coursed instantly through their minds. They saw dark passages, beatings, and many other violent acts. Then, the moment passed. "See?" he said.

Then he cursed. "You connected to me. You can feel one another. You can share thoughts, powers and abilities. You are one. You ARE the Absolute, and the Absolute is YOU."

Tav felt a knot form in the pit of her stomach. "Yes. I know. I... It's just..." She fell silent. She was at a loss for words.

"Nere and Thrinn should be quite happy to hear about these instructions on creating adamantine," said Greymon. "Should be able to use 'em as leverage. Let's keep it between us and them, though. Shall we? Not everyone in Clan Flameshade is a believer. They're after coin, and that's it. They get a whiff that someone's got instructions to create adamantine, and it's all over. They'll abandon us in a heartbeat."

"Right," said Tav. "Like I said, we're supposed to give instructions to Nere and Thrinn. That's it."

Greymon grinned sadistically. He tapped the side of his head. "Best do a better job, then, at keeping your memories and thoughts locked away. I now know as well. Saw it when we connected. The spiders got 'im. You can keep thoughts and memories from other, less powerful, people. Keep that in mind. You just willingly gave me the information; like you wanted me to have it."

"Don't let any of the other cultists know," he continued with his lecture. "They'll likely spill it to the non-believers. Flameshade's a bunch of mercenaries. Money'll send them right out looking for the prize. They won't even hesitate. It's been almost two weeks, and Nere still hasn't given them what he's promised. If he doesn't deliver soon, the whole clan's gonna tear itself apart. They require a steady flow of money. They don't get it? Someone dies."

Then he gestured up ahead to a bend in the cavern walls. "Ah. We're almost there." After that, they continued forward in silence until the lights of a camp twinkled through the murk. At last, they arrived at Grymforge.

The lake bent around to the south into a canal some two hundred feet wide and perhaps a thousand feet into the air. On the starboard side, cold, gray stones rose up into the darkness. Flaming orange stalactites hung from above, glowing as if they were metal pulled recently out of a forge. These were clustered together in various places amidst a sea of black stalactites that seemed to absorb all light. On the port side, there was what looked like an open portal with six-foot-tall guardian statues on either side. It was open, and what looked like a furnace was beyond - or perhaps a sea of lava. Intense heat radiated from it, pouring light upon a rocky path beyond. From what they could see, that path led east, most likely to Glut's old grotto and beyond.

Then they looked up in awe to behold a truly grand sight. There were statues; two on either side. They looked to be hundreds of feet tall. Tav recognized the image at once. Shar. They were made from granite and overlaid with gold and onyx. Even though the Goddess of Darkness was her nemesis, she couldn't help but marvel at the craftsmanship. They were each identical to one another, and they were magnificently sculpted.

Each statue was of Shar standing straight-backed with her arms folded across her armored chest. Gold lines laced throughout the armor from her headdress to her pauldrons, her gauntlets, breastplate and skirt. Her midriff was mostly exposed, as was most of the front of her legs and hips, for her skirt flowed down from her backplate over her buttocks and the back of her hips to her calves. There was only the appearance of a strip of cloth in the front to cover her private area, and it was only connected to the rest of the skirt by a framework of thin, golden laces.

The headdress was made from what looked like either shimmering onyx or obsidian. The base was a cap that covered her eyes and came down to the tip of her nose with guards on either side covering her sideburns. These angled inward towards her mouth. From the crest of the cap, it flared out to each side and then up over the head like a crescent moon. The outline was of gold. At the zenith, there was a huge, onyx circle, like a dark moon - the symbol of Shar. A golden rim was formed around the onyx stone with twin horns jutting up on either side above it.

In each hand, Shar held a sword. They had onyx blades. Each had a stone hilt with a golden teardrop in the center of the handguard. The blades zigzagged at first, like jagged lightning bolts, but then they arched upward and curved so that the tips were facing inward and the edges outward. They rose above each statue beyond the headdress almost like horns.

As they approached the main gate, it began to open with a thunderous, clanging and grinding commotion. The gateway itself was like a half-moon dipped into the surface of the water. Above it were three circles. The central circle was smaller than the two on either side. Above these was another, even larger circle that was completely exposed. Only a thick, impenetrable darkness hovered within. On either side of the gate, there was a walkway and balcony. These were for the purposes of allowing guards to observe anyone who approached and to attack if necessary. On both balconies and walkways, there were many ancient racks of weapons.

The gate itself was made of steel. The bars came together to form a delicate pattern. Dead center, they formed the outline of Shar's body. This was similar in appearance to the statues, looking like she was standing with arms folded and holding the hilts of two blades. In the smaller, center circle above the gate, there was the head of Shar with visor covering her eyes. It seemed to be staring down at them, completing her ominous form. However,

the headdress was not visible, for it was mostly covered by the metalwork frame. The blades of her swords were also not visible. All around the goddess, and forming the main portions of the gate itself, the metal bars gave the appearance as if clouds of magic or darkness were engulfing her. In the larger circles on each side of her head, there was the appearance of fan blades or shurikens.

As the gate ascended, the entire image of Shar ascended as well into the largest circle above. It was as if the goddess was rising in all her glory. Suddenly, Shar's blades began to jut up into the upper portal. By the time the gate was completely raised, her image, complete with headdress and swords, filled the upper circle, and it looked as if dark tendrils were wiggling behind her image. Below, as the boat passed through, sharp spikes hung down over their heads like huge spears threatening to drop on them at any moment and impale them.

It was in that moment that the scrying eye spotted the stowaway drop into the black water and swim away. While the boat continued to the dock on the starboard side, the small creature maneuvered to the port side where duergar were dragging the bodies of dead gnomes. Unseen, it slipped up onto the path behind them. Then it vanished from sight as it made its way deeper into the duergar encampment.

Chapter 32 - Welcome To Grymforge

“Well,” said Greymon as he squinted to see beyond the darkness of the gateway. There, on the starboard side, off to their right, two duergar were making their way to the edge of the dock. It was difficult to make them out from that far away. “I’ll be plowed sideways. We got a welcoming party.”

The boat pulled in closer, and Greymon took the controls so that he could guide it in. As it came to a halt, they found themselves staring down upon a lighted stone dock. Lanterns of many kinds were placed at intervals to illuminate the entire place. The stonework was incredible with many intricate designs, but at once they could see that the place was a mess. Rubble seemed to be scattered about as well as torn tapestries and frayed ropes, rotten barrels and baskets, and the like. In more places than they could count, the walls and floors were crumbled, stairways broken, statues shattered and doors off their hinges.

The two duergar that were their welcoming party stepped up to the edge of the pier. One was a dark gray, bald female with leather armor and a mace at her hip. She had black tattoos around her eyes and down her cheeks. They made it look as if her eyes were weeping tentacles. The other was a male who looked like an older version of Greymon, but he was totally bald on top and his beard was white. He wore ringmail armor, and he had a war pick on his back.

The bald female was the first to speak. “You \$#@Shead - time you showed up. We got trouble.” She was clearly ticked off, as if she was having the worst day ever.

Greymon scowled. “Spit it out, Morghal” he said, jumping down onto the dock. Then he made an insinuation that was supposed to be a colorful joke, but it caused Tav to turn three shades of red. It had something to do with Sergeant Thrinn and Nere doing lewd things together and the whole affair ending quite poorly for Thrinn.

“Drugh no,” said Morghal bitterly. “The \$#@S-Soul caused a rockfall. Trapped tighter than a ring on a fat finger.”

“You’re \$#@Sing me,” said Greymon. He was both surprised and angry. “He pay up?”

“That’s the trouble,” said Morghal. “He’s got the gold on him. Sergeant’s arm is falling off what with all the gnome slaves she’s been beating.” Then she looked at Tav and her companions. Suspicion flooded her features. “Who’re the hoons, Greymon - new slaves for the dig?”

“Call me a ‘slave’ again, and I’ll feed you your own stomach,” said Rina sharply. She wasn’t really insulted, but she was trying to play the game. One insult deserved another, she knew, or respect was lost in duergar culture.

“Ooh!” said Morghal with a chuckle. “This one’s feisty. Thrinn’s gonna knock the snot right out of her.”

Tav tried to reign the conversation in. She really, REALLY didn’t want to be there anymore. The further they pressed onward, the greater her anxiety level. “I was told to report to the sergeant,” she snapped as if she was someone important and she was demanding to be shown the way.

Greymon gave her an annoyed look. “Aye,” he said to Morghal. “She sniffed up Gekh’s corpse. Found the hoon sailing his skiff.”

“That so?” asked Morghal, her suspicion increasing. “I... Nngh...” Suddenly, she winced and lurched forward. Waves of energy passed between her, Tav, Rina, and Pona. They felt the slightest of stirrings in their heads. The duergar was not infected, yet their minds resonated.

The moment passed. “I’ll be,” said Morghal after she recovered. “You’re one of them cult-freaks. Felt the tingle.” Then she became irate. “You know what? I’m glad. Your \$#@S-Soul chum owes us a load of coin. You want through? Make a donation.”

Greymon chuckled at this. He looked at Tav. “I guess ya gotta pay toll, Princess. Morghal’s in charge of the docks. If she says ya gotta pay, then ya gotta pay.”

“How much?” asked Tav, clearly displeased.

“Hundred gold,” said Morghal. “That’s a piss in a bucket compared to what Nere owes us.”

“I don’t have that much,” said Tav. “I can give you ten. That’s it.”

“Ten!” cried Morghal, outraged. “Bah! You True Souls are nothing but trouble. As far as I’m concerned, we should kill the lot o’ ya.”

“Hey!” said Greymon. “Watch it. I’m one of ‘em. Or did you forget... AGAIN!”

Morghal seemed a bit afraid of him, and she recoiled. “Hey! I wasn’t serious, Greymon. Cut the \$#@\$. I don’t see you as one of ‘em. You’re not like the others. You’re still one of us. Not like Thrinn. She’s sold herself out completely to that \$#@\$.”

“You cut the \$#@\$,” said Greymon. “If things go down, I’m stuck in the middle. That’s gonna make me super pissed. I REALLY don’t want to start cutting down my own clansman, and I sure as \$#@\$ don’t want to choose which side I’m on.”

Tav then handed Morghal the only ten gold pieces she had on her. "I'll pay you the rest later," she promised.

Morghal was beside herself with shock. "I'll be @\$ to Shanatar. @\$'s looking up." Then she pocketed the coins. "But I'm warning you - that @\$-Soul ain't settle up soon, there'll be hell to pay for the lot of you cult-buggers - Greymon being the exception, of course."

Pona leaned closer to Rina. They and Izar'la were still up on the boat, for they were thinking that if things went poorly, they might have to grab Tav and flee real fast out onto the lake. She said to the dwarf in extremely low, flippant tones, "Seems we'll have to free Nere before we can collect the bounty on his head. Might be worth talking to some of the gnome slaves - before they're worked to death, that is." Rina snorted at this but gave no reply.

"Well," said Morghal viciously. "What're you waitin' for? Thrinn's off that way." She pointed off south along the dock. There were stairs there leading up to a landing. From there, more stairs continued on up to another level while a flight on the left led down to the southern area of the dock.

Tav gestured to the others, and they hopped down onto the dock near her. "Fine," she said to Morghal. "We'll be taking our leave. Thrinn's at the top of the stairs?"

"Keep going to the next level," Morghal instructed. "All the way to the top, yeah. Then head left from there up another flight of stairs. You won't go far before the heat slams into you full force. Then you'll see the lava lake surrounding the platform where the cave-in occurred. You can't miss it. There'll be plenty of other duergar there, and you'll hear the gnomes hard at work chiseling away at the rubble. Thrinn's cane'll be cracking too, and you won't mistake her voice for anyone's. She'll be the one hollerin' at the top of her lungs and threatening to do all sorts of terrible things to the gnomes."

Tav gave her a sneer. "Should I thank you?" Then before Morghal could answer, she started off towards the stairs. She was purposely, rudely turning her back on her.

Morghal laughed. "Sure. You can thank me - by paying me the rest of my @\$ @\$ hundred coins - preferably BEFORE Thrinn has you hung on a hook by your @\$." Then she and Greymon and the other duergar with them burst out laughing riotously.

"I really don't like them," Tav said to Izar'la who came quickly up on her right as they ascended the stairs.

"Me either," she replied.

"I can't WAIT to kill them all already," said Rina, her voice totally blanketed by the still-laughing dark dwarves.

"Such a fine, upstanding thing to say," said Pona with a smirk. "Aren't we supposed to be the good guys here? Should we be so eager to mass-murder people of any race?"

"Ain't nothing wrong with killing evil people," said Rina. "Kill evil before evil kills you or someone else who is good."

They reached the top of the landing before the second flight up, and Tav paused. On the right, there was one of the strange runes etched into the wall; like the one they found on the beach at the decrepit village. "Odd," she said. She ran her hand over it.

"I think there was one at the Selunite Outpost too," said Rina. "What the @\$! Someone marking their territory?"

They looked from one to another, but none seemed to have a clue. "Who knows?" said Izar'la at last. "Mages. All a bunch of crazy nut-jobs. Am I right?"

Pona chuckled. Then she glanced back down towards the dock to see that the duergar were not paying attention to them anymore. Seeing this was the case, she decided to slip a document out of her pocket. "What's that?" asked Rina.

Pona made sure her back was to the duergar so they couldn't see that she was holding the document. She showed the backside to her companions. It was a hand-drawn map depicting a grotto on the east side of Ebonlake. "An attacker's account marks the other side," she replied. "It reads, 'One of the drugning shrooms sensed us and split. Chunky one, too. Month's worth of soup, at least. The rest were too busy droning to put up a fuss. Nere pays us, and I'm bolting for Mantol-Derith, Thrinn's orders be @#\$. They got eelsteak, mineral mead, and top-land food of all sort. Clan can't live on fungus alone.'"

She gestured back towards where the duergar were near Gekh's boat. "It was sitting on one of the barrels down there. Thought it might be helpful to us. Looks like the map shows most of the passages and such of Ebonlake. If we need to go back to the grotto, or we need to try to find another way to get back to the surface, this map could really be of use."

"Nice work," said Izar'la. She then gestured to Pona to let her have a look. Pona handed it to her. Izar'la studied it for a moment and said, "I think I may have been in these passages previously." She pointed to a northern section of the map. "Can't be sure, but that may have been the way I came down here. If nothing else, might be

worth it to investigate in that direction, should things not work out here.” She handed the map back to Pona who slid it in her pack.

Then they noticed Tav still staring down at the duergar. “You okay?” asked Pona.

Tav snapped back to the present. She forced a smile. “Yeah. I guess. I mean... True Souls. They think we’re True Souls and members of their cult. We connected with them. I was just thinking... What if... What if a True Soul is someone infected by a mind flayer parasite; one of the special kinds like what we’re carrying? What if Nere is just like us with a tadpole in his head?”

Rina and Pona were both a bit taken aback by this. They hadn’t really been thinking about it. “By the Nine,” breathed Rina. “If we wind up connecting with Nere...”

“That could be bad,” Pona finished for her. “What if he’s an Elder Brain, or whatever, like Zrathentil was suggesting? What if he could somehow take control of us?”

Izar’la then spoke up, her tone lethal. “Then I’ll just have to free you from his hold on you. I don’t have one of those things in my head. Maybe I can be the ace up your sleeves.” They all looked at her quizzically, so she explained. “Whenever you’ve linked with someone, you’re temporarily distracted and seem to be experiencing visions or memories being shared - whatever. You and those you connect with are temporarily off-guard. I can use that moment to kill him.”

“Okay,” said Tav. “Sounds like a plan.” Then she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Well. Shall we?” Then they ascended the stairs and took the path to the left up yet another flight, just as they’d been instructed.

As they went, the scrying eye noticed that Greymon was, in fact, watching them as he continued to joke with Morghal and her companion. When the party disappeared up the stairs, he made a few last joking comments. Then he excused himself and followed.

He reached the top of the second flight, and he encountered Danna, a duergar female in a dark robe with her cowl pulled up and a battleaxe in hand. She was a duergar mage, and her current role was patrolling the area. When he saw her, she was standing in a dark recess near a broken wall with a plaque on it. There was no one within line of sight of them.

As he passed her, ignoring her, she suddenly spun and cracked him in the back of the head with the blunt side of the head of her axe. A brief scuffle followed. Danna fell dead, and Greymon dragged her body to the left side of the path where the wall had crumbled away. Without any witnesses, he dumped her over the edge into a pit where no one would find her corpse again. Then, he pulled out a hanky, wiped himself off, tossed it on her dead form below, and he went about his business as if nothing had happened, a wicked smile on his lips.

Chapter 33 - Conspiracy Upon Conspiracy

Almost immediately as they topped the last flight of stairs, the party encountered two duergar; a male and female. They were standing off to the left just outside a chamber that was emanating heat beyond comprehension. The place was a balcony of sorts. It was about sixty feet wide and eighty long. A single wall extended upward on their right about a hundred feet to another level. There was no ceiling, for the cavern was the ceiling for many places in Grymforge. To the left, the wall contained a large, circular portal that stood about six feet above the chamber floor, allowing a catwalk that was suspended above the dock area to pass through. The door into the swelteringly hot room was directly south of where the duergar stood, and the catwalk continued on through it. Various torches were lit in the hall, bathing the room in a soft light. Straight ahead, it was open with only a railings to prevent individuals from tumbling off the edge and down into dark ravines.

Against the south wall, directly ahead, they saw a human-sized granite statue of Shar, again with gold trimming, standing upon what looked like a hearth except there was no fire pit. It was enclosed, the stonework crafted in the shape of an onyx half-moon where the fireplace should be. A plaque lay on the floor to the left of it. The plaque read, "Selune did call forth the moon and the stars; Shar cloaked them in shadow to cover our scars." There were candles atop the hearth, and a black vase laying on its side to the right of the base. The vase was covered in cobwebs.

Tav and her companions tried to act like they belonged there as they made their way towards the south door. The duergar were engrossed in their conversation, and they didn't notice the party at first. "Seen her run with a barrel under her arm," the male was saying. He was bald on top with a white beard that was trimmed and regal. He looked older, with rings under his eyes, and his skin was tough, like leather. He had black tattoos on his forehead that looked like flames. He wore dark ringmail and he carried a war pick on his back. "Someone should grab it. Slaves are never gonna manage with pickaxes."

"Can't go chasing 'maybes,' Elder - the sergeant's our ticket in," said the female. Like many of the other duergar females, she was completely bald. She didn't even have eyebrows. Her skin was dark brown, and she appeared more youthful; without scars or blemishes. She wore scale armor and carried a heavy crossbow on her back.

That was when the male noticed Tav and her friends. He held up his hand to his partner and to them. "Would you look at that, Kur," he said gruffly. "Someone's having a listen."

A shiver ran through Tav, Rina and Pona. Their minds were awash in ancient resentments. Once again, they connected with someone - Elder Brithvar - but the person wasn't a True Soul. Brithvar had no parasite in his head. He wasn't even a believer. How was that even possible? Why was it happening all of a sudden? They'd encountered others who weren't infected, and they never connected with them. Why were they connecting to so many duergar?

"True Soul, no less," barked Brithvar as he recovered from the connection. "What do you think, Stone Guard - should we take Nere's debt off them?"

"Don't be absurd," Rina barked. "I hate these True Soul cultists." And it was clear, she was quite sincere about it.

"Yet you got that \$#@-Soul stench," said the elder as he wrinkled his face. "If I didn't know better, I'd say a mind flayer \$#@ a worm in your brain. Should split your head open and poke around in there if you lot don't pay up."

Rina then snapped, "A stench? Ridiculous. I'm no more a True Soul than you are." But, as if to spite her, the shiver returned. This time, it was colder and sharper.

"The stench don't lie," Brithvar replied, grasping the left side of his skull. "You're one of them."

Pona then quickly took control of the situation. "We WERE True Souls. That cult lied to us, and now we want revenge."

The elder's interest was piqued by this. "Hm... revenge, eh? In that case, I got a proposal. Want to earn some gold?"

"Depends," said Rina, putting on her shrewd face. "What do you need done?"

"Thrinn's after the Absolute's glory," Brithvar explained. "That's why she's got those slaves digging for Nere. But we ain't need glory - just coin. And Nere's got plenty. Help Thrinn free Nere. Then you and my chums and I grind him up. Whatever the spoils, we'll drop you a fat cut. You in?"

The party looked at one another, eyes wide with disbelief. This was an even better turn than they could have hoped for. Maybe they didn't need to tell the clan about the adamantine instructions after all. Maybe they could keep that in their back pockets, just in case. After all, if the Flameshade mercenaries were willing to help them kill Thrinn and Nere and the cultists, then they certainly didn't want to tell them about the instructions and

have them clear out of Grymforge. They'd need every Flameshade duergar that was there. Without exchanging a single word, Tav was able to speak their thoughts. "How many, would you say, are on your side versus on the side of Nere?"

Brithvar tallied up the numbers in his head. Then, he replied, "We've lost a lot over the last several months; all on account of Nere and these \$#@ cultists. First, we fight myconids, then gnomes, then there's the behir, and then one of the gnomes bloody sets off an explosive and creates a cave-in. Clan's practically decimated. Of those who are here, and not out patrolling or chasing after an escaped slave, I'd say we have about a dozen cultists throughout the camp. We non-cultists are probably about the same in number here at the camp and about another couple dozen out and about. Gekh was a cultist, and he had a few with him, but he also had about a dozen non-cultists with him."

"But, let me put it this way," he added after his assessment. "Nere is the only person we want dead. The rest of us are all Clan Flameshade - even Thrinn. If we can, we'd like to bring her back from this whole True Soul \$#@, along with all the others that fell for it."

"Not probable," said Tav matter-of-factly. "In my experience, most True Souls are fervently loyal and devoted to the Absolute. They'll likely turn on you as soon as you help us kill Nere. You and yours need to be ready to kill the cultists, no matter who they are."

Stone Guard Kur cursed. "We'll do what needs to be done to save the clan," she replied. "Thus far, this cult has done nothing but drag us into \$#@. We've been diminishing more and more ever since we agreed to this \$#@."

Brithvar agreed with a nod. "So, you in, or not?"

Tav, again, didn't need to consult with the others. "We're in," she replied.

"Good," said Brithvar. "But first, we need to take care of something. You seen that weird orb-eye floatin' about?" The party exchanged confused looks. Seeing they had no idea what he was talking about, Brithvar sighed. "Just keep an eye out for a big, black eye-thing that looks like it's made of glass or something. Knife it, and don't get caught. Moonrise watches through it, and we can't risk more \$#@-Souls showing up."

And with that, Brithvar's patience ran out. "You still standing about? Get on it!"

Pona then asked, "Any ideas on getting Nere out? You must have some thoughts."

"Some days back," replied Brithvar. He was clearly annoyed. "... a slave gnome bolted with smokepowder. Handy stuff. Her crew knows more than they're letting on. See if you can get 'em to talk." Then he grew more irate. "Now move. You're hogging my air."

The party moved away from them and towards the hellish chamber to the south. They didn't dare speak, but they were thinking similar thoughts. This much was clear, for there was a spring in their steps. Things were definitely looking up. Their enemies might kill one another, if they played their cards right, and they might just save the gnomes in the process. Who knew, by the end of the day, they could potentially accomplish all they had set out to do AND escape the Underdark by finding the lift that they remembered was on the map.

As they passed through the southern entranceway, they stopped. Not only was the heat like a wall, the chamber inspired awe and more than a little dread. It was as if they'd stepped through a portal into the Hells. A multi-tiered lake of lava could be seen beyond the once circular, stone platform they stood on. To the south, it was only about six feet below, but to the east, it dropped about a hundred feet into a chasm. Along the outer walls, it flowed from higher up, pouring down like superheated waterfalls.

Massive pillars and walls of stone protruded out of the fiery sea supporting ridges and platforms that rose high in the air. There were so many of them that they could not count them. There were also outcroppings of stone and shattered fragments of the constructed fortress that the lava flow cut off, forming numerous islands. Various walkways were set up to bridge the gaps, though many were either destroyed or close to it. Some were makeshift planks of iron obviously put there by the most recent inhabitants. One platform in particular, out above the eastern chasm, looked to have a rather large mechanism with levers.

The catwalk that ran through the previous room continued on to the south in between two of the walls, forming what looked like another gateway. They were about thirty feet beyond the platform, and twin statues of Shar were carved into them; one on either side. Lava flowed through and formed a pool at their feet. To the left, there was another gap between the statue and the platform. It looked as if it had once been connected, but age or some sort of destructive force had shattered it, letting lava empty into the chasm off to the east. On the right, a walkway along the outer wall allowed individuals to stand at the feet of the statue on that side.

At the south edge of the platform, directly below the catwalk, there was an altar. Atop the altar was a huge black circle with gold rim. The circle was made of onyx, and it swallowed up all light. A few candles and incense sticks, that appeared quite old, rested at the base of the dark moon. At the center of the platform, before the altar,

there was a massive, decorative circle. An intricately designed, grated, circular portal was the heart of it, allowing the light and heat of the lava to shine up through from underneath.

There was movement that caught their attention to the right of the altar area. Along the outer wall, there was an ornate door and a huge pile of rubble blocking it. The cavern wall, high above, had collapsed in front of it. A handful of gnomes were working on chiseling away at it with pickaxes, and there were a few duergar managing them. Besides them, there were about five or six other duergar lurking on the platform. There was another entranceway off to the right of the rubble heap, and above it was a walkway. Both were bathed in darkness.

To the right of the entrance the party stood in, there was a large, primitive tent. It was open on two sides, and it seemed to be meant to protect supplies. After all, there were a number of crates and barrels within it. Besides all this, the platform was littered with yet more barrels, crates, digging equipment, food supplies, levers and gears, shattered statues, debris, ceremonial tables and benches - many broken and shattered - and random equipment of various sorts.

A loud, terrible, female voice told them who Sergeant Thrinn was. "You \$#@\$ got some nerve. Clean up this mess," she snapped at the gnomes who were frantically at work. "Slowest of you lot is gettin' tossed to a rothe in heat. Back on your feet, or I'll bite your toes off, one by one!"

Thrinn had short, white hair parted from right to left. It flowed across her forehead in straight locks just above her eyes and then fell to her jawline. Her pale gray skin was given a metallic appearance as it reflected the light of the lava. Black lines were tattooed on her face starting at her chin on both the right and left sides. Then each line passed up through her lips near the corners of her mouth and angled across her cheeks all the way to her sideburns. Besides these, she had black lines on either side of the bridge of her nose which shot up under her hair on her forehead, making it seem like her nose had horns.

She wore a finely decorated suit of armor that looked like padded armor. Over the top, covering the shoulders, upper chest and back, and flowing down to her calves, she wore a heavy leather piece with a high collar that was fastened above the heart by the symbol of the Absolute. Unlike many of the symbols of the Absolute, hers was similar to Nere's in that it was a skull resting upon an upside down triangle which then rested upon a rightside up triangle. The armor was dark blue while the bust and cape were black, all with white trim. Between the shoulder blades, on her back, another symbol of the Absolute was embroidered. This one was the size of her head. It featured the skull atop a single upside down triangle with a painted blue hand across the face.

On each hip, she had a mastercraft hammer, and in her hands she wielded a bloody cane with spikes on it. She was hefting it threateningly, and several times she raised it as if to strike, just to keep the gnomes on edge. Nearby, several other bloody canes lay strewn about the floor, broken as if some ogre had snapped them like twigs.

As the party examined her, they suddenly noticed a most interesting feature about her ensemble. She was barefoot. Pona saw this and immediately positioned herself behind Tav with Rina on her right and Izar'la on the left. She wanted to make sure the duergar slavemasters didn't ever have the ability to see the boots she was wearing. Everything they were attempting to do would likely fall apart if Thrinn knew the halfling was wearing the boots Thulla had given her. In fact, she pondered slipping them off and keeping them in her pack as soon as they were out of sight, just in case. She was half-cursing herself for not thinking of it sooner.

Tav and her companions approached cautiously. As they went, Izar'la quietly cast Disguise Self and took on the appearance of a rather nondescript drow female. She figured that would cause her to blend in just about anywhere in the Underdark. Duergar throughout the chamber glanced at them curiously, but no one stopped them. Finally, they came up behind the sergeant.

"Faster!" Thrinn snapped. Then she turned to a duergar male near her. He had a full white beard that flowed down to his medallion of the Absolute which dangled across his chest. His white hair was pulled back into a ponytail at the base of his skull, and it was braided in several places, as was his beard. His skin was black, and on his face, covering everything that wasn't hair, he wore a dull, metallic steel faceplate. It gave him a truly monstrous visage. Only the whites of his eyes could be seen glaring out of the sockets amidst darkened pools of shadow. He wore padded armor that looked like a lesser version of Thrinn's, and he carried a greataxe on his back.

To him, Thrinn said, "Heat up some rocks. Let's see how the little \$#@\$ do when we strap fire to their legs."

"Charming," said Izar'la so only her companions could hear. "Hell is truly where we make it."

Then Thrinn noticed them, and she turned. "Move, hoon," she snapped. "I don't have time for drugnin' outsiders."

Tav immediately fell into the role they'd agreed upon. "I was told to report to you," she replied. "Gekh Coal is dead."

Thrinn was not pleased. "Dead? Drugnin' Gekh. Figured I could count on him. Lesson \$#@\$ well learned. Now move. I've got no time for..."

The parasite stirred, but it was a mere tickle. Tav, Rina and Pona heard no thoughts or memories, just an echo of scars that never healed. This caused Thrinn's expression to soften. Immediately, she went from cold, vicious and tyrannical taskmaster to a relieved and almost happy young woman. "A True Soul, eh?" she said with a smile. "Useless rakkah of a lookout could've told me."

The lookout, a bald, purple-skinned duergar with black markings on her face and the symbol of the Absolute around her neck, cried out defensively, "I had no idea. Saw them arriving - almost put a hole in their boat with my crossbow. I - I had no way of knowin'. Greymon could've signaled me or somethin'."

Thrinn shot her a dirty look. Then she looked back at Tav and her companions. "Glad you're here to take responsibility," she said. "Tunnel's collapsed, trapped True Soul Nere. He's stuck in there with poisoned geysers. We don't get him out soon, it's all our heads."

"Ah," said Rina with more than a hint of sarcasm. "The famous Nere - subject of the myconids' ire, no?"

Tav tried to immediately keep Thrinn's attention to avoid any further discussion about myconids and their involvement with the party. "How did Nere get trapped?" she asked.

Thrinn shook her head. "Place is older than bonedust. Previous tenants left a trap - dropped a \$#@-ton of metal once we'd dug a ways in. Get Nere out, and you'll have the Absolute's blessing, no doubting that."

"What are you hoping to find at this dig?" asked Rina. "We were given very little information."

Tav looked up at the top of the buried doorway, and she immediately knew the answer. She'd never forget THAT location on the map. Nevertheless, she didn't get a chance to answer Rina's question herself. Thrinn did. "Entrance to an ancient temple. General's orders, Nere said. Must contain somethin' important. He got me to recruit non-believers. But not everyone's seein' the Absolute's truth. They don't get paid soon, I'll have a riot on my hands."

"Clearing the rubble will not be an easy feat," said Rina. "Any ideas?"

Thrinn sighed. "Not a one - unless you count tacking aboleth fangs to my whipping cane."

"We'll take care of it," said Tav with confidence.

"Thought you would," said Thrinn. "True Souls don't abandon their own."

"Right," said Tav. Then she gestured for Thrinn to lean in closer as she did the same. "Mind if we interrogate your slaves then? We've heard they might know something about one of their kind who escaped with some smokepowder. I'm thinking of tricking them. We convince them that we're only pretending to be working with you, but we're actually here to save them. Maybe I can sweet-talk them into telling us where their friend with the smokepowder might be hiding."

Thrinn was pleased. "\$#@ nearly blew my face off. Then her piece of @#\$\$ friend tore the boots off my feet and ran for it. Now Gekh's \$#@ dead and that \$#@, little piece of \$@@ got away. \$#@ yes. If you can convince them to tell you where that little \$#@ is, I'll gladly help you \$#@ the \$#@ out of her. And yeah. That smokepowder might just do the trick here." She gestured at the gnomes. "They're all yours."

Then Thrinn addressed her slaves. "Good news, \$#@! You can take a small break. This one here needs a word or two with you. Tell her everything she wants to know, or I swear I'll \$#@ the \$#@ \$#@ out of you. Got it?" Then Thrinn gestured to her companion with the metal faceplate, and the two walked a short distance away.

Tav and her friends approached the confused and suspicious gnomes. As soon as she crouched next to them, in their midst, Tav's face brightened. "By all the stars in the sky," said Tav, "am I glad to see you're alive. I mean, there aren't as many as I thought there'd be, but at least there are a few of you left."

"Who are you?" asked one of them. He was bald with a crooked long nose and face. His clothes were in much better condition than the others. He had a tunic that looked like it was made of three different colored fabrics. Green was the bust, tan was the waist and brown was from the belt to the knees. Underneath, he wore gray breeches and leather boots. He looked utterly terrified.

"My name is Tav. My companions and I are here to help you. We ran into Thulla near an old village on the east shore of the lake. She asked us to come save you, but we need your help to do that. Can you..."

"My sister's in there!" said the gnome, cutting her off. He seemed quite desperate, and it was clear that he wasn't paying her much attention. He kept glancing over his shoulder at the rubble as if that was the only thing that mattered in the world. "Meerna's in there. We have to do something to save her."

Tav grabbed both sides of his face to force him to look at her. "You're hysterical," she told him. "I need you to pull yourself together and help me. I..."

He broke away from her and turned back towards the rubble heap. Immediately, he started to chisel away again. "MEERNA!" he cried. "Meerna, can you hear me?"

"Welso, I think his name was," said Rina. "Meerna was the Burrow Warden, if I remember correctly, and Welso was her brother. I think he's lost it."

Tav nodded. "Maybe we'll try some of the others." She turned towards a male and female pair. They were speaking in soft whispers, the words all but lost in the hot air.

"We'll never get through. We need that smokepowder," the male was saying. He was a bald gnome with light gray skin and tattered brown headband. He was covered in blood and filth, and his light gray tunic had seen better days. His pants were slit in so many places, it looked like they weren't providing him much protection, and his shoes were beaten and worn. On his right wrist, he had a leather wrap, and on his left, the leather wrappings wound around his knuckles and up past his wrist.

"Philomeen's gone," whispered the female. "And if she's smart, she won't be coming back." She was also tattered, covered in blood and filth, and looking overall worse-for-wear. Her gray skin was stretched over bone from malnourishment, and her eyes were sunken. She had a cropping of white hair atop her head that was loosely pinned towards the back, and it fell on both sides of her face in stringy, tangled messes. She wore a yellow shirt with hood and brown pants that came down to her shins. Her brown shoes were barely able to be worn.

"Tell the sergeant where she went - Beldron's trapped with that maniac Nere!" said the male.

The female shook her head. "Forget the smokepowder - they'd kill Phil on the spot. I won't let you do it."

Tav decided it was time to interrupt. "Excuse me," she said, and both gnomes jumped to attention. It was obvious that they were afraid they'd been overheard. Therefore, Tav tried to be diplomatic about it. She pretended she hadn't eavesdropped. "I'm a friend. Thulla sent me."

"Glittering gods! She actually survived!" said the female in awe.

"Praise Ironhand," said the male. "Laridda, our prayers are answered!" Then he grabbed a hold of Tav. "Ma'am, our friends are trapped in the cave-in, and I know a way to get them out."

The female was beside herself. "Bug, please! True Soul Nere will - you KNOW what he'll do."

Tav looked resolutely at Laridda. "Leave the True Soul to us. Now, tell me what you know. I promise you. We're here to help. We're only pretending to be on Thrinn's side so we can get at Nere." She gestured at Izar'la. "See her? She's a Harper sent to kill Nere and Thrinn and take down the cult in this area. We're here because we promised Thulla we'd free you. I'm a cleric of Selune, and I'm here to shine her light into this foul, evil place of Shar. We've got a plan, and it's actually really good. We might just have a shot at succeeding here. All we need is the smokepowder your friend has."

"Lunkbug, don't," pleaded Laridda, ignoring Tav. She obviously really cared for her friend Philomeen.

The one called Lunkbug looked from Laridda to Tav and then back at Laridda. "I've... I've got no choice, Laridda," he told her sympathetically. "We have to chance it." Then he met Tav's gaze. "A few days back, there was a... a scene. Our friend Philomeen - she's a sapper - set off a blast and ran off."

"Yeah," said Rina, annoyed. "We know. Then Thulla snatched the boots right off of Thrinn's feet and was stabbed and poisoned and ran to the upper level where she jumped in the lake and Gekh was sent by Thrinn to go hunt her down. Then she swam to the eastern shore where the village is and led the duergar to the rest of your companions at Expedition Number Forty-Two. Gekh showed up with his troops and wiped the floor with the gnomes, but Thulla escaped to the myconid colony where Spaw, the sovereign, took her in. Spaw fought back against the duergar and killed a lot of them but suffered heavy losses as a result. Then Gekh sent his remaining troops back here to get reinforcements while he remained. Meanwhile, Thrinn's been making you all dig out the temple here, and you finally succeeded. But a trap went off, a landslide, and Nere's now trapped inside with poison geysers spewing gasses everywhere, along with Burrow Warden Meerna and some guy named Beldron - I think you said - and maybe a few others, and now the only person who can get them out is Philomeen who has smokepowder that we could use to blow the rubble heap to tiny pieces."

She sighed and took in a deep breath. "So, did I cover it all? Did I miss anything? Are we all caught up on the situation? Oh. Wait. Right. There's still the part about how we don't know where Phil is, so we can't get the smokepowder so that we can use it to free your friends inside with that crazy fanatic, Nere. That's where YOU come in. See? So, this is the part where you tell us where we can find Phil so we can get the smokepowder."

Lunkbug was a bit more reluctant after Rina's summary of events mostly because of her tone. Seeing this, Pona stepped forward. "You'll have to excuse our friend. She's a dwarf. They get irritated easily. Ya know?" Rina raised both eyebrows in shock. She was quite ready to throttle the halfling for that, but Pona ignored her. "The fact that she just sprouted off all that to you has to tell you what we've been through just to get here. Please. Tell us where Phil is so we can get her help here. Then help us fight back against the duergar when we tell you to."

Tav took over at that point. She was rather excited. "We've managed to convince some of the duergar to help us against True Soul Nere and Thrinn. We've made it so that they're going to fight amongst themselves and try to kill one another. The non-believers in the Absolute are going to try to kill the True Soul cultists. Then, when we've killed Nere and Thrinn and the rest of the cultists, we'll turn on the non-believers and kill them too. That's

when we sure could use your help. If they're focused on us, the remnant won't expect their slaves to attack from behind. You ambush them with your pickaxes, and we'll flank 'em and finish 'em off. Whatdaya say?"

They seemed unsure, but Lunkbug was obviously convinced enough. "We set a spot for hiding if someone found trouble," he told them. "I'll mark your map."

"We don't have one," said Tav. "Someone took our copy from us. Can you just tell us what direction we need to go in? Can you give us a basic idea?"

"Northeast corner," said Lunkbug. "Head to the east side of the docks. There's a kitchen there. You'll need the key or pick the lock. I think some of the duergar have the key. Towards the back, left corner of the kitchen - that's the northeast corner - there's a hidden button on the wall. If you press it, you'll open a secret door. Beyond is a stairway leading up to the second floor. Continue along the path beyond out onto a broken path. Hop across to a ledge on the far northeast side. You'll find another locked chamber. I think it was a meditation chamber or something like that. If Philomeen made it, you'll find her there. She'll have the stuff to blow that tunnel wide open and get Beldron and the rest out."

"Thank you!" said Tav, relieved. "We'll do what we can."

"Please," pleaded Laridda. "Please don't hurt my Phil. I beg you."

"Hurry," said Lunkbug. "Our people won't last in that cave-in forever."

"We will," said Tav. Then she stood, put on her serious face, and gestured for the others to follow her. As they made their way to Thrinn, she gave her best sinister smile along with a subtle nod. "All but done," she told her.

"Good," said the metal-faced duergar. "Now bugger off. You're distractin' the slaves. They run, you're dead."

Thrinn patted the air in his direction. "Relax, Dunnol. They're with us." Then she looked up at Tav. "Need me to send some with you?"

Tav shook her head. "She's got smokepowder. If we show up with any duergar, she might panic and blow us all to pieces. Best if we go alone. We should be able to trick her like we did her friends."

Thrinn shrugged. "Suit yourself." Then she gestured for Dunnol, and the two returned to where the gnomes were. "All right, you lot. Break time's over. Get back to work!" Then she struck her cane hard on the ground. The gnomes immediately sprang back to the rubble heap, and the clanging of pickaxes resumed.

The party hastened out through the northern entranceway back towards the dock. As they went, Greymon passed them. He made his way towards Thrinn and Dunnol. For a moment, the scrying eye paused. Another scrying eye was following the party. Surely it was the one Eldar Brithvar had mentioned, the one from Moonrise. Omelum would need to be careful. He did NOT want it to know he was spying from above. For a few moments, he considered what he should do.

That was when he picked up on Thrinn's conversation with Dunnol and Greymon. "How we lookin'?" asked Greymon as the three stood far enough away that the gnomes wouldn't pick up on what they were saying.

Thrinn's smile was truly wicked. "Beautifully," she replied. Then she turned to Dunnol. "And THAT, My Dear Mind Master, is how you use naive \$\$@\$-heads to do your dirty work for you. Everything's going according to plan; just like I said it would. Now pay up."

"Fools!" he growled. Then he handed her some gold. "Bah! They actually think we're buying their whole 'I'm a loyal True Soul' act. The elf was the worst one. I could barely stomach it. I just wanted to kill them all right then and there. AND THEY EVEN HAVE YOUR \$\$@\$ BOOTS!"

"I told you it'd work," Thrinn replied, stashing the money inside her armor. "From the moment they arrived, I knew the Absolute sent them. I'm telling you. They are just what we needed. They convinced the gnomes to tell them where the smokepowder is. They'll convince the escaped gnome to give them the smokepowder. They'll use the smokepowder to free Nere. Then, we kill them all including Elder Brithvar and his mutinous pieces of \$\$@\$. Nere will be pleased, and so will the Absolute. We'll have unearthed the Temple of Shar, and we'll have wiped out the non-believers - every last one. No more \$\$@\$ \$\$@\$ gnomes. No more \$\$@\$ \$\$@\$ greedy unbelievers. No more stupid, idiot outsiders. And before you know it, WE will be True Souls. Beloved of the Absolute!"

"Bout \$\$@\$ time," said Dunnol. "Bout \$\$@\$ time."

Thrinn then locked eyes with Greymon. "Go. Follow them. Find out where that \$\$@\$ gnome is. After they get the smokepowder from her, the moment you get the chance, kill her. Make her suffer as she dies. Then gather the rest of the believers and be ready. As soon as Nere is free, when the \$\$@\$ hits the fan, I need you to be ready to back me up."

Greymon smiled blood-thirstily. "Consider it done."