

Chapter 9 - Flower Power

It was still the third day since the crash on the beach when the party left the shore near the village and made their way a short distance to Lenore's Arcane Tower. Pona was conscious by then, for they had spent a good five hours at the dock. They had rested, ate, bandaged themselves, repaired their armor and equipment, and so forth. They weren't exactly at peak performance, but they felt that it was important that they get moving and not waste another day. Who knew how much time they really had? Besides, they were hoping Lenore was friendly and would be willing to help them.

Before leaving, Zrathentil took control of the undead. He gave them orders to lie in wait, spread out, in hiding places within the village. If drow or duergar, redcaps or a hag, or a spectator entered the village, they were to attack and kill them - any drow, that is, except him. "Hopefully," he said as they began to set out, "by the time we return, if there is any other duergar out there, the zombies will kill them for us."

Finally, they arrived at the secret dock. The tower rose high above them into the darkness. It looked to be six stories tall, though the fifth and sixth floors seemed to be heavily damaged. It was as if something huge had smashed them, leaving the uppermost level without a ceiling and most of its walls. There were balconies on the second, third, and fourth levels. All three had a balcony facing west. The third and fourth also had one on the north and one on the south, and the fourth had some sort of entranceway, landing, stairway and path on the east side. Based on the map, it looked like this was the area with the arcane turrets with the shattered outer wall that they'd seen as they descended. Large pipes extended out of the tower in various places, mostly on the north and south walls. Giant mushrooms grew up on the south side on both the tower and the rocky clefts.

Everything was just as Blurg and Omelum had described. It had been hard to find the entrance to the secret alcove, for the reeds and hanging overgrowth had hidden it well. In the darkness, they had almost missed it. They tethered the boat to a small pier. A pole nearby had a torch holder at the end. There was a torch in it, but it was not lit. They wanted to make sure that Lenore knew they were there so that it didn't seem like they were sneaking up on her, so Zrathentil lit it. Both Kethryn and Pona appreciated it as well, for it was hard constantly being blind.

To their left was some sort of garden nestled in a rocky nook. There were a few strange plants there including a tree with flowers that glowed fluorescent blue. The path from the shore ran a short distance, maybe a hundred feet, to a single door leading into the tower.

They ignored the garden, for they did not want to intrude upon Lenore's property in case it might upset her. They moved straight to the door. Two small braziers dangled on hooks on either side. Neither was lit. Then Zrathentil noted, "Not a single light in the whole tower. Either Lenore prefers the dark or she's not home."

"She could be in a basement or something," suggested Rina. "Maybe she's got some lab or something and spends a lot of time in it."

"Maybe," said Pona. "She did sound like she was a scientist, according to Blurg."

"No way to find out except to knock," said Kethryn. "I don't see a doorbell, and I don't think picking the lock would make her happy at all."

"And she supposedly has guardians," said Rina. "I think they said automatons and animated armors? Just barging in seems like a bad idea."

Kethryn knocked as loudly as he could. No answer. "I don't see a bell or anything," he repeated, and he tried to knock a second time. Nothing. He then tried the handle. It was, indeed, locked.

"Maybe we should break in," said Tav. "What if she needs help?"

"That's rich, coming from you!" said Rina. "Never thought I'd hear you suggest that we break into some place."

"If she's hurt," said Tav, "then we might need to break in to help her."

"I don't know," said Pona. "If she doesn't answer, we should probably just go. I don't think we're up for fighting automatons and animated armors."

"I disagree," said Zrathentil. "Those spores we are looking for are possibly inside. If they are able to help the mind flayer at the myconid colony so that he can extract the tadpoles, it'd be foolish to just walk away. It's worth the risk."

"We could run to the boat and flee if the automatons and animated armors attack us," said Kethryn. "I agree. I think we should chance it. And, like Tav said, what if Lenore has imprisoned herself in a magic barrier or something? What if, by breaking in, we're able to save her life? We could gain a rather valuable ally. Yes?"

"Seems I'm outnumbered again," said Rina, a bit put out. "Fine. Let's do this." Pona then picked the lock. It was a bit complex, but she was rather skilled at such things. The lock clicked, and they tried to quietly open the

door. Unfortunately, it creaked loudly, echoing throughout the entire tower. Everyone gritted their teeth. If there was anyone at home, they would surely know someone had intruded.

Kethryn led the way. Tav was right behind. Pona came next, and Rina was after her. Zrathentil was last. Kethryn then called out, "Hello? Anyone here? We come in peace. We mean no harm. We tried to knock, but no one answered. We really don't mean to intrude. We're just hoping to speak with Lenore. Hello? Is Lenore home? Anyone?"

"Gods!" said Rina as she looked around the pitch black room beyond. "If they are hostile, we've just alerted the entire place that we're here."

Kethryn scowled at her. "As if the door didn't? It's the right thing to do," he said. "Sneaking up on someone in their own home and not announcing your presence means you deserve to get attacked and captured or killed. If we announce ourselves every step of the way, and then we get attacked, then I have every right to defend myself. However, if I break and enter and then get attacked because I'm trying to sneak up on the owner, if I kill the owner at that point, I may have killed an innocent person just trying to defend their home."

"He's right," said Tav. "I'd feel terrible if we killed someone who was actually nice and good simply because we were trying to sneak around and she thought we were trying to kill her."

They lit more lanterns and searched the room on the bottom floor. There was some sort of lever near the entrance, just off to the left. A quick examination indicated that the lever was used to lock and unlock the door. To the right was a long table with gemstones, lab equipment, and a stack of books on the left back corner. A blackboard was hung on the wall above. There was a strange apparatus to the left. A dusty, web-covered bookshelf was next to the apparatus, and there was a candelabra as well. Half-burnt candles were set into it. It had obviously not been used in a long time.

Taking up most of the center of the room was a machine of sorts. It was circular in shape and completely enclosed with transparent glass. It had conduits and pipes, spider-webbing this way and that, sticking out of it. It looked almost like a lift, but there didn't appear to be any pulleys. It had only one entrance facing the west. This was up on a platform that was the entirety of the second floor. The party could see it from the entrance, for the first two levels were one large room.

Towards the back of the first floor, there were more apparatuses, another table taking over the southeast corner, books, bookshelves, crates, pots, vases and the like. Along the back of the central lift machine, there was an opening with withered blue petals strewn about. "I wonder if the flowers from the tree outside have something to do with the machine," said Tav. "Maybe they have some magical properties that are used to power the lift; possibly even the whole tower. Maybe that's why everything's so dark."

"A logical deduction," said Zrathentil.

"Here's a book," said Pona as she searched the southeast lab table. It had glowing blue beakers on it that cast an eerie glow. "It's called, 'The Antimagic Properties of Sussur Tree Flowers, by L. De Hurst.'"

"L. De Hurst," said Tav. "Lenore maybe? So, we know her last name."

"Probably," said Kethryn. "What does it say?"

Pona flipped it open and began to read. "'For those knowing about Sussur Trees, their magical properties have always been a topic of debate; not only their ability to create an antimagic aura, which is complete enough that even those unattuned to the weave can feel its effects, but also - and most interestingly to those living in the World Above - the ways its roots, bark, and flowers can be harnessed to make magic items. Rumors of such items are rare, but spread in settlements bordering the Underdark. Their actual existence, however, has never been confirmed by any of our clerics, nor by any other reputable scholars. I hypothesized that these items are no mere legends, and indeed, in this treatise I will endeavor to explain how I myself created items with both antimagic properties, and ones using the magical absorption of Sussur Tree Flowers as a power source.'"

"A power source?" asked Zrathentil. "Bravo, Tav. Looks like you hit the nail on the head."

Pona flipped a page and stopped. She was confused. "There are lines here that have been drawn." She flipped to more pages. "They're on the following pages too. It's as if the author intended to fill them with writing, but the remainder of the thin book is blank. Odd."

Kethryn felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "That's a sure sign that something unexpected happened to Lenore. The place looks unlivable for some time, with cobwebs on the bookshelves and so forth, and now that book indicates that she planned on filling in more pages but she never got a chance to."

"Whatever prevented her from completing the book might still be lurking around," suggested Rina.

"We know," said Pona, a bit sharply. "You want to leave. We get it. You're trying to find every excuse to leave. Can you just pipe down about it?"

"No," said Rina, folding her arms across her chest with her new Exterminator's Axe still in hand. "I'm a survivor. It's what I do. Part of surviving is having a brain in your head; the kind of brain that says, 'Hey, Stupid."

Something bad happened here. Don't continue going in that direction because you might run into a nest of trolls or something. If you want to live, turn around and leave before it's too freaking late!"

Zrathentil smiled and shrugged. "Well, she's not wrong," he said. "However, I'm still willing to take the risk if it means finding those spores. Once we do, though, I'm with her. I say we get out as fast as we can."

"But what about Lenore?" asked Tav. "She could be hurt, imprisoned or dying?"

Kethryn sighed. It seemed they were always at odds with Zrathentil and Rina. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He had to admit, the two typically had their best interests at heart. They were more grounded and cautious while Tav and Pona were more idealists. He, admittedly, was also mostly an idealist, which made the idealists a majority and put the realists in a bad position. If they always did what the idealists wanted, Zrathentil and Rina might eventually become frustrated and leave. That would be bad. They really needed one another, which meant that they might have to start making some compromises. Because of this, Kethryn said, "Agreed."

This shocked Tav and Pona. Thus, he explained. "Lenore is obviously a powerful cleric/mage. We've hardly explored this tower, and you can feel it in the atmosphere. She lived alone, or so we were told, and she did all sorts of experiments. These all tell me that she was not one to be trifled with. Take that to its logical conclusion. If something captured or killed Lenore, what chance do we have if we run into that something? After having had our skills and abilities reset, I highly doubt we could save her. Logically speaking, our safest path is to find the spores and leave."

"Finally!" said Rina. "Someone's developed some sense."

Tav was not at all pleased. "Well," she replied, her expression clearly displaying her feelings. "I'm going to do what I can to see if I can learn what happened to Lenore. You do what you feel you need to do."

"I'm with her," said Pona.

Rina snapped. "So, when the shoe's on the other foot and the majority is going in a direction you don't like, you throw a fit and stomp your feet and tell us you're not going to go with the majority. Is that right? Meanwhile, every time I'm outvoted, I'm expected to just fall in line. Double standard. That's what that is. You're a couple of hypocrites."

"Why don't you stick your axe up your..." Pona began, but Kethryn cut her off.

"Stop!" he barked. "Please! This isn't helping." Everyone fell silent. "We need each other. We have to work together and stay united as a group. Everyone's skills are vital to our survival. Tav. Pona. Rina's right. Like it or not, you have to admit that she and Zrathentil have been outvoted a number of times now. However, for the sake of the group, they did what the majority decided. We need both of you. We can't afford to lose either of you."

"Tav," he continued. "You are our healer. You are our only cleric. If we leave you here and you die as a result, we're in serious trouble. We need Selune's light especially here in this darkness. And Pona, we wouldn't have even gotten into this tower without you. If not for you, we'd have likely died against the duergar. It was only because of you that we were able to eventually get our hands on the amulet and stop the undead from swarming us. We have all been working very well together. Let's not ruin this by dividing over such issues. Can we please stick together and go with the majority?"

Tav wouldn't make eye contact. Neither would Pona. However, after a few moments of silence, both nodded and said, "Fine." With this, the group continued on around the tower's first floor, searching for the mushrooms and any clues as to what might have become of Lenore. They found none and wound up back at the generator.

"So," said Tav. "Do we try to power this thing up?"

"There's a stairway leading up around the central lift to the second floor platform," said Kethryn. "Let's take the stairs first. I'd rather not power up this place unless we absolutely have to."

"Agreed," said Rina, and Zrathentil provided his consent also.

And with that, they made their way to the stairs and slowly made their way to the second floor. They immediately stopped as they came to the top. There was an ornate chest there on their right set against the wall. They popped it open to investigate and found only a necklace beneath layers of dust. Its inlaid gems still gave off a blue sparkle. "The color of Mystra's clergy," said Zrathentil. "This is Uncovered Mysteries, a magical necklace that provides the user with the ability to cast Detect Thoughts once per day."

"We should leave it," said Tav. "Taking it is stealing."

"Only if the owner is still alive," said Zrathentil, putting it in one of his pouches. "I promise I'll return it to her if we discover that she's alive." Tav rolled her eyes but said nothing further. All she could think was that if they even got the remotest of proof that Lenore was still among the living, she would not let it slide.

The second floor actually seemed half-finished. Near the chest, just to the right of the stairway, was another single door similar to the one they'd entered the tower through. It led out onto a balcony with two more braziers hanging on either side, a bench and a few large vases. A single walkway led from the door right to the lift

entrance. Two large buttons protruded from the floor of the lift, obviously meant to be stepped on to activate it. A massive eight-point star took up most of the floor with a ring around the outer rim. "Mystra," said Zrathentil. "That's one of her symbols."

"Definitely safe to say she was a cleric mage of Mystra," said Rina with a grunt.

There was a small platform around the lift shaft with some barrels. Most of these were filled with utterly rotten food and maggots and such. One, however, had a healing potion in it. Kethryn took this.

"I'm traveling with a bunch of thieves," Tav remarked.

"I'm on Zrath's side this time," said Kethryn. "Sorry, but if Lenore is dead, we can't afford to leave this stuff just lying around. We need every healing potion we can get. Better that we have it than the duergar or whoever."

Tav shook her head. "I thought you were different," she replied. "You take something that doesn't belong to you. That is stealing. Thieves always have excuses for stealing. It doesn't make it right."

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Rina. "Geez! You're annoying sometimes. Look. There appears to be no other way up, and we still haven't found those stupid mushrooms. Either we just leave or we have to power up the dumb tower. What do we do?"

"I say we power up the tower," said Zrathentil.

"Agreed," said Pona.

"Fine," said Tav.

"Looks like we can all agree on this, at least," said Kethryn. "Let's go get some Sussur Flowers."

And so, they went back down to the first level and made their way into the garden. As they approached the glowing tree, suddenly, they felt it. A wave of antimagic hit them like a ton of bricks. Instantly, magic was suppressed. They felt it, but Zrathentil felt it the worst. They spun around to watch him, amazed to see the drow coming unglued.

A chill ran through him. His magic, the fire that burned within was... fading. He tried to cast a few simple cantrips, but the magic in his fingers sparked. The spells failed again and again, consumed by the Sussur Flowers. For the first time in memory, he was without magic. He felt cold and empty and lost, as if the world had suddenly ended and he was plunged into a void of darkness. His magic was gone, replaced by fury. He and his powers were one. This would only be temporary. He clenched his fists and teeth in defiance. "Let's get this over with," he gasped.

"You could head back to the boat," suggested Tav. "We can handle this."

Zrathentil shook his head. "This is a valuable experience," he replied. "Notice anything unusual?" The others exchanged glances and shrugged, so he explained. "Even my magic has left me. I can't cast any magic at all. The Sussur Flowers completely negate all magic... except one."

"The tadpole," said Pona, realization dawning on her. "It's not affecting the shadow magic that is keeping the tadpole in stasis."

"Precisely," said Zrathentil.

"By the Hells!" said Rina. "What next?"

"How do we know it isn't messing with the shadow magic?" asked Tav. "Maybe it is and we just can't feel it."

"Omeluum said that we're going to likely change instantly and painfully as soon as the magic is no longer keeping the tadpoles in stasis," said Kethryn. "I think we'd feel it."

"So even anti-magic flowers can't defeat the power of the #\$\$@ #@\$# #@\$ tadpoles!" growled Rina. "The flowers will #@\$ stop every other kind of magic but the #@\$ #@\$ magic we want it to stop."

"We don't want it to stop the magic keeping the tadpoles in check," said Zrathentil. "Remember? The moment the shadow magic is shut off, we'll likely transform."

"So why isn't the Sussur working on the shadow magic?" asked Tav. "That makes no sense."

"Who knows?" said Zrathentil. "Perhaps Sussur Flowers only create anti-magic that inhibits the Weave of Mystra. Maybe it doesn't work on the Shadow Weave. Maybe the Shadow Weave CREATES the anti-magic barrier through these flowers that grow up in the midst of the Underdark. So maybe... maybe the magic inhibiting the tadpoles is related in some way TO the Sussur Flowers."

"What?" asked Tav. "That makes no sense, I..."

"Think about it," said Zrathentil. "What if the Sussur Flowers have the ability to inhibit ceremorphosis? What if they cause mind flayer tadpoles to become dormant? If they do, and the magic barrier around them is what is keeping the nasty vermin in stasis, then that would explain why the Sussur Flowers are having no effect right now. They'd only be adding to the anti-magic that's already surrounding the tadpoles and keeping them dormant. That

would also explain why Omelum can't breach the barrier and why Ethel couldn't either. Don't get me wrong. It's just a theory that I whipped up. It's not like I'm saying that I'm certain this is true. It's a potential."

"If your theory is true, though," said Kethryn, "we may have to then consider the very real possibility that Lenore is connected to our situation. Her research may have been what created the unique condition that we have. She may BE the person responsible for all of this." He pointed at the side of his head.

"Exactly," said Zrathentil. "And now we have another reason to explore this tower."

"Well then," said Kethryn, moving up to the tree. "As you said, let's get this over with." Then he carefully extracted one of the blooms, making sure that he didn't lose even a single pedal. With that accomplished, he made his way into the tower, keeping the Sussur Flower as protected as possible the entire time. Once inside, he hurried to the back, and he gently set the Sussur Flower onto the receptacle just inside the generator. As he did this, he asked, "Now what?"

"We have to close the hatch on the generator," said Zrathentil. "Then, we will need to figure out how to activate it."

"Once we do, is that thing going to fill the entire tower with antimagic?" asked Tav.

"It shouldn't," said Zrathentil. "She'd have been a pretty big fool to use such a flower to power up her generator if it shut down all of her magical protections. My guess is that the generator turns anti-magic into an energy that is no longer harmful to magic. In other words, if my theory is correct, Sussur Flowers are a conduit for the Shadow Weave. If that's true then maybe this generator converts the Shadow Weave into the Weave itself. A cleric of Mystra would certainly desire to find a way to 'purify the Shadow Weave' and convert it into Mystra's Weave. Perhaps the conversion creates a harnessable power that is then far more potent than standard magic."

"You know what?" said Rina, "I hear a lot of 'maybes' and 'ifs.' Just in case, I'll wait outside."

"Me too," said Pona. Both went back out to the boat, leaving Kethryn, Zrathentil, and Tav by the generator.

"Nice," said Kethryn. "Sacrificial lambs."

Zrathentil smiled. "No sense in more than one of us potentially dying from this. I'm confident this won't do what they're afraid it will do, so I can take it from here, if you'd both like. Why don't you go out and join them? I'll just close the hatch and activate the generator."

Tav shook her head. "I'll protect you, just in case. I don't abandon people like that."

Kethryn rested his hand on her shoulder. "Why don't you go with the others, just in case. You're our cleric. If something goes wrong, you might be able to heal us. If you are hurt or killed with us..."

Tav sighed. "Fine, I guess." Then she hurried to join the halfling and dwarf.

Zrathentil waited until he was sure she was clear. Then he closed the hatch. After doing so, he found the switch and threw it into the upwards position where it locked in place.

Suddenly, the generator's exhaust exploded with blue smoke and flames. Energy then danced through the central lift chamber, coursing through the lines that made up the eight-point star and the circle border. Then the energy passed up the shaft and spread out through the tower as if every conduit was a vein and the blue energy was the blood that flowed through it. The hanging braziers by each door of the building flared to life with blue fire.

Then Rina, Pona and Tav all watched in horror as a column of soft blue light shot from a central circle on the upper floor. It was almost twenty feet in diameter, and it was bright enough to cast the symbol of Mystra upon the ceiling of the cavern hundreds of feet in the air. Instantly, the tower was like a beacon in the night. It was a lighthouse on the edge of Ebonlake.

"By Selune," Tav breathed. "What have we done? Now everything throughout this entire region of the Underdark will know we're here."

Chapter 10 - The Arcane Tower

"The tower's safe," said Kethryn from the door. "And it's powered up. Let's use the lift and check out the rest of the place."

"Better hurry," said Rina anxiously as she ran up. "As Tav here just pointed out, that tower is now letting every creature in the Underdark know we're here. It's going to be like a magnet drawing every creepy, bad thing to us."

Kethryn stepped outside and looked up. He swore. "That's not good. I have no idea how to shut it off, either. Maybe Zrathentil will know."

The drow came to the door. "We can shut it off," he said. "Won't take much. The generator has a kill switch. As soon as we're done here, we'll shut it off and get back to the myconid colony."

"Fine," said Rina. "Then after you."

Without delay, they headed right back inside, making their way to the lift chamber entrance on the second floor. Stepping inside, they faced one another. "Everyone ready?" asked Kethryn.

"No," said Zrathentil with a smile. It was obvious that he was kidding, and he pressed the only button with an arrow that was glowing. It was pointing inward. Instantly, blue energy coursed around them as if like clouds of lightning. It enshrouded their vision and was gone. As they blinked to see, they recognized that they were no longer on the second floor. They were on the third floor.

In the northwest corner, there was some sort of mushroom garden. Four massive, glowing mushrooms jutted up almost to the high-vaulted ceiling. Two medium mushrooms were on the southwest side of the raised garden, and all around the larger ones, there were many smaller ones of various shapes and sizes. South of the raised garden was a shelving unit. This contained old gardening tools and the remains of dead plant life.

To the right of the garden, along the north wall, there was another shelving unit. This contained a lot of jars and bottles filled with strange liquids, powders and other chemicals. On the other side of the door that led to the northern balcony, there was a storage area. This was covered in webs. There was a table with lots of moldy sacks and empty jars and vases. In this corner, along the east wall, were three large barrels on their sides. One was stacked on top of the other two. Next to this, there was some sort of strange rock garden with massive blue crystal-like formations sticking out of it. In the southeast corner, there was another mushroom garden filled with a plethora of reddish fungi. These were of various sizes and shapes. Finally, along the south wall, there were more shelves, but these seemed cluttered with empty vases and useless items.

"Ah," said Rina in relief. "Mushrooms. Those have to be what we're looking for."

Tav nodded and pointed to the mushroom garden on the right, in the northwest corner. "Those are Timmask," she told them. "And the ones in the southeast corner are Tongue of Madness. I should be able to figure out how to harvest them. Let me get that duergar's armor on. Should protect me from the effects. Right?" Immediately, she set her bag down and started to pull out the Mind Over Matter armor.

Then Pona noticed an extremely dusty book on a shelf near the south door. "That might tell us more. Looks like the only book in the place. Could detail exactly how to harvest them."

"Sounds good," said Tav. "Just don't get too close to those Tongue of Madness shrooms. You all might also want to step outside. Who knows what kinds of spores are loose in the air in this chamber."

Pona did as she was instructed. She was able to grab the book easily enough. Then they opened the door on the south side to step out onto the balcony. The door was not locked. As they stepped outside, they found those hanging braziers on either side. Both were burning brightly. There was a bench near the railing off to the right. A number of large mushrooms had sprouted off the south side of the tower on their left, creating a stairway for giants all the way up to the fourth floor landing.

"Well," said Rina with a smile. "That's a sizable security breach. We could drop down from the fourth floor landing to this door and get in without picking a lock. This door has no lock whatsoever. And look." She pointed to the cavern wall further south across a small, inner branch of the lake. "Looks like more shrooms over there could be used to climb up from the ground floor. Haha! Great layout! I could essentially dock a boat down there and jump to or use ropes or ladders to climb up to those mushrooms. Then I could make my way up to the fourth floor area and drop down to the third floor balcony here and break in without anyone being the wiser. Maybe Lenore wasn't so smart after all."

"These have probably grown up since she's been gone," said Zrathentil. "I think this implies just how long she's not been here. Cobwebs everywhere, everything is rotten, mushrooms are overgrown in the raised gardens, these giant mushrooms out here now create a security hazard, her lift doesn't seem to have been used in a very long time, no guardians to greet us, her research was left unfinished - everything points to her having abandoned this place possibly even a decade ago or so."

Tav was still changing within the lift chamber, but she could hear their conversation. "I wonder what happened to her. Now, all I want to do is find her and meet her."

"Especially if she's responsible for the tadpoles in our head," said Rina.

Pona opened the book and began to read. "This threadbare book looks like it once contained a play, but most of it has been lost to time, vermin, and an unfortunate ink spill. Only two full sentences are distinguishable. They must have been more important than the others and preserved by magic. They must mean something. 'How can I trust? How will I ever know? How can I show myself, my darkest me?'"

"Hmmm," said Rina. "I can think of better places to enjoy literature than in the depths of the Underdark."

"Let's keep it," said Zrathentil, and he took the book from her. "Might help us open some secret vault or something."

"Well, the book doesn't tell us about harvesting the spores, though," said Rina. "So, now what?"

"Let's check the shelves over there for the spores," said Kethryn, pointing to the jars on the north side.

"Bad idea," said Tav. She was still wrestling with the armor change. "They've likely been there for like a decade. They'd probably kill us. We'll need to harvest fresh samples from the raised gardens."

"But do you know how?" asked Pona.

Tav finally got the armor on, and since it was magical, it adjusted its size to fit her perfectly. She stepped out of the lift. "I think I've harvested enough medicinal herbs and such to be able to figure it out. You all just wait outside in case I get too many spores floating around in the air."

"How do you think Lenore harvested them?" asked Pona.

"Probably had some protection from poison spell or something similar," said Rina.

"Or," said Zrathentil as he pointed to the shelf Pona had taken the book from. "She wore a mask. That most likely protects you from the effects."

Pona went to the shelf and grabbed it. It covered a person's entire head with huge goggles and a snout with a filter on the end. It was, in a sense, a breath mask. "Did you want this too?" she asked Tav.

Tav shook her head. "Keep it. I can work better without it obscuring my vision. If, for some reason, this armor doesn't protect me, we'll need someone else to put that on to come and drag me out."

Pona then retreated back to the others, and they shut the door. Tav made her way first to the shelving unit with jars on it. She found empty ones and then made her way to the northern balcony. She threw the doors open to allow any spores she accidentally sent up into the air to waft out. Then she went to harvest the Timmask spores first. When she'd gathered enough, she made her way over to the Tongue of Madness. She did the same with them, gathering as many specimens as she could. Finally, she packed the jars in her bag, grabbed it and her other armor, and she rejoined her friends. Just in case she did something wrong and filled the air with spores, they closed the door behind her with the idea that they would give the room plenty of time for the air to clear out.

"Should be all set," she said as she began to remove the Mind Over Matter armor to put her chainmail back on.

"Good," said Rina. "You sure you're okay?"

Tav nodded. "Armor worked perfectly. Not a single symptom." Then she widened her right eye and squinted her left, staring blankly ahead. "Or... perhaps... not..." Her left eye twitched. Then she laughed and continued taking off the armor.

Pona slapped her on the shoulder. "I believed you for a second there."

Rina laughed. "Then you're an idiot. It was obvious."

"I said for only a second," said Pona, defensively.

Kethryn smiled. "Nice to see you all getting along for a change."

"Shhh," said Zrathentil. "Are you trying to spook them?"

"Hah. Hah," said Rina sarcastically. "You're a riot." Then she gestured to the mushrooms on the wall of the tower. "So, do we wait for the room to clear out, or should we try to climb up the shrooms to the next floor. Didn't see anything else of value on this floor. Did you?"

"No," said Tav. "But the lift is on this level."

"The lift is magical," said Zrathentil. "It actually doesn't rise through the tower. It teleports you from one platform to the next. Technically, it's on every level."

"Then I say we climb," said Tav. "Just in case, we don't want to mess around with those spores. If I filled the room with them, and we all go mad as a result..."

"The shrooms it is," said Rina.

"Let's have Kethryn chuck Rina to the first mushroom to test it out," said Pona with an evil grin.

"Everyone's a comedian right now," said Rina, narrowing her eyes at the halfling. "Gotta wonder if we DID inhale some shroom spores or something."

Kethryn went to the edge of the balcony and gauged the jump. "That's a good four feet," he said. "And it's about four and a half feet up. Looks like a potentially slimy, slick surface too."

"And we lost our rope," said Zrathentil. "So, perhaps we should wait for the room to clear out after all."

Kethryn nodded. "Yeah. Too risky, if you ask me. It'd be one thing if we were descending from the fourth floor. Going up, that's another story."

And so, they waited for a good thirty minutes. Then they opened the doors and returned to the lift as swiftly as they could. There were now two buttons lit up on the floor. One pointed inward and the other outward. Since the one pointing inward had taken them from the second to the third floors, they used that button again which, indeed, took them to the fourth floor using the same magical means.

This floor was mostly empty. It had four sets of double doors; three leading to balconies on the north, south and west sides, and the one on the east leading to the landing. There were more windows on this level, commanding a nice view of the Underdark even from within. One of the windows, on the southeast side facing the landing, was completely shattered. Two arcane turrets rested in the northwest and southwest corners of the room. Much to everyone's relief, they appeared to be powered down. There were numerous statues of some of Mystra's greatest clerics and mages along the walls at various intervals, and the chamber had a plethora of crates and chests throughout. Like the previous floors, there were candelabras placed here and there which were dark with cobwebs clinging to them. More than one section of the ceiling was collapsed, scattering rubble and debris about.

Searching this level took virtually no time at all. They found several potions; one of healing, one of force resistance, and one of invisibility. Zrathentil took all of these. Obviously, these items had simply gotten jumbled around with other unrelated things during a move or something of that nature. After all, most of the boxes and containers had machine parts in them, so it was odd that there were potions inside as well.

Then, on the northern balcony, they found another ornate chest. It was locked, and Zrathentil immediately felt power emanating from it. "Must be something good inside," he commented, and Pona set to work to pick the lock. Again, it was difficult, but she managed to not only disarm the magic trap that was set on the lock, she managed to get the lock open.

Inside were two scrolls and some magic boots. Zrathentil examined them and recognized the scrolls as the Protection from Good and Evil spell and the Shield of Faith spell. Tav reluctantly took both of these. Then he identified the boots as, "Mystra's Grace. 'Wearing these boots is like walking on cotton clouds.' That's what the book said that I read it from once upon a time. They give the wearer the ability to walk on air. It's not the Fly or Levitate spell, but it's still rather nice to have. I could essentially put these on and walk right off this balcony and continue walking horizontally as if there was an invisible walkway. Duration is one minute, though, so you can't do this for long periods of time. You also only get three uses of it a day. Then it needs to recharge."

"So, you can't go vertically?" asked Kethryn. "You can only go horizontally?"

"Yes," said Zrathentil. "From the moment you speak the command word, that's when you can't fall or climb higher. You can only go horizontally. So, I could swing from this balcony and fling myself into the air some thirty feet up, speak the word, and land at that altitude, remaining up that high for one minute. It's really not a lot of time, but you can cover a good amount of distance before the spell ends."

"Essentially, then, you could walk on water across the Ebonlake without the boat, couldn't you?" asked Tav.

"Run would be more like it," said Zrathentil, "but yes. You are correct. I'd have about three full minutes to run as fast as I could across Ebonlake with my three uses per day."

"Wonder how far across the lake this Grymforge place is," said Pona. "Not like running with the boots to the other side even remotely makes sense."

"Who should take the boots?" asked Rina.

"Who else?" asked Pona. "Zrathentil's the mage. Having boots that allow him to walk on air gives him the ability to pummel enemies with spells from above, and they wouldn't be able to hit him easily in return."

"One could say the same about Rina and her bow, My Friend," said Zrathentil. "I have taken a number of magic items. Rina should probably take the boots."

"I'm planning on using this axe more," the dwarf replied. "You take 'em. Makes the most sense. You're too squishy."

He laughed. "I suppose. If you all insist." No one argued, and so he put them on.

Finally, before leaving the fourth floor, they found a book. Tav flipped it open. "The beginning of this book proudly declares it to be a play by Dame Inia, followed by an extensive introduction and twenty-three pages of notes on the text. Though the book itself seems barely touched, one stanza is encircled twice."

"Does it match the other two lines we read in the other text?" Kethryn asked.

"No," she replied. "It reads, 'There is a light in every living thing. It's crawling t'wards the surface to survive. And in its wake, it tramples everything. We'll kill the rest, so that the one can thrive.'"

"That's friendly," said Rina sarcastically. "No idea what it means, but I don't think I like the part about killing the rest so that one can thrive."

"Probably another password or something," Zrathentil commented. "This and the other two lines will probably help us unlock a vault or chest or something. Let's take this one too." And so they did. Then, they made their way back to the lift and went up to the fifth floor.

This was a devastated level. Sections of the ceiling and floor were totally crumbled away, making maneuvering about a bit more difficult. This was likely Lenore's private quarters. Along the northern wall, dead center, there was a window with a telescope, a comfortable, padded chair and a globe. "Useful for spying on people from afar, I suppose," said Rina as she went to the telescope to peek through it. "Oh, yeah. You can see everything on that map the hobgoblin gave us. I can even make out the Selunite Outpost through gaps in the cavern walls. Well, at least, I think that's what that is way over there at the top of some cliffs. Whatever it is, it's shining brighter than the bloody tower."

Then she swiveled down towards the bay, for flashing lights caught her attention. "Wait! I see them."

"See who?" asked Kethryn.

"A duergar patrol," she replied. "There WAS more of them in the area. They're in the village; a whole bunch of 'em - maybe fifteen. Hah! Zombies are swarming 'em. Heh heh!"

"You can actually see them from here?" asked Tav.

"They have torches and lanterns," she replied. "Besides, I think this telescope provides some sort of magical enhanced night vision. This thing's great."

"It's bolted to the floor," Zrathentil commented. "Too bad. I'd take it with us if we had the right tools to remove it. Those look like pretty sturdy bolts. It'd take some doing to get it free of the mount."

Tav shook her head. "You just want to rob this woman of everything good, don't you?"

"Yes," said Zrathentil. "She's not here. She's likely dead or our enemy. So, yes. I want to take everything. But it'd just be for safe keeping." He smiled innocently. "It'd be just to protect it for her until we meet up with her later - provided she's not our enemy."

Tav's eyes narrowed. "Ah. Right. Sure."

"And..." said Rina, "... they're fleeing. Yes! Beautiful. Six dead. Zombies surprised them and took out almost half in the first few seconds. Now they're running east. Oh dang! They're coming towards the tower. What the \$#@\$ is that?"

"What is what?" asked Pona anxiously. She was now trying to peer out the window to see, but it did her little good. She could only make out dancing lights.

"By the gods!" said Rina. "It's a bloody redcap riding on a giant toad."

Kethryn and Zrathentil immediately remembered the giant toad that had attacked them in the bog. They exchanged glances. "Did the hag send them down here to look for us?" the folk hero asked.

"Possibly," the drow replied. "Or that one may have insisted. There was one who said we killed his brother. Just before we ran to the portal at the back of the house, one of them cried out something about it. He vowed to rip out our something-or-others."

"Yeah," said Rina, adjusting the lens and zooming in. "That's him, I think. You're right. I remember him. Nasty wart on his nose the size of the tip of my pinky finger. Thought he had another nose growing out of his nose. He's screaming at the duergar. They're coming right towards him. Wait! Haha! Now THEY'RE fighting. This is great!" She was as giddy as a school girl just released for a long holiday. "One duergar swallowed by the toad. Redcap's slid off the toad. He's retreating. Duergar are hacking the toad to pieces. Zombies just showed up. Redcap's heading east. The coward abandoned the toad and is saving his own skin."

Everyone noticed a bright orange flash in the distance. "What was that?" asked Tav.

"One of the glowing orange mushroom things just exploded," said Rina. "Whoa! Duergar got too close. That took out two duergar and a few zombies who were chasing the redcap. By the Nine!" She never took the telescope off the redcap. "He's fled to some sort of - what is that? I think he just dropped down a hole or something. I can't see him now. He's escaped into some sort of vertical shaft." Another series of orange flashes. "That took out the rest that were pursuing him. Another orange exploding mushroom thing - or rather, a bunch of them exploded all around. It was a chain reaction."

Several bright white flashes caught their attention. Rina swiveled the scope so that it was practically kissing the window sill. "The last of the duergar are coming towards the tower instead. They'd split up." More flashes of light followed. Rina whistled.

"What is it?" asked Tav.

"Arcane turrets, I think," Rina breathed. "They're not dormant. They're quite active. The duergar just ran into the path of one of them. By all that is good and holy! I'm so glad they didn't try to kill us."

"Me too," said Pona. "We must not be viewed as a threat, I guess."

"I guess," Rina replied.

After a full minute, the turrets stopped firing. Rina pulled away. She shook her head. "Made short work of both the duergar and the zombies," she told them. "The turrets just magic missiled the crap out of them. There are two down there - turrets, I mean. Closest enemy drew their fire. Four duergar cut down. One of 'em ran in between the two turrets and was caught in a crossfire. The zombies were too stupid to know what to do. They just pursued the duergar, and once the duergar were cut down, they stood there and let themselves get pummeled to death."

"That's a shame," said Zrathentil. "Now all my minions are gone. Maybe I'll attune myself to this Absolute and raise those larger serpent skeletons on the beach - the behir, or whatever they were." He grinned with an evil glint in his eye.

"Don't joke like that," said Tav. "I've had enough undead for one day, and the last thing we need is for you to become a cultist True Soul - whatever they're called."

"Well," said Rina. "That's the end of the duergar for sure. I saw them all die. Either the zombies got 'em, the orange exploding mushrooms got 'em, or the turrets got 'em. The toad's also dead. Only the redcap got away into that vertical shaft."

"Maybe we'll track him down later," said Kethryn. "Better to find him and put an end to him than to have him sneak up on us when we're least expecting it."

"I can't help but agree with that," said Zrathentil. "Let's finish up here. Then maybe we'll go down there and look for him."

And, with that, they continued to search the fifth floor. To the right of the telescope was an empty dresser. This indicated that Lenore had packed all of her clothing before leaving. This meant that she likely went away on a trip. It wasn't some short stint into the Underdark where she was murdered by some random creature nearby. If she packed all of her clothing, she was planning some great journey. "This might mean she wasn't ever planning on returning, for all we know," said Zrathentil.

Right of this was a bed that hadn't been slept in for a very long time. At the foot of the bed was another locked chest that Pona picked. Inside was a ring. "Mage's Friend," said Zrathentil upon closer examination. "This increases a person's knowledge of the arcane and of deities and so forth. When wearing it, this ring helps bring information to a person's mind, even information they never knew before." Then he took it and slipped it on. Besides that, they found thirty gold and a bottle of rum.

In the northeast corner of the room, there was a window. On the sill was a button, and next to the button was a dog collar. Zrathentil eyed it curiously. "Lenore owned a dog. It's inscribed with the name 'Myrna.' I think it has some sort of connection to this button." He pressed the button, and the collar came to life, vibrating. Runes then appeared across the band. Zrathentil put it around his neck and fastened it.

"Great look on you," said Rina.

The drow chuckled. He pressed the button again. Instantly, a steak was conjured out of thin air by magic from the collar. He tossed it at her, and she caught it. "Is this real?" she asked, turning it over in her hands. Her stomach even growled.

"Sure is," he said, removing the collar. "Clever. She made it so the dog could feed herself. She wears the collar, presses the button, and poof. Dinner." He held the collar out for Rina. "Want it?"

She gave him a dirty look. "No thanks, but I will take this steak. Lunch is on Lenore. We should take a break and eat."

"Stow it in your pack for later," said Kethryn. "Let's just finish this up and get out. The sooner we turn this tower back off, the better. Right?"

Rina then carefully packed the steak in her bag along with the rest of the food she took from the duergar barrels and crates in the village. Then they set the collar back on the sill. "We can always come back here later, if we need to, to produce more food from the collar," said Zrathentil. "Looks like it produces one steak per day."

From there, they continued their search. There were more bookshelves littered with books, a desk and chair, barrels, crates and many other containers. The room took them the longest to search, for they checked every book to ensure that there was nothing of importance. Among all the things, they found a bomb in a chest in the southwest corner, a Web spell scroll and a Feather Fall spell scroll plus several documents that they did think were necessary to take.

The first was a play. Tav picked it up and read it. "The title is 'The Roads to Darkness.' It gives a short synopsis. 'An epic tragedy about power, corruption, and loneliness.'" She flipped a few pages. "'PROLOGUE. A lonely road. Thunder and lightning. Enter Soreth. Soreth: New sounds through damp and dark oppression break."

Is it the foe, that foul, contemptuous heel?” She was reading it dramatically, and she was doing a fairly good job at it. “Or art thou friend, a rescue from my lonely wake? Come out of love for me, not love for blood and steel.”

“Enter Rysia. Rysia: How would I know, how would I know, Soreth? It’s been so long, what do I know of you, and you of me?”

“Soreth: Wait - do you hear that sound?”

“Enter Amphius. Amphius: What’s this? Those figures so familiar both, but still you seem so strange.”

“Soreth: It’s Amphius.”

“Rysia: Dear Amphius! What happened to your face?”

“Soreth: Your eyes are black as Shar.”

“Amphius: And you? I saw your teeth, they’re sharp as blades. And what is with this road, so slick with blood? What happened here? What happened to us all?”

“Exeunt. END PROLOGUE. ACT I. Ten years prior.”

Then Rina cut her off, indicating to her that she should speed things up and give them a synopsis. “Let’s not read the whole thing, shall we?”

Tav flipped through the rest of the pages and skimmed them quickly. After a few minutes, she said, “The rest of the play tells the tale of three elven friends, their paths to power, and how - corrupted, mad and lonely - they killed each other. Geez! Terrible!”

“Well,” said Zrathentil. “That gives us more insight into who Lenore really was. Doesn’t it? That seems like a pretty dark tale. I’m thinking she wasn’t exactly a happy person full of sunshine and rainbows.”

“You can say that again,” said Rina, who was holding a second document. It was a single, creased parchment that she’d unfolded. “Listen to this. ‘To the Gray. From Barakuir we made our stand, meant to rule but led astray by wicked tentacle and wicked hand, this world belongs to the gray. Oryndoll stole all we had yet taught the weapons by which to slay. Forge your minds to ironclad. This world belongs to the gray. The Exile freed us with his command to conquer what was taken away. Crush every monument into finest sand. This world belongs to the gray. Trade your heart for steel intent, for with whip and mind we flay. Let them all hear of our descent, the world is nothing but gray.’”

She folded the piece of paper back up. “I can’t help but agree. This Lenore person is sounding more and more dark and sinister to me, the more we explore her tower.”

“That poem is very much connected to both duergar and mind flayers,” said Zrathentil. “Both of which WE are connected to now. Coincidence? The Exile is clearly a reference to duergar. He is Laduguer, the patron deity of their people. Oryndoll is also known as the City of Loretakeers. It was a large underground mind flayer city state in the Lowerdark of the Darklands. Like it or not, my friends, it is starting to look more and more like we are pawns in some grand scheme. I’m almost starting to feel like we were MEANT to come here; as if some divine hand has been guiding us.”

“That is a comforting thought,” said Tav, and she meant it. She was thinking of her goddess Selune when she said it.

“Not to me,” said Zrathentil, his tone pressing home his point. “I’m not entirely sure that the entity that is guiding us has our best interests at heart.”

After that, they found a torn-out page from some book. It was resting on a shelf by itself. The writing on it was shaky and blotted with what was probably tears, making it barely legible. “The silence stretches on - I’m all alone. Please, can I hold your hands, for just a while?” Tav read. “How sad! I think it’s Lenore’s handwriting.”

“My guess is Myrna died,” said Zrathentil. “After the dog died, Lenore felt very alone.”

“Tragic,” said Tav. “I hope she didn’t do something stupid like commit suicide. There are so many other things you can do besides kill yourself.”

After this, they found a letter that confirmed Zrathentil’s deductions. “Dearest Lenore,” he read. “I’m not sure I should say this, but your last letter really worried me. Why in all Hells would you tame a bulette? Just because you found it near Myrna’s grave doesn’t mean that that’s a sign. I’m really worried about you, Lenore. A bulette is not a pet. Using it as a guardian is one thing, but you sound quite taken by it. I know you don’t want to come back before you finish your research, but if you are feeling lonely, you know my door is always open. Lots of love and hugs, Amarith. P.S. It really warms my heart to hear that you put the autumncroc flowers on Myrna’s grave. I remember she liked to roll around in them, even though she’d always sneeze after. She was such a soft, loyal dog. I wish there was more I could do.”

“Bulette?” asked Rina. “Did that say she tried to tame a bulette?”

“Sure did,” said Pona. “Is that even possible?”

Zrathentil shook his head. “Actually sounds to me like she lost her mind. Sounds like the loneliness caught up with her.”

“Can you blame her?” asked Kethryn. “Reading all this depressing stuff, it’s bound to drag you down. Then, having lost her dog, her only companion down here, I can only imagine that her sanity must have been quite brittle.”

Rina shook her head. “Any idea at all where she buried that dog? I’d like to avoid that area at all costs. A bulette is nothing to sniff at.”

“No,” said Zrathentil. “But if we see a grave with autumncrocus flowers on it, we know a bulette must be near.”

“Might be too late by then,” said Kethryn. “Sounds like the moral of this story is that we need to not explore too much of the Underdark. We just return to the myconids and then get back to the boat and not stray from the path.”

“Totally agree with you there,” said Rina.

Then they returned to the lift and went to the sixth and final floor.

Chapter 11 - The Fate of Lenore

“New sounds through damp and dark oppression break. Is it the foe, that foul, contemptuous heel?” a metallic voice spoke as they found themselves on the upper-most level of the tower. They had found the tower’s guardians. Animated armors and automatons stood before them, scattered throughout. One of which, who was nearest to the lift, had just spoken. The lift was no longer enclosed, so it was standing just outside the platform behind them.

It was shaped like a human made of silver plated metal. Gears and mechanisms were exposed throughout most of the body. Only the head was completely enclosed. There was an outer structure over the internals, but it seemed decorative more than functional since it swirled and looped throughout. Two shoulder pauldrons jutted out on each side, and it looked like it was wearing some decorative headdress. Electricity coursed through it, and its eyes glowed blue. On its back was a wicked looking halberd. On the left side of its collar, the word “Bernard” was etched in small, intricate letters.

Then Tav excitedly stepped forward. “Wait! I know these words. They are from the opening stanza of that play with the three elves we found earlier.” Then she addressed the automaton. “Or art thou friend, a rescue from my lonely wake?” She hoped that was enough, for she couldn’t remember anything further.

“Come out of love for me, not love for blood and steel,” Bernard replied, his voice male and soft, like a poet reciting lines on a stage. He seemed passionate even. He had a mouth that opened and closed as he spoke, like a puppet’s, giving him a truly sentient feel. “Command as you see fit, My Lady; My Liege.” Then he bowed to her slightly and waited for her to respond again.

Tav stared at him blankly. What now? What was she supposed to say? She glanced back at the others, desperate for someone to give her the answer. No one dared to speak. One wrong word might set the automaton off, might label them as intruders or enemies. Tav had kept all of Lenore’s writings in her pack. Immediately, she pulled it off her back and began rifling through it. Finding those lines that had been singled out, she tried to figure out which one she should use. The one that spoke to her most, which seemed most like Lenore, was the one written on a torn-out piece of paper. “The silence stretches on - I’m all alone. Please, can I hold your hands, for just a while?”

“Of course, My Love,” said Bernard gently and with compassion. Tav was relieved. The automaton didn’t seem hostile. She must have chosen wisely. “Don’t be afraid, Sweet Girl. What can I do? Say, would you like a hug?”

Tav put herself in Lenore’s shoes. None of the other lines fit here. All she could think of to say was, “Yes, please.”

Then Bernard spread his arms wide as if to embrace her. “Come here, for just a moment. Let it out.”

Bernard was nearly seven feet tall. Tav was much shorter. He had to practically double over to hug her, and it was more than a little frightening. His arms were long and his claw-like hands massive. She stepped into his embrace, not knowing what else to do. With semi-jerking motions, he pulled her in.

Then Tav realized that his arms were too tight and too low for a comfortable hug; as if he was meant to be embracing someone slightly shorter. “Remember, you are loved, Lenore, so much. You’re doing great, and everyone will be so proud of you; as I already am.”

Then he withdrew to full height, releasing her. It was then that Tav noticed that the rest of her companions were quite ready to strike. They weren’t sure if the automaton was hurting her or not with his embrace. When she saw this, she patted the air to assure them that she was fine. They relaxed. Then she turned back to Bernard.

“Thank you, Bernard.” She hoped it was now okay to speak freely.

“Of course, My Love,” he replied.

Then Tav gestured to her companions. “These are my friends. From now on, they are welcome here in my tower. Understand?”

He looked at them, then back at her. “Yes. Of course. New friends make life less lonely. I am happy for you.”

“You are to protect them and serve them even as you would protect and serve me,” said Tav.

“Of course, Lenore,” he replied.

Then she looked back at them and sighed heavily. “Now what?” she asked.

Zrathentil took the initiative. “Is there anything of importance or value on this level?” he asked the automaton.

Bernard pointed to a ring on a table not far from him. “That is Guiding Light,” the automaton replied. “It is a ring worn by Lenore to not only access the Underdark’s darkest corners but also her own basement. It reflects light where there should be none.”

Tav took it and examined it. "I think I'll give it to my friend here," she said, and she handed it to Kethryn. "I think he'll need it more than me."

"As you wish, My Love," said Bernard.

She then found a scroll next to the ring. As she unrolled it, she saw that it was the Prayer of Healing spell. She took this for herself and slipped it into her bag. "Anything else?" asked Tav.

Bernard pointed to a crate at the far side of the room. "I believe you left some things in there." There they found another healing potion and an antitoxin plus a Thunderwave scroll, a Silence scroll and a Detect Thoughts scroll. Tav took the Silence scroll and Zrathentil took the other two.

Then Tav quietly asked her companions, "Do you think we should ask him where Lenore went? I could say something like, 'I can't remember. I'm having some difficulties. An enemy did something to me,' or something like that."

"Too risky," said Zrathentil.

"Agreed," said Rina. "I say we search the basement. We might find some clues down there."

"This place could make a great place to stay at least for the night," suggested Pona. "These automatons and animated armors would likely protect us while we slept since they think she's Lenore."

"I just don't like that the symbol of Mystra is being projected to the ceiling of the cavern and this place is like a lighthouse for lost ships," said Kethryn. "We could have an entire army of duergar, or gods know what else, beating down these doors. I think the sooner we shut this thing off, the better."

Then, with that, they returned to the lift. Kethryn put on the ring, and suddenly a third button appeared. Stepping on it, they found themselves in Lenore's secret basement. As it was with the sixth floor, so it was with the basement. The lift was no longer enclosed. The lift was on a platform made of wood. Not far from them, to their right, there was a table with lab equipment on it and a couple of bookshelves. A brief search revealed jars of Timmask Spores and four scrolls. One was Inflict Wounds. They also found two Detect Thoughts, and Barkskin. There was a desk behind the lift, an empty barrel and some other equipment that was covered up.

On the left side of the platform, the south side, there was a ramp sloped at a forty-five degree angle. Heading east took one to an upper walkway. Heading west took one down a short way to a little nook with another table filled with glowing blue beakers, some machinery just to the right of it, and yet more bookshelves to the left. Water flowed like a river under this platform. Vines and roots grew down the walls, and oddly enough, magical torches glowed on the walls to provide soft lighting.

As they approached the table, they found a flask. Zrathentil examined it and said, "Basilisk Oil. It's a thick, gray oil swirling slowly in its container. It is extracted from a basilisk's gullet. This oil has the ability to turn petrified flesh back to its organic state." He snatched it up. "Could definitely come in handy."

"How does bile from a basilisk's gullet turn someone back to flesh from stone?" asked Pona.

"That's how basilisks eat," said Rina. "They turn things to stone. Then they eat the stone and swallow it. Then their guts turn the stone back to flesh and devour it. So, the best cure for petrification is to extract the internal juices of a basilisk."

Pona shook her head. "Who knew?"

Searching the bookshelves, they then found several more scrolls: Entangle, Shocking Grasp, Spike Growth, Lesser Restoration and yet another Detect Thoughts. "She really liked that spell," said Zrathentil. "Another sign perhaps?"

"Of what?" asked Tav.

"She was messing around with the mind," said Zrathentil. "Why did she need to cast Detect Thoughts so much unless her research had something to do with connecting people's minds, or blocking such a connection?"

After this, they made their way back up the ramp to the higher walkway. At the top was a raised platform with another desk dead ahead, and yet more lab tables and equipment. Roots and vines and more soft lighting provided decorations and made it so that their lanterns weren't needed. Against the south wall, they found a staff with a crystal set in the end. The point of the crystal was pointing upward, making it look almost like a spear. There was a circular base around the crystal, giving the impression that the stone was resting on a raised platform.

Zrathentil took it and said, "This is the Staff of Arcane Blessing. Though dust has settled into every nook and cranny of this staff, it still emanates a soothing aura." He held it out for them to see. It glowed faintly with a soft, golden light. "My guess is that its previous owner cast it aside, forgotten because there was nobody to bless."

"That's harsh," said Tav. "Poor Lenore. I feel so bad for her. It must have been very hard on her being here all alone."

"Anyone want it?" asked Zrathentil.

"Keep it," said Rina. "It suits you."

"Suit yourself," he said. "I now have the ability to act like a cleric. I can cast Bless. Tav is no longer needed."

"Maybe Rina was right. Maybe the spores have messed with us all. He's a real comedian today," said Tav sarcastically.

"He's trying to be," said Pona.

After this, they found yet another Detect Thoughts scroll, and a Burning Hands scroll on some bookshelves to the right of the table, along with jars of Tongue of Madness near the lab equipment. There was a heavy wooden chest to the left of the desk at the top of the ramp, and in it they found a non-magical ring, some gold, and a diary. Tav quickly grabbed the diary.

"De Hurst's Diary!" she cried excitedly, and she flipped it open. "Crisp cursive fills the pages of the diary, detailing the daily struggles of a cleric of Mystra studying the magical properties of the Underdark. The last entry here dates back about ten years. '2 Alturiak, 1481 DR.'"

"And now we have a date. Eleven years," said Zrathentil. "Almost twelve. It is, I think, around 20 Uktar 1492." He said this last bit to Kethryn for his sake. They had told him the year previously, but they'd never told him what month. Alturiak was the second month. Uktar was the eleventh.

Tav then read the entry. "Who would have thought, three years ago, that I would start a diary - not a research journal, but a real diary. I guess when every soul is more likely to kill you than converse with you, talking to a book starts making sense. And who would have thought, three years ago, that I would be called back to Baldur's Gate to confer with the other clerics of Mystra, right at the apex of my studies: I have all the pieces, but I have barely started my treatise. No matter. I will take my ring with me, to show them a glimpse of the possibilities. I will leave you, my dear book, here, together with the rest of my research, waiting to be finished. I should be back before next Nightal.' Signed, 'L.D.H.'"

"Finally," said Rina. "We know what happened to Lenore. As we thought, she went on a journey. That's why all her clothes were gone. She went to Baldur's Gate almost twelve years ago for some cleric's convention. For one reason or another, she never returned. This research seemed pretty dang important to her, so chances are she's dead. Something must have happened to her either in Baldur's Gate or along the way."

"Probably got killed by her bulette," said Zrathentil with a sinister glint in his eye.

"That's terrible," said Tav, and she slapped him on the shoulder.

He laughed. "It's plausible. What would be the last thing she'd do before leaving here? Visit the dog's grave. Where was the dog's grave? Near the bulette she cared for. She visits the grave and out pops the bulette. She says goodbye to it, and it turns on her."

"It is a plausible theory," said Rina. They were both enjoying the little guessing game, especially seeing Tav's reactions. "She would likely have visited it upon her return as well. She stops by there before going to the tower, and it hasn't seen her in a year or something. The bulette attacks and kills her, smashing her skull to goo."

"Or she could have simply had more pressing matters to attend to, and her research was permanently suspended while she dealt with it," Tav argued. "She may still be alive in Baldur's Gate, for all we know."

"You are so attached to this Lenore person," said Rina. "It's almost scary."

"Tav just likes everything to have a happy ending," said Zrathentil. "She's soft-hearted. That's all." Tav slid Lenore's diary into her pack and gave them both mean looks. "Honestly, there is still the potential that she's evil, and that her research has something to do with our tadpoles. Don't forget that."

"Come on," said Kethryn, not wanting them to fight about something they had no way of proving. "Let's see if there's anything else, and then let's get out of here."

"Now that's the best thing I've heard all day," said Rina. Then they made their way along the walkway as it wrapped around the lift platform. It ended at a door. When they threw it open, they found that it led to a stairway up. At the top, there was a lever on the right side of a recess in the wall shaped like a door, and when they pulled it, the recess slid open.

And just like that, they were once again on the first floor. To their right was the door leading out to the boat. "Selune be praised!" said Tav as she stepped outside. "That's it. We've searched the whole place."

"Now, let's shut this thing off and get out of here," said Rina as she and Pona joined her.

"Should we, though?" asked Zrathentil who stood in the doorway. "It could be a very good stronghold for us."

"I thought we'd been over this," said Kethryn. "It's a beacon for everything for miles around. It'll draw monsters like moths to a flame. Don't you think?"

The drow shrugged. "Highly defensible," he replied. "I say, 'Let them come.' We even have a small army of animated armors and automatons who think Tav is Lenore. We could position them at various places around the tower. The approach from the east has two of those arcane turrets. There are two more on the fourth

floor. For the most part, the only way up or down is the lift. You can only enter the basement with the ring you're wearing. So, yes, it is a beacon, but it is also very safe here for us. With the dog's collar, we'd even have an endless supply of food; at least a steak a day. It's not much, but it's something."

The others considered this. "You know, I was thinking it was a good idea to shut this thing down right away, but he has a point. It could be a place to fall back to; a good home base," said Pona. "Besides, we determined earlier that we don't think we can trust Spaw now. As long as those automatons think Tav is Lenore, this place would be pretty impenetrable. We could even set up traps on the mushrooms on the south side. If Spaw double-crosses us, or the duergar show up in greater numbers, this place would be much safer than anywhere else out there."

Rina caved. "Well, I guess I'm sold. Let's see. Sleep in a big tower with lots of fortifications or sleep in a myconid grotto with no real walls or protection at all. I think I'll pick the tower. Yeah, sure. It's a beacon in the night. Yeah, sure. It'll draw monsters from all around. But you can't argue with that. If we can seal ourselves away in the basement, with no one even knowing we're down there, that's a WHOLE lot safer than the myconid grotto, AND a whole lot more comfortable."

Kethryn nodded. "Well, that's majority, I guess," he said. "Fine. We'll make the tower our base of operations. Let's return to the grotto so we can see if that mind flayer can help us, and we can also tell Spaw that we killed off the duergar on this side of the lake. I think he promised some sort of reward or something for it. Maybe that will help us get beyond the lake and back to the surface."

"I say we leave the boat where it is," said Zrathentil. "It's fairly well hidden. We can have Tav post an automaton or animated armor to guard it. It'll be harder to steal it from there, and if the duergar send reinforcements, they won't just find it at the village and take it from us. Let's also have Tav command the automaton and animated armors to begin patrolling the tower and the grounds outside to help keep out intruders. We fortify this place a bit, set some traps, and then make our way out the fourth floor exit when we're ready."

"You want to risk going past those turrets?" asked Rina, a bit nervous about the prospect.

"The ones on the fourth floor didn't try to kill us," said Zrathentil, "and the automaton thinks we're all friends of Lenore here." He gestured to Tav. "So, why would those turrets attack us? Especially if we have Bernard escort us to the exit and he is patrolling that area, I think we'll be fine." He was about to continue his plan, but then something else struck him. "Oh, and we should probably stop calling her Tav. For the foreseeable future, she is Lenore. We need to get used to calling her that just in case." Then he addressed Tav. "And take that book with you and memorize the lines just in case. We want to make sure you don't accidentally ever give Bernard or any of the guardians the wrong code phrase."

"The code phrase is likely what causes the automaton to think I'm Lenore," said Tav. "We should all memorize it. If something happens to me, one of you can use the phrase and get us through."

"Good point," said Kethryn.

"Well," said Pona. "All this sounds good to me. Where do we start?"

Zrathentil gestured back towards the basement. "Let's shut the place up, store all of our food and excess gear down there in the basement, and clean up the place. We'll make the basement, in particular, our living quarters since it's the most secure. We can have Tav harvest more of those Tongue of Madness and Timmask spores. She and Rina can then set traps on those mushrooms to the south and throughout various places that are security risks. Any excess jars of both substances can be put at defensive stations throughout the tower and used as weapons in case we're attacked. We can lob jars of those spores at our enemies and either confuse them or drive them mad. That should keep a LOT of enemies at bay."

"While they're doing that, the rest of us can position the automatons and animated armors, and we can barricade any doors we don't really need access to, and so forth. There're plenty of crates and boxes throughout the tower that we can use to create a number of defensive positions."

And with that, they set to work. It took them a number of hours to do all that Zrathentil suggested, but in the end, they were satisfied. They had enough animated armors and automatons that they were able to set four at the boat, two on each level, and four more off to the east near the two arcane turrets. Bernard was one of the four guarding the approach from the east. He escorted them to the exit, past the arcane turrets, without incident. Then the party made their way back off through the village and on to Spaw's grotto.

Chapter 12 - Elder Brains

The most important thing to the party was to return to Omeluum and Blurg to see if the harvested spores could, in fact, help them remove the tadpoles. And so, they didn't go straight to Spaw to tell it about their successes against the duergar. Instead, they hurried on to the little alcove of the Society of Brilliance. This time, both Omeluum and Blurg were out front. They were discussing and debating some random topic that was beyond anyone in the party. As they approached, Omeluum was the first to speak.

"I greet you, children of the dark," he said in their minds. This time, they all went with Kethryn. They weren't really afraid of the mind flayer anymore. Their curiosity and anxiety overruled any past hesitations. "How has your search for the mushrooms fared?"

Tav stepped forward and bowed slightly. "We found and harvested those mushrooms you were looking for." She then handed them to the mind flayer.

"These are fine specimens," said Omeluum as he examined them. "It will only take me a moment to brew them to proper potency. I shall make five vials, though only one of you should test it. Naturally." Then he turned away and prepared the potions, lost in his own musings.

When he was finished, after nearly ten minutes, he turned back around, and five vials floated in the air before them. "You must drink the entire draught," he instructed as they each took one. "I can make no promises as to its taste."

"What, exactly, is this going to do to us?" asked Zrathentil.

"It will lower the psionic defenses around the larva," Omeluum replied. Blurg was recording everything in a notebook behind him. "If I cannot remove them, I may still be able to tell you more about their origin."

Then Tav noticed that the mind flayer was watching them intently. He greatly longed for them to proceed. He had some sort of suspicion as to how things were going to turn out, but he wasn't mentioning it to them. He was hiding it. "What aren't you telling us?" she demanded. "Is this experiment dangerous?" She was starting to have some serious doubts.

"Only in that you may be a danger to yourself," said Omeluum. "What the potion may make you see or feel - I cannot determine. But unless you are already a step from death, it will not kill you."

"I don't know," said Tav, looking at Kethryn in concern. "I don't think we should do this."

"We went through all this, and now we're not going to proceed?" asked Rina.

"Are you going to be the one to test it, then?" asked Pona. Rina didn't respond.

Annoyed, frustrated, and tired of everything, Kethryn uncorked the vial and drank the potion without further delay. Everyone watched, a bit stunned but now anxiously waiting to see what would happen. No one spoke. Kethryn choked. The acidic liquid tightened his throat, burning on the way down. It was a bolt of agony straight to his stomach.

Omeluum watched, his eyes like that of a hungry wolf. "Not a drop left," he said. "Very good. As the potion influences your mind, you may find yourself acting irrationally. Try and stay focused."

The world lost its edges, its finer boundaries. Kethryn was fluid but trapped, like a creature suspended in amber. He fought against it and tried to focus on the present, not the illusions. A few sparks and colors danced around Omeluum, but Kethryn stayed steady and stared ahead. Then the tadpole spasmed, seized. It began to fight the potion even harder than Kethryn was. Fear pierced the folk hero's mind like knives of ice. The parasite dug deeper, as if it meant to hollow out his skull...

The world shifted. He was outside. It was night. There was a river nearby. A raven kept watch in a tree above. He saw others sleeping or meditating in various places around him. There was a half-drow male, a drow female, two githyanki, a human mage, a half-elf cleric, a pale elf, a dark-skinned human, and... Wynari! She was very much alive and well, and she was sleeping right there in front of him. He hurried up to her and stood over her. Did he dare to touch her?

Yes! Absolutely! He hadn't seen her in forever. She likely was feeling the same as him; lost and confused and feeling quite alone. Why **SHOULDN'T** he wake her? Surely, she'd be relieved. He knelt down by her. No! That was too intimidating. It might startle her too much. And so, he lay down in front of her so that they were facing one another. Then he reached out his hand to touch her cheek.

"Chosen," he whispered to her. Why did he say that? Had he really said it? The word just came bursting forth from his lips. Then, he found himself saying, "Let me come to you. I can help you."

He blinked, and the world became a peaceful and colorful flower garden. Wynari was now alone with him, lying in the grass full of clovers as if awakening from a good night's sleep. The others he had seen were gone. His own companions were nowhere to be seen. There were stone columns nearby. They formed a circle around the

outskirts. There were vines climbing all over them. He also saw flowers and bushes and a stream. A waterfall gushed out of a rocky ledge not far away. There was a fine mist in the air. It was warm and pleasant.

"I know that voice," Wynari said as she stirred. It was as if she couldn't see him even though he was right in front of her. "I heard it on the nautiloid."

"I've been searching for you. You're always so far away," Kethryn said softly - or was it someone else's voice? He couldn't be sure. It sounded like his. He even felt his lips moving and his vocal cords vibrating, but he didn't feel like he was really in control. And yet, the yearning within his soul was very much his - wasn't it?

Wynari smiled. "Come here," she answered with yearning. "Come to me."

Then, all of a sudden, it was as if she could see him. She stared at him with such joy in her eyes. There was so much excitement and relief and happiness that Kethryn didn't want the moment to ever end. Teasing words just burst forth from his lips. "You frown in your sleep," he said with absolute love and concern on his face. "There must be so much on your mind." Wynari leaned closer to him, unable to resist the attraction. His fingers were warm against her cheeks, and she was softer than expected. She was very much enjoying his touch. He was enjoying touching her.

Then he pulled away and began to sit up. "You think that you're sick; that you're dying. Are you afraid?"

"Who are you? WHAT are you?" she asked. She didn't believe it was actually him. Then Kethryn got the vague impression that she was not truly alone. Others were experiencing something similar. They were acting as if they were in one accord, having the same exact dream but with someone else.

And yet, he never stopped holding her gaze. He poured out to her his total adoration and compassion. He could sense that it touched the very core of her being. "You know. I think in your heart, you know. We wouldn't be here like this if it weren't destiny."

Then, his vision blurred. He fought to clear his head. What was happening? Why was he saying those things? It was as if someone was speaking through him. His mind was being invaded. He was being controlled, and he was controlling others. He was being used like a tool. He was a conduit. He was connecting something else to Wynari and her current companions. Yes! He had a pre-established direct connection to her, and someone or something was using that connection to link up to the others with her. Or was it the other way around? He couldn't be sure. Was he the catalyst, or was it Wynari? Either way, they were all now connected to one another, both groups.

As he opened his eyes, he saw her, still in the Paradise Garden. However, she didn't seem to see him anymore. She turned around, desperately searching for him. He rushed up to her from behind, pressing his warm body against her back, embracing her as lovers do. That's when she was able to detect him again. He was inches from her face; seductively close. She couldn't help herself as he thread his legs between hers. She leaned into him, accepting him.

"Come now," he said. "I'll make you feel better." Then he danced his fingers over her shoulders playfully. This was followed up by tender kisses on her back. "Let yourself go. Lean back." Wynari complied. "So eager. Hungry. But..." he said as he continued to kiss her back and shoulders lovingly.

Something in her stirred and twisted, recoiling like a wounded beast. Whatever it was inside, it wanted him gone. He felt immediately hurt and angry. He felt rejected. "... you're not ready." This seemed to tear her heart out. She wanted to turn around and assure him that she was sorry for rejecting him.

Kethryn smiled with hope. "I will return when you are." Then he leaned closer, a devious grin spreading across his face. Why was he smiling like that? He could feel it. There was sinister intent there, as if he was about to do something to her to tempt her against her will. He was only a breath away from the nape of her neck; whispering into her ear. "But I do have a parting gift." And with that, it ended.

Fear replaced everything. He was plummeting through darkness. His five senses were screaming in a panic. He couldn't get his bearings at all. There was no sight, no sound, no touch... nothing! It was total sensory deprivation.

"No!" he cried in his mind. "I won't let it win." Then he walled up his mind from the psionic seizure. The cold blades lost their edge. He was stalwart, and he turned the tide of fear against itself. The parasite swelled with power - more power than Kethryn had ever felt before. It surged and twisted, lashing out against that which would dare to intrude.

"Ah!" Omelum cried audibly as he withdrew. The parasite in Kethryn's mind quieted, pleased with itself. Kethryn blinked rapidly. He was once again in the myconid grotto standing before Omelum and Blurg. His companions were behind him, reeling from what had just happened. Though their experiences were different, he knew in the back of his mind that they had, in fact, gone through something similar. It wasn't exactly the same, but they had shared in some sort of dreamlike mental invasion. They had each met their dream lover. And like him, they were now connected to a greater conscience; to others they didn't even know previously.

Blurg was at the mind flayer's side. "Omelum! Are you well?"

Omelum was not only well, but he was beside himself with excitement. "The larva is like nothing I have ever observed before. Its power is... unsettling."

Kethryn's mind was still clearing. He held his head, dazed and confused. He could see the others near him, struggling to also return to reality. They were unable to speak. Kethryn, however, found his voice. "I felt it grow inside me," he told them. "There's more power than ever."

"Such an outcome was not in my calculations," Omelum assured him. "There is more to this being than mere stasis."

Kethryn was beyond frustrated. "What's next; cutting off my own head?"

"Such crude destruction may not waylay a larva like this," said Omelum matter-of-factly. "But there is another possibility. I possess a Ring of Mind Shielding. It prevents Elder Brains from noticing my presence. It will not remove the larva, but it will limit its influence, both positive and negative. I would offer it as a gift, but in truth, the ring is priceless. Is there anything you could offer me in turn that would make it worth it to me?"

Kethryn struggled to think of anything he could offer. What would a mind flayer want that he could possibly offer? His brain searched for anything he could think of. No! He was blocked. The tadpole! He could feel it. It didn't want him to offer anything useful to the mind flayer. It wanted him to remain under its influence. The ring might negate its ability to control him. It might sever its connection to him, or at the very least reduce it.

It was Zrathentil that answered for him. "How about I tell you more about that nautiloid; every last detail?"

Omelum was pleased. "A fascinating topic indeed! What can you tell me?"

Then, much to everyone's surprise, Zrathentil gave a very dramatic retelling of his and Kethryn's brief time on the mind flayer ship. He followed up by telling the mind flayer everything that had happened to the half-drow, Kaedyn, the drow female, Vexir, the githyanki ranger, Ryth-Shan, Wyanri, and all of their companions. He told everything in every detail, all the way up until they had their first Dream Lover dreams; everything from the time they awoke on the nautiloid to the events in the Emerald Enclave. It was as if he was connected completely to them. It was as if their memories were easily accessible to him. He was able to simply pluck the experiences right from their subconscious minds while they slept.

When he was finished, Omelum replied, "What a brilliant experience. To feel one step closer to my ancestors is a fine gift indeed. Here. The ring is yours. May it serve you as well as it has served me. Of course, the larva remains. Be ever-vigilant of its growth." Then he handed the ring to Zrathentil.

"Thank you," said Zrathentil with a gracious bow. "I guarantee that we will use this wisely." Then he nudged Kethryn and the others, and they left the alcove.

As they went, Omelum said to Blurg, "I've never seen anything like it, Blurg. Are my people evolving?" That was the last part of the conversation they heard, for Zrathentil urged them to move as quickly away from them as possible.

When he was sure they were alone, back at the place they had slept at the night before, he turned to them and said, "Did everyone experience all that?"

"The dream?" asked Rina. "Yeah." Tav and Pona also made it clear they had as well.

"We suddenly connected to another group of infected individuals," said Tav. "It's like we shared their experiences. In a flash, we had walked in their shoes and lived their lives. It was... potent and disorienting. Do you think they also experienced OUR lives? Do you think they know everything about us?"

Zrathentil shook his head. "Something allowed us to share theirs, but it prevented them from sharing ours. I wonder if it was because they are sleeping. Even the elves were thrown into a sleep-like dream state. We were awake the whole time - well, sort of. I felt as if we experienced their lives, but they did not experience ours. Something, or someone, gave us that gift to peer into their lives but prevented them from experiencing our lives in return." He looked at Kethryn as he said this.

"And what was with that dream?" asked Pona. "Some crazy, tantalizing guy was all trying to seduce me or something."

"Yeah," said Rina. "I mean, it wasn't unpleasant, mind you, but..."

"But it was too good," said Pona. "It was too..."

"Tempting," said Tav, clearly ashamed and unhappy. "It was as if my mind was being invaded by another, greater mind, and he was able to know my wildest fantasies and desires. It was like he knew my deepest, darkest secrets."

"Wait," said Kethryn. "You were on the receiving end? You weren't the ones doing the seducing?"

"No," said Rina. "Why? You were? Were you seducing someone?" She was amused by this.

"Wyanri," admitted Kethryn, unashamedly. "I was the one saying all sorts of crazy, weird things to her. I was trying to convince her to let herself go and to lean back and so forth."

"You dog!" said Rina, enjoying the moment in spite of everything.

"It's not funny," said Tav. She was very displeased with the whole affair. It had shaken her up considerably.

"I was also seduced," said Zrathentil. "I was not the seducer. How intriguing that you were." Then he paused as he considered something further. "This only goes along with a theory I've been developing."

"What's your theory?" asked Pona.

"That Kethryn is, in fact, an Elder Brain," said Zrathentil.

"A what?" asked Tav.

"An Elder Brain," said Zrathentil. "Didn't you feel it back there? Whatever Omelum did to him with that concoction, it made Kethryn's tadpole hyperactive. It not only broke free, temporarily, of its stasis, but it lashed out. It connected to others, and it took control and authority. It invaded this Wynari person's dreams. He WAS the dominator who was trying to seduce her. Somehow, there is a connection between the two of them, a connection beyond the tadpoles. This made him a conduit to connect to her."

"Don't you get it?" he asked. "It's just like with mind flayers. Every collective has an Elder Brain. Every collective has the dominating, mastermind. HE is the master. That is my theory. Kethryn is the head brain that connects us all. He is the focal point. He is the center. What he decides, we all do. We may not even want to, but if he decides something, we all just instinctively agree to do it, whether we like it or not. He has the ultimate power and authority over the whole."

"And he just connected to that other group," said Rina. "Does that mean he's dominated them also?"

"It means that he tried to, at any rate," said Zrathentil. "If that group also has an Elder Brain, or dominating member - say, this Wynari person - then Kethryn and that person would be equals. Perhaps that's why he tried to seduce Wynari. Perhaps SHE is the other Elder Brain, and the only way he could dominate her is to get her to submit to him. They would not likely share authority. It'd be like two male lions fighting over a single pride. One would destroy the other and claim the collective - unless one submits to the other. Well, I suppose with mind flayers that it's different. Two Elder Brains can work together. They don't have to war. This has happened, I believe, in the past. Either way, this dream and Kethryn's attempts to seduce Wynari only lends credibility to this theory. Both he and Wynari are Elder Brains, I think, and he was just attempting to get her to submit to his will so he could claim both collectives as his."

"Whatever the case," said Tav, "I think it's clear that Kethryn's tadpole is more powerful than the rest of ours."

"Yes," said Zrathentil. "I believe HE is more special than the rest of us. HE is the glue that keeps us together."

"I just thought he was a charismatic leader type," said Tav, a bit stunned by this revelation. "I have noticed, though, that no matter how much the rest of us disagree, he seems to always be the one to step in and convince us to continue on together. Whatever he decides, we do."

"What about the tower?" asked Kethryn, a bit displeased with this entire conversation. "I didn't want to keep it active. That was the three of you." He pointed at Zrathentil, Rina and Pona.

"But you agreed to it," said Tav. "Therefore, we went along with it. YOU decided that we would not shut it off in the end because they convinced you. YOU decided to go with majority rule. Therefore, once you'd decided, we all just went along with it, as if the matter was concluded. I found myself not wanting to argue anymore. Because YOU were convinced, I was convinced."

"Or," said Kethryn, defensively, "I only went along with it because they influenced me. Maybe one of THEM is the Elder Brain or whatever." Then he grew even more frustrated. "Bah! This is insane; all of it."

"Let's test it," said Zrathentil. "Let's see if you are the Elder Brain. I say we give Omelum's ring to Kethryn. If he puts it on, and that severs our connection to the others and to one another, then we know that Kethryn is the catalyst. He IS the tie that binds us."

Kethryn wiped his hand over his face. "This is a terrible idea."

"Why?" asked Rina. "Afraid it's true?"

"I wonder if we firmly disagree with him if we'll suddenly find ourselves persuaded to take his side," said Pona, her mind fully engaged in reasoning through it.

Zrathentil shook his head. "It wouldn't work like that," said Zrathentil. "If he truly is the Elder Brain in our collective, then we will, by nature, agree with him. We will not attempt to resist. This doesn't mean that we would not have our own individual voices. Elder Brains are made up of a collective conscience. Therefore, we might all voice our opinions, but he has the final say. That's how it works. It isn't about what we want. It's about what the whole collective agrees upon; him most of all. So, if my theory is correct, if he puts this ring on, we will all lose connection to one another and to the other group."

"I say we do it, then," said Rina. "Give him the ring." Zrathentil held it out to the folk hero.

"Agreed," said Pona.

"I don't know," said Tav.

"Majority rules," said Rina.

Kethryn snatched the ring. "Fine," he said. "I was going to use it anyway after what the mind flayer did to me. No one else had their tadpoles nearly devour their entire brain. Well, at least, it felt like it did." Then he examined the ring. It was forged from a smooth, alien metal, capped with eyes of emerald that watched the world unblinking. He sighed. Then, with great strength of will, he put it on.

Wynari awoke. It was still the middle of the night. She looked around, bewildered. Emptiness and despair filled her. There was a void in her soul now that she could hardly endure. She was in a secluded place, a little nook of her own in the camp. They all were in their own quiet places; all of her new companions. They were awake too. They had awakened at the same time, as soon as Kethryn had put on the ring. None of them saw the others. She could feel it. None of them wanted to. Her face was flushed. She was breathing heavily. She clutched her heart, feeling as if it had vanished from her chest. Then she wept bitterly.

Kethryn! He was gone. She could no longer feel him. She could no longer feel any of those with him. Zrathentil, Rina, Pona and Tav, they were all gone. For the briefest of time, she had felt them. He had connected to her; had connected them to her. She only caught brief glimpses of who they were and what was happening before the connection was severed. Thus, she had no idea how they got where they were. She only had the vaguest of impressions as to their location - somewhere in the Underdark, not far from where she was.

But was it really him? He felt so real. Was he really alive? Had he also been on the ship? Had he actually spoken to her, or was it a lie of the mind flayer parasite in her head? And did he love her? She certainly felt his love and adoration in the dream. But was it genuine? Was it really HIS feelings? She definitely wanted it to be him. She wanted it to be real. She wanted HIM! This feeling made her weep all the more. She was doubled over, silently crying into her hands.

But then, she was both comforted and disturbed at the same time. Something had awakened within her. It was not threatening. Instead, it was something dark and seductive; enticing and inviting. It was warm and comfortable. It felt so good. She had gained new power. What's more, the others had also, but hers was far superior. She could feel it. She could feel THEM. They were a part of a collective; HER collective. Deep down inside, she knew this. Was she just as Zrathentil had said? Was she an Elder Brain? She certainly felt powerful and strong. She felt as if she might, in fact, be able to control them - to silently dominate them.

Yes! She alone continued to remain connected to Kethryn and his companions after the dream had ended. She had witnessed their conversation all the way up until Kethryn put on the ring. She knew it. She didn't know how, but she knew that none of the others had witnessed those final moments before the folk hero severed the connection. She, alone, had experienced it. Was it because she was an Elder Brain? Had she been wrestling to maintain her dominance over them?

Then she thought about testing it. She would only peer a little into a few of the minds of her current companions; quietly and stealthily. She didn't have to spy out all of their secrets. She could just peek enough to prove whether or not it was true. None of them would sense her. She was almost sure of it. They couldn't detect her presence. She would be able to pluck the thoughts and memories from their minds at will, and none would be the wiser. If she wanted to, she could spy on them, listening to their conversations through their own thoughts. She could easily peel back the mental barriers that they put up around them to try to keep others from knowing who they were, and she could do it all without them having even the slightest inkling that she was doing it.

She withdrew. No! It was wrong. She gripped herself tightly. "I have to fight against this," she told herself. "People who do bad things eventually get caught. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't even know if any of this is true. I'm just assuming that this Zrathentil person is real and that all of what just happened with Kethryn is also real. Just because this Zrathentil guy says he thinks I'm an Elder Brain, am I really going to accept that?"

"No. Think it through, Wynari. I don't know how to prevent them from peering into my mind or how to peer into theirs undetected. This is all further temptation and manipulation. And I am not a monster. I am not that kind of person. No matter what, I will not use this power. I have to resist. I have to fight back."

But that wasn't all she could do. She had a new wild shape. She could transform into an intellect devourer. She could even devour someone's mind and steal their bodies. Oh what a gift indeed! Should she test that also? Should she slip out of the camp and become an intellect devourer? Should she find someone to prey upon? Should she take them over and BECOME them? When an intellect devourer devoured someone's mind, it took all of their memories and knowledge and so forth. It knew EVERYTHING about them. She could too. She could take over someone's life for an entire week and BECOME them, knowing everything they knew.

“No! NO! Abomination!” That was the antithesis of who she was. She was Wynari Nell, druid of Silvanus. She loved nature and adored it. She served Silvanus. Becoming such a vile creature, eating someone’s mind and taking over their bodies, that was beyond unthinkable. She would never do such a thing. She would never...

Something inside her urged her. “Test it,” it whispered into her thoughts. It sounded just like Kethryn. “Test it and see just how powerful you could be. You are a GREAT WEAPON, Wynari. You could literally do whatever you want. No one needs to know. Who do you have to answer to? Who would judge you? You have no family. You have no friends. It is just you. It has always been just you.”

“Slip out of the camp. Become an intellect devourer. Find one of the goblin leaders. Devour their minds. Take them over. Learn all of their secrets. Know everything about the goblin camp, Halsin... ALL of it! Take over their army. Command it. Return to the grove. Ambush Kagha. Take her over. BECOME Kagha. Command the druids. Save the tieflings, if you want. Find Kethryn! All of it could be yours. The world is now your playground. YOU could be supreme. YOU could be ABSOLUTE!”

Chapter 13 - Only The Beginning

Wynari shook the memory from her mind as she followed the others. Slowly but surely, she had worked her way to the back of the group. They were headed towards the ruined Temple of Selune which had, until two days earlier, been the goblin camp of Minthara, Ragzlin and Gut. Wynari and her companions were going to try to find their way down into the Underdark using the poem that had once belonged to the dwarf, Brian. Brian had been a member of an adventuring party led by a human named Aradin. Aradin's crew had also been trying to get into the Underdark, for they had been hired by some wizard in Baldur's Gate to seek out an artifact known as "The Nightsong." After all they'd been through, the survivors gave up on their quest, handing it over to Wynari and her friends.

So much had happened since that night when she'd connected with Kethryn. It felt as if a million years had transpired even though it had only been just over four days. "Geez!" said Wynari to Ziva, her green-scaled flying snake companion. Ziva was perched on her shoulder now, no longer hiding from everyone by pretending to be Wynari's belt. She had a yellow belly and orange eyes that seemed to always be assessing others. "It's hard to believe that only a week has gone by since it all started."

Wynari recalled everything she and her companions had been through in just such a short time. Kaedyn, Vexir and Ryth-Shan had met on the nautiloid after escaping their pods. They'd all been in the same chamber, and their pods had been damaged by dragonfire. They fought their way to the helm with the help of Lae'zel, and they took control of it. For some reason, they brought it to the Western Heartlands, about halfway between Baldur's Gate and Elturel. The ship had crashed just south of the Emerald Enclave, a grove of druids led by the First Druid Halsin. They were tossed out of the doomed vessel just before it circled around several times and smashed into the shore.

That was the morning of the first day; 18 Uktar. On the beach, they met Shadowheart, and she joined their party, connecting immediately to them mentally. Following that, they fought three intellect devourers. Kaedyn and Vexir were both nearly killed, and so they wound up taking the remainder of the day off to rest and recover. They made a camp on the east side of the ruins they found on the beach which later became affectionately known as the "Dank Crypt."

While this was happening, Wynari's pod had been thrown out into the river east of the Emerald Grove. She barely escaped and swam to the shore. After that, she explored the grove and was trying to figure out what the true situation was there. She could sense something was wrong, and she went about trying to investigate. She learned about Master Halsin and how he had gone off with Aradin's band of adventurers. This led her to the goblin camp. Having learned that Halsin was supposedly a great healer, she figured he was her best chance at getting cured of the mind flayer parasite. And so, she turned herself into a cat and crept about undetected, eavesdropping on their conversations. That night, she slept in a hole in the wall in the temple.

The next day, her companions added Astarion and Gale to their company, and they were reunited with Lae'zel. They fought mercenaries in the crypt and were nearly killed in the process. And so, they slept that night just at the top of the stairs leading to the lower level.

Meanwhile, Wynari spent the second day sneaking around and learning more about the goblins. Late in the evening, she found out about Aradin and his adventuring party. The goblins didn't know it, but the mercenaries had been living in the catacombs under the temple for over a month. They were discovered because Brian had gotten greedy. He had tried to steal food from the goblins and had gotten caught. She spent the remainder of that night listening to interrogations to learn more about their story and rumors and such about what was happening between them and the goblins.

On the third day, Aradin and his crew escaped the temple ruins and fled to Bogrot, also known as Moonhaven and the Blighted Village. Wynari followed them and tried to help as much as she could to save Halsin. There was a final fight just outside the eastern gate. Halsin was captured, but Aradin and two of his companions escaped to the main entrance of the grove.

That's when Wynari's companions arrived. They spent the morning exploring the crypt only to meet Withers, the Guardian of Tombs. He promised to meet them again at the proper place and time and to provide them with resurrection services should any of them die. After bidding him farewell, they left the crypt and made their way to the grove. That was when they helped defeat the goblins that were chasing the adventurers. From there, they made their way into the heart of the sanctuary, rescued a goblin named Sazza, questioned a tiefling named Zorru about Lae'zel's people, met Kagha, the new First Druid, saved a tiefling girl named Arabella from Kagha's clutches, and met Nettie. There, they learned about Halsin and the plight of the tieflings and the grove and the surrounding land.

Wynari met them shortly before they left. She agreed to help them, for they had learned that Kagha was toying around with being a shadow druid and Wynari was totally opposed to it. Wynari not only wanted to team up

with them to discover a cure for their affliction, but she wanted to help save the grove from Kagha's schemes. Before calling it a night, they encountered some harpies just outside the grove on the east side near the riverfront. This encounter had drained them, and they returned to camp.

Supper was interrupted when they met Raphael, a cambion who had offered to remove the tadpoles in exchange for their souls. After they rejected him, and after some discussion about him, the party finally went off to rest. That was when they had their first Dream Lover nightmare; the night Kethryn first connected with her and then soundly disconnected by putting on the ring.

The fourth day was when they started learning about True Souls and the Absolute and so forth. They fought owlbeats, explored the ruins of Moonhaven, saved a deep gnome named Barcus from goblins at a windmill, saved a noble from Baldur's Gate from a burning inn, fought some skeletons outside a necromancer's lair - Oh! And they nearly all died at the hands of a githyanki patrol, a githyanki knight named Kith'rak Voss, and his RED DRAGON!

That had almost been the end of their party. They barely survived. Then they had fought and had nearly separated. Lae'zel, after all, had betrayed them. She discovered that her people were searching for a powerful githyanki artifact weapon, and Shadowheart had stolen it and had been keeping it a secret from everyone. Hurt and feeling betrayed herself, Lae'zel had revealed Shadowheart's location near the Necromancer's Lair in Blighted Village.

That night, the party shared secrets with one another. Wynari remembered being tempted to use her connection to try to eavesdrop on them without them knowing. It kept nagging at her in the back of her mind. After everything they'd been through, she wasn't sure she could trust her "friends." It would be so easy. It was as if the tools she needed were lying on a table right in front of her. All she had to do was pick one up and wield it.

But once again, she resisted. She told herself again and again that she didn't know what she was doing. She talked herself out of even trying. There was too much risk involved, and she was not that kind of person. She didn't know how to hide things from others, and she didn't have the power to stealthily peer into their minds either. To accept such a reality was to accept that she was, in fact, an Elder Brain. No. She was convinced that she wasn't. It was all a lie.

But, in fact, she was one. Wasn't she? She had allowed Astarion to think that he was able to hide his thoughts from everyone; from her. He was wrong. She let Astarion think he was superior. She even let him eavesdrop on her conversations, but only those she wanted to allow. She purposely didn't block certain things if individuals tried to pry, but other things she kept quite sealed away.

She remembered telling Ryth-Shan, for example, about her hatred for vampires, and she told herself that she had not wanted anyone to know. She convinced herself that she didn't want to create additional conflict in the group. She didn't guard her thoughts. She didn't know how. Did she? No. SHE didn't know how, but the tadpole did.

Astarion was playing around with his newfound skills. She could sense it. He'd faked leaving camp after biting Vexir. Yes! Wynari somehow knew that he had done this. It just came to her, instinctively. The tadpole was granting her such insights. He pretended that he was leaving and going off to find something else to kill. But he was perched above, spider climbing on the walls of the ruins where no one could see him. He didn't think anyone in the party knew that he could even do that. He was eavesdropping on their conversations using his mental link. In a sense, he was trying to BE her.

And she let him - to a certain degree. She let him even into her own thoughts. She had purposely told Ryth-Shan all about her story and how she hated vampires so that the dirty, little vampire spawn would know. She wanted him to understand that he was, in her opinion, the least liked member of HER collective. She had plans for him, and they weren't good. He was nothing but a tool. He was a pawn. She cared nothing for him. In the end, she planned to ensure that he was destroyed.

Well, she supposed, it wasn't entirely true that he was at the bottom of the totem pole. Wynari didn't like Lae'zel the most. The abrasive, proud githyanki had truly earned a bad place in Wynari's collective. She was mean and cruel and single-minded with only one objective in sight. She had to please Vlaakith and somehow earn her way back into her queen's good graces. She would step on anyone and kill whoever she needed to in order to accomplish that goal. Wynari knew this, and she detested it. She detested her. Lae'zel had her uses, like Astarion. She was a fierce warrior, and she would serve well as a frontline soldier and guardian - and she would die as such.

"No," Wynari told herself now that she was looking back on it all. "It wasn't really me thinking those things. It was the tadpole. I know that now. I was never an Elder Brain."

"I'm sorry," said Ziva. "What was that? Were you talking to me?"

"Just talking out loud," said Wynari, but she had still been using her Speak with Animals spell. "I'm trying to work through something. That's all."

"What is it?" asked the snake.

"Well," said Wynari, certain that none of the others could understand them. None of them, after all, had enabled Speak with Animals. Ryth-Shan had an amulet that allowed him to constantly speak with animals, but he was far ahead, leading the procession. The only other person was Halsin, but he was chatting away with Karlach. He seemed totally oblivious to her. They all did. Typical. Like always, Wynari was overlooked.

"This whole thing has been an awful experience, Ziva," she confessed. "I honestly don't know what the truth really is. Basically, at one point, during the night when I first met all of them, I was told that I might be something called an Elder Brain. It really messed with my head. At some points, I felt it was true. I felt like I was being manipulative and controlling and hiding things from the others and so forth. At other times, it just seemed like the Absolute was messing with me and trying to make me think it was me. So, I'm just trying to figure out what was REALLY me and what was the tadpole. Ya know?"

Ziva smiled at her. "I can't pretend to help you with it. All this is way beyond me."

"I know," said Wynari, "but it's good to just be able to talk about it. I feel like it's been a thousand years since I was myself. Today, I feel like I'm starting over. I feel like this is only the beginning of our new lives."

"That's because it is," said Ziva. "Everything, up until now, has been just trying to get rid of that thing in your head. Now, it's gone. Now, you're free."

But Wynari wasn't so sure. "Am I, though? Honestly, Ziva, I'm not sure."

"Why?" asked the snake. "Is it because you agreed to go with them to help them?"

She winced. "Honestly, I'm not going with them just to help them."

"You're not?" she asked.

"No," said Wynari. "The truth is, I think... well... that is... I think Kethryn might still be alive."

"What? Who?" asked the snake.

"Kethryn," said Wynari. "Do you remember the guy who we traveled with for a short time back in Icewind Dale? He was blonde with armor and a sword and a beard and..."

"Oh yes! I remember him," said the snake. "He called you his Ice Queen, or something like that. You were getting kind of close to him. He was really nice. It's really such a shame what happened to him. I thought he was pretty much dead. Isn't he dead?"

"I-I don't think so," she replied. "Well, that is, I'm not sure. You see, on the night when I first met these guys, Kethryn connected to my mind. I mean, I think it was him... maybe. I think he's one of them. I think he's afflicted with one of the tadpoles. I think that what happened to him back in Icewind Dale has been reversed, just like what happened to me... well... I guess my situation wasn't exactly reversed. The Heart of Auril was dormant for a time. It wasn't completely removed from me." Then she realized she'd gone off on a tangent. "Either way, it could be that we might be able to save him."

"How?" asked Ziva. "Where is he?"

"In the Underdark," she replied. "Do you remember the hag's lair? We went there on the fifth day."

"Yes," said Ziva. "How could I forget? Terrible experience."

"That pit that Lae'zel fell into," explained Wynari, "when I connected with Kethryn's mind, snippets of his memories were shared with me. When I was standing there, staring at the pit, I realized that I had seen it before. Kethryn and a group of others went down that hole on the first day after we crashed in the river. It led him into the Underdark. I saw it in my mind, Ziva. I think he met the hag days before we did. I think she tried to kill him, and he and his companions fled into the Underdark."

"I wanted to go down that hole after him. I wanted so badly to go down there that day. But the fight had left us unable to. Between the Necromancer's Lair, the Phase Spider Matriarch's Lair, and the hag, we had to stop for the night. Lae'zel had to be resurrected by the Guardian of Tombs, and we were exhausted."

"And we went to the bog also," said the snake. "We had to get the evidence against that druid lady."

"Yeah, we were exhausted, but we pushed ourselves because we had to," said Wynari. "Kagha was giving us no choice. Before the fifth day was over, we had to get that evidence against her. Then we had to confront her in the grove. Olodan, the evil shadow druid leader, showed herself, and that nasty fight broke out."

"You became a Faithwarden, though. That was nice," said Ziva. "What an honor! In the end, the grove was purged of the shadow druids. You were amazing, as always."

"But the enclave was crippled," said Wynari. "The druids were much weaker and fewer in number. Kagha, however, had done the right thing and had returned to the light. So they had that, at least. She rejected Olodan and helped defeat her. That night, we slept in the grove both to avoid the dragon and that monster hunter who was searching for Astarion. We had another stupid Dream Lover dream, but that one was different. It didn't feel like Kethryn. It felt like... I think THAT was clearly the Absolute." Then she waved that aside. "There never seemed to be a good time to try to go looking for Kethryn and his companions."

"Then came the sixth day," she continued, shaking her head. "That was when everything came to a head. We fought gnolls on the road, killed some evil cultists of Zariel, met Karlach, who joined us, saved Halsin from the goblin camp, killed Priestess Gut and Warlord Dror Ragzlin, lured Minthara, the evil drow cleric of the Absolute, to the grove for a final conflict, and then we fought for our lives to defeat the stupid goblin horde and save the tieflings, the druids, and everyone."

"Then, yesterday, we cleaned up and prepared for the funeral and victory celebration. During the party, I did that thing." Wynari shuddered from the memory. "I-I cured myself of the tadpole."

"You know," said Ziva. "That was... I don't even have words to describe what you did. Maybe it's just because I'm an animal and I'm just too simple-minded, but watching you turn to ice and jab a dagger into your skull over and over again - that was insane!"

"The Heart of Auril," Wynari replied. "It was that powerful cursed artifact that had nearly consumed me. It gave me the power, but it also was fighting to turn me into a permanent avatar of Auril, Goddess of Winter. Because it was imbued within me, I was able to freeze myself over, including the tadpole, and then extract it from my own brain without bleeding to death. I had temporarily become an avatar of Auril so that I could imprison the tadpole and carve it out of my own skull with the dagger. Then I healed myself back over by reforming my brain and skull. Because I was purely ice at the time, I was able to reform myself to perfection using a method of melting and refreezing. I don't really know how else to explain it."

"I wasn't sure at all that it would work," Wynari confessed. "After all, Zrathentil and Kethryn had both tried to have someone remove their tadpoles from them, but their experiments had failed miserably. I wasn't really sure what was involved in those, but I knew they'd tried. I knew something about it being shadow magic, whatever that is, and I think there was this mind flayer that Kethryn met who said that any attempt to remove the tadpoles by force might cause severe cranial injury - er, I mean... that I might damage my brain. I was pretty sure I was going to lose all my memories or something."

"But I didn't care. I had been only logical at the time, and logic told me that it was better to be completely devoid of my past life and memories than to have that thing attempting to control me. My past was a detriment anyway to my future as an avatar of Auril. At the time, my personal self meant nothing anymore. It was worth the risk, and it had paid off. My powers, granted to me by the artifact, had given me the ability to carve it out and kill it."

Then she gave a light laugh. "That's actually partially why I'm forcing myself to recall those things that had occurred over the last week. I want to ensure that my memories are pretty much intact. So far, it seems that the 'surgery' worked perfectly. Amazingly, I THINK I am able to recall not only my own experiences but the experiences of those I connected to mentally - well, as much as I'd gleaned from them, anyway."

"And that, ultimately, is why I want to keep traveling with them. Aside from the fact that I care about them, I know they are going to head down to where Kethryn was - er - is; maybe. Four days have passed, and I have no idea what has happened to him or the others with him. Are they still alive? Are they still down there? I think there was a tower that they found and turned into a safe refuge. Is that maybe where they are? I hope that we descend into that region of the Underdark and maybe find Kethryn casually relaxing with automatons and animated armors still protecting them."

Then she waved that aside. "Anyway, since that day when I'd had that first dream, I have not connected to Kethryn again. I have no idea what has happened to him after he put this mind flayer's ring on. It has completely cut him off from me. Now that I no longer have the tadpole, and now that the Heart of Auril is gone, thanks to Halsin, I have no chance of connecting to him again."

"So you see, Ziva," she said, "I have to go into the Underdark. I have to find him. If he is also afflicted, as I think he is, I have to help him. I can't just walk away. In fact, HE has been a HUGE motivation for me this whole time."

"Do you remember the spear I repaired? It was because of him that I did that. It was the spear I fixed in the owlbear cave on the fourth day. In Kethryn's memories that he shared with me, I remembered that there were warnings about phase spiders in the Underdark and how they had a way down to where he was. I wasn't sure I really believed it, but I thought it best to not take chances. I figured the spear might come in handy against them since it magically did more damage to creatures with multiple eyes."

"Ah," said the snake. "I had no idea."

"I was so relieved," said Wynari. "I thought maybe the others might try to reach our next destination, Moonrise Towers, via the surface and through the Shadow Cursed Land; or whatever it's called. I was about ready to fight tooth and nail to insist we go down. Thankfully, they chose the Underdark, partially to avoid any potential unpleasant ambushes by githyanki. It was also because the other route sounds truly deadly. In short, it just makes a whole lot more sense to go down rather than over."

“But, you know,” she added, trailing off a bit. After a moment, she continued. “Could it have been because of another reason?”

“Like what?” asked Ziva.

“Well,” said Wynari, “I WANTED to go into the Underdark since the third day. I firmly, subtly tried to plant the desire into their minds as soon as I’d learned that Kethryn might be down there. So... had I? Are they only going because I was an Elder Brain and I’d successfully influenced their minds so that they would also want to go into the Underdark? For nearly four whole days, I’d been struggling to find any way I could to get to him.”

“So, maybe I’m the reason we’re going this way. What if it’s a bad idea? What if I’m actually sending us to our deaths? The Underdark is a terrible place full of many powerful creatures and untold evils. Are we really up for this?”

Ziva bobbed her head. “You are more than ready for this, Wynari. THEY are more than ready for this. All those goblins you guys killed - and spiders, and ogres, and that drow lady, and that hobgoblin, and the goblin priestess, and such - Yes! I’d say you are more than capable. And frankly, it sounds like you don’t really know whether it was you or not. Regardless of what happens, you can’t blame yourself. You have no idea what was that stupid tadpole and what was you. Right?”

Wynari smiled. The warm sun was beaming on them from behind as they made their way down the path past what had once been a goblin checkpoint. It wasn’t far now. The path ahead bent north towards the bridge that led right into the main courtyard of the devastated, old temple. Wynari felt happy for the first time in a very, VERY long time. It wasn’t just a momentary happiness either. No. It was joy; true, pure joy. She was free at last. She was free of Zeryph and her desire to get revenge on him. She was free of her grief for her adopted mother. She was free from all the ties that bound her in her past life. She was free of the Heart of Auril, and most of all, she was free of the tadpole! To top it all off, she was getting her chance to head into the Underdark; her chance to find Kethryn and be reunited with him. Hope filled her to overflowing.

Raphael, the cambion who had visited them and had offered to remove the tadpoles from them, watched undetected from the shadows. He smiled to himself as he watched her. “Hope,” he said to himself as if he was reading her mind. “Look at just how hopeful that one is.” He chuckled to himself. One of his minions knelt beside him, barely visible. “They have learned nothing.” His grin was sadistic. “Did I not warn them? Did I not say it?”

“Hope. Such a tease!”