

Demon Hunters: Part 10 - Full Circle



Story and setting based on the Out of the Abyss campaign produced by Wizards of the Coast. Demon Hunters is written by and original characters by GM4Him. Some descriptions of characters, places, events, etc. are taken directly from the Out of the Abyss campaign. And, of course, MAJOR SPOILERS for the Out of the Abyss campaign... though not really any spoilers in this particular part of the story. This part is original.

Chapter 1: Cleaning House

Aelun, Fiovay and Droki made their way through the narrow passage towards the cultist hideout from the pens. Fi had been a bit disappointed when she found nothing of interest in the cave bear lair, but she quickly got over it as she and the charmed derro sped through the winding tunnel. Aelun followed them, but he lagged behind. He had taken a few extra moments to destroy the spell on the spiral path to make sure that the bears would not be influenced by it when they returned.

The narrow tunnel was lit by the same dim, ambient light found throughout the complex. Ahead, Aelun heard the high-pitched cackling of several creatures. Then, all at once, there was Fi and Droki, crouching low and peering around a bend. Aelun joined them, sneaking up on them from behind.

Four quasits were wrestling each other farther along in the path. They were smaller fiends, barely coming up to an adult human's knee or thigh. Their eyes were like insects, bulbous and black. They had long, pointy ears like a goblin. Their triangular shaped mouths had nasty, yellow, sharp teeth, and they had long, twin devil horns on their heads. They had five-fingered claws, a long reptilian tail, and two-toed clawed feet like a bird's.

'Quasits infest the Lower Planes,' Aelun's internal encyclopedia told him. 'They are physically weak, but they are sneaky, keep to the shadows, and are mischievous. They're usually spies and messengers when they're not savagely tearing something apart. Be wary. They can also assume animal forms.'

Droki turned to Fi and whispered, "The tunnels here are shortcuts to deliver messages across the areas of the Whorlstone Tunnels or for cultists to simply hide from their duties. The quasits act as a line of defense. Looks like they've been too busy goofing off to notice that their masters are dead."

"Do you think we can take them out quick?" Fi asked Aelun.

"If we hit them hard and fast enough," said Aelun.

"Done," said Fi. "Droki. Stay here. Aelun. You ready?"

He nodded. "Let me go first. I'll use Burning Hands."

¹And he did just that. Springing out of the passage, he ran up to them and cast his spell. Jets of flames engulfed the quasits, though they were resistant to such spells. Fi was right behind, and as soon as the flames died, she was there, hacking down one of them.

Aelun shifted position quickly and cast the spell a second time before they had time to react, hitting the quasits while avoiding Fi. Another fell, taking the flames to the face. As before, Fi

¹ Quasit 1 = 14, Quasit 2 = 9, Quasit 3 = 22 and Quasit 4 = 17. Aelun only rolled a 4 for damage, dealing 1 to Quasit 1, 2 to Quasit 2, 1 to Quasit 3 and 1 to Quasit 4. Fiovay = 9 and 16, dealing 7 to Quasit 1, killing it. Quasit 2 = 20, Quasit 3 = 8 and Quasit 4 = 22. Aelun rolled 12 for damage dealing 3 to Quasit 2, 6 to Quasit 3 and 3 to Quasit 4. Quasit 3 died. Fiovay = 23 and 11, dealing 10 damage to Quasit 2, killing it.

was there to cut down a third leaving only one alive. The quasit panicked with a scream, turned invisible, and fled.

"There's only one way he could go," said Aelun, and he took off after the creature. As he did, he ignited Dawnbringer's blade. Before him, he could sense the creature's movements, and he swung blindly.² He missed, but he noticed a slight rippling of magic. Fiovey noticed it too, and she threw her dagger. THUNK! The blade scored a direct hit right in the back of the creature's skull. The fiend turned visible again as it tumbled end over end in a bloody heap.

"Nice work," said Aelun.

Fiovey beamed proudly as she yanked the blade free. "Thanks," she said as she wiped it off on the creature's hide.

Droki joined them a moment later. "You made short work of them," he said, amazed, but greed took over right away. "Now come on. There's treasure to be had in the cultist hideout." And he was off once more.

Fiovey and Aelun followed him to an intersection. Droki took the right passage. Finally, they arrived at the hideout. Droki was soon pacified. They searched the area in minutes and took everything of value. The head priest, Narrak, had a key around his neck which opened a lock to an iron chest, and within was forty-five gold, fifteen silver, and some sort of ointment. Aelun examined the substance and announced, "Keoghtom's Ointment. Swallow it or apply it to your skin and it'll help mend your wounds or even cure poisons and diseases."

"Nice," said Fi. "Mine." Then she pocketed the items. Aelun only took one of the cultist repeating crossbows and all the ammunition cartridges he could find that went with them.

As for Droki, he was happy to take a simple hourglass and a Potion of Invisibility. By the time they were ready to go, he was sitting cross-legged playing with the hourglass. "Come on," said Aelun. "Let's catch back up to the others."

This they did in no time. At the intersection leading to the Gray Ghost's area, their companions were taking a breather, resting and recovering after their previous ordeal. As Aelun, Fi and Droki approached, Derivell stood. "Everything okay?"

"Small encounter with some quasits," said Fi, "but nothing we couldn't handle."

"Everyone ready?" asked the paladin. "The sooner we do this, the sooner we leave this terrible place."

Eromani was on her feet then. "I'm ready."

"Still eager to leave, I see," asked Rini. Eromani just laughed at this.

Derivell led the way with Droki and Fi beside him. All returned to normal size, for the passage was certainly wide enough. Two hundred or so feet ahead, they came to a set of double doors

² Aelun = Critical Miss. Fiovey = 18 even with disadvantage, dealing 5 damage, killing it.

with a tunnel leading off to their left. The doors were made of thick zurkhwood and reinforced with crudely forged steel. ³Fiovay quickly picked the lock, and she carefully pushed them open.

Derivell then sent Graiyla back for Vlynrifane and the bears to join them, for they had waited back at the previous intersection to spring the ambush. When the knight saw the doors, he decided it made more sense to ambush their enemies there.

They went another seventy-ish feet until they came to another intersection. To their left was a tunnel extending about twenty-five feet into another chamber. Straight ahead came the smell of rot that was quite strong. Fiovay, Droki and Aelun scouted ahead briefly and discovered another chamber. The smell was coming from a large depression at the center where dozens of fungi of many species grew. A barrel-shaped copper tank sat at the edge of the pit. Attached to the tank was a tall copper pipe that arced over the pit. Crates lined one wall.

Three duergar worked there. Seeing them, Droki whispered, "Gray Ghosts who have been assigned gardening duty. This is their gardens. They grow a variety of fungi for use in alchemical experiments. The alchemist, Lorthio Bukbukkenworks on the upper level in the chamber we passed back there. His lab contains a work table, a desk, a case of shelves lined with vials, and a dome-shaped oven. All furnishings are made of zurkhwood except the oven, which is made of stone."

They returned to their companions and reported their findings. "So," said Derivell. "One duergar in the chamber to the left. Three in the chamber ahead." He shrugged and turned to Vlyn. She could still see them from the doorway. He gestured for her and the bears to join them once more. Then he said, "Think you and the bears can handle three duergar in the garden up ahead?" She nodded. "Then we'll take the alchemist. Let's hit all of them at once."

Vlyn led the bears to the entranceway of the garden. The tunnel was still wide enough for their enlarged size to pass through. As they neared the opening, Eromani, Aelun, and Fiovay led the way into the alchemist's lab. Derivell and the others trailed behind for they knew they weren't stealthy enough to get close. Derivell gave the signal once everyone was in place, and they synchronized their attacks.

The alchemist's lair was surprisingly clean and orderly, split into two levels connected by a ramp made from zurkhwood planks. The upper level that Droki had mentioned was dead ahead. The passage the companions were entering through led right into this area. It contained a fully furnished laboratory, while the lower level to the east had two bunk beds. The wall of the lower level was set with a closed door further on the east side.

The alchemist was busy at work and had no idea they were there until it was too late. Eromani and Aelun led the charge, each casting Fire Bolt. ⁴The missiles struck Lorthio in the back, toppling him forward across the table he was standing near. Fi swiftly closed the distance between them, dropping onto his back and plunging a dagger between his shoulder blades. Rini came into the room a moment later, launching an arrow into the duergar's left side, and Arla finished him off with a crossbow bolt to the head.

³ Fiovay = 18, DC 15 Thieves' Tools.

⁴ Eromani = 18, dealing 15 damage to Lorthio. Aelun = 17, dealing 4. Fiovay = 25, dealing 11. Rini = 20, dealing 8 damage. Arla = 18, dealing 6.

Meanwhile, in the garden, Vlynrifane led the way. The bears roared as they surged into the chamber. The duergar jumped out of their skins at the terrifying sight. Before they could even react, the mammoth beasts were upon them. Before they died, two enlarged themselves and tried in vain to fight back while the third attempted to maneuver around to operate the copper tank. Vlynrifane blocked his path. He, too, enlarged himself, but it was no use. The three massive cave bears plus Vlynrifane, with the support of Derivell, Graiyla, Sarith, Arla and Havvah, made short work of them.

Fiovey picked through the alchemist's pockets and the lab in search of treasure while the cave bears enjoyed their meal. Aelun joined the kitsune as Droki scavenged up his own reward. The derro found his coveted mythrill medallion.

Aelun assessed the situation. "This'll take us at least an hour to search," he said to Fiovey. "I don't think we have time to really go through everything here."

Fiovey looked around, her brows furrowing. "But there's so much good stuff here. We might find something we really need." She glanced over at Droki. "Maybe we don't need him to guide us anymore. How much more is left here? We found and took out the cultists and the Gray Ghosts."

Derivell and the rest of their companions joined them. Vlynrifane was also with them, having returned to her true form. "Looks like we've cleared out the area. Any other Gray Ghosts?" asked the drow.

Fiovey went up to Droki and got his attention. "Hey, Droki. Quick question. Are there any other Gray Ghosts? We're trying to make sure we clean house before leaving the tunnels."

Droki pondered this. After a moment, he replied, "There's the Spider King in the Dire Den, but he's not a Gray Ghost. He's a two-headed giant spider. He's just a bit odd - almost human. He's just beyond the garden. Take the narrow tunnels to get to him."

Eromani came up behind the rogue. "Is he affiliated with the cultists or the Gray Ghosts?"

Droki shook his head. "He's just the Spider King. He's kinda crazy."

"Pot... Kettle... Black," said Arla more to herself than anyone.

"Could be a problem for people in the city," said Derivell.

"Or he could just want to be left alone," said Graiyla. "Doesn't seem to be our problem."

"Does he have any treasure?" asked Fiovey.

Droki shook his head. "I don't think so, but I don't go into his lair really. I try to avoid him."

"Anyone else?" asked Fi.

"There's a water monster," said the derro. "Go out the door and take the passage we didn't go down. There's a fountain there. It's evil. The chamber splits into two paths surrounding a large pool, filled by water trickling from stalactites along the ceiling. I think the water comes down from Darklake. The western path forms a ramp above the pool's surface, while the eastern path

runs level with the water and continues into a tunnel opening. The water turns darker toward the center of the pool where it transforms from a gentle swirl into a churning vortex. That's when the water monster appears. I always sneak along the eastern path to avoid it."

"Anything else?" asked Fi.

"I'd like to avoid the water monster, if we can," said Arla.

Droki continued to rack his brain. Then he snapped his fingers. "There's a cavern beyond all that. Take a left at the crossroads. The Gray Ghosts are there too. Pliinki is her name. She's a derro savant. She's the only one there, if I remember right. She has a big floating blobby creature with a big eye in the middle and eyes on the sides too. I've only been there like once. They don't like anyone going there. In the room is a big black pillar made of metal. They don't like me going there, so they chased me out."

"Is that it?" asked Fiovay, trying to pry every last bit of information out of him before her charm wore off.

The derro thought some more. Finally, he shook his head. "That should be it."

"You sure?" said Fi. Droki nodded. "Awesome," she said sweetly. "Now enjoy your medallion."

"Okay," said Droki, and he returned to staring lovingly at it. Fi worked her way around behind him and unceremoniously rendered him unconscious with a blow to the back of the head. Once he was unconscious, she quickly tied and gagged him, stripping him of all of his belongings including the medallion. Then, feeling a smidge guilty, she returned the hourglass and medallion.

"Why'd you do that?" asked Aelun. "He's insane, and he was helping evil people do terrible things. We actually should just kill him. Shouldn't we?"

Fiovay shook her head as she looked down at him with pity. "I can't do it. Can you?" she asked, looking up at him. "Now that it comes to it, I feel sorry for the little guy."

Aelun considered this and shook his head. "He's crazy, and he has no morals. Let him live, and he'll hurt others in the end. We should kill him. The only reason you like him right now is because you charmed him and made him like you. He became your friend only because of a spell. Once the charm wears off, he's going to hate you and want to kill you in your sleep to get his things back."

Fiovay's expression was tender. "But I can't now. Are you saying you can?"

Aelun stooped down and took the mythril medallion. "Turn your head if you have to," he told her, and he pulled out a dagger to do the job quickly.

Fiovay caught his hand. "No. Wait. Please." Their eyes met. Aelun hesitated. She was making him feel terribly guilty, but his brain was telling him that leaving the derro alive was a bad idea. He didn't really WANT to kill Droki, but he knew letting him live was a danger, to say the least.

Eromani came to the rescue. She stooped down next to the pair. "Aelun's right, Fi. Droki's not a good person. He'll only hurt others. Best to end it quick. He won't feel a thing." And she pulled Fiovay away. "Just don't look, like Aelun said." And Aelun ended the derro's life with a swift slit of the throat.

That's when a strange sensation washed over him. He blinked rapidly. 'What the... What is this?' It was almost as if... as if... he ENJOYED spilling Droki's blood. The feeling made him sick to his stomach. 'Where is this coming from?' he wondered. 'Why do I feel this way?'

He shook himself, wiped his blade, and stood, quickly turning away from his victim. He swallowed hard. "Maybe we should get out of here," he said, shaking. "I think I'll wait outside."

"You okay?" asked Eromani. She was now worried about both Fi and Aelun.

Aelun nodded. "Yeah. That was just harder than I thought," he told them. This was true, but he knew he made it sound as if it was hard because he'd hated killing the little man. Guilt was now seizing him. 'What's wrong with me?' he wondered. 'Am I sick in the head? Is the demonic influence having an effect on me? Why did I enjoy killing him?'

He walked even faster out of the area, making his way out of the Gray Ghost lair, through the door, and out into the adjoining passage. There he stopped, breathing heavily as he tried to collect himself. 'Lathander help me. Why am I feeling this way?'

Then it seemed almost as if a sinister voice was speaking to him from an incredible distance. It was dark and cold and chilled him to the bone. "This is your birthright, Aelun. You are, at the end of the day, MY child. You are MY spawn."

Vlynrifane then appeared. "You okay?" she asked softly.

Aelun felt cold, but he hid his feelings, just as he always did. "I'm fine. Really. I just... I killed Droki, and it... it's messing with my head a little I think. I'll be fine. I just needed to get out of there."

"Understandable," said Vlynrifane, a look of sympathy in her eyes. "Something like that is easier said than done."

He nodded. "Tell me about it." And he felt terrible that he was keeping the truth from her - that he'd enjoyed killing Droki.

'No,' he snapped at himself angrily. 'If you truly enjoyed it, you wouldn't be feeling this way. You'd be embracing it. This is something else. This IS the madness of the caverns. The demonic influence is messing with you. Right?'

'Whatever you need to tell yourself to sleep at night,' came that evil voice. The chill ran down his spine again.

Vlynrifane chased it away by putting her warm hand on his. He was surprised by this gesture and even more surprised when she laced her slender fingers between his. She gave a squeeze. Their eyes met. 'Can she tell? Can she see through me?' he wondered, and he felt even more guilty.

"It'll pass," she told him. He could see that she was not used to trying to encourage people, and she was a bit awkward. "Just remember that the only reason you feel the way that you do is because you are a good person. This whole thing bothers you because you don't enjoy killing. You are only doing it because you have to in order to protect yourself and others from evil. You are trying to make the world a better place."

He nodded. 'Funny,' he thought. 'Wasn't that pretty much what I was just thinking? Still, hearing it from someone else does help.'

"Thanks. I appreciate that," he told her. Then another thought came to him. "You're not like most drow - well, that is, from what I've read about drow. Were you always like this, or did something change you?"

Vlynrifane released his hand and stared off down the path to their right; the one that supposedly led to the Fountain of Evil and the water monster Droki spoke of. After a moment, she replied, "I guess I've always been like this. I've always been different. I hated drow society. That's why I left. I didn't fit in. I hated hurting people and manipulating and scheming. So I fled to the surface and lived in the jungles."

Aelun took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He was starting to feel better just talking to her. "Must have been difficult."

"It was," she said. Then she looked at him and smiled. "But it was nothing compared to all of this. Ironical, isn't it? Here I am in my traditional home, the Underdark, and I hate it. I was safer and felt more at home in the Jungles of Chult than here. Maybe I'm not really a drow. Maybe I'm a moon elf in drow skin."

Aelun laughed at this. "Or maybe not every person in a particular race is the same. It just goes to show that it doesn't matter how you are brought up. That's no excuse for who you become. You get to choose. Your society doesn't."

Derivell arrived to check on them. "Fiovay's better now. She's even scouring the alchemist's lab with the others, searching for anything that might help us in the future. Looks like we've pretty much cleaned out the Whorlstone Tunnels. I think everyone is in agreement. We're going to finish up here, make our way to that last place Droki spoke of with the Gray Ghost. You know - that Pliinki person and her beholder."

"Beholder?" asked Vlynrifane. "We're going to fight a beholder now?"

"Sounded like one, at any rate," said Derivell. "Eromani says it could be a spectator or something lesser, but we're preparing for the worst. After that, we're done with this place. Hopefully, we can get back to the city, talk to the captain and whoever else we need to, and get the flip out of Gracklstugh."

"Sounds good to me," said Vlynrifane.

"What about the bears? Are they going to be a problem for us?" asked the knight.

Vlynrifane shook her head. "I think they're pacified now. They seemed happy with their new home in the garden. I think they're planning on making it their den. But just in case, I gave

them some of those shrinking mushrooms so they wouldn't be quite so big should they change their minds."

"Good idea," said Derivell. "Okay. Are you two going to guard the entrance here?"

"Sure," said Aelun.

"Perfect. I'll get back to the others and we'll get moving shortly." And with that, he was gone, leaving Aelun alone with Vlynrifane once more.

For several moments, neither knew what to say. Silence fell between them. Then, feeling awkward due to the silence, Aelun decided on a whim to admit, "I liked it."

Vlynrifane looked at him curiously. "What? What do you mean?"

He met her gaze and held it, and he could tell he was looking at her worriedly. "I liked killing Droki. Does that still make me a terrible person? Is there something wrong with me? Do you think maybe the demons are messing with me?"

Vlynrifane's expression was as stoic as his own normally was. She didn't seem to know what to say at first. Then, all of a sudden, she replied, "No. You're not a terrible person, and no, there's nothing wrong with you. Are demons messing with you? Maybe." With that, she seemed to be attempting to read him more thoroughly. "Whether it's demons or not, I can't say. However, I do think something or someone is attacking your mind."

"How can you tell?" he asked, curiously.

She seemed thoughtful. "I can see you're struggling with this. It's deeply bothering you. You liked it, but did you? Something within you didn't like it. Something within you was deeply disturbed. That tells me that YOU didn't actually like it. Something else within you, that's playing with your emotions and mind, DID."

"So you really think something's influencing me? What should I do?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Maybe we'll try to see if Rini can purify you. Maybe a spell or something will cleanse your mind. I don't know. It's hard to say. But it's good you were honest with someone about it." She paused as her mind shifted directions. "And I'm touched that you chose me. We'll keep an eye on it. Promise me you'll continue to be honest with me about it - or at least someone. If we monitor it, we might be able to figure out what it is and then do something about it. Sound good?"

Aelun nodded. "Okay. Yes. Sounds good."

After that, silence fell between them again, but Aelun rested in it. Vlynrifane seemed to as well. The awkwardness had passed, and each was content to drift into their own thoughts. 'Something else is messing with me,' he decided at last. 'Yes. I've never been like this before. I am not some crazy, psychotic killer. I do not enjoy murder. What I did was necessary. Droki was a slippery individual who was working for Demogorgon to kill people and further the plans of his evil masters. Letting him live could have been very bad.'

But the chilling voice returned. 'Whatever helps you sleep at night - My Son.'

Chapter 2: Holy Fire

Derivell was tired, but he didn't want to ever come back to the tunnels. He was not looking forward to facing a beholder-like creature of any kind, and he was especially afraid that someone he cared about might get turned to stone. It was a real threat, for they had nothing they could use to turn a person back. The thought was eating away at him.

And yet, this was supposedly the last thing they had to deal with in the Whorlstone Tunnels - he hoped. Droki mentioned a water monster and a spider king person, but it didn't sound like they had to confront those creatures. They were not objectives on anyone's list, and though he didn't like the idea of leaving such potential threats alive, there was no guarantee that they were, in fact, evil.

'And a beholder is quite enough,' he told himself. 'It serves these Gray Ghosts, and they are obviously up to no good. They need to be taken down once and for all.'

He considered the situation with Aelun, Fi and Droki, and he glanced back at the kitsune first, then at the sorcerer. He could see that both were still affected by the decision to execute the derro, but Derivell couldn't help but agree with their choice. 'Droki wasn't an innocent. He was a terrible, nasty thief and servant for both the cultists and the Gray Ghosts. He was an avid follower of Demogorgon, and he was helping to create death, chaos, and destruction in Gracklstugh. While charmed, he'd been nice and friendly, and that's all that's messing with their heads. If Droki would have remained as he was while charmed, I would have not let Aelun kill him.'

'But maybe I should have done it. Aelun seems really upset by it. He is young, after all. He's not used to having to do such things.' Then again, Aelun was also hard to read. Derivell could have been assuming he was terribly affected by it when he wasn't. He didn't really know him that well.

As for Fi, he had a feeling she'd get over it soon enough. Though he could see that she was thinking about it again, after they'd removed Droki's body from the alchemist's chamber, she had set to work quickly on searching for loot. And she'd found some decent gear. They would likely come in handy, possibly even against the beholder creature they were about to face.

Among the alchemist's possessions were two vials of acid and two flasks of alchemist's fire. His lab also contained two herbalism kits, one poisoner's kit, and ten healer's kits. In an unlocked zurkhwood chest, they found another vial of acid and 6 more alchemist's fires, two potions of healing, one potion of greater healing, one potion of fire breath, and one potion of psychic resistance.

On the alchemist's desk, they found a letter hidden in a secret compartment. It read, "I don't need your poison anymore. I'll deal with Werz Saltbaron myself. Bring me an elf blade, one with the swirlies carved on the steel, and I'll forget you failed me. And I don't want to see any of your goons near my post. The captain's poking around, and I could use a scapegoat." It was signed, "Gorglak." They made sure to pocket that, for they remembered the trouble they had at the gate. Gorglak was the guard who had threatened to arrest them when they'd first arrived. The duergar captain would surely be interested.

In the adjoining room off to the east, the party had found an empty chamber except for an iron ladder that climbed approximately sixty feet to a stone trapdoor embedded in the ceiling. The

trapdoor, they discovered, was unlocked, and above it was a long, naturally formed, ten-foot wide passage that led to a narrow, spiraling tunnel. This portion was chiseled out of the earth over the span of many years by numerous picks and shovels. It ran back up to a secret exit to the Darklake Docks.

They were so tempted to leave right then and there, but in the end they decided that they couldn't. The last of the Gray Ghosts, and her beholder creature, was too much of a potential threat to the citizens of the city for them to pass up. "We could go to the captain and let her deal with it," Eromani suggested, but Derivell shot this down.

"There's too much of a chance that the last of the Gray Ghosts will find the place cleared out. Then she'll escape with her beholder creature, and she might return later to create yet more havoc. Best to clear the place out completely and let the captain worry about the water monster and the two-headed spider king thing."

In the end, most of the party agreed with Derivell. Leaving an enemy who might seek revenge against them didn't seem wise. "Who knows?" said Aelun. "This Pliinki person might be a cleric who can speak with the dead. She might learn from their bodies who we are."

And so, they were making their way through the tunnels, heading straight for the Fountain of Evil Droki had mentioned. Their plan was for Derivell to use the boots of speed they'd acquired from the derro, and he'd take the western path. This would lure the water creature towards him and away from the eastern path. Then the others would hurry along the eastern path and flee to the far side. Derivell would continue to run about, keeping the creature's attention until they were clear. After that, he would race around and join them. If the monster wound up being something they felt they should kill instead, they would gang up on it and take it out.

The western path sloped upward to a maximum height of sixty feet above the pool's surface. As Derivell ran up the trail at normal speed, the water in the pool began to swirl until it erupted like a geyser, effectively lifting the creature within up to where Derivell was, putting him within reach. The water took shape and form, and it became a watery dragon-ish monstrosity without limbs or wings. 'Water weird,' the paladin thought, recognizing the creature from stories he'd heard, and he immediately prepared himself to fight it. Though that was not according to plan, he determined that he and his companions would likely be able to kill it.

⁵Derivell summoned Selune's power, imbuing his sword with radiance. Then he slashed at it twice as it approached. The gleaming blade cut mercilessly through the creature's face, but the water reformed instantly. As this occurred, the elemental engulfed him with its body, dragging him towards the edge as he fought to break free.

"Derivell!" he heard Eromani shout, and she quickly cast Magic Missile. Five energy projectiles flew from her palm, blasting the monster in the left side. Rini hit it a moment later with an arrow, and Aelun a moment after that with his new repeating crossbow. The others fired as well, but their attempts did very little.

⁵ Derivell = 14 and 15, dealing 24 damage to it. Water Weird = 24, dealing 9 damage and grappling Derivell. Eromani rolled a total of 17 damage. Rini = 16, dealing 4 damage, and Aelun = 14, dealing 3 damage. Vlynrifane = 24, dealing 3 damage. Havvah = 8. Graiyla = 9. Arla = 21, dealing 1 damage. Sarith = 11.

⁶Derivell threw himself sideways suddenly, breaking free of the monster's body just at the edge of the path. He tumbled and rolled to his feet. As he did, he took off as fast as he could away from it. The creature did exactly what he was hoping. Enraged that he'd escaped, it continued after him. It tried once more to engulf him with its body, but he shifted directions and sped off back the way he came. The monster just barely missed him, and it turned to pursue.

But that's when Eromani hit it in the face with a ray of frost, freezing its head and upper portion in place while the rest of it tried to continue after the paladin. Having lost its connection to its "brain", the "body" of the elemental became pure water once more. The upper torso crashed to the stone path, shattering into pieces while the geyser that connected it to the pool cascaded down like a waterfall. Thus, the Fountain of Evil was purified.

For several moments, the party stood and stared down at the pool, waiting to see if anything else emerged. When it didn't, Derivell said, "Sorry about that. Last minute decision. When I saw it coming up for me, I decided we could probably kill it. Then we wouldn't have to worry about it on the way back."

"You okay?" asked Havvah.

"I'm fine," said Derivell. "Just a bit soaked to the bone."

"So, you'll live," said Eromani with a smile. With that, she started to lead the others along the eastern trail.

Derivell chuckled. "You might not want to get close to me anytime soon, but yes. I think I'll live."

"Duly noted," said Eromani.

"Why?" asked Fi.

"I stink," said the knight. "That thing smelled awful. I feel like I've been drenched in sewer water."

"Awe," said Rini with a mischievous grin as she followed along. "Now Nini doesn't get no smoochy action." This brought a chorus of chuckles from the others, but Eromani stopped dead in her tracks. Rini ignored her stunned expression and continued past her. The halfling was clearly happy with herself. She didn't look back, and Derivell could see that she was barely containing her own laughter.

Eromani was left blushing bright red as everyone strode past her, snickering. Graiyla even patted the sorceress on the shoulder as if to provide her support. Finally, Eromani looked up at Derivell as if expecting him to somehow do something, but he only shrugged. Then he set off to join them without a word. Eromani did the same.

Both decided not to bring it up again, letting the matter drop, and having had their fun, the rest of the party did the same. They left the fountain behind and came to a crossroads some twenty feet beyond. They could head either left or right. Droki had told them to go left, so they continued on in that direction. The tunnel narrowed as it gradually angled to the right. At

⁶ Derivell = 19 vs. DC 13 Save. Derivell breaks free. Water Weird = 14. Eromani = 22, dealing 6 damage, killing it.

various points, they had to turn sideways to squeeze through, but in the end the corridor widened.

Ahead, fungi grew all over. They immediately recognized bigwigs and pygmyworts on the ceiling, walls and floor. About fifty to a hundred feet later, they came to a larger section. A natural bridge of stone directly overhead sloped down to their right along the wall, meeting with the path they were on. This led to another tunnel heading west. Ahead, they could see that the tunnel came to an end at a set of double doors almost hidden amidst the overgrowth. These were made of zurkhwood.

They checked the doors. They didn't budge. Fiovay looked for a lock. Finding none, she tried to peer through the crack between the doors. She turned, a frown on her face. "No locks. The doors are barred from the other side."

"What about Mage Hand?" said Aelun.

Fiovay's face lit up. "Of course!" she said with a smile. She winked at him. "You're so smart." Then she spun back around, peered through the crack, and in a moment she manipulated the crossbeam out of the way. The doors swung open, admitting them quietly into the adjoining corridor. It, unlike the one before it, was completely free of fungi. It was just a rugged tunnel naturally formed in the earth approximately five feet wide and six feet tall.

About a hundred feet into the passage, it began to angle to the right. Another fifty feet and it sharply turned right. Fifteen feet later, another sharper turn. As they went, they felt the ground sloping upward. Another gentler turn appeared. After a steady upward climb, the tunnel opened into a huge, well-lit chamber.

There was a combination of light sources. First was the glow of faerzress and bioluminescent fungi. By themselves, they would have only dimly lit the cavern, just as in other areas of the Underdark. But the primary source of light, almost as if the sun itself was beaming down through the ceiling, came from shafts of white light that fell upon naturally formed shelves along the walls as well as a rocky mesa at the center of the cavern.

Derivell marveled at the sight. 'Selune be praised!' he thought in awe. For a moment, he forgot where he was as he stared in wonder at the "daylight" in the Underdark. The others with him also stood gaping. They could hardly believe what they were seeing, and Derivell noticed that Rini even wiped a tear from her eye.

All around, crudely formed ramps connected the different levels of the mesa up to the height of its two topmost tiers. These were linked by a sturdy bridge. Atop one of those tiers sat a large red egg. Atop the other stood a fifty-foot-tall obelisk made of smooth black metal with a few noticeable imperfections, as though small parts of it were somehow chipped away.

That's when Graiyla pointed, drawing everyone's attention to a female derro standing close to the obelisk, gently patting and stroking its surface. The obelisk flashed once, the glow of faerzress around the cavern flaring in response. The derro squealed with glee as she snatched an object up from the ground. Then she wrote something down in a small notebook.

"Are we... Are we near the surface somehow?" Rini asked in a hissing whisper. "Is there maybe a way out of the Underdark from here?"

Eromani bluntly crushed all of her hopes. “No,” she replied. “It’s just a natural trick caused by crystal growths reflecting and amplifying the light of the bioluminescent fungi growing on the walls.”

Derivell shook himself free from his trance. He glanced at the sorceress and then at her daughter. Rini’s face told the tale. Weariness was threatening to overtake her - a weariness brought about by the fact that she was trapped seemingly forever in the depths of the earth, far away from the forests that she loved. Eromani’s expression told him that she at once regretted saying what she did. She didn’t mean to be so callous.

The paladin tried to smooth things over. “Well, we can at least enjoy the simulation of home while we’re here. I take this as a sign from Selune. Even light can shine this brightly in the darkest of places. It won’t be long. We’ll see the sun and moon again. Just a little longer.”

“Do you see the beholder creature?” asked Vlynrifane as she scanned the chamber for what they assumed was their primary threat.

Fiovay dared to slip gingerly out into the chamber, drinking the Potion of Invisibility she took from Droki as she went. She disappeared from sight. Everyone waited with baited breath. Minutes went by. The derro woman continued to write in her notebook. Nothing else stirred.

Fiovay’s voice made them all jump with fright. “It’s above us,” she informed them, still invisible. “It’s sitting on a shelf above the cavern’s entrance, guarding the area. No doubt, as soon as we enter, it’ll alert the derro by the obelisk.”

Derivell considered this and asked, “Any other enemies that you can see?”

“No,” said Fiovay, “but there’s the red dragon egg we’re supposed to be looking for.”

“I noticed,” said the knight. “Okay. Fiovay, sneak up on the derro and take her out. As soon as you attack her, that should lure the beholder out.” He turned to the others. “As soon as the beholder moves out into the open, we need to hit it fast and hard. We absolutely must take that thing out before it gets a chance to hit any of us with its petrifying rays.”

Aelun swallowed hard. “Beholders are terribly difficult to kill, Derivell,” he said. “Their hides are hard to penetrate. They have antimagic cones.”

“What is that?” asked Arla.

“Their central eye creates a cone of antimagic extending out before it,” Aelun explained. “In this field, which is roughly a hundred and fifty feet out from the creature, it basically disables all magic. The only good thing about it is that the beholder can’t use its own eye rays on anything within that cone.”

“But nothing within the cone can use magic,” said Graiyla darkly.

“Exactly,” said Aelun. “Its bite is bad, but its eye rays are its greatest weapons. It can shoot roughly three rays every few seconds, and they can charm, paralyze, cause a person to be frightened, slow a person down, inflict wounds from necrotic energy - and that’s POWERFUL necrotic energy, mind you - put someone to sleep, grip you as if with invisible, magical hands, disintegrate you into a pile of gray dust, kill you instantly, or turn you to stone.”

“Oh,” said Rini, her eyes wide with fear. “Is that all?” Her voice squeaked softly as she said this.

Derivell was having second thoughts. He took a deep breath. “I thought turning to stone was the worst thing it could do to us,” he admitted.

Eromani bolstered her courage. “Like you said, we just need to hit it hard and fast.” She turned to Aelun. “Any resistances or weaknesses?” He shook his head. “Good.” She then pulled out her Necklace of Fireballs. “Eight remaining. If each of us throws a bead, we might just kill the sucker before it gets a chance to attack back.”

“Maybe,” said Havvah almost under her breath.

Derivell nodded. “Okay. Fiovey takes the derro. We ambush the beholder and hit it with the eight fireball beads. Forget waiting for it to come out of hiding. We rush out and throw them up on the ledge.” Eromani snapped the beads off the necklace and handed them out. “We’ll wait for your signal, Fi.”

Once again, they waited. Several minutes went by. Then, without warning, Fiovey attacked the female derro, coming upon her from behind. She became visible even as she struck. ⁷Pliinki, the derro, screamed and barely managed to avoid instant death. Fi’s first dagger jabbed a quarter inch into the woman’s right shoulder even as she rolled backward. Fi’s second dagger only managed to scratch her.

Derivell gave the signal, and he darted out into the open. As he did, the creature on the ledge above stirred. Suddenly, a voice echoed in his mind even as the monster screeched audibly in alarm. “Ohhhooohooo! What is this? How exciting! Intruders for me to kill! Almost as exciting as the things that will be when the obelisk is complete.”

Then it came into view just as Derivell threw his bead. The fireball consumed the creature. It screamed in agony and wavered in the air just above their heads. Aelun was right behind him. He also threw his then cried, “Wait! Spectator! Hold your fire!” The spectator tried to avoid Aelun’s bead as well, but it failed. The blast sent it flying through the air. Then it dropped to the ground with a sickening thwomp.

Aelun had saved them from wasting the remaining fireball beads. The others were within mere moments of throwing theirs as well. But with the spectator dead, they turned their sights on Pliinki. Arla already had her crossbow out. She quickly took aim and hit the derro in the left side. Eromani clipped off a fiery bolt that blasted the derro in the chest, and Rini slapped an arrow to her bow and shot the Gray Ghost right between the eyes without even aiming. And just like that, the encounter they were so afraid of had ended.

They froze, looking around as if expecting more to come. Spinning in every direction, they scanned the chamber, fully expecting a beholder to appear. But it never came. At last, Derivell put his own weapons down. “Looks like we’re clear,” he told them.

⁷ Fiovey = 22, dealing 11 damage with Sneak attack. She rolled 25 for her second attack, dealing 3 more damage off Pliinki. Derivell = 32 damage. Spectator rolled 13 to resist, DC 15. Full damage. Aelun = 26 damage. Spectator = 15 to resist, DC 15. Half damage. The Spectator died. Arla = 21, dealing 8 to Pliinki. Eromani = 23, dealing 14 damage with Fire Bolt. Rini = Nat 20, dealing 13, killing Pliinki.

"That's it?" asked Fi, almost disappointed. "I thought beholders were big and nasty and tough and scary."

"It wasn't a beholder," said Aelun. "I noticed almost too late. It was smaller and far less dangerous; just a mere spectator."

"Oh, is that all," said Arla, breathing heavily. Fear, more than physical exertion, had threatened to cause her knees to buckle and give out.

"Well," said Derivell. "Let's spread out and search the area. Make sure it's clear and take anything of value. Fi. Grab the egg, would you?"

"Sure," she said. "But let me search the Gray Ghost chick first. I just wanna make sure I'm not lugging a big dragon egg around while I'm trying to search for valuables."

"Fine," said Derivell. "But let's make it quick. I think we can all agree that we're done now. Let's get back to Gracklstugh, return everything to those who sent us down here, and get the flip out of this city. At this point, I'm done with this place. I'd rather sleep out in the wild Underdark than spend another hour here."

"What?" said Vlyn, and Derivell noted an expression similar to something Fiovay might wear. "Don't want anymore dealings with duergar, insane derro, or dragons?"

Derivell shook his head and smiled in return. "Fiovay's rubbing off on you. But no. Thanks. I'm good. Let's give the egg to the duergar Flame Keeper people and just go."

"I agree," said Eromani.

By this time, Fiovay had already searched Pliinki. "Nnnnggg. What is this crap? A single gold coin, a stick of charcoal, and a battered notebook. Her leather armor's trashed now that we've punched so many holes in it, and there's nothing else of any real value here." She pocketed the coin and left everything else. "Bah. I'll get the egg, I guess."

"Nothing else to report over here," said Graiyla from the east side of the cave.

"Same," said Havvah from the west.

Derivell turned to Aelun. "Any idea what that obelisk is or what it does? Could it have something to do with all the troubles happening down here in the Underdark?"

He shrugged. "I'll go take a closer look." Then he hurried up to it. Derivell followed. Aelun stood before it, refraining from touching it as he walked around it, studying it closely. "Made from black metal of alien origin, this monolith is perfectly smooth except for the cracks and chipped-off edges where it seems to have been splintered by some unknown force. It's about fifteen feet per side at the base and roughly fifty feet tall, tapering slowly to a pyramidal cap."

"Does that mean anything to you?" asked Derivell. Eromani joined them, also studying the tall structure.

"Um... Guys?" Fiovay's voice came from the direction of the egg, but no one noticed.

"The obelisks fractures appear to be leaking quasi-magical energy," Aelun replied. "Feeding magical energy into the obelisk might activate its latent magic."

"Excuse me. Guys?" Fiovey said again, her voice sounding a bit alarmed. Still, no one noticed.

"Do you think we should destroy it, activate it, or just leave it?" asked the knight.

Aelun shrugged. "Who knows? It's too difficult to ascertain its true purpose. It seems to be made from the same metal as that lump we acquired from Droki. I'm guessing it's a fragment that probably fits into one of these chipped sections."

"I don't think destroying it is an option," said Eromani thoughtfully. "I don't think we have that kind of power. Trying to destroy it with magic might actually empower it, as Aelun was suggesting. Trying to use it is extremely risky. Who really knows what it could do? We might be transported to another plane of existence - even one that is completely hostile to us. We might just die, or we could summon more demons from the Abyss. For all we know, THIS could be what brought all the demons into the Underdark."

"So we just leave it?" asked Derivell.

"I don't think we have a choice," said Eromani in reply. "In my opinion, it's not our problem."

"And besides," added Aelun. "Chances are it won't properly function again until all the fragments are returned to it and it's fully repaired. I suspect that's what the Gray Ghosts have been doing with it. They were getting Droki to find and deliver any fragments of it that he could find. But as long as we keep one of the fragments, it'll likely never be restored to its full, proper functionality."

CRACK! The sound came from directly behind Derivell. He turned to see Fiovey standing there with the dragon egg in her arms. It was roughly four feet tall and three feet in diameter. In her arms, it looked like it weighed a ton.

That's when Derivell noticed several fault lines in the shell and the kitsune's worried eyes. Realization dawned on him. "The egg's hatching?!" he said, eyes as wide as saucers.

Fiovey nodded briskly. "Whadda we do?" she asked.

"We gotta get this thing to the duergar!" said Eromani. "NOW! It'll bond with the first person it sees, and we do NOT want that to be one of us."

Derivell quickly took the egg from Fiovey. "I'll use the Boots of Speed." Then he clicked the heels together and shot off at full speed. "Use the passage in the alchemist's lab," he called back to them. "I'll meet you at the Keepers' lair place near the dragon's lair."

And with that, he was gone from there, practically flying at top speed through Whorlstone Tunnels. 'Selune, please don't let there be any other hostiles in the area, and please don't let me run into those cave bears.'

The egg shifted, cracking a bit more. Derivell's heart skipped a beat. 'Oh please! That's the last thing I need. I do NOT want to be this thing's mama.'

He passed through the Fountain of Evil and on through the tunnel towards the former Gray Ghost hideout. A cave bear came into view. It saw him and roared. He continued towards it, spotting a gap on the beast's left. He summoned his courage and charged. The bear stood upright, ready to bash him with its claws. At the last second, he jerked to his right, held his shield up over his head, and sped past the animal on its left. The bear swiped at him, but it bounced off his shield. He continued on to the door.

CRRRAAAAAAACK! Into the alchemist's lab he went and then down to the door and into the adjoining room. CRACK. He reached the ladder and climbed with one hand faster than he'd ever climbed before. CRRRACK! There came a cooing inside, and a strange heat emanated from one of the cracks.

'Selune! Please don't let it see me. Please don't let me become its mama. It's a RED DRAGON! But it'll be innocent at this age. Right? I've sworn an oath. It'll be innocent. I won't be able to let anything happen to it. I'll have to protect it. I'll have to take it with us. I'm SWORN TO PROTECT THE INNOCENT!!!'

CRRAAAAAAACK! A red-scaled snout with a tiny horn burst up through the shell. He reached the opening at the top of the sixty-foot-high ladder and quickly pulled himself into the tunnel. 'But I have to get all the way through the stupid city to the stupid Keepers' lair before it hatches. I have to...'

CRACK! He stopped running after only about fifty feet into the passage. He hadn't even reached the spiraling section yet. 'Oh gods, no!' The dragon's head emerged, a big red eye with round black pupil stared at him. Smoke and heat trailed from the creature's snout. It seemed to smile at him with sinister intent.

"Myrni," the hatchling said, gurgling out the word. Derivell was frozen stiff, still holding the egg in his outstretched hands. The baby's head was only about a foot from his face. The dragon tilted its head to the side, examining him closely. "Myrni," it said again.

'Put the egg down,' said a voice in the back of his mind. 'You're going to have to let it break free from the egg, and you're going to have to let it consume the remainder of the insides of the egg for sustenance.'

'Selune?' Derivell asked. 'Is that you? Please help me. What do I do?'

'Put the egg down.' This time he obeyed. As if understanding what he was doing, the dragon then broke free the rest of the way from the shell, scattering the gooey remnants all about. Hungrily, it began to lick up the mess, feasting on everything but the shell. Finally, it licked itself clean revealing its full, rather beautiful form.

The red dragon wyrmling was roughly three feet long from the tip of its snout to the base of its tail. The tail itself was another three feet long. It stood roughly a foot off the ground and was about a foot in diameter. As it cleaned itself, it spread its leathery wings. Derivell couldn't help but marvel at the wingspan.

He shook his head. The creature was both frightening and adorable at the same time. Its scales were a bright and glossy scarlet with the top of its head being deep blue, almost black like the very hottest part of a flame or like metal burned by extreme heat. This coloration was

from the stubby horn on the end of its snout all the way to the base of the skull. It was also along the trailing edges of its wings, and Derivell noticed it near the base of the spiky ridge that ran along its spine. Its black claws were like sharp daggers, and its twin horns that angled back on the sides of its head were like that of a devil's.

It looked up at him after it had groomed itself. It was once again smiling. "Myrni," it repeated, and this time it pointed at him.

Derivell placed his hand to his chest. "Myrni?" he said, fighting fear. 'Don't let it smell your fear,' that voice in the back of his mind told him. 'Be strong. Dominate it. It is a dragon. You MUST make it clear that you are in charge.'

"Myrni," it said again. This time, it pointed its snout, the tip of its tail, and one of its fingers on its right claw at him. Then it laughed, a silly, youthful giggle that made it seem far less dangerous than it really was.

"Myrni," he replied, this time with genuine confidence and strength. "Parent." 'Gods! I have to own this, don't I?' "Father." He pointed at himself again and again. "Father."

The dragon tilted its head to the side, watching him closely. "Father," it said at last, and without warning, it danced around behind him and climbed up onto his back. Its head shot out over his right shoulder as it coiled its tail around his hips. Its wings spread outward, and flapped a few times. Its foreclaws gripped his shoulder plates, and its back claws gripped the lower edges of his breastplate. It was securely fastened to him.

He sighed. "Well," he said after a moment, having finally collected himself. Then he reached up and pet the creature on the right side of its face. Eagerly, it leaned into his touch. He looked down. 'A girl, I think,' he thought. 'She needs a name. Selune! I can't believe I'm doing this. I should kill it. Right? It's a RED DRAGON, and a female no less. They're evil. She'll grow up to BE evil. She'll produce more red dragons who are evil. Can a red dragon be good? Is she really innocent? Must I protect her?'

'No creature MUST be evil,' Selune told him. 'All creatures have the choice to be either good or evil. Her nature will nudge her towards evil, but it is still ultimately her choice. Right now, she is not evil. There is hope for her.'

'I trust you,' he prayed in reply. 'I trust you.' The second time he thought it, he was attempting to assure himself that it was true. 'So what do I call her? How do I train her so she doesn't become evil?'

That was when a name came to him as if by divine inspiration. "Tanwen," he said aloud, and he pointed with his left hand at her. "You are Tanwen. Tanwen means 'holy fire'." And he patted her several more times as he repeated the name. "Tanwen."

She looked at him curiously. Then she patted herself with her right claw. "Tanwen?" she said.

He nodded. "Tanwen." And he cupped her face with his right hand and pressed it against his own. Her pointy ridges hurt, but he was trying to make a point. He wanted to solidify something immediately. "Father loves Tanwen." He released her.

She smiled, this time more sweetly. “Tanwen,” she repeated. “Tanwen loves Father.” And she snuggled his face again.

Water Weird



Tanwen



Chapter 3: Trouble With Dragons

A roar drew Derivell's attention back down the passage towards the Whorlstone Tunnels. All at once, one of the cave bears - probably the one he'd run past on his way - came barreling towards him at full speed. 'It must have followed my scent - or Tanwen's,' he thought. 'She stinks so much of sulfur and pumice. But did it actually climb that ladder to get to us?'

Just then, Tanwen jumped off his back and met the challenger head on. "Tanwen! No!" Derivell cried, and he chased after her. 'Gods! She can't take on a cave bear. Can she?'

She ignored him. The bear came within range, and much to Derivell's surprise, she leaped up into the air, landed on the back of its neck, and bit down hard, ⁸tearing flesh and fur and swallowing it in one seamless motion.

Derivell roared in fury, like a barbarian, hoping to get the bear's attention. Then he stabbed at its face, but the bear reared up at that moment. Derivell pressed in closer, stabbing again, but the bear smacked his sword to the side. The beast reached back, grabbed Tanwen, and hurled her against the stone wall. The hatchling smacked hard into it and tumbled to the ground.

But she got right back up and returned to the fight just as the bear attempted to snap its powerful jaws down on Derivell's arm. The knight threw his shield up in time, deflecting the creature's face away. Tanwen popped up again on the beast's left, ripping a huge chunk out of its shoulder.

This got the bear's attention yet again, and it roared in fury. Derivell took another couple of quick jabs. The first strike seemed to hit bone, but the second managed to pierce the animal's right breast. Blood spewed at him, but Tanwen still had its attention. "Tanwen! Back!" Derivell ordered, but she completely ignored him yet again.

The bear bit down on her, lifted her off the ground and threw her over Derivell's head. She hit the ground and tumbled to a stop. This time, she didn't get up quite so fast. She had suffered a blow to the head, and blood was trickling down the left side of her face. Her back was also bloody from where the bear had bitten her.

But she still wasn't about to surrender. The crazy little thing charged back into the fray. This time, she came around Derivell's left and up under the bear's chin. Twisting at the last second, she threw herself instinctively up and bit down on the beast's jugular. With a fierce thrashing motion, she tore out its throat. The bear cried pathetically as its brain shut down; its life gushing forth all over the hatchling. Tanwen scrambled away, watching in fascination as the bear lurched to the left, smacking its head into the wall. Finally, it slumped to the ground dead.

Tanwen leaped onto its body, tearing into it like she was a starving man at a grand feast and it was the main course. Derivell withdrew, both mortified and relieved. 'Well, if she's eating the bear she won't likely attack my companions when they get here,' he thought. Then he closed his eyes, took off his gauntlet, and wiped his face with his bare hand. 'Eromani. What is she going to say about this?'

⁸ Tanwen = 21, dealing 10 damage. Derivell = Crit Miss and 10. Cave Bear = 25, dealing 11 to Tanwen. Bite = 19, missing Derivell. Tanwen = 20, dealing 17 damage. Derivell = 10 and 20, dealing 10 more. Cave Bear = 22 and 16, dealing 13 damage. Tanwen = 18, dealing 13 damage, killing the Cave Bear.

He slumped against the wall. It'd been a long day. He couldn't wait to rest, but now they were going to have to leave the city for certain as quickly as possible. If Themberchaud found out about Tanwen, he'd try to kill her and all of them. If the Keepers of the Flame found out she had hatched, and that she had bonded with him, they would undoubtedly throw a fit and try to kill them.

He sighed. 'What ARE we going to do? The duergar captain was going to get us out of the city. I think that's what Aelun said. Will she after she finds out we are taking Tanwen with us? Does she even know about her? Will she care?'

'And will Eromani and our companions insist we kill her or leave her behind? Even if they don't, with Tanwen, how am I supposed to even go up to the city? She'll stand out like a sore thumb. How am I going to sneak her out? Selune! This is impossible.'

For several minutes, while Tanwen feasted, Derivell just sat there pondering his plight. Suddenly, a commotion drew his attention and Tanwen's. The hatchling's head popped up, flesh still dangling from her jaws, and she tensed as if ready to pounce on whatever was approaching.

Derivell jumped to his feet. "Tanwen! No!" He commanded, giving her a strong, stern look as he held out his left hand to further emphasize his instruction.⁹ Finally, she looked at him, and he saw recognition in her eyes.

"No," she repeated.

"No," said Derivell. "Stay." He half turned and began to walk away. She started to follow. "No!" he snapped. She froze. "Stay." He patted the air in her direction. They interacted this way several more times until she finally understood.

By then, Eromani approached, sword in hand. The rest of their companions were behind her, also with weapons ready. "Derivell?" asked Eromani, uncertain what to make of what she was seeing. "Is - Is everything okay?"

Derivell only partially looked in her direction. His left eye was still on Tanwen guardedly. "I'm fine," he said. "I just didn't exactly make it in time."

"I can see that," she replied, continuing towards him cautiously. After seeing Tanwen, a knot formed in the sorceress' gut.

"Did it actually bond with you?" asked Fi. "Are you its mama?"

Derivell sighed and nodded. "Yes. Her name is Tanwen."

"You NAMED it?" asked Graiyla, clearly shocked by this.

"I don't have a choice now," he told them. "She, like all babies, is innocent. She has committed no crimes. Therefore, I am sworn to protect her. That means I am essentially her father." His own guts twisted inside him from nervousness. How would they respond? What would they do?

⁹ Derivell = 11 Intimidation check, DC 11. Success.

"No," said Aelun firmly. "This is not good. Derivell, she's a red dragon. They are..."

Eromani stopped him with an outstretched hand. "Stop! Don't. Think for a second. Dragons are very intelligent. She may even be able to speak, and she's likely to understand more than we know. Don't define what she is to her. Don't put ideas in her head. Let her decide for herself."

Derivell was stunned. He didn't expect that kind of reaction from her. "Wow," he said audibly. "I thought you'd resist - well - this," he said.

Eromani turned back to look at him. She was clearly strained by this new development. "Well, you're wrong," she told him. Then she made her way around him towards Tanwen. "She's hatched. She's bonded with you. The best we can do now is try to train her and guide her so she learns to be good."

"Good?" said Graiyla. The yuan-ti woman was clearly not comfortable with this. Derivell glanced around at the others in an attempt to read their expressions also. None were pleased except maybe Fiovay who wore an excited grin.

Graiyla brought his attention back to her. "You can't teach a red dragon to be good. I'm sorry, but this time I'm putting my foot down. Gods above! Are you kidding me right now? With everything we've got going on, you want to cart a red dragon hatchling around with us? They grow up to be BIG red dragons, you know. You can't control such a creature. She'll eat one of us, or ALL of us, without a thought. Gods! Look at her! Who killed the bear? Was it you or her?"

Derivell didn't know how to respond to this, but Eromani diverted everyone's attention as she spoke to Tanwen in Draconic. "Hi," she said. She had stopped only about five feet from the little creature. Tanwen was resting atop the gruesomely mauled bear, licking her lips. "I'm Eromani. Can you understand me?"

Tanwen eyed her curiously for a moment. Then, all at once, she responded in broken Draconic. "Yes. You speak words - make sense too?" She giggled. "Father speaks weird words. You Eromani?" She pointed at herself proudly. "Tanwen. Father calls Tanwen."

Aelun just shook his head in awe. "Can you understand it?" asked Fi in hushed, but still quite audible to everyone, tones.

He nodded. "She speaks Draconic. Dragons are sometimes born with the ability to speak Draconic right away."

"That's insane," said Fi.

Eromani continued, Derivell now stepping up on her right as if to provide his support. "So, you can actually communicate with her?" he asked.

Eromani smiled and nodded. Then she said to Tanwen. "Father speaks a different language called Common. You speak Draconic. I'm also part dragon. So is he." She jabbed a thumb at Aelun. "So we speak Draconic too."

Tanwen seemed happy about this. "You like me? You dragon too?"

"Part dragon," said Eromani. "I'm also part elf and part human. My mother was half human and half elf, and my father was a black dragon. You are a red dragon."

"How many colors dragons there are?" she asked.

"Many," said Eromani.

"What is human and elf?" Tanwen asked.

"We'll explain all those things later," said Eromani. "Right now, I need to ask you a few questions."

Tanwen perked up. "Questions? Like what?"

"You're a very smart girl," said Eromani. "I want to ask you about what you want to do and where you want to go."

"What are you saying to her?" Derivell asked, growing more nervous.

"Shhh," she hissed at him. "I'm trying to determine if she even wants to come with us or not. What if she might like the idea of the Keepers taking care of her and raising her to be the next dragon of the city?"

"Good point," said Rini. "She might not want to come with us into unknown dangers, and then we won't have to try to figure out how to solve this little problem."

Eromani returned to talking to Tanwen. "I am Father's friend. We are partners." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek to illustrate what she meant. "So, I'm going to tell you truthfully because I think you're smart and you can handle it. You were born from a much bigger red dragon. She was like you but much bigger. People in this city took you from your big red dragon mother so that you could be raised to be a replacement for the current red dragon that lives in the city above where we are right now. Are you understanding what I'm saying so far?"

She tilted her head from side to side for several moments. Then she said, "Yes."

"Good," said Eromani. "Now, some people down here stole you while you were in your egg, and we saved you. Father here was trying to take you back up to those who took you from your dragon mother so you could replace the red dragon in the city above. They want to feed you and care for you and give you all sorts of treasures. If you stay with them, they will treat you very well. All you have to do is use your fire breath, once you develop it, to start fires that they want you to start. Would you like that?"

"Yes," said Tanwen. "They give food and treasures too?"

"Yep," said Eromani, and she was feeling a bit more hopeful. "Maybe this could all be resolved without trouble. "So would you like us to leave you with them?"

Tanwen's brows furrowed. "You leave me? Father wants leave me? So, he not want me? He lie me when he say 'Father loves Tanwen'?"

Eromani looked at Derivell. The knot in her gut twisted tighter. She'd just made a tactical error. She had to quickly recover. "You told her you love her?" she asked the knight.

He nodded. "I wanted her to know right away that I care about her. I figured it would help to ensure she listens to me and doesn't do anything like try to kill you or the others."

"Pshhh!" Graiyla spat, and she shook her head, turned and walked a few feet back towards the Whorlstone Tunnels. Then, realizing she had nowhere to go, she just started pacing in frustration. Everyone else just watched in silence, unsure how to respond to the situation.

Eromani resumed her conversation with Tanwen. "Father loves you," she told the now anxious hatchling. She tried to be as confident and genuine as possible. "He fell in love with you right away. He only wants what's best for you. We are in danger, you see. We don't belong down here in this city or these tunnels. People are hunting us. We are trying to escape. If you stay in this city with these people, you'll be safe. If you come with us, you'll be in danger. So we're only trying to do what's best for you."

Tanwen seemed to be sizing her up. 'She's attempting to determine if I'm lying to her,' the sorceress thought. She was quite impressed, but it also increased her anxiety.

After a few moments, the dragon said, "These people take Tanwen from big dragon mama. They want replace other. So one day, they replace Tanwen with other." A look of anger swept over her features. "No. I no like. Father loves me. I stay with Father."

Eromani tensed. Aelun let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. Eromani forced a smile and nodded. Then she turned to Derivell. "She's smart. She's REAL smart. She says she doesn't want to stay with the duergar because she's figured out that if she is supposed to replace Themberchaud, one day they will replace her."

"Gods!" said Arla. "She's smarter than Themberchaud, and she just flipping hatched."

"We should kill her here and now," said Sarith bluntly and suddenly. "At this point, she's bonded with him, so we can't give her over to the duergar. Themberchaud will certainly just kill her, and the duergar probably will too. They won't want a dragon who is loyal to anyone but them. Our only alternatives, therefore, are for you to raise her yourselves or kill her, and raising her is a HUGE mistake. Like Graiyla said, she'll eat you and everyone here. Make no mistake. It's not a matter of IF but WHEN."

"Finally!" said Graiyla. "Another voice of reason."

"Killing her is out of the question," Derivell snapped with a little more force than he intended. His nerves were shot, and he was definitely not happy with the entire situation himself. "I MUST protect her. If that means we go our separate ways, then so be it."

"Holy \$#@\$!" said Graiyla, both hurt and stunned that he said such a thing. "So that's it? Some stupid little baby monster comes along and all we've been through goes out the window?"

"No!" said Derivell with a growl. "Did you not hear what I said? I am bound to protect her. She's an innocent. She has done no wrong. So my choices are to protect her or find a place where she is protected. If she doesn't want to stay here in Gracklstugh, then I have no choice

but to bring her with me. And if I'm going to protect her, I'm going to love her and try to convince her to not be evil so I don't have to kill her. Get it?"

"What about protecting us and other innocents?" Graiyla shot back. "She's A DRAGON, Derivell. It's like Sarith said. It's not a matter of if but when. She WILL kill innocents, and she's likely going to turn on us and kill US!"

"Whoa!" said Fi. "I've never seen Derivell this way - or you, Graiyla, for that matter. Okay. Okay. Let's have everyone just try to calm down now - please - thank you - please."

"And Eromani was right," said Aelun darkly. He was also trying to help diffuse the argument. "We have to be careful what we say around her. Look." He gestured to the hatchling, and all eyes fell on her. She appeared to be agitated, and she was glaring threateningly at Graiyla.

"He's a paladin," said Havvah calmly. "He must keep his vows. He has no choice, Graiyla. They're right. You need to calm down. This is only making things worse." Graiyla didn't respond, but she stared fearfully at Tanwen, hand gripping her sword tightly.

Rini then added to the mix by commenting, "Not gonna lie, Nini. I have a REALLY bad feeling about this."

"She not like me," the baby dragon said suddenly to Eromani. "She want kill. He too." She gestured with her snout at Sarith. The spines on her back bristled.

Eromani sighed. In Common, she said to everyone, "And there we go. She recognizes you two don't like her and are opposed to her being with us. She's feeling threatened by you. That's REALLY not good. Let's all try to relax."

"Why so scared?" Tanwen asked. "Why so mad with me? What me do?"

Eromani sighed again. She was trying to keep it together herself. "Listen," she replied. "You are obviously VERY special. Ironically, you're far smarter than the duergar would probably prefer anyway. The duergar are the ones who took you from your dragon mother. Anyway, because of how smart you are, I'm going to tell you the whole truth - especially since everyone here is making it so obvious that we're afraid of you."

"You afraid too?" said Tanwen, a little surprised.

"I am," she told her. "So is Father, to be quite honest. He's afraid FOR you and of you because you are so smart and strong, even though you just hatched. You will one day rather soon have the ability to hurt lots and lots of people, and Father is sworn to protect people who haven't done anything to deserve getting hurt or killed. He's very afraid that you will grow up and start hurting good people, including our friends here, and then he's going to have to hurt and even kill you to protect those you are hurting or killing. He REALLY REALLY doesn't want to do that, but he'll have no choice if you can't control yourself - if you hurt good people. Do you understand? This is another reason why we want you to maybe stay here in the city instead of coming with us. We want you to not hurt people like our friends."

"I feel like I'm screwing this up," Eromani then confessed to her companions without looking away from Tanwen. "And you guys are definitely not making this easy on me."

"You're doing fine," said Aelun. "I agree with you. The truth is best now. She's too smart to keep things from her. Straightforward and honest - that's only going to help, I think."

Then he stepped forward and spoke in Draconic as well to try to help. "I'm Aelun. Eromani's right. Everyone is scared that you might try to hurt people. That's all. It's okay to hurt people who are bad, but you have to learn to tell who is good and bad so you only hurt bad people."

"You see," he continued, "we're not afraid that you will kill us - not really. We're pretty tough people. Especially right now, we could kill you, but Father and Mother here don't want to do that. None of us actually do. We want to love you and care for you. Those two..." He pointed at Sarith and Graiyla. "... they're just scared because you're very tough too and because most red dragons like to hurt good people. This is why they seem to want to hurt you. Scared people do things like that. You just have to try to calm them down."

"And you're not like other red dragons. Right? You love Father. Right? So, do you think you can learn who is good and bad and only kill those who are bad when Father or Mother or one of us tells you to?"

"Mother?" said Tanwen, looking at Eromani.

"So I'm Mother now?" asked Eromani, not sure she liked the idea.

"Makes sense, doesn't it?" said Aelun with a shrug. "You and him are together, and you are trying to help him raise her. So..."

"Myrni," said Tanwen. "Myrni means 'Mother' too? Do you want be Myrni too?"

"Myrni means 'Mother'," Eromani corrected. "Pynir means 'Father'. Mother is female. Father is male. You thought he was Myrni because you bonded with him when you first hatched."

Tanwen nodded in understanding. "So you want be Mother?"

"Yes," said Eromani, resigning herself to her new fate. "I'm your mother now. And Aelun's right. The main reason they're all afraid and upset is because most red dragons like to hurt people and kill them. They are afraid you will do that too, especially as you get older. So, like he said, do you think you can fight your natural instincts really hard so that you learn to control yourself and not just kill whoever you feel like? You have to listen to us and obey us so we can help you learn who is okay to kill and who is not. Will you agree to that, because if you don't, we'll have to leave you here with the duergar. We'll have no choice."

Tanwen considered this. She looked around at everyone in the party. They were very tense and nervous. Even Derivell was staring intently at her. He couldn't help himself. Finally, she smiled. "It kinda funny everyone scared of Tanwen," she replied, and Eromani noted the hint of haughtiness. "I hatch, but they scared. Are they so weak? Are all so weak? This thing here I eating was tough, and I thought it kill me first. But it older than me, and I just hatch, and I kill it."

Eromani and Aelun exchanged glances as if they were asking one another how they should respond. No answers were given, so Eromani turned back to Tanwen. "Red dragons are very powerful, but that doesn't mean you should treat everyone like they are inferior to you."

"Why?" asked Tanwen.

Eromani swallowed hard. 'This is very challenging,' she thought. "Because when people get like that - what we call cocky and arrogant - they hurt good people. They think they are so much better than everyone, and so they mock people and ridicule them and abuse them and even kill them. That's exactly what we're afraid of."

"And even the most powerful dragons have been slain by people like us," Aelun put in, hoping it would help. "Sometimes the smallest things can be the undoing of great things. The proud overlook their own weaknesses, and others find them and exploit them. There are many legends and stories of people like us defeating great dragons in battle."

"Really?" Tanwen asked, and she was suddenly, intensely interested. "Will you tell me some?"

Aelun nodded. "If you're coming with us, I would tell you stories like that."

"He's right too," said Eromani. "Just because you're tough and powerful and smart, it doesn't mean you're invincible. Besides, a life like that is no fun."

"It isn't?" asked Tanwen.

Eromani shook her head. "No. It's no fun. Life is much more fun when you are interacting with people in love and friendship and such. We joke and laugh and play and tell stories and we share life together. That's much more fun than doing what a lot of dragons do. They just sit in their lairs all alone and do nothing but sleep and eat and lay on treasure."

Tanwen blinked rapidly upon hearing this word. "Treasure." The word came out almost as if she was looking at a very tasty morsel. "What is? I hear word, and I feel strong. I want. I want LOTS." A greedy look came over her.

Eromani tried really hard to maintain her calm. "Treasure is something dragons like a lot. It can also lead you to do bad things. You need to control yourself about treasure too. We can get you treasure of your own, but you need to learn to share it too. Sharing treasure will help you enjoy it more because you'll be enjoying it with others."

Then Aelun had an idea. He pulled out the mythril medallion he'd taken from Droki. Stepping forward, he held it out before Tanwen. Both of her eyes locked onto it, and she stared in wonder as it twinkled in the magical light emanating from Rini's bow. "See?" said Aelun. "This is treasure. Do you want it?" Tanwen nodded without thought. It was as if he had her locked in a trance. "Well, I might give it to you, but you have to earn it."

She looked at him then, furious. "Earn it? What you mean?"

"I'll give it to you if you're good," he said. "You have to listen to Mother and Father and us and not hurt people when we tell you to. If you can do that, I'll let you have this. Okay?"

Eromani felt relief flood her entire body. 'You're a genius, Aelun,' she thought. "And there will be more treasures too that you can earn from us, as long as you keep listening to us and obeying."

Tanwen nodded exuberantly. "You want me to do anything so I stay with Father, and now I do and you give treasures? YES!" She sprang to her feet. "I'm ready. I'm ready."

Aelun put the medallion away. He looked at Eromani. "What do you think?" he said in Common.

"I think we're good, for now," she replied. She looked at the others. "We've convinced her to work with us. PLEASE help us. Don't give us any additional troubles."

"Do we have a choice?" asked Graiyla.

"Fine," said Sarith, "but I'm warning you all. I'll take care of our dragon problems real quick if she even remotely looks at me like she's going to hurt me."

Rini just stood there, shaking her head. "Whatever you guys think is best, but I've gotta say... I'm REALLY struggling with this one."

"Me too," said Vlyn, eying the bear sadly.

"I don't know," said Fi happily. "I think she's awesome and cute. I mean, she's scary as sin, but there's just something super incredible about having a dragon wyrmling traveling with us."

"I'm just going to walk towards the back of the group with Graiyla from now on," Arla commented, and Derivell noticed that Havvah joined them.

"Good enough for me," said the aasimar. It wasn't the best conclusion, but it was something he could work with. "Now, with that out of the way, this leads us to yet other issues."

"Like what?" asked Fi.

"How are we going to get Tanwen out of these tunnels without tons of people seeing her and reporting her to every duergar in Gracklstugh?" he said. "And even IF we can get her out of the tunnels undetected, how are we going to get out of the city with her?"

"Easy enough," said Fi. She gestured at the remains of the bear. "There's enough fur and skins left here to cover her in them. We'll make her look like some deranged animal."

"Can you really do that?" asked Derivell. "I mean, can you actually disguise her enough that people won't know she's a dragon?"

"Or demand to examine her more closely?" asked Eromani.

Fi laughed. "No sweat. Give me maybe thirty minutes. As long as you can get her to cooperate, I'll have her disguised in no time."

"If you could do that," said Derivell, "then we can go up to the city, collect everyone, wrap up what we need to wrap up with the duergar, and get out."

"I say we split up," said Aelun. "You stay down here with Fi and Eromani and get her disguised while the rest of us go to the city. We'll wrap up everything with the Keepers, the Stone Guards, and the merchant."

"Merchant?" asked Fi. "What merchant?"

"Ylsa. She's the one who wanted us to look for coins from the surface and where they might be coming from," said Aelun.

"Did we find any?" asked the kitsune.

"I actually think you might have. Remember back in the obelisk chamber? You found a strange coin on Pliinki. I didn't see the coin, but I picked up the notebook she was writing in after you tossed it back down. I think it has details about various activities including acquiring surface coins. It was hard to tell, though, for like all derro writings, it was all over the place and hard to decipher. I figured we could give the coin and notebook to the merchant and let her figure it out."

"Really?" said Fi, blushing a bit from the oversight. "Who knew?"

"We can go up to the city, meet with the merchant, give her the coin and the notebook, and she's supposed to give us the best, fastest routes to Neverlight Grove and Blingdenstone," said Aelun. "Then we can go to the captain and tell her all about Droki and the secret way down here from the docks and the activities of the Gray Ghosts and cultists. After that, we can visit the Keepers and tell them everything we found down here except we'll leave out the part about Tanwen."

"I say we don't even do that last bit," said Vlyn. "We could just go to the captain and skip the Keepers and the dragon. I'm sorry, but if the dragon catches Tanwen's scent on any of us, it's over. The captain said she'd get us out of the city. Right? So let's just get her help and go."

"Besides," said Havvah, "I got the impression the Stone Guards and the Keepers hated one another. We might just be able to convince the captain to help us smuggle Tanwen out of the city, if it means sticking it to the Keepers."

"That's not a bad idea," said Eromani. "Maybe you can test the waters."

"Okay," said Derivell at last. "Aelun and Graiyla. You're in charge since you're the ones who spoke with the merchant and the captain. Use your best judgment in regards to getting the captain's help smuggling Tanwen out of the city. We meet at the inn to collect the rest of our companions. Sound good?"

And, at last, it seemed they had a way forward. Most of the companions left the tunnel, making their way to the docks above. As they departed, Fiovay set to work with Eromani and Derivell, skinning the bear so they could somehow turn Tanwen into a sort of weird, furry, Underdark animal.

Chapter 4: The Invitation

Graiyla was still fuming, but she kept silent. 'It won't do any good,' she told herself. 'They're not listening. All I can do is either leave them or stick around and try to protect them from that monstrosity whenever she decides to turn on them. I just can't believe how stupid they're being - especially Derivell. No. Especially Eromani. I thought they were wiser than this.'

'I get it. He's a paladin. He's got to keep his oaths and crap or he'll lose his abilities. But that THING is NOT an innocent. She's an evil, maniacal dragon - as bad as any devil or demon - and she is cunning and manipulative and deceptive and vicious. She's playing them already, and she just friggin' hatched! She may not be doing anything at this very moment, but give her a few days - not even a week - and they'll be forced to kill her to stop her from committing vile acts. No doubt. I just hope no one is seriously hurt or killed before they realize just how ABSOLUTELY idiotic they are.'

The spiraling tunnel they were in suddenly came to an end. They were forced to crawl for the last ten feet, for the floor rose to meet the ceiling. Over their heads was another hatch. Aelun opened it, and there was a small, somewhat circular chamber beyond - a roughly-hewn well. Another ladder extended upward some seventy-five to eighty feet. So they ascended.

"Do you think I was wrong?" Graiyla finally asked Aelun as they went.

"What?" asked Aelun. "I'm sorry. What do you mean?"

"Do you think I was wrong to be mad?"

"No," said Aelun. "Not even remotely."

"We are all upset by the dragon," Rini assured her. "And Derivell didn't mean the thing about parting ways, you know. He obviously doesn't want that. He's just stuck. You know? In his mind, he has to do the right thing even if it means he has to do something really hard like part ways with his friends."

"I know," said Graiyla. "It's just frustrating. It's a red dragon - A RED DRAGON. It should be a 'duh'. You don't raise a red dragon. You kill them. I mean - think about it. It's like he found a baby demon. 'Well, it's innocent. It hasn't hurt anyone or anything - yet. So how can we kill it?' Um. It's a DEMON!!! I don't care how cute it looks. It's EVIL. It will absolutely BE evil for the rest of its existence. You don't need to question it. You don't need to ponder. Kill it while it's weak. End of story."

They were about halfway up the ladder. "Not necessarily," said Aelun matter-of-factly. "Dragons are sentient creatures. Demons are fiends tethered to the Abyss. Dragons CAN choose to be good or evil. Meanwhile, fiends cannot. Due to their metaphysical nature, unlike mortal creatures, fiends literally cannot have morals. If they somehow became good, they would cease to be fiends. This is not true for dragons. Good dragons can choose to be evil, and evil dragons can choose to be good."

"Bull \$#@," said Graiyla. "Fish can't learn how to walk and breathe on land, and chromatic dragons can't learn to be good."

Aelun paused at the hatch above him. He looked down at her. "Just because it isn't common, that doesn't mean it's impossible. I wouldn't have supported this if it were otherwise."

"No offense," said Graiyla, "but you are hardly experienced enough to convince me that you're right. Just because you read it in some ancient tome or something, doesn't make it true."

"And just because you heard many severe tales of evil chromatic red dragons and that they all must be evil, doesn't make it true," Aelun retorted.

"Can we just get out of the tunnels now?" asked Rini. "I don't like it either, Graiyla, but what's done is done. This is happening, whether we like it or not. And quite frankly, I don't think I could kill the dragon baby. I mean, I don't want to bring her along either, but I don't think I could deal the killing blow. It just feels wrong."

"I'd do it," said Graiyla as Aelun pulled himself up through the hatch.

"We know," said Rini, annoyed, "but I'm saying I don't think I would let you either. When push came to shove, I'd probably have stopped you too. She's just a baby. It doesn't seem right to kill her just because she might - or even most likely will - grow up to be a big, evil, monstrous, vile, man-eating dragon."

"I don't think that helped your argument, Rini," Vlyn told the halfling as she came up behind her. "You might have been more persuasive if you'd left out the big, evil, monstrous, vile, man-eating dragon bit."

"Must have been a slip," Rini replied.

The chamber above wasn't a chamber at all. It was a pipe. It extended on into the darkness in both directions. However, they could hear the sounds of water lapping against a shore off to their left. "That's the way to the docks," Rini told them. "When we explored it earlier, we followed it along to the end. It goes about a hundred feet to a series of loose bars. Fioyay disabled the alarm trap on them. Just remove the bars and we'll make our way out through lovely piles of refuse into the easternmost pier of the docks." Aelun nodded and led the way in silence.

Graiyla sighed. "I'm sorry," she said after a few moments. "I don't mean to drive everyone crazy about the - let's just call her - The Problem."

"Let's just call her Tanwen," said Aelun. "I really want to make sure we treat her well. If we have any hope of keeping her friendly towards us, and obedient to Derivell and Eromani, we absolutely need to treat her well. She will be able to sense those who don't like or trust her, and that will mess with her psyche. More often than not, a good, loving emotional support structure is all a creature needs to become good and loving. Even creatures with evil natures can learn to be good. Wild animals can learn to fight their natural instincts and become domesticated."

"Please don't lecture me anymore," said Graiyla, annoyed. "Why can't he just shut up and let me vent?"

They came to the bars and removed them. Then they began to dig their way through the refuse piles. At last, after several minutes, they were on the pier - just in time to witness an assassination attempt!

The busy docks of Gracklstugh were used primarily by flat-bottomed rafts made of zurkhwood and lacquered puffball floats. Some of these ramshackle barges came with oars and paddle wheels. The rafts looked ungainly, but each could carry tons of trade goods. On one of these rafts, docked at the pier the party climbed out on, there was what appeared to be a duergar merchant, and he was cornered by what appeared to be two masked and hooded duergar assassins with soulblades; shortsword-sized, visible blades of psionic energy.

Before the party could do anything, the assassins stabbed the merchant viciously. He fell backward, crying out as he clutched his wounds. But he was still alive. Graiyla was first to respond. She charged up behind the killers, her blade dancing with electricity. Next to her, Aelun attacked with Dawnbringer and a dagger.¹⁰ Graiyla's enemy fell with a single stab and twist. Aelun's staggered from the ranger's slashes across the duergar's left side. Then Rini shot him in the head, ending him.

The merchant was beside himself with relief. "Thank you! Thank you!" he cried in Dwarvish, but Graiyla had no idea what he was saying. "I'm Werz Saltbaron," he announced. "I'm a merchant here of some repute."

"Why were you being attacked?" asked Arla, for she could understand him.

"I have no idea," said the merchant.

¹¹"Oh?" she replied. "I find that hard to believe, Mr. Saltbaron."

"Saltbaron?" said Aelun, his brow furrowing. "Wait. Where have I heard that name?"

"Doesn't sound familiar to me," said Rini.

Werz looked from one to the other in the group. Then he said to Arla, "Well, I really must be on my way. Thanks again!" And without warning, he danced around them and fled down the pier.

"Should we stop him?" said Arla, crossbow in hand. "He was obviously lying. He's up to something."

"No," said Vlyn. "Let him go. He's no business of ours."

"I agree," said Graiyla. "Let's just do what we have to and get out of this place. I can't believe we've only been here like less than a day."

"Tell me about it," said Sarith offhandedly.

Aelun snapped his fingers. "He's the one supplying the gate guard with magic weapons. He's working with the Gray Ghosts."

"What?" said Havvah. "How do you know this?"

¹⁰ Graiyla = 18 and 14, dealing 18 damage to Soulblade 1, killing him. Aelun = 14 and 17, dealing 14 damage to Soulblade 2. Rini = 15 with Sharpshooter, dealing 16 damage, killing Soulblade 2.

¹¹ Arla = 14 Insight check, DC 12. Success.

“Fi and I found a letter in the alchemist’s lab. It was addressed to Werz Saltbaron. It said something about bringing swirlie elf blades to the gate guard. He didn’t want anymore poisons.”

“So, do we still want to let him go?” asked Arla. “I can still see him from here.” She aimed her crossbow.

“Some Stone Guards are approaching,” Vlyn pointed out. The duergar soldiers stopped Werz for a moment, asking him a few questions. After only a few seconds, they let him go. Then they approached the party.

Arla put her crossbow away. “Sorry for the trouble,” Arla said immediately. “Did he tell you? We were just rescuing him from a couple of thugs.” She gestured to the bodies of the assassins.

The lead guard nodded. “Yeah. He told us as much. You’re good. On your way.”

“Did you get a good look at him?” asked Arla.

“Yeah. Why?” asked the guard.

Arla gestured to Aelun. “Do you have the letter?”

“Sure,” said Aelun. He pulled it out. Arla took it and handed it to the guard.

“He’s a Gray Ghost,” said Arla. “His name is Werz Saltbaron, or so he said. This letter was found in the Gray Ghost lair.”

“Awe \$#@\$!” the guard swore. “This is \$#@\$\$. One of ours is working with the Gray Ghosts? Does the captain know?”

“We were on our way now to tell her, but we just happened to run into him,” said Arla, gesturing after the long-gone merchant.

“Okay,” said the guard. “Wish we had known while he was right there next to us.” He pocketed the letter. “I’ll take it from here. We’ll spread the word and start searching for him, and we’ll let the captain know about Gorglak.”

“Much appreciated,” said Arla. “And your name? We want to make sure we tell the captain when we see her about other stuff we’ve taken care of.”

The guard then seemed to recognize them. “Hey! Wait a minute. You’re the adventurers the captain told us about.”

Arla became more hesitant. “Maybe. Why?”

“Captain’s looking for ya,” said the guard. “Says she has an invitation that you absolutely cannot refuse. You need to see her at Dungalorin Torune immediately.”

“We’re on our way,” said Arla. “We’ve just got to make a few stops first. An invitation? Do we get to know who has invited us and to what?”

The guard shrugged. "Beats the \$#@ out of me. Do you think she tells us anything? Just make your way to Dungalorin Torune as soon as possible. Don't \$#@ around."

"Don't worry," said Arla with a confident smile. "We're headed there anyway. Like I said, we just have a few brief stops first."

"Fine," said the dwarf. "Let's go." Then he and his companions hurried off presumably in search of Werz Saltbaron.

Arla turned to her companions. "The captain of the duergar wants to see us - something about an invitation."

"Hmmm," said Aelun, lost in thought.

"Should we be uneasy or happy, do you think?" asked Rini.

"Uneasy," said Graiyla, and she genuinely was. Something wasn't right, but she couldn't put her finger on it. "I smell trouble."

"Any time something out of the blue like this happens, it's almost never good," said Sarith.

"Well," said Havvah. "We don't have much choice. Let's get moving." And with that, they were off.

The meeting with Ylsa went fairly smoothly. She was actually quite ecstatic that they'd found the notebook and the coin, and she upheld her end of the bargain. "This is a special map," she told Aelun. "I've imbued it with magic. It will guide you along to Neverlight Grove first and then to Blindingstone, should you wish to go there. As you make your way along, it will erase the map behind you. In this way, you can't just sell my trade route to someone. It's a one-use item. You follow the map, it takes you to these places, and then that's it."

Aelun accepted the magical map. "Thank you," he said, and he placed it in a safe place amongst his belongings. They then wished her farewell, and they headed to Overlake Hold, the Stone Guard headquarters. Upon arrival, they were ushered directly to Captain Errde Blackskull's office.

She was quite pleased to see them, and after they gave her a full report and all the evidence that they'd found, she said, "I'm always true to my word. You've done me more service than you know. Having a secret way into the West Cleft is going to really help us out, and you even took out both the Gray Ghost leaders and these weird cultists. Truly amazing. We'll definitely take care of this spider king person and check out that obelisk you mentioned."

"Now," she quickly added, "on to other matters. Before you leave Gracklstugh, I have an invitation for you and your companions. I was told to make sure ALL of your companions are present."

"Really?" said Aelun as he exchanged concerned glances with his companions. "And may I ask who this invitation is from?"

Blackskull smiled as warmly as she could. "It's a great honor, to be sure. The Deepking himself has invited you to his palace. This is one invitation you won't want to refuse. So, do you have all your companions?"

Aelun looked back at the others. They all seemed to be thinking the same thing. 'There is no way we can bring Tanwen to the Deepking. That will certainly be suicide.' "Yes," said Aelun. This is everyone."¹²

Errde's smile widened. "Don't you have some people at the Ghohlbrorn's Lair?"

They exchanged looks again. Aelun replied, "Well, yes. I mean, we do have more companions at the inn. I just mean that we can easily pick them up on the way."

Errde slapped her palms against her desk and stood. "Good. Let's go collect them and make our way."

"Now?" said Aelun, his uneasiness growing stronger.

"The Deepking said as soon as we found you we were to bring you to the palace. I think he's got something he wants to discuss with you. It's probably something he wants you to do, of course, but it could be a reward for everything you've done to help us. Who knows? Either way, you've caught his attention, and he's definitely wanting to see you at once."

"But ALL of us?" asked Vlyn. She was also quite concerned about this.

"Yes," said Blackskull. "That tells me it's probably a reward. He wants to make sure all of your party members receive gifts."

'That doesn't sound at all like duergar,' Aelun thought. 'But she's right. It's not like we can refuse.' "Fine then," he said in his most hospitable manner, gesturing to the door. "Lead the way." She nodded. Then she led them out the door, collected a contingent of Stone Guards, and they escorted the party to the inn.

Everyone's anxiety increased exponentially when they spotted Derivell, Eromani, and Fioyay already at the inn, discussing their plans with the rest. At Derivell's feet sat a strange looking, furry dog-like animal with horns.¹³ Zen was sitting next to it. Aelun was truly impressed. Fioyay had done an amazing job.

Rini ran up to Zen and hugged him happily. The wolf wagged his tail wildly and licked her on the face. There were other fond greetings between them including Rumpadump and Stool who seemed quite overjoyed to reconnect.

Then Aelun explained the situation. Derivell looked past him to Captain Blackskull who remained waiting in the entranceway. "So the king wants to see us?" He strode up to her. "Can you be straight with us? We've done a lot for you. Is this something we should be worried about?"

¹² Aelun = 8 for Deception, DC 13. Failure.

¹³ Fioyay = 21, DC 15. Success.

The captain fortunately spoke Common well enough, and she replied, "Look. Even if I knew what the Deepking wanted, I wouldn't be stupid enough to tell you. You've done a lot for me, so I respect you and your party a lot. You've made an ally of me, but that only goes so far."

Derivell wasn't afraid to show his displeasure. "Can we at least clean up first? Some of us suffered quite a lot in the Whorlstone Tunnels, and as you can tell, we stink. I'd hate to meet the Deepking smelling and looking like this."

Blackskull shrugged. "Do whatever you want. I'm in no rush."

Derivell turned to everyone. "One hour. Let's get cleaned up and meet back here in the common room in one hour. Then we'll go meet the Deepking. Everyone good with that?"

¹⁴The Stone Guards were everywhere outside. Blackskull obviously didn't trust them. She had her people positioned at every plausible exit. So the party had no choice. After cleaning up and collecting all their belongings, they made their way back into the common room.

Derivell approached Blackskull. "We'd like to leave immediately after meeting with the Deepking," he told her. "Can I also collect my horse from the local stables? We'd like to be totally ready to head straight to the western gates of Gracklstugh as soon as we're finished."

Blackskull shrugged. "Fine with me." It was a small concession to her. Then she noticed Tanwen who was sitting at Derivell's feet and just behind him. "Weird pet," she commented. "What is it?"

Fiovey quickly stepped in. "It's a horned trublex hound from Prismeer," the rogue replied.¹⁵ "Isn't she a beauty?"

Blackskull lost interest. "You all ready?" she asked.

Derivell nodded. "Lead the way, Captain."

The Hold of the Deepking stood south of Laduguer's Furrow and north of Themberchaud's lair. As they approached, they saw a dark and foreboding edifice lodged between two great columns that rose up into thick clouds of smoke that concealed the cavern's ceiling. Giant basalt braziers filled with molten lava bathed the palace facade in a hellish glow, and the thick stone walls bristled with iron turrets and battlements.

There appeared to be no one guarding the palace, which Eromani thought was odd. Then, without warning, Tanwen reported in a low voice, "I smell things - more them." She gestured with her snout at one of the Stone Guards. "They all over. I no see them."

Eromani looked down at her without tilting her head. "You need to stop talking now," she warned. "They might notice you."

As if to emphasize her point, the Stone Guard near her said, "Are you saying something to me?"

¹⁴ Derivell used his last Hit Die, healing 5 HP. Arla used Second Wind and regained 14 HP. Then she Short Rested with the party, regaining Second Wind and saving it for later. Tanwen used a Hit Die and recovered 8 HP.

¹⁵ Fiovey = 16 Deception check, DC 15.

“No,” said Eromani. “Just talking to myself. This place is impressive.”

“Hmph,” the guard replied, and he said no more.

Through the main doors they went and on into the palace. From there, they were led through several wide halls with high ceilings decorated sparsely with nothing frivolous or luxurious. In fact, there was a sort of militaristic feel to the place, as if it was a glorified outpost rather than the home of royalty.

At last, they came to a set of double doors which were pushed open to reveal the Deepking's throne room. Lava poured down troughs cut into the black basalt walls of this vast chamber. The heat was oppressive, and the air reeked of sulfur. Thick black columns supported the heavy ceiling, and at the far end of the hall stood an iron throne atop a polished obsidian dais. A crowned duergar encased in armor sat on the throne. Next to him stood a royal consort wearing a gown made of gold coins.

Blackskull led them to the base of the dais and stopped. “Deepking Horgar Steelshadow V, may I introduce to you the mercenaries who you have requested to see,” she said in a loud voice with absolute respect. “They have assisted us by cleaning out the Whorlstone Tunnels - ridding Gracklstugh of both demon cultists and the Gray Ghost leaders. They have also exposed rebellious elements of the Council of Savants. I have evidence to support.”

“Very good, Captain” said the Deepking, his white mustache quivering as he spoke. It was long and pointed out horizontally both to the left and right roughly six inches from his mouth. His braided beard flowed down his chest to his shins in a single train, held together by a dark blue band near the end. He wore a red royal robe with gold trim, and the shoulders were covered with shaggy, blue furs. “Mercenaries. Welcome to my hold. I...”

Suddenly and unexpectedly, the consort interrupted. “Forgive me, My Lord,” she said with a purely wicked grin that sent shivers down Derivell's spine. “If I may, My Love... I cannot contain my excitement any longer. Please.” She seemed to be begging and pouting as she said this. “Let's get right to the fun. Shall we?” Then she turned and met Derivell's gaze, locking eyes with him as she said, “Guards. Please admit our other guests.” The Deepking confirmed her orders with a gesture, and the soldiers positioned nearby did as they were instructed.

‘There's something familiar about those eyes!’ Derivell thought as dread gripped his soul. ‘I've seen those eyes before. I've gazed into those eyes before.’

Side doors opened, and Derivell's heart stopped. Xalith of House Masq'il'yr strode into the chamber along with a rather large drow entourage including Asha Vandree, Jorlan Duskryn, and their surviving elite.

“Welcome to the party, Derivell - My Love,” said the consort, and Derivell saw the wild, savage hunger in her expression.

“Selune, save us... Miralin!”

Deepking Horgar Steelshadow V



Chapter 5: The Desperate Move

Eromani heard what Derivell said, and her stress levels shot through the roof. ‘Miralin! How I HATE that witch. Crap! This complicates things.’ She subtly leaned over to Blackskull who was just to her right. ¹⁶“Does your king always allow his woman to interrupt him like that? Isn’t that just a bit odd?” she asked.

Blackskull seemed put out by the situation. She didn’t move much, but Eromani saw her looking at her out of the corner of her eye. “What are you getting at?” she asked.

“That consort is a succubus,” Eromani said. “We’ve encountered her before. Derivell here was enthralled by her. He knows her well enough to see through her disguise. That’s why she’s acting this way. She’s gloating. And we escaped from those drow in Velkynvelve. They’ve been pursuing us for almost a month. The fiend is obviously working with them to get their revenge on us, and they are using you and your Deepking to do it.”

“So you’re trying to tell me the Deepking’s enthralled by that \$#@?” said Errde.

“Do you see any other reason why he would act this way?” asked Eromani. Errde paused for a moment to consider.

Meanwhile, the duergar consort continued to address Derivell directly. “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Shal, consort of Deepking Horgar Steelshadow V. These are our drow allies. Isn’t it lovely, Derivell? I’ve helped the duergar and drow make amends. We’re all friends now, and it’s actually all thanks to you and your friends. You see, all we have to do is give you over to them, and then we’re all allies. Trade can open up between Gracklstugh and Menzoberranzan, and peace will unite the Underdark at last - all because of you. Isn’t that great?”

“This woman is not a duergar,” Derivell erupted as he drew his sword and shield. Near him, Tanwen tensed, growling menacingly. Eromani and the rest of their companions also tensed, hands on weapons. “She has your king under her spell. She’s a succubus named Miralin.”

“See?” said Eromani. “I told you.” Blackskull still said nothing.

Shal laughed riotously, but the Deepking stood to his feet. He was thoroughly enraged. “How DARE you say such things about my Shal?”

“Oh, My Love,” said Shal, pouting. She was feigning that she was hurt. “Why does he say such terrible things about me? But let’s not kill them. Remember our drow allies. Let’s give them over to the drow so they can take them back to Velkynvelve where they belong.”

“Drop your weapons or we will forcibly remove them,” said the Deepking. “Do it NOW!”

Eromani noticed that the drow were tensed also. They were ready to attack in a moment. She recognized the crossbows with bolts undoubtedly laced with poison.

Finally, Errde interrupted, just as Eromani had hoped. “Deepking. With all due respect, you do not seem to be yourself. Perhaps we should speak without the presence of your consort. I think we need to discuss this further before we make a mistake.”

¹⁶ Persuasion check, DC 15. Eromani = 16. Success.

"Oh!" squeaked Shal, feigning that she was shocked by the captain's behavior. She even covered her lips as if exasperated. "My Love! They appear to have enthralled the captain also. She's one of them now."

Errde was now fully committed to supporting the Demon Hunters. "Shut your \$#@\$ mouth, \$#@\$!" she snapped. "I'll ram my \$#@\$ up your \$#@\$ and \$#@\$ \$#@\$ you before you \$#@\$ing hit the floor."

The Deepking exploded, his grayish skin turning purple. "ENOUGH! How dare you, Blackskull? You have crossed a line. Surely, it is true. This group of mercenaries has bewitched you. Guards! Take them by force."

Thud...thud...thud...thud... There was a quaking in the distance, barely detectable by anyone in the hall.

"Stop!" said Blackskull. "Something IS wrong with the Deepking. For the security and safety of our people, we need to summon the Keepers of the Flame to inspect the Deepking and make sure he's not bewitched himself." Blackskull's Stone Guards who had escorted the Demon Hunters seemed prepared to help defend her against the king's royal guard.

"Wait!" Fiovay suddenly cut in. "Waaaait! Your majesty - oh Great Hrorgart Steelbottom the Fifth." Everyone froze, and all eyes were on her. They were glaring with intense hostility.

Thud...thud...thud...thud...

"How DARE you mock the Deepking's name?" said Shal fiercely. "You insolent..."

"Yeah yeah," said Fi, waving her aside as if she meant nothing. "Shut your pie hole, wench. We know who you are, Miralin."

"Take them! Take them now!" cried Shal.

"You heard her," said the Deepking. The royal guards and the Stone Guards all prepared to fight.

THUD...THUD...THUD...THUD... The thundering became louder. Now everyone in the hall was alerted to it. Confusion took over. An alarm horn was sounded from outside. Shouts filtered in through the walls.

Fiovay adopted a superior posture. "That's what I was attempting to warn you about, Your Majesty," she said, and a mischievous grin spread across her face. BOOM! Doors were battered open from somewhere beyond. The walls quivered, and the floor vibrated beneath their feet. "But your whore wouldn't let me finish. I'm afraid something, you see, has upset your dragon, Themberchaud."

BOOOM! The doors to the throne room burst open, and sure enough, Themberchaud came in with a mighty roar, shaking the very foundations of the hold. In a flash, Fiovay pointed towards Miralin. "Themberchaud!" she screamed. "Look! Dragon egg! They're replacing you!"

And much to Shal's amazement, there, sitting at her feet, was a red dragon egg. Instinctively, she looked at Derivell, and there was a triumphant smile on the aasimar's face. "Die, Demon Witch," he said.

"Look out!" Fiovay cried, and the party dispersed as Themberchaud surged forward into the chamber in all his rotund glory. Furious, he spewed his fiery breath, and he filled the far end of the chamber with his wrath. The Deepking and Shal both disappeared in the inferno.

"Save the Deepking!" Errde Blackskull roared, and she led the charge at Themberchaud. The dragon seemed oblivious to them. As for the drow, they retreated with haste back out the door they had entered through.

¹⁷The flames cleared, and the Deepking ran about as he screamed, his robes ablaze. He then tumbled to the floor and rolled back and forth, trying to put them out. Shal also fled in the opposite direction, but in a panic, she forgot that there was a magical wall of force around the dais controlled by the Deepking's staff. It extended into the Ethereal Plane, essentially trapping both the king and the consort within. She slammed face first into it and fell backward to the floor.

Themberchaud hurled himself into the wall of force, for Fiovay's illusion remained on the dais. He was maddened by the sight of the egg, a feeling of utter betrayal consuming him.

Seeing Shal on the floor, Eromani paused in her flight, risking everything to seize the opportunity. Summoning everything she had from within her font of magic, she hurled five missiles at the fallen fiend. The missiles flew through the wall of force without hindrance, and they pounded into Shal, causing her to scream but not die.

Themberchaud breathed fire onto the dais again, this time aimed only at Miralin, for the king was now on the far side away from the dragon egg. When the flames cleared, Shal's coin gown had melted all over her, constricting her movements. She screamed and vanished into the Ethereal Plane.

'Son of a... She got away again!' Eromani thought, but she knew they didn't have time to worry about the succubus. Their objective was to get everyone they'd arrived with out of Gracklstugh. Miralin was the least of their concerns.

Derivell was at the doors of the throne room. Tanwen was at his feet. "Tanwen. On me. Now," he said, and she obeyed, climbing onto his back as she had in the tunnel. Eromani had explained the plan to her thoroughly, and the sorceress was glad to see that she'd fully understood. "Fi! Drop the illusion!"

The egg vanished. Tanwen understood that this was her cue. She tore her disguise apart by spreading out her wings behind Derivell, and the knight ripped it off her head and face. Tanwen then tilted her head to the ceiling and gave out the strongest cry that she could. It was a cute little shriek, and it wasn't very loud at all compared to Themberchaud's rage, but it certainly was enough to get his attention.

¹⁷ Themberchaud's Fire Breath = 65 damage. Miralin rolled Nat 20 to resist, only suffering 16 damage. The Deepking = 19, suffering 32 damage. Eromani = 16 damage with Magic Missile. Themberchaud flame recharge = 6. Themberchaud's Fire Breath = 66. Miralin rolled 8. Failure. She suffered 33 damage. She had 1 HP remaining.

The massive dragon was at first utterly stunned to see that the egg had vanished. He was alarmed, wondering how someone had snatched it up right before his eyes. Maybe it was the consort who had taken it. After all, she had also somehow magically disappeared.

But then he heard Tanwen's shriek, and his thick head snapped around just enough for his eyes to look in Derivell's direction. He spotted the hatchling, and his eyes flared like molten lava had somehow burst into them. He roared again in fury, and he threw himself onto his side, rolling himself around so that he was facing in the opposite direction. As he did this, duergar scrambled to escape his huge girth - some failing and some barely succeeding.

Seeing that he'd gotten Themberchaud's attention, Derivell continued to execute the plan that he and his companions had developed at the inn during their one hour of "rest". He'd made sure to keep Bastion near him, and he quickly climbed onto the horse's back. Kicking the stallion into a full gallop, he raced out of the throne room and on towards the main gates. Tanwen continued to cry out over and over again as if taunting her supposed predecessor.

Themberchaud's rage drove him to madness. He threw all caution to the wind. His sole purpose in life at that moment was to catch that hatchling and chomp her into pieces and then swallow her. But the angel on the horse was escaping with her, and that was not acceptable. Finally managing to get his feet under himself, the dragon immediately thundered out of the throne room in hot pursuit.

Eromani waited until the dragon's back legs were past her. Then she called to her companions. "Quickly now! Stay with him!" Everyone did as they were told. Insanely, they chased after Themberchaud with Errde Blackskull and her Stone Guards right behind them.

"Protect the Deepking!" Blackskull called back to the royal guards as she hurried after the behemoth, but Eromani hardly noticed her. She was of little consequence now. The dragon was their ticket out of the city. No one would stand in Themberchaud's way, and that meant a clear path all the way to the docks.

There was only one thing that she knew that could go wrong. 'If the guards at the northwest gate don't open up to allow Derivell through, he'll be cornered by the dragon. Everything rides on him getting through the gate.'

Leading the charge, Derivell exited the Deepking's Hold through the already forced open main gates. Outside, what looked like fifty or more duergar royal guards waited with weapons ready. As Derivell emerged, he cried out, "Get out of the way! The dragon's coming! The dragon's coming!" And he continued to head straight for their front line.

They didn't budge until Themberchaud came into view. Seeing the dragon was going to plow right through them, the duergar captains decided it wasn't worth the number of casualties they'd suffer. Just in time, they quickly split down the middle, allowing Derivell to pass through unhindered as the monstrosity emerged from within.

As soon as Themberchaud entered the courtyard, duergar on the battlements turned their magical turrets upon the creature. Still, it was as if Themberchaud was impervious to pain. They tore into his back, leaving welts, but he kept on after the mounted knight and the baby red dragon who was clinging to his back. Tanwen was still screaming like a banshee, antagonizing the big red.

Derivell sped up the street winding north as soon as he could. As he went, he called out almost constantly, "Clear the streets! Themberchaud's on a rampage. Make way!" And duergar citizens fled in a panic. The knight didn't have to ride hard, for he noticed that the dragon was struggling to keep up. Interestingly, he found himself struggling to keep Bastion from fleeing at top speed, for the horse was quite frightened. And yet, he wanted to make sure he was well beyond the dragon's breath range. This was the challenge, to find the perfect distance in order to keep Themberchaud's attention but to keep enough ahead that he didn't fry them.

Suddenly, he passed a duergar mother and child in the street. The child was paralyzed by fear, losing her grip on her mother's hand as the woman fled. Derivell heard the mother cry out, and he looked back to see her and the child frozen in place. It was as if neither could move. The mother was just off the street, standing in the doorway of a nearby building, and the child was directly in Themberchaud's path.

The paladin of Selune reacted without thought, having no concern for himself. "Tanwen, stay!" he ordered, slapping the horse's rump. Thankfully, the dragon obeyed, letting him go and latching on to the stallion's bucking backside. Then he jumped off his mount in mid-gallop, ¹⁸and he landed, rolled, came to his feet, clicked his heels together, and sped back the way he'd come, right towards the gaping jaws of the fierce monstrosity. He reached the child, a little boy, scooped him up, raced to the mother, unceremoniously plopped him in her arms, and took off running to catch up to Bastion.

Themberchaud was only feet from him, snapping his jaws over and over again as he attempted to lunge forward enough to catch the knight and eat him. Thanks to the Boots of Speed, Derivell began to increase the distance between himself and the enraged dragon. Too late, the monster realized that he might be able to whip Derivell in the back of the knees with his tongue, and so he lashed out. Fortunately for the knight, he'd already maneuvered barely out of range.

Without Derivell guiding him, the horse picked up speed, making it impossible for the aasimar to catch up. To make matters worse, Bastion veered left instead of right when he reached Laduguer's Furrow. Derivell REALLY wanted to go east, but the horse was going west instead.

"Tanwen! To me!" he cried, slapping his chest as he followed. His hope was to take the baby dragon and flee in the direction he needed to go. Maybe Eromani or one of the others could chase down the horse and reacquire him.

But Tanwen did the unexpected. Having seen how Derivell guided the horse, she grabbed the reins and yanked hard. The horse reared and came to a halt, bucking and kicking hysterically. Tanwen curled her tail around the stallion's midsection to remain seated on the saddle. Derivell caught up, slapped the rump as hard as he could, caught the reins, snatched them from Tanwen, and cried, "Heeya!" He didn't even try to climb on. He just ran with the horse, guiding him along down the street.

Themberchaud continued after them, thundering along and creating minor quakes throughout Gracklstugh. Duergar soldiers came running from every direction in the hopes of doing something to stop the insane wyrm. Derivell led them to an intersection he felt was wide enough for Themberchaud to fit down, and he veered left, attempting to circle back towards the northeast bridge spanning Laduguer's Furrow. Themberchaud reached the intersection and

¹⁸ Derivell = 16 Athletics check, DC 15. Success.

tried to clip the corner too fast. He smashed into a stalagmite building, lost his balance, and he and the building both fell to the ground with a monumental boom.

This bought Derivell some time. Praying no one was seriously hurt within the collapsed building, he pulled Bastion to a halt at last, clicked his heels together to deactivate the boots, and climbed on. "Tanwen. On me," he commanded, and she scrambled onto his back even as he mounted.

Themberchaud roared and regained his footing. Derivell took off again to the next intersection and sped to the left. The dragon stomped along behind, exerting himself more than he ever had in his adult life. The paladin reached the far end of the next street and turned sharply left - directly in front of the Deepking's Hold! Duergar soldiers were pouring out of it, screaming and shouting at him as he took off north back towards the rift.

Finally, he made his way directly towards the bridge with the shattered gate that spanned Laduguer's Furrow on the far east side - the same shattered gate that the crazed two-headed giant had ruined in his rampage earlier that day. Sure enough, he was relieved to see that the duergar had removed the gates altogether in order to replace them. And so, the way was clear.

He rode directly through the gateway, continuing on into the Darklake District. All around, the Stone Guards yelled in outrage, confusion, and fear. None tried to stop him, for as soon as they saw Themberchaud in hot pursuit, they fled. As for the dragon, he was barely slowed by the already damaged gateway. He flapped his wings violently, lifted himself up to the top, and threw his full weight into it. The portal exploded into a million pieces as it tumbled into the rift. The dragon landed hard on the far side where he tumbled and rolled to a halt in the middle of an open square.

Derivell was already racing north and west down a wide street, making his way towards the main gate on the far northwest side of the city. As he went, he continued to shout for people to clear the way, and their panicked screams shrieked throughout the district as they did just that. Themberchaud once more regained his footing, and he resumed his chase.

Gates appeared before the knight, and he saw that they were shut. The alarms blaring around the city must have caused the duergar to do this, sealing off the northern edge of the city. Derivell readjusted his course. He veered left down another main street, the gates now on his right. The dragon followed. Another side street appeared on the paladin's left. He sped down it. Themberchaud followed, crashing into another stalactite. This one fortunately didn't collapse.

He reached Laduguer's Furrow once more and jerked to the right, heading west again. Themberchaud attempted to keep up, tripped, and once more rolled to a halt. He almost went over the edge and down into the rift. The street along the rift was more narrow, making things difficult for the dragon to maneuver, but he flapped his wings and climbed into the air, straining with everything he had in him.

Derivell continued along the rift. The dragon trailed behind. Derivell's companions trailed behind him. Captain Errde Blackskull and her Stone Guards trailed behind them. Finally, a host of other duergar soldiers and even Keepers of the Flame trailed behind them. More were pouring through the gates on the bridges of Laduguer's Furrow.

Themberchaud once more set down on the street, surging along. He'd actually gained some distance while flying, and he thought perhaps he was in range of his fiery breath. And so, he temporarily stopped running as he inhaled and spewed an inferno at the fleeing paladin. The flames licked Bastion's tail, but nothing more.

Finally, Derivell reached the far western edge of the street, and he sped down a wide avenue towards the north. From there, he angled left past the Hall of Sacred Scrolls and on down the westernmost street of Gracklstugh. This led directly to the northwest gates and out of the city.

'Thank you Fiovey for showing me the map you made of the city,' he thought. She'd been making it ever since their arrival, and she'd found several bulletin boards on the streets that had detailed out map locations especially within the Darklake District. If she hadn't done this, the paladin would surely have not known how to get to the northwestern gate.

He arrived with plenty of time to spare, and as he approached, he shouted, "Open the gates! Open the gates!"

The Stone Guards at the gates did not comply. Instead, they turned invisible and escaped into secret doorways all along the passage. Derivell's mind went numb. The plan was failing right at the very last. If they didn't open the gate, Themberchaud would corner him right there. He would have nowhere to run to and no place to hide.

The dragon appeared at the far end. He was gasping and out of breath, but he kept coming. The gates were drawing near. Within moments, he'd be forced to stop at them. He desperately looked around, hoping to find some sort of other path of escape or some lever or SOMETHING that would open the gates.

Nothing. He pulled to a halt. 'Only one hope now,' he thought. He dropped off the horse, Tanwen still clinging to him. She was now quivering in fear. He ignored her and aimed Bastion so that he faced towards the northern wall of the tunnel. Then he turned towards the dragon, steeling himself so that he could do the most insanely dangerous thing he'd ever done in his life. Themberchaud came for him, his eyes blazing with victory. Derivell clicked the heels of his boots, and at the last moment, he shot off to his right.

The passage was wide enough that he easily cleared the dragon on the monster's left side. Bastion, in terror, fled north, just as Derivell had hoped. The dragon tried to twist and bite at Derivell, but the aasimar was too fast. He ran back towards the city, totally unharmed.

Meanwhile, Themberchaud lost his footing, and he tumbled directly into the northwest gates, smashing them open with his head and great bulk. He came to rest outside the city with only the end of his tail still inside. Exhausted, the mighty Wyrmsmith of Gracklstugh gave up and simply lay there, gasping for breath.

The party reunited as Captain Errde Blackskull led a horde of duergar, all charging with grim faces. Seeing nowhere to go, Bastion turned and raced towards the now open gates. Derivell recognized that this was, in fact, their only option at that point besides surrender, so he raced up to the stallion, caught the reins, and led the way. "Come on! Follow me!" he yelled to his companions, and they obeyed without question.

All around, the secret doors began to open, and duergar Stone Guards appeared. They shouted angrily at the escapees, demanding their surrender as they raised crossbows. But they

were too late to do much. The deep gnome merchant's, Ariana's, earth elemental was taking up the rear, providing cover. And so, the Stone Guards only shot it in the back as the entire group fled.

Derivell came to the head of Themberchaud, and for several moments, he feared that the dragon would rise and attack. But he couldn't. He had absolutely no strength left within him. The monster's eyes were closed, and he filled the passage with his hot, foul breath as he wheezed; tongue lolling out of his open maw, soaking the stone floor with his drool.

Captain Errde Blackskull called the charge to a halt at the gates as she watched the party disappear around a bend. She was also breathing heavily, but she could have continued. And yet, she didn't, for she saw no reason to. The mercenaries had left the city. They would no longer cause trouble. And the dragon was subdued. He would also no longer cause them problems - provided the Keepers of the Flame could pacify him. But that was not her concern. That was their problem.

'Besides,' she thought, 'I promised them safe passage out, and I'm a woman of my word. Well, they are now safely out of the city. Promise kept.' She smiled to herself. 'Nice work, I must say. I hadn't even remotely expected any of this. I knew the angel guy was up to something when he asked for an hour to rest and clean up, but this... How did they pull this off?'

She shook her head and turned to her soldiers. "Keepers! This is your mess. Clean it up. The rest of you, to me. We need to get back to the Deepking and make sure he's okay." As she strode through the crowd who had followed her, she spotted the Keeper leader. "Gartokkar. Assign a Keeper to come with me who is powerful enough to break charm spells that a succubus might put on someone, or any other kind of weird magic or influence for that matter. We know for a fact a succubus was manipulating the Deepking, and he might already be back under her spell - if the dragon didn't kill her, that is."

She continued walking briskly towards the heart of the city. "And if anyone sees the drow who are allied with that foul fiend consort witch, kill them! You know what? In fact, I want the heads of every \$#@sing drow you find in the \$#@sing city. Leave no drow alive." And the duergar soldiers quickly dispatched to do her will.

As they did, Gartokkar was furious and greatly embarrassed, and he desperately wanted to clean up the situation as quickly as possible. He said nothing to the captain as she walked away, but he assigned a Keeper to her at once. Then he gathered the rest of his own people and hurried out of the city so that they could speak with Themberchaud. They approached nervously, hoping beyond hope that they could somehow smooth things over with him.

On the far side of the city, Jorlan, Asha, and Xalith gathered their forces and fled out the northeast gate. They sensed that things had gone horribly wrong, and the duergar would be looking for someone to blame. Therefore, they quickly spread the word to every drow in the city. "Get out while you can. We'll undoubtedly be taking the blame for the dragon's tirade."

Meanwhile, Miralin extracted herself from her melted gown, and she transformed back into herself. The Deepking had dropped the wall of force to allow his royal guard to assist him, and so she was able to escape in the Ethereal Plane. Once free from the palace, she worked her way through the streets, limping and wheezing herself from the pain she'd endured. Even though she was resistant to fire, the flames of a dragon were truly terrible, and she'd endured two full-on blasts. She could barely walk.

But she managed to work her way out of the city and to the rendezvous point she had with her fellow conspirator. Once there, she threw herself down and returned to the Material Plane. She was once again dressed in her scarlet gown.

"How did it go?" her companion asked from the darkness nearby.

"Terrible," said Miralin bitterly. "The stupid dragon, Themberchaud, ruined everything. We had Derivell and his companions surrounded, and the drow were there and everything was going according to plan. I was about to watch as the duergar soldiers tore each other apart. Then we'd have finally captured the Demon Hunters and the swords and everything. But the dragon came rampaging into the throne room at just the wrong time. Now they're gone. I have no idea where they are or whether they've been captured or anything."

"They're gone," said the other, his deep voice echoing off the stone walls around her. "My spies informed me just before you returned. They escaped out the northwest gate, thanks to Themberchaud. They're heading for Neverlight Grove."

"If you already knew all this, then why'd you ask how it went?" asked the succubus sorceress, shooting her companion a spiteful look.

He laughed. "You know me, My Dear. I enjoy seeing you throw a tantrum. You're adorable when you're upset."

She didn't like him even remotely at that moment. But then, she didn't like him ever. She despised him, in fact. Of course, she despised everyone except herself. In her world, she was the only thing that mattered. Nothing else even came close. "So what now?" she asked. "What's our next move?"

"The only way to the surface from Neverlight is currently being blocked by Zuggtmoy's tower," he told her. "Unless they somehow kill her and destroy her tower, there's no way they're getting to the surface from there."

"Is there any chance, do you think, with Esaldayon and Evronar, that they COULD actually kill Zuggtmoy?" asked Miralin.

"Not a chance," said her companion. "They're still too weak for such things. Eromani cannot control Evronar long enough to defeat Zuggtmoy, and Havvah has completely lost all her former skills and abilities. Derivell is also not strong enough to be a true threat. Indeed, the Demon Hunters will have but one choice. They will need to move on from there to Blingdenstone. That is their only hope for escaping to the surface."

Miralin brightened. "I see. So we will set our next trap at the deep gnome city."

Silence fell for a moment. Then her companion said, "There is no need. I have been preparing for their arrival since the beginning. Make no mistake, Miralin. The Demon Hunters will not leave the svirfneblin city except in bondage."

Chapter 6: The Short Trip

Rini was thoroughly amazed that they had escaped Gracklstugh alive. After all was said and done, they'd managed to pull it off. It was nothing short of a miracle. She couldn't help but relive it as they made their way through the wild tunnels of the Underdark to the northwest of the duergar city.

From the moment they'd arrived, she'd had the feeling that it had been a mistake. The Stone Guard at the gate had given them issues, acting all crazy, then Xalith appeared, and then the two-headed giant. After that, they were recruited by two groups of duergar AND THE DRAGON, and they found themselves roaming the stupid tunnels of the mad derro nutjobs. 'Not to mention the fact that we ran into a resurrected Buppido, of all people,' she thought. 'Talk about chaotic. That whole place was one weird after another.'

She looked up at Eromani as she rode on Zen's back, and she smiled. 'Nini still has the orange hair and nails that match her eyes. I wonder if it'll ever go away or if we'll have to do something to change it back. Maybe once I've rested I can try casting restoration on her.'

On her right, Vlynrifane walked with Shreiken in her arms. She was playing with him and laughing; a small reward for the good work he'd done. It had been Shreiken that had saved their lives, after all. After Blackskull had agreed to allow them to rest for an hour before meeting the Deepking, Derivell had called them into their party room. Then he laid his quickly devised plan out for them in hushed tones so that the duergar wouldn't hear. Shreiken had been pivotal to his scheme.

"Arla, I need you to write a note to Themberchaud," the aasimar instructed. "Write it in whatever language you were talking to him in. Tell him that we have discovered what the duergar are up to, and we are appalled that they would dare do such a thing to someone so magnanimous and so awesome as he is - or something like that to puff up his ego. Then be blunt and mean and harsh and as vicious as possible to incite his wrath against the duergar. I don't care how you word it, but make sure you really tick him off."

"What should it say? I mean, how am I supposed to tick him off? Do I tell him the duergar are laughing at him behind his back?" she asked.

Derivell shook his head. "Tell him that we found a red dragon egg, and we discovered their plans for him and it. Tell him the truth, basically, but do it in the harshest light possible."

"I can help you with it," said Fi.

"Me too," said Fargas.

"Basically, we need to let him know that the duergar plan on killing him and replacing him with the baby as soon as the baby is old enough."

"And why are we doing this?" asked Anarillia.

"I'm getting to that," said Derivell. "We want him to feel betrayed and enraged enough to storm into the Deepking's Hold and attack."

"What?" asked Topsy. "Are you serious?"

"Aren't we jumping to conclusions just a bit?" asked Ariana, the deep gnome merchant they'd just met.

Derivell shook his head. "The captain made it obvious when I was talking to her. She also suspects something's wrong. This is unusual, and she was basically trying to warn me that this could wind up being bad for us. She actually suspects that it'll go bad for us."

"Seriously?" asked Rini. "How'd you pick up on that?"

"When I asked her, she told me that even if she knew what the Deepking was going to do to us, there was nothing she could do about it. I read between the lines. She was trying to tell us something without saying it outright."

He continued to explain his plan. "So we need Themberchaud to be incited, and the only way we're going to do that is if he learns that the Deepking has the red dragon egg in his throne room, and he's going to sacrifice us in some ritual to empower the dragon egg to hatch quickly and grow to adulthood immediately, or something similar to that. Basically, we need him to feel like he needs to storm into the Deepking's Hold and attack the egg and destroy it before the Deepking kills us for his ritual and makes the egg a fully grown threat to him."

"Genius!" said Fi. "We can convince him of that. So, basically, we tell him we're all being summoned to the hall so he can kill us all and make a replacement instantly. The only way Themberchaud can stop this is if he busts in and kills the egg before they complete the ritual and kill us. Done."

"We get the message to him before we set out to the palace," said Derivell. "In that way, Themberchaud will sure to be sitting outside his lair watching to see if what we're saying is true. When he sees us being escorted into the palace, he'll surely believe it and come running."

"Waddling is more like it," said Fi with a giggle.

"But how do we get the message to him?" asked Havvah, trying to follow his line of thinking.

Derivell gestured to Shreiken. "Vlynrifane will explain to Shreiken that he needs to sneak out of the inn with the note and deliver it to the dragon. He's the only one stealthy enough to pull it off. All he has to do is run with it to the dragon's lair, drop the note where the dragon can see it, and flee. Themberchaud will see the note and curiosity will surely draw him to it. He reads it. He gets ticked off, and he comes out to see if what the note says is true. When he sees that we're going to the palace, he will probably mull it all over for a few minutes first, and then he'll decide he can't take the chance. His life is too good for them to replace him with some younger model."

"To add to this," said Fi, "I could create an illusion of Tanwen's red dragon egg right near the Deepking's throne as soon as Themberchaud enters," said Fi. "That'll lure him right to the duergar leader, and he'll surely attack. All eyes will be on Themberchaud then."

"So then what?" asked Topsy. "We just run for it while the dragon distracts the duergar? They still might not let us out through the gates without permission."

"No," said Derivell. "I'm not done creating havoc yet. Tanwen and I will make our way to the throne room doors as soon as we can. Then Tanwen will shed her disguise and we'll get the dragon's attention. Tanwen will be the bait, basically. I'll hop on Bastion's back and ride out with the dragon hot on my tail. As he chases me, the rest of you follow in his wake. No one is sure to stop us with an insane dragon barreling through the city after me."

"When I reach the northwest gate - I think that's the one we need to take, right? - I'll order the guards to open the gates to let me pass so that the dragon doesn't destroy them. I'm hoping they'll obey, for they won't want the dragon to shatter their outer defenses. Right?"

"That's a big 'if'," said Eromani. "I'm not sure I like that part. The rest is actually quite impressive, but the ending is a bit lacking."

"And aren't you afraid innocents might get hurt?" asked Graiyla. She was obviously still upset about Tanwen and using this to get a dig in.

Derivell nodded. "Yes, but at this point I'm fairly certain that we're being messed over. The dragon will be chasing me, so I'm hoping beyond hope that no one who is innocent will get in the way. If I'm constantly warning people to clear out of the way, as long as I stay far enough ahead of the dragon, I should be able to avoid him killing any regular citizens."

"What if the duergar aren't actually messing us over?" asked Eldeth. "What if they are legitimately going to reward us or something? What if they've got a way to the surface?"

"Yeah," said Derivell, "I thought about that too, but if we show up at the Deepking's Hold and he winds up being friendly and not messing us over, then when Themberchaud arrives, we'll try to convince him that the letter he got was a lie. There is no dragon egg. Hopefully we'll talk him down - but that's only IF we're not actually being messed over like I think we are."

"And I do have a sort of backup idea," Derivell continued. "If it seems the gates aren't going to open because the duergar are insane and refuse to let us out of the city, as long as I get there fast enough, I should be able to backtrack and head off towards the docks. Plan B will be for me to ride out onto the piers, steal a raft, and hurry out onto the lake. The dragon may or may not chase me out onto Darklake, but either way he will scatter any duergar on the docks and allow the rest of you to also steal a raft or two and escape via the lake."

"The lake?" asked Eromani. "Aren't you worried about Demogorgon? And what IF Themberchaud chases you out on the lake. He'll probably be faster than your raft."

"That's why that's Plan B," he replied. "I don't really like that plan, but it's better than nothing."

"Okay," said Fi, pulling out her map of Gracklstugh. She'd been making it ever since they arrived. "Here's the city. Here's the Deepking's Hold. If you make your way with Bastion to this bridge here on the far east side of Laduguer's Furrow, that's the one the giant destroyed. The gates shouldn't be barred because they were damaged. So you should be able to pass right through. Make your way down these streets and wind your way through here to the Hall of Sacred Scrolls. Turn here and on to the northwest gates. If you need to, backtrack this way, wind through here, and on to the docks."

Derivell studied the map carefully and nodded. "Okay. I think I've got it."

“So, I take it we’re not planning on coming back,” said Aelun with a smirk.

Everyone looked at him as if they wanted to hit him. “I never want to return to this nightmare,” said Eromani. “Once I’m on the surface again, I’m never coming back to the Underdark.”

“Never say never,” said Havvah. “You never know what the future might bring.”

Eromani shot her a dirty look. Rini cut in to divert. “This is incredible,” she said excitedly. “For the first time since we got here, I feel like things are looking up.”

“And if we’re lucky, Themberchaud actually will eat the baby dragon,” said Sarith.

“Or you,” said Eromani.

Vlynrifane stood. She’d been whispering in Shreiken’s ear. She said, “Shreiken’s ready. He understands what he needs to do. He’ll hurry back to the Deepking’s Hold and wait for us outside the gates and rejoin us once we are making our escape.”

“What about Rumpadump and Stool?” asked Topsy. “You know, the myconids. They’re not very fast. How’re they gonna keep up?”

“I’ll put them in my pack,” said Havvah. “I’m not carrying much right now.”

“Is the earth elemental fast enough to keep up with us?” asked Turvy.

Ariana nodded. “He can keep up,” she assured them.

“I’m more worried about Anarillia,” said Rini, gesturing to the elf woman. “She’s not used to this kind of thing.”

“Neither was I in the beginning,” said Arla. “She’ll be fine.”

Derivell then looked at Dalazaril. “Are you still coming with us, or are you going to use this as an opportunity to go your own way?” he asked. “It’s up to you, at this point.”

“Are you sure?” he asked with a clever grin. “You’re far too trusting, Derivell. What if I went and warned the duergar about what you’re going to do, hoping for them to then reward me by turning you over to me so I could turn you over to Ilvara?”

“That’s why I trust you,” he told the drow. “If you were going to do that, you certainly wouldn’t put the idea in my head. You’d just do it. So what do you say? Are you with us? Are you wanting to start a new life elsewhere? Now’s your chance.”

Dalazaril shrugged. “The duergar captain did say ‘everyone’. I’m still part of your group, so I guess I have to come.”

Rini smiled at him. “Awwwwe. Lazi.”

“Lazi?” said Fi, laughing. “I love it. That’s Rini for you. She’s always gotta shorten people’s names to something with two syllables.”

“Okay,” said Derivell. “That’s that, then. Let’s get to it.”

And they did, and Rini was still marveling that it had all worked out, especially since Miralin had shown up and had been influencing things - not to mention Jorlan, Asha, Xalith, and their drow minions. In short, they should have all been captured and returned to Velkynvelve. All their hard work should have come to naught.

She smiled, pleased with her friends. ‘But we came together, and we prevailed.’ Then she looked up at Derivell, and she found herself admiring him. ‘He’s an incredible man; a real hero. I can see why Nini likes him so much. I hope he makes her happy. I hope after all this is over, the two of them can settle down somewhere and really be happy together.’

‘I can’t believe he faced down that dragon and managed to outmaneuver it like he did. He got the dragon to smash open the gates to allow us to get away. That was so flipping awesome. I just...’

She looked at Fargas, a sadness suddenly overtaking her. ‘I just hope I’m not alone when all this is over.’ She looked back at Eromani. ‘I hope they’re happy, but I hope Nini doesn’t lose herself in their relationship and forget about me. I mean, how selfish of me, but I want to find someone too.’ She glanced back at Fargas again. ‘But is it him? Could it be someone else?’

She shook the thought away. ‘You’re still trapped in the Underdark, Rini,’ she scolded herself. ‘That’s not important right now. Fargas is nice. You can keep getting to know him and see if something works out. If not, there are plenty of other fish in the sea once we get back to the surface; lots of other halfings up there.’

‘And you know Nini isn’t going to forget about you. She loves you. She’s your mother, no matter what.’

‘No she’s not,’ she argued with herself. ‘She’s my adopted mother, and that’s not the same.’

‘No,’ her more secure self replied. ‘You’re right. It’s not the same. Nini CHOSE to be your mom. She didn’t have to, but she did. You weren’t some byproduct of romantic love, as if romance might have been first in her mind and you were second. No. There was no other person involved in regards to Eromani’s love for you. She loved only you for you. There was no, “You remind me of your father,” or nothing like that. No other strings attached and no other reason why she would want me. She just did.’

Suddenly, Fiovay drew everyone’s attention. She was really excited about something. They gathered around her to see. The kitsune held out Ylsa’s magic map. “We’re actually not far,” she told them. “This passage right here leads to this passage which leads to this cave, and if we follow this path we’ll be right at the small cave’s mouth which houses a portal that will take us within one mile of Neverlight. Do you guys realize what this means?”

“We’ll be in Neverlight Grove within only a few hours,” said Aelun.

“Talk about your short trip,” said Arla. “That’s awesome. Finally, a break.”

“Then let’s find a place to rest first,” said Eromani, weariness etched all over her features. “I’m just as eager as everyone else to get out of the Underdark, but it can wait until morning.”

"Amen to that," said Derivell. "Especially after that confrontation with Themberchaud and Miralin and such, I'm done. I don't think I can take much more."

"Do you think the duergar will send out search parties for us - or the drow?" asked Anarillia.

"Even if they did," said Vlyn, "I doubt they'd find us. Ilsa's map has been taking us down some truly winding pathways. We seem to be constantly moving from one random passage to another. I'm personally quite lost, and I don't think I could find my way back to Gracklstugh at this point."

"I could," said Fiovay with a proud smile. "I know Ylsa might not like it, but I've been mapping out the way the whole time. I'm really trying to create a thorough map of this whole region of the Underdark so that when we reach the surface I can maybe sell the maps to anyone who's crazy enough to WANT to travel down here. And besides, you never know when WE might need to backtrack or something. I want to make sure we're never lost here ever again. You know?"

"That actually is quite comforting," said Eldeth.

"Like you said," Aelun commented, "I don't think Ylsa would be too happy with you mapping out her secret trade route, but I'm not sure I care."

"I know I don't," said Ariana, and she leaned closer to Fi, giving her the sweetest look that she could muster. "Oh great mapmaker! May I please purchase from you at a fairly discounted price, a certain yon map of yon Underdark Darklake region? I know about a dozen of my kind who would pay through the nose for that thing."

Fiovay laughed. "I'll think about it, but maybe after it's complete." Then she gestured for everyone to follow. "Come on. I think we could find a good place to rest that's fairly defensible near the portal cave." And they set out once more.

At last, after only about another two hours, they arrived at a nicely sized cave with bioluminescent mushrooms to light the area. It was only about five minutes, Fi said, from there to the small cave with the portal. Once inside, the party spread out and enjoyed a quiet respite. They tended to their injuries - and there were many - they mended their clothes and armor, and they sharpened their weapons. Vlynrifane kept first watch, and Anarillia kept second, allowing everyone to be fully rested in just eight-ish hours.

In the "morning", they ate a decent meal, having acquired mushrooms and other cooking ingredients from the Whorlstone Tunnels including meat from the cave bear Tanwen had killed. Besides creating a disguise for her, Derivell, Eromani, and Fiovay had carved up a good portion of what remained of the beast, and they packed it for their trip. So they ate well, and for the first time since they could remember, they had full stomachs. They didn't just have to survive on magic berries. Even Tanwen was satisfied.

And so, after breakfast, they set out, found the portal cave, and made their way through it. Sure enough, only about an hour after this, they arrived at last at Neverlight Grove. 'Things are definitely looking up,' thought Rini, and she smiled happily as they made their way towards the next leg of their journey. 'I can feel it. Soon, we will see the surface again.'