

Chapter 38 - The Tiefling Thief

As the party made their way towards the heart of the grove, it was about mid-afternoon. The sun was high in the sky, and the birds were singing sweetly in the trees. They maneuvered around some carts and a few tiefling children who had set up shop in the area. In one of the carts, they found a pair of metal gauntlets which Vexir immediately slid on. Kaedyn gave her a look, letting her know that he did not approve of her stealing them, but she ignored him. He didn't say anything, for there were too many around. Drawing attention to them was the last thing he wanted to do.

When they came to the main section of the grove, they were surprised to find a crowd of angry tieflings blocking the way. Three druids stood at the base of the stairs, at the entranceway. They were blocking the path. There was a good deal of shouting, but the druids were not budging.

"Get back! I won't say it again," a dark-skinned human female yelled at the top of her lungs. She was dressed in leather armor with furs on the shoulders and an antler headdress. Her hair was dark and curly, and she had a round face, eyes and nose. "If you don't get back, you'll regret it. You don't want us to bring out teeth and claws."

One of the tieflings, a female with short, straight, strawberry hair, growled at her. She had pale skin with a purplish hue, and she wore a plain, dirty, white shirt and gray slacks. "Let our daughter go. Right now!" she snapped. She looked as if she was about to attack the druids with her bare hands.

"She's a thief, Hellspawn, and you will wait for Kagha's judgement. Now get back," said the dark-skinned druid.

The tiefling woman growled again. "Argh. Let me through, Magreshem, or I'll rip your throat out!"

Then, another human druid, a lighter skinned man with dark brown hair, transformed right before their eyes into a black bear. He roared as he did so, which effectively intimidated the tieflings. They withdrew in fear and then began to disband. They didn't go far, however. Most remained nearby as if prepared to charge, should someone get up the courage to lead them to do so.

The tiefling mother and another tiefling, a male, withdrew to a safe distance and began to argue. The mother cursed. "We could have taken those guards," she said. The tiefling male who was likely her husband, had dark brown hair, mustache and beard with more of a yellowish skin tone. His mustache curled upwards on both sides of his upper lip, and his beard jutted down to form a point off his chin. His facial hair was only around his mouth. It did not extend along the jaw to his ears, and he had no sideburns.

"I'd rather you not get eaten by a bear, Marricko," said the male.

"Locke! We need to get Arabella out. Now!" said Marricko.

"You heard the guards," replied Locke. "They're waiting on Kagha to give word."

"I'd sooner trek through the Nine Hells than trust that snake. Argh!" growled Marricko again. Her fiery red eyes blazed with worry and anger.

"What in the world is happening here?" asked Ryth-Shan, stepping to the front of the group.

"Arabella, our daughter, tried to steal the druids' idol," Locke explained. "Druids lost their minds about it. They need it for their precious ritual."

Marricko whimpered. "It's all my fault. I told her I wished the wretched thing would just disappear; or better yet, explode."

"Now Arabella is being judged by a bunch of druids who hate us. That's not right," said Locke in despair.

Gale sighed, his expression full of restrained anger. "This grove is like a cauldron about to boil over. I say we check in on the child; make sure she comes to no harm."

"She's just a child," said Kaedyn, equally upset. "The druids are overreacting. I'll talk to them."

"The child deserves to be arrested and punished," said Ryth-Shan coldly. He liked kids, but he didn't like parents who just let them get away with anything. Children should be taught to control themselves. Uncontrolled kids were like wildfires. They just destroyed everything, including themselves. "She stole the idol of Silvanus!" Then he pointed at Marricko. "Like you said, it's your fault. You should've tried parenting her. Thieves deserve to be punished. It's as simple as that."

Locke bared his pointy teeth at Ryth-Shan. Then he looked at Kaedyn with less hostility. "Well, I'm glad, at least, that ONE of you is kind hearted. Thank you. The druids won't give us the time of day. We appreciate your help."

"Hurry!" said Marricko. "I'm at the end of my tether as it is. I can't take this waiting."

"We'll get her back," said Kaedyn. "Don't worry." Then he turned to the others. "Come on. Let's hurry."

"Fine," said Ryth-Shan, "but unless her punishment is extreme, I don't approve of getting her off the hook. Stealing an idol of Silvanus is not only extremely rude, but it's a serious offense. That should be common sense."

You don't desecrate someone's shrine and then expect them to just pat you on the head and smile. The druids have taken all these people into their home to give them safety and sanctuary. Stealing their idol is quite the slap to the face."

"She's just a child, though," said Gale, clearly unhappy with Ryth-Shan. "Children make mistakes. It's what they do."

"Let's not argue about this here," said Kaedyn who was noticing that Marricko was about to explode. "Come on. We'll deal with this when we meet this Kagha person."

Then, before they could argue further, Kaedyn started off down the stairs. Vexir exchanged looks with Ryth-Shan and shrugged. She seemed almost amused to see Kaedyn fighting with the gith. Gale and Wyll followed quickly after Kaedyn. Vexir and Ryth-Shan followed up in the rear.

"Stop! Move back at once," cried the dark-skinned druid. She held her hand up to Kaedyn as he approached.

"Whoa! Wait!" said Kaedyn, stopping short. "We mean no harm. We're the ones who fought off the goblins at the gate. We just need to speak with your leader, Kagha."

"Keep back. Force my hand, and I'll show you its claws," the woman replied.

"A moment, Jeorna," said a gnome druid standing next to her. He was not the same gnome druid that they'd met in the tunnels. He was much slighter of build with white robes and a plain wooden staff that was twice as tall as him. He wore a white hood with antlers on it, similar in design to Jeorna's headdress. He had a long beard and bushy mustache, and his eyes were sharp and unfriendly.

Jeorna leaned over as he whispered into her ear. "What?" she said. "Oh. I understand." She righted herself. "You. Apparently Kagha wants to see you. Go ahead."

Kaedyn and the others visibly relaxed. "Thank you," he said to her in reply. "Most kind of you."

"Don't thank me," said Jeorna. "Kagha's orders, I guess. Seems she wants something from you."

"May I ask which way?" he then asked.

Jeorna pointed towards a large stone off to the west that acted like a door. It was as if the entire entrance was carved into the side of the ridge and yet one with it. The door was very similar to the ones that barred the secret tunnels. The main difference was that it was about five times larger. Many runes were etched into it, and it seemed immovable.

The heart of the grove was like a paradise garden. It was circular by nature with the cliffs serving as high walls all around. There were patches of grass framed by stone pathways, and a myriad of flowers and bushes grew there. Decorative columns crafted by druids long ago were set along the outskirts, and they were covered in vines and growth. There were benches between the pillars so that observers could rest in peace and simply enjoy the ambiance. A few plaques were set into some of the pillars, providing some inspirational sayings or teachings.

Here and there, animal statues, like those in the secret tunnels, were positioned as if they were watching protectively over the inhabitants. These were designed with similar magic, but the trigger that set them off was much different. If an enemy attacked, the druids could utter a command word, and the statues would come to life. They would then proceed to pummel everything in the area with Moonbeam until someone uttered another command word to shut them off. So, the idea was that if the druids had to, they could retreat into the inner sanctuary behind the massive door, and then they would activate the statues. It was more of a last resort than anything. No one ever expected to use them.

The entire center of the area was a massive fountain and pool that was the altar of Silvanus. This was perfectly circular with three columns, representing three of the four elements of nature, positioned at the north, west and east positions on the rim of the altar. These columns were also covered in vines and overgrowth. Atop each of the pillars was an animal guardian statue. The wolf was to the north. The bear was to the west. The stag was to the east and the rising of the sun.

At the center of the fountain, on a raised platform, was the idol of Silvanus. It was glowing powerfully, bathing the entire area in magical soft green light. Six druids were gathered around it. They were concentrating heavily on their chanting, and a good deal of magical light was also surrounding and emanating from them. Each held a parchment in their hands that they were reading from; chanting the same ritual spell over and over again in unison to generate more and more magical energy.

The main stairway into this holy place was on the north side. The door into the inner sanctuary, where Kagha was, rested along the cliff side on the west. To the southwest, there was a lift that could take individuals quickly up to the top of the ridge. It was a shortcut to the main gate of the grove. Presently, a large brown bear was sleeping on it.

Just to the left of the lift, directly south of the wolf statue, there was a path leading down to a small cove. This path was created most likely by a landslide, and it had taken out a section of the circular altar area. There,

another pillar used to sit with an eagle statue on top, but because of the natural disaster, the pillar now lay shattered on the slope. It had become embedded into the ground. It seemed no one had tried to dig it out and put it back up. They seemed to like it there, as if it enhanced the nature of the place. All they did was build a wooden walkway around so that individuals could still traverse the altar on that side.

Many jagged cliffs rose up out of the water in the cove, blocking the path from view if one was traveling on the river. So it was a quiet, hidden place where one could go and enjoy the river without fear of being watched. From what they could see, a black bear was there at the moment, and he was batting at the water attempting to catch some fish.

On the east, almost opposite the door into the inner sanctuary, there was another path leading to jagged cliffs that overlooked the river. An arch was built over it, similar to the northern entrance, as if to welcome individuals passing to and from the heart of the grove. A funny looking, bearded human man was standing nearby. He was dressed in clothes that reminded Kaedyn of a jester with a big, poofy hat on his head. He looked as if he was attempting to discuss something with a bear.

Kaedyn ignored everyone and led the way to the massive door leading into the inner sanctuary. As he went, he noticed a boar who seemed quite unhappy and a blonde elf woman with short hair talking to a bird. She was dressed in plain clothes, not in the typical druid leather armor. He came to the door and gestured to Ryth-Shan who then stepped forward and let the circlet do its job. They watched as the door rolled aside to allow them through. It was amazing how quiet such a massive door was. It barely made a sound.

Inside, it was dimly lit by torches and natural light streaming down from small holes in the ceiling. Wide stone stairs led down to a central area that was surrounded by water on three sides. There, three stone disks with runes on them acted as flooring. The base of the platform was fifty feet in diameter, embedded into the ground. The second was forty-eight feet in diameter, and it rested atop the base to create a stair. The third was forty-six feet in diameter, and it created the upper platform. All around the base there was grass, vines, bushes, stone pillars and guardian animal statues. On the platform was a table and chairs, some tree stumps, wicker baskets, and many other furnishings. Roots and vines wove about the entire chamber, covering many areas and many things.

There was Kaga, a druid named Rath, and Arabella. At Kaga's feet was a horned brown snake. Nearby, other druids watched as if spectating and silently judging the situation transpiring before them. There was an air of tension about them. It seemed like everyone was wound up so tightly that the slightest breeze would cause them to snap.

Kaga was a high elf with ginger hair which was pinned up in an elaborate manner. Her demeanor reminded Kaedyn of a nun he'd once known who had been one of his early childhood teachers. She always wore a scowl, had sharp, veiled eyes, looked down the rim of her nose at people, and her rigid stance made it seem like she was always ready to give someone a good, swift kick in the rump. She wore decorative, magic leather armor, a dagger, and a scimitar. Her expression was disgust mingled with arrogance, and her tone was sharp and cutting.

Rath was a dark-skinned human male who was clean shaved and bald with an antler headdress on top of his head. The druids really seemed to like those. On his back was a great club. He was a tall man; muscular and lean. However, his eyes were warm and friendly. He seemed to be caring and soft-hearted. He was quite the opposite of grove's new First Druid.

Arabella was a tiefling girl that looked a lot like her mother, sharing a similar skin tone and hair color. She parted her straight hair down the middle, and it fell nicely to about shoulder length. She was completely unarmed and wore a light blue tunic with a lime green scarf around her neck.

"The grove will be made safe. The Circle will be closed," Kaga was saying as the party arrived.

"Please. I'm sorry!" said Arabella with a whimper. She then stared down at the snake in fear.

Rath then spoke. Anger spewing from his lips. "This is madness, Kaga. She's just a..."

"A what, Rath? A thief? A poison? A threat?" Kaga nearly spit the last word out. As she said this, Arabella folded her arms across her chest and recoiled, scared to even move. "I will imprison the devil. And I will cast out every stranger."

"Thief? Poison?" said Kaedyn angrily as he approached them at a brisk pace. "What's the girl's actual crime?"

"Girl? You mean parasite," said Kaga with disdain. She regarded Kaedyn with suspicion and a hint of curiosity. "She eats our food, drinks our water, and then steals our most holy idol in thanks!" She turned back to Rath. "Rath! Lock her up. She remains here until the rite is complete." Then she looked down at Arabella. "And keep still, devil. Teela is restless." The threat was clear. If the girl moved, Teela, the snake, would bite her; likely with a lethal dose of poison. Arabella's jaw fell open. She looked about to try to bolt for it.

"Come, Kaga. We took back the idol," said Rath. "Surely..."

"Do it," Kaga demanded furiously. She seemed about ready to kill the girl then and there.

Kaedyn intervened. "This punishment, what you are suggesting, doesn't that seem a bit harsh compared to the crime committed? I am a cleric of Tyr. I would see justice done, but..."

Ryth-Shan stepped forward and cut him off. He could see Kagma's heated expression. She did NOT like some outsider interfering with druid business. "To reject the helpless is to reject Silvanus himself," he said. His manner was just as harsh as Kagma's.

Kagma seemed annoyed by this, but she recognized that Ryth-Shan was, perhaps, one of them. "The Treefather's words spoken by a gith. How curious!" She then grinned as if her next thought was quite clever. "Perhaps you don't know that Silvanus spoke further. The parasite must be removed for new seed to grow. Yet, behold. The parasite lives."

Ryth-Shan did not back down. Now that it came to it, seeing the young girl had changed his mind. She was utterly petrified with fear, and she seemed rather sweet. He couldn't just let her get locked up. "A seed nobly sown renders the sweetest fruit. Be noble. Set her free," he said.

Kagma pondered this for a moment. She seemed a bit subdued by his words. Then, at last, she said, "Again, the words of the Treefather; spoken plainly. It is as you say. Ssifsv. Teela. To me." Then she looked down at Arabella again with disdain. "Out, Thief! My grace has its limits."

"Thank you, Kagma!" Rath said, utterly relieved. "Master Halsin would..."

"Halsin isn't here. Keep his name off your tongue, lest Teela pierce it," snapped Kagma. "He's abandoned us, Rath, and for what? He didn't even give us an explanation. He's been gone for over a month, and those adventurers have returned without him. He's dead. It's just us now. We must be strong and move on. Stop clinging to the false hope that he'll return. I will have no more talk of Halsin. As far as I'm concerned, he's a traitor to us all." Then she spun on her heel and walked away. Teela followed, freeing the girl. Arabella didn't hesitate. She bolted for the exit as fast as she could. A druid near the entrance let her out. Rath, in his anger, forgot all about the party as he strode away to ponder things further.

As soon as no one was paying attention to them, Gale then spoke up in quiet tones. He seemed quite heated. "That woman has more venom in her heart than a snake in its fangs. But at least the child is safe. What is youth if not a time to be forgiven for one's transgressions?"

"I know I said that what she did deserved punishment," answered Ryth-Shan, "but putting a child on display like that was monstrous. I'm glad we intervened."

"It was certainly not justice," Kaedyn added. "She stole their idol, but they got it back. The girl should have been returned to her parents, and her parents should have been held responsible. Even then, the punishment should have been recompense of some kind. Imprisonment was a bit steep."

Vexir chuckled. "If you ask me, I think it's the fault of the druids."

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "What?" asked Ryth-Shan, totally caught off guard.

Vexir folded her arms across her chest and shifted her weight. "Don't you think? Their security is SO lax that in the midst of them performing their ritual, a tiefling CHILD was able to slip up and steal the IDOL right in front of them? You saw them, didn't you? We went past them as we came through the heart of the grove to get in here. There were druids everywhere chanting that ritual all around the central platform where the idol was resting. In broad daylight, she slipped past them and stole it? The fault clearly lies with the druids, in my opinion."

"Hah!" laughed Gale. "You know, I couldn't agree more. The girl wasn't innocent, that much is true, but that doesn't mean she was guilty."

"Well," said Kaedyn, clearly NOT agreeing but not wanting to get into some serious debate over it. "Come on. Why don't we make sure she got back to her parents okay? We can then return here and talk to Kagma and this Nettie person."

The others agreed, and they left the inner chambers once more. They hurried back to Arabella's parents who thanked them profusely and promised they wouldn't ever let her do it again. "We don't have much," said Marricko, "but we will at least give you this. Know, that if you call, we'll come running; no matter what."

"I hope we'll meet again under better circumstances," said Kaedyn with a smile.

"Likewise," said Locke. "Arabella?" He then gave her a sign that she should say something further.

"Thank you," said Arabella bashfully. "For helping me."

Then Marricko gave Kaedyn a locket. "What's this for?" he asked as she stepped away.

Marricko smiled graciously. "Something to hold us to our promise," she told him. "It is very important to me. This is how grateful I am to you. You can return it to me when you call upon us for help." Then she showed him the inscription on the back. "'You're the light in my darkness. Thank you for making me the happiest man alive. Love you always, Locke.' He gave it to me some time ago as a sign of our love. For saving my daughter, I want you to borrow it. With it, you can cast Dancing Lights."

"Come," said Locke. He didn't seem terribly thrilled that she'd given Kaedyn the locket, but he didn't say anything about it. "I think we've taken enough of their time." Then the three turned and walked away leaving the half-drow unsure how to respond. He didn't know what he should do with the locket, so he simply stuck it in his magic pocket.

"Right," said Vexir. "Now that that's done. Shall we?" She gestured back towards the heart of the grove, and with that, they all returned to the inner sanctum to speak with Kagha and find Nettie.

Chapter 39 - Kagha

They returned to the inner sanctuary, and immediately Kagha approached them. Much to everyone's surprise, she addressed Vexir. "I was hoping you were going to talk to me after that little incident with the child," she said. Her manner was surprisingly more friendly. "But then I turned around and you were gone. Please, come with me to a more private location. There is something I wish to discuss with you." Then, before they could even respond, she turned and walked away towards a chamber to the left of the entrance, on the south side. They all glanced at one another to see if anyone objected, and seeing that no one did, they followed.

The chamber she took them to was on the south side and connected to the main gathering area by a stone bridge that spanned the underground river. It was circular, like just about everything in the grove, it seemed. It had once been an enclosed chamber with a man made wall set approximately three feet from the outer cavern walls. However, it was now crumbled and fallen in many places, as if by some natural disaster, thus creating a number of gaps which in turn made it a more open study.

Set into the inner wall in four places were smaller bookshelves stacked with books, documents, parchments, scrolls, and other personal belongings and decorations. Between the inner wall and the outer cavern walls was a ring of grass and ferns and bushes which gave the room a rather peaceful atmosphere. Ryth-Shan then noticed a chest behind one of the bookshelves on the left. It was hidden amongst the tall grass and bushes. There was a way to slip around behind in the back half of the chamber. He couldn't help but wonder what the new First Druid could be hiding within it.

The cavern walls vaulted upward to a high ceiling which was only able to be seen because a few beams of sunlight filtered down through cracks above. The floor was slightly sloped towards the center of the inner sanctum so that if any rainwater poured through, it would glide into the river. Nothing was set directly under these cracks or in the paths the rainwater would take.

The study consisted of two halves divided by a large stone structure directly behind Kagha's desk. One could pass to the second half on either side of the desk. The structure was square in design, almost like an entranceway with two wide supports and a stone set atop. There was a large bookshelf set in between that filled the space. It was stacked with books and other documents. In front of each of the supports was a guardian wolf statue. This created an intimidating presence, as if Kagha had fiendish bodyguards protecting her chamber at all times. Whenever anyone entered to discuss something with her at her desk, they felt as if those statues were staring holes through them constantly.

On the other half of the room, there were many wicker baskets that held Kagha's personal belongings and wood furnishings. This was obviously Kagha's more private home. If she didn't want to be disturbed, she would step into that half and pull two curtains closed, one on either side. These were fashioned from gray animal furs. Along the back wall was a tree and bed of soft grass, and she had a wicker chair with cushions on it set behind the bookshelf facing the tree. This was, for her, a holiest of holies. Everyone knew that when she closed those curtains, she was to be left alone unless it was an absolute emergency.

Kagha immediately sat straight-backed behind her desk as the companions came to stand before it. It was covered by a plethora of documents. Kaedyn wondered how she ever found anything. One of the documents was entitled "The Rite of Thorns," but seeing that both Kaedyn and Ryth-Shan were eying it, she immediately covered it up with a few other papers.

Finally, she spoke with them again. When she did, she kept her voice below the babbling of the stream that ran through the entire inner sanctum. "A deep elf," she said, looking at Vexir with a smile, "in our grove and on this day? A sign, or rather, a gift." She seemed genuinely happy to see Vexir. They were all caught off guard. Kagha continued as if oblivious to their surprise. She seemed so eager to win Vexir's approval. "Who better to understand a watchful broodmother than a beloved child of Lolth? I'm glad to know you're on our side."

Everyone looked at Vexir as if curious to see how she would react to this. She was immediately on guard and suspicious. "You are a high elf, and you DON'T have anything against my kind?"

It seemed Kagha realized her mistake and became more guarded. "Yes. Well. It is merely that it seems I am outnumbered here. Rath and your companions have shaken me. They've caused me to question my own decisions. I was hoping that at least you would be able to understand my reasoning."

Vexir shrugged as if she no longer cared, but deep inside something about Kagha unnerved her. "You protected your own without hesitation. My compliments," she told her. It was what she knew Kagha would expect to hear; what she wanted to hear.

Kagha brightened again, relaxing her guard. "Then we agree. Preservation is not luxury. It is not zealotry. It is necessity. A viper bares her fangs defending her brood. Is it not her nature to strike at invaders? I took back the Idol of Silvanus and the rite has resumed. We will seal the grove; free from harm and free from invaders."

Wyll could no longer contain his outrage. "Free from the threat of little children?"

Kagha's eyes narrowed into slits as she glared at him. "I do not expect YOU to understand," she said arrogantly. "I know your kind. You only see heroes and villains. To you, I am nothing more than a monster."

"You're @\$%4 right!" said Wyll emphatically. "Anyone ready to lock up a little girl is a monster. You said it. Not me. You're a prejudiced witch!" And he jabbed his finger at her. Kagha was NOT pleased.

Vexir regained control of the situation. "This rite must be born of powerful magic. What exactly is it?" She said it as if Wyll had never even blown up at the druid. It was as if she was dismissing him entirely; not even acknowledging his presence.

That restored some of Kagha's more pleasant attitude. She looked from Wyll to Vexir, her expression softening a bit. "The Rite of Thorns. It is the Treefather's gift, that none come to harm. When we speak the final prayer, the Great Vine will sprout forth." Then she began to glow with anticipation. "The grove will be cloaked in bramble and thorn. No one enters. No one leaves. Sanctuary." She said the last almost in complete bliss.

But then she turned once more into a fireball of rage. "None of this can happen while outlanders infect us. Silvanus demands that we choke them out."

"We came on behalf of Zevlor," Kaedyn then interrupted. "His people will perish if you force them out."

"And how is that MY concern? My people will perish if he stays," Kagha replied forcefully. Then she turned back to Vexir. Even though Kaedyn was half-drow, she seemed to show him no respect. To Vexir, she said, "You showed great mettle at the gate. Sounded like the mettle of a skilled sword for hire. I want you to provide your services to Zevlor. Offer to guide the outlanders out of the grove. I'm sure they'll reward you well. They're to be gone before final prayer. If they are not..." She let that linger for a moment. Then she completed the thought. "The viper must strike."

Vexir eyed her shrewdly. "And what is it that you are offering me for this?" she asked. "Sure, the tieflings might reward me, but it seems we'd be helping you as well. So, let's say I decide to offer my services to Zevlor. What are you going to give me for it to make it worth my while?"

Kagha's eyes glittered as if thoroughly pleased with Vexir's manner. She then took an amulet out from under her leather armor. It was golden with purple gemstones. Each of the amulet's jewels shined like a viper's eyes. "This is Broodmother's Revenge," she told her. "Whenever the wearer is healed, her weapon will magically drip with poison. It is yours if you will guide Zevlor and his people out of here."

Vexir considered it a moment. "Fine," she said, holding out her hand.

Kagha laughed sharply. "When I see the tieflings and other outlanders completely cleared out, meet me by the main gate. I will give it to you then before I shut the gate behind and lock them all out."

Vexir withdrew her hand and nodded. "Agreed. Then it seems I'd best speak to Zevlor."

"You will do more than speak," said Kagha firmly. "This tale ends but one way; with the outlander rot cleansed and the grove forever shrouded."

Then one of the druids in the central meeting area poked his head in. He was an elf with blonde hair and blue eyes accompanied by a gray wolf. Seeing that she was needed, she excused herself and strode off out of the chamber. She left them without another word.

"Well," said Gale with a bit of barely contained anger eking out. "How nice! You've agreed to have us lead the tieflings out to their deaths." Wyll's arms were folded across his chest. He was looking at her with equal hostility. Ryth-Shan and Kaedyn seemed to be pondering everything that had just happened. It looked as if they had yet to judge her actions.

Vexir shook her head, her face as hard as stone. Her red eyes glittered in the light of the torches as she stared off in the direction Kagha had gone. "You misunderstand me, all of you," she said crisply. At that moment, she was fed up with putting on her tough-drow exterior. She was tired of everyone disapproving of her actions. She decided to defend herself and explain why she did what she did. "That woman is up to something, and I don't like it. She LIKES drow? No. That's just as odd as everything else happening to us around here."

She then turned to face Ryth-Shan. "This Rite of Thorns is not the kind of thing a typical druid would cast, am I right?" she asked Ryth-Shan.

"Right," said the gith. "And she kept talking about shrouding the grove. That concerns me. She's just a bit too happy about being enshrouded in shadow. Silvanus would have his people bathe in the glorious light of day and bask in the moon's glow. He would have them run wild and free, not hide within the confines of a grove. It's... it's just unnatural."

"Exactly," said Vexir. "Now, think about what I did, for a second. I made her think we're her allies. I made her think we're helping her. We now have free access to the grove. She even left us in here alone, trusting us while in her inner sanctum. So, what did I sacrifice? Nothing. We were going to help the tieflings leave this place anyway. Right?" She looked at Wyll. "Wasn't that your condition? So, we kill the goblin leaders after we find out

what their involvement is in regards to our situation, and the goblins will scatter. Then we make Kagma happy by leading the tieflings out. We'll even get a powerful amulet for it. With the goblins gone, the road will be clear, and we'll be helping to protect the tieflings just the same."

"So, not only did I basically make Kagma an ally, I also managed to manipulate the situation so that we'll be rewarded by the tieflings and Kagma for doing something we were planning on doing anyway. Right? And, in the meantime, we've gained the trust of all of them, so we will have more of a free reign to roam about this entire grove to find more clues as to what is really happening here and potentially with us."

"Now, tell me. What did I do that you disapprove of?" she asked, glaring at both Gale and Wyll.

Gale was the first to reply. "I... I don't know what to say. My apologies," he said with a bow. "That is truly a well-thought-out and expertly executed plan. Truly. I don't know how you did it, but you've managed to weave everything together into one nice package. I underestimated you, and for that, I am deeply sorry."

Wyll's expression also brightened. "And here I thought you were just a heartless witch like her. You had me fooled, I must say."

Ryth-Shan wasn't fully convinced. "You really want to investigate the grove's situation?" he asked.

Vexir rolled her eyes and shrugged. "Sure," she said unconvincingly. "I mean, I don't REALLY want to do any of this. I'd rather be back home in the Underdark without a tadpole in my head. But, it makes the most sense to look into all this. EVERYTHING around here is strange, including Kagma and this grove. We need to get to the bottom of it. I'm sure it's probably connected as well to everything; the Dead Three, the mind flayers... everything."

Kaedyn then put his hand on her left shoulder as he smiled at her affectionately. "I knew there was more to you than you were letting on."

She rolled her eyes at him. "Wipe that stupid grin off your face before I do," she replied, her usual, harsh self. "And who said you could touch me?" She then sidestepped and brushed his hand off of her.

He let his hand fall to his side, but he kept smiling. She decided to ignore him and turned to Ryth-Shan. "There's no one here, at the moment. While I keep watch, do you think you can poke around?"

He smiled broadly. "You and I are attuned to the same brainwave," he replied. Then he went directly for the chest. Keeping low, he crept into the second half of the chamber and then around behind the row of shelves on the left. He reached the chest effortlessly, and then took out his picks. The lock clicked. He carefully opened the chest and rummaged around inside.

What he found sent an arrow to his heart. Hidden amongst a variety of things he didn't care about, there was a book; Faldorn's Canticle: The Shadow Druids' Doctrine. The book's spine was limber from overuse. The corner of one page was folded inwards. It read, "Balance is a myth. Where any clan treads, nature struggles. Unity is a fiction. Men of mere flesh seek only to tame beast and raze flora. We are the thunder, and we are the rain. We shatter mankind, and grow new life in its place."

He also found a half-torn note. The marks crisscrossing the page didn't look scribed so much as slashed. The note said, "Kagma. Swamp-docks. Tree. Meet me. Alone." It was signed, "Olodan." He took both the book and the note and carefully closed the chest back up; locking it. Then he made his way back to the others.

"I found these two things in the chest," he told them. "Seems pretty clear to me, now, that my worst fears are true." He showed them the book and the note. They all passed them around.

"So she's a shadow druid," concluded Vexir. "Nice."

"Why else would she have their doctrine locked away in a chest?" asked Ryth-Shan. "It's pretty clear it's her chest, unless someone else confiscated that note written to her. My guess is that this Olodan person is also a shadow druid."

Kaedyn shook his head. "No. I agree. It seems pretty clear to me. All the evidence points to it being true. Still, we should go to that tree and meet this Olodan person."

"What good will that do?" asked Wyll. "Don't we have the evidence we need? We'll just present this to that Rath person, and he can show it to the rest of the druids and reveal her as a traitor to the grove. Hah! Problems all solved. With Kagma dethroned, the Rite of Thorns will likely not happen, and the druids will not likely kick the tieflings out."

Kaedyn shook his head again. "We need someone they will trust to go with us and help us discover the truth. If we present these two items as proof, the druids will surely believe we fabricated the evidence to try to mess Kagma over in order to save the tieflings. We need something more substantial if the druids are going to believe us. We need to convince one of their own of the truth and let them present it to their own kind. If we take one of the druids with us, someone they trust, and they witness for themselves that Kagma is a shadow druid, then that should hopefully be enough."

Vexir then asked, "And which druid are you thinking of asking? How will you get them to go with us?"

Kaedyn shrugged. "I guess we'll just have to see which one stands out to us. I have faith that Tyr will guide us to the right person. Justice shall prevail!"

She rolled her eyes again. She seemed to be doing that a lot lately. "You are utterly ridiculous. Sometimes, you should hear yourself. Then maybe you'd stop acting that way."

He just kept smiling. "It's inspiring. Right?" he teased. "You can't help but feel good. That's why you resist it, I think. You're not used to feeling good. It makes you uncomfortable."

She closed her eyes and sighed as if trying to find the strength to continue. "Let's just move on. We need to find this Nettie person now."

But Ryth-Shan was not quite ready to go. "I've barely searched her chambers," he told them.

Then he was about to go back into the other half when Gale stopped him. "I think we've lingered too long. Will-o' reports that she's returning."

Ryth-Shan jammed the evidence in the magic pocket inventory. Then he hastened to Kagha's desk. There was one last thing he needed to check. He shifted the papers off of the Rite of Thorns, and he did a quick examination. As he skimmed the page, he processed the basic information. Then he put the papers back in place and hurried over to his companions, acting as if they had all simply been standing there talking the whole time.

Kagha stepped back into her chambers and paused. "You're still here?" she asked, a bit perturbed.

Vexir shrugged. "We were just discussing our next move. We need to talk to a healer named Nettie. Can you tell us where to find her?"

Kagha jerked her thumb towards the western-most chamber of the inner sanctum. "Now kindly get out." And with that, she made her way to her desk.

There was no more need to delay. Everyone casually left and gathered just outside the chamber Kagha had indicated. When they did, Kaedyn asked Ryth-Shan, "So what did you learn about the Rite of Thorns?"

Ryth-Shan sighed. "Well, it is a powerful druid ritual. It doesn't seem evil. In truth, it seems just like a last resort defense. It's meant, however, to allow the druids within to be safe for a very long period of time. In order for it to be truly successful, the druids would have to be fully prepared with stores upon stores of non-perishables. The underground river would supply them with plenty of water, but it'll literally choke out all light."

"How long will it take to complete the ritual?" asked Gale. "How much time do we have?"

"Three days," said Ryth-Shan.

Gale whistled. "That's a long ritual. Those druids are going to need some serious stamina."

"This grove was established on an incredible place of power," said Ryth-Shan. "That sanctuary we found in the secret tunnels is only one conduit of the power that resides here. The fountain is another. When the idol is upon the fountain altar, a powerful illusion is cast over the grove to hide it from the view of enemies. It also increases the power of the druids while they are within the borders. The Rite of Thorns would not even be possible if not for the power of nature that dwells here. It's actually quite incredible. Silvanus did, in fact, give the Rite of Thorns to the First Druid of the grove some hundred or so years ago. I guess there was some trouble back then, and it was provided just in case the druids lost the fight."

"Good to know," said Kaedyn. "Nice work. And, I hate to say it, but thank you Arabella for stealing the idol and resetting the ritual. Now we know we have three days to stop it."

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Agreed. Let's find Nettie, find a druid to help us, and get out of here. The sooner we leave, the sooner we find what we need to dethrone Kagha and stop this insanity."

And with that, they entered the western chamber. Nettie was there, tending to an injured bluejay.

Chapter 40 - The Other Afflicted

"I see you," said Nettie as the party approached. "Just give me a moment." Nettie was a dwarf female with straight, dark brown hair parted to the right. It only fell to about her jawline. She wore a Circlet of Nature on her head. Like many of the other druids, she wore leather armor decorated with leaves, and she had the symbol of Silvanus on her chest with blue background and golden leaf and nut.

Ryth-Shan stepped forward. "Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked as he looked around the circular, stone chamber. It had many stone beds lining the north wall, a kitchen and tables full of herbs and bottles and lab equipment and cooking pots and pans and utensils towards the southeast, some books and scrolls and tomes laying here or there on various end tables, a couple wicker baskets, and a few torches set on wall mounts to provide lighting. On the southwest side, there was another of the magical stone doors. It was closed.

"A moment," said Nettie as she stepped back and then cast Healing Word on the bird. "There. It's up to her now; life or death." She turned to them, looking up with warm and inviting eyes. Nettie was a light brown skinned woman with green tattooed markings on her face. One of these came across her nose from cheek to cheek and then branched back from her cheekbones to her ears. It made her look almost like she was wearing a mask. "Now. What was it you needed?" she asked.

"We're looking for Nettie," said Ryth-Shan. "We were told we could find her around here."

"Well, look no further," she replied. "You've found her. But you still haven't answered my question. What can she do for you?" She spoke with a thick accent.

"We need help," said Kaedyn. "We need a healer."

Nettie's brow raised. "Well," she replied. "Let's have a look at ya."

Kaedyn stooped over before anyone else could, and he let her examine him. As Nettie looked more closely, she said, "Hmmm. Strange. I'm good enough of a healer to tell there's nothing obviously wrong with ya. You're a bit tired, maybe, but we're all a bit tired lately."

Vexir grew impatient. "Look, there's no good way of putting this. We... uh... have tadpoles in our heads."

"Tadpoles?" she gasped. "Mind flayer tadpoles?"

"You know about them?" asked Kaedyn. "Can you help us?"

Nettie seemed uncertain. "I... I'll do what I can. Come. Follow me. I might be able to help. We need to be quick. This way."

Then she led them into the chamber through the closed west door. Much to their surprise, there was a dead drow lying on a stone table near a desk with many scrolls and papers on it. This was just inside the door on the left. A giant wolf bust stood in the center of the chamber with glowing blue eyes and lines all over it. Four pedestals stood at four points - north, south, east and west - around the circular dais that the wolf statue rested on. Each of these had a stone tablet resting on it except for the one on the north. It only had an indentation.

The room was a library, it seemed. It was the only room in the inner sanctum that was not circular. It was in more of a compass shape with four alcoves - north, south, east and west. The first alcove was the entranceway where the desk and stone table were. The other three alcoves were lined with shelves full of books and parchments of every kind. All the walls and floor were covered in grass and vines and other plant life that sprang up in between cracks in the stone or formed huge beds of life in various places.

And there was yet another magical door between the west and south alcoves. That's when Ryth-Shan remembered the circlet and he took it off to make sure he didn't activate it should he move too close. Thus far, no one had questioned him about it, but then he'd noticed Findal in the inner sanctum. Maybe the gnome had told them some sort of version of the story so they knew he was a friend of the grove. Who knew? Either way, now that he remembered it, he didn't want to take any chances, so he slipped it into his magic pocket inventory.

Nettie stopped near the dead drow. She turned to face them. "This one had the same problem as you," she told them. "Attacked us in the woods together with some goblins about a month and a half ago. Tadpole crawled out of his head soon after we killed him. We've used some magic and alchemicals to preserve his body for further study. That's why the smell isn't absolute rot and decay."

Vexir was trying hard to refrain from killing Nettie right then and there as she stared at one of her people lying dead. Ryth-Shan helped by taking the lead. "The drow had the same kind of parasite?" he asked.

"Seems so," said Nettie with wide eyes. She looked afraid. "Gave Master Halsin a right start. We didn't have much of a choice. He came at us and forced us to kill him along with the goblins with him." Then she turned to the desk and began to mess with some vials of liquids and some sort of thorny branch. "Anyway, let me see what I can do here." She continued to work as they watched.

Then, with thorny branch in hand, she continued, "It's why he joined the adventurers on their expedition; to find out what was happening. A pity you got me instead of him. He understands these things; studied them. Still, we have options."

"Really?" asked Kaedyn hopefully. "Thank you. We'll take anything that can help." The others were not so convinced.

Ryth-Shan then asked, "What's that plant? Will it help?"

Nettie seemed nervous. "It might. But first things first. Tell me about your symptoms. Have you noticed anything strange happening?"

Then Ryth-Shan recognized that the branch was no druidic cure. "Put the briar down, and we'll talk," he said, grabbing Kaedyn by the shoulder and forcing him back. He placed himself between Nettie and the others. "I know exactly what that is. That's Kelemvor's Kiss; a deadly poisonous briar from the Dalelands. Are you planning on killing us?"

"I want to help you," said Nettie anxiously. She was now even more tense. "But I can't unless you work with me. So, please. Just answer my question. Has anything unusual happened to you?"

Ryth-Shan continued to watch her guardedly. "We fell from a ghaik ship in the sky, but something caught us before we hit the ground. It saved our lives."

Nettie was shocked. "Protected from on high? Sounds like the drow. Master Halsin said he was tougher than he had any right to be. How'd you pick up the parasite? Halsin was desperate to find where all this was happening."

"On a mind flayer ship," answered Ryth-Shan. "We were kidnapped and infected."

"A mind flayer ship?" asked Nettie. "But Master Halsin was sure..." She trailed off as if her mind was lost for a moment. Then, she recovered and said, "Look. You've been straight with me, so I'll be straight with you. You're dangerous. If you transform here, we're all dead. But you seem like a good soul. You deserve a chance to save yourself."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a bottle of strange liquid. "This is a bottle of wyvern poison. Swear to me you'll swallow it if you feel any symptoms. It only takes a little, so that should be enough to kill all of you."

Ryth-Shan's expression mirrored Vexir's; hard and cold. Both folded their arms across their chests as they sneered at her. "So, you don't have a cure. What a surprise! Bah! Lae'zel was right," Ryth-Shan snapped. "The only people who can cure us are the githyanki."

"Are you going to try to kill us if we don't swear to this?" asked Kaedyn. "I'd really like to work with you here. I don't want to make enemies of the druids."

"I hope it doesn't come to that, but... Can't you understand the position I'm in?" answered Nettie. "If you turn, EVERYTHING I love will die."

Kaedyn then took the bottle. "Fine. I swear," he said. "I am a cleric of Tyr. I promise that if I am able to, I will make sure that if we start to turn, we will drink this poison."

Nettie seemed totally relieved. "Thank you," she said. "You know. I've spent my life treating folk and never once saw a mind flayer infection. Then, suddenly, there's dozens of you; maybe more. Master Halsin and I were tracking them, studying them, trying to figure out what the Hells was going on. Because you should all be changing. There should be a small army of mind flayers out there! But you're not. Weird powers aside, you seem perfectly normal."

"You must've learned something from studying them," said Gale.

"Yes. Well," Nettie replied. "For one, that thing in your head is like nothing we've ever seen from mind flayers. It's one of their worms, for sure, but this one gives you powers; telepathic connections. And it doesn't turn you into one of them. Not yet, anyhow."

"You said you were tracking other victims," said Ryth-Shan, still watching her guardedly. "Did they change?"

"Hard to say," said Nettie. "There's a lot we don't know. Infected - folks like you - have been converging on an old temple of Selune, and I've no idea why. Either way, it's been months, and I haven't seen a mind flayer milling about the area yet... well... that is... until that ship crashed."

"The goblin camp," said Wyll more to himself than anyone else.

"When Master Halsin heard the adventurers were heading that way, he saw a chance to get answers. Joined on the spot. Whatever he found there, he didn't make it back."

"You think he's still alive?" asked Kaedyn.

"I think so. I hope so," said Nettie. "I can feel it in my heart, but he HAS been gone for over a month. I've sent birds to find him, but they can't get close without goblins trying to shoot them down. What puzzles me is why it

took them so long to return. The temple's only like a half hour walk from here, beyond the old, ruined village of Moonhaven."

Then an idea seemed to come to her. "You, though. You're one of them; technically speaking, I mean. They might not kill someone carrying their parasite. If you can find Halsin and get him out of there, we can discover what he learned. Perhaps he can save your life. How's that sound?"

"Gods!" said Vexir. "All roads lead to the goblin camp."

"You sure he can cure us?" asked Kaedyn.

"I can't make any promises," said Nettie. "This is like nothing we've seen before. But I know this for sure. Master Halsin is the only one close to understanding these things. He's your best bet to survive. Otherwise, that bottle's your only option."

"All right," said Vexir with a sigh. "We'll find Halsin. We're going to the goblin camp anyway."

"Really? Thank you!" said Nettie, again relieved. "It would mean everything to the grove; to me. I wish I could tell you more, but only those adventurers know what happened out there. All I can say for sure is they all went to the old temple of Selune and Master Halsin didn't make it back. Talk to them if you want more details. Good luck out there, and if things start to go bad, remember the bottle. Remember your oath."

"I will," said Kaedyn. Then he put the bottle in the magic pocket, and Nettie left them and headed back into the room with the bluejay.

The group waited until she was out of earshot before they began to discuss what Kaedyn had agreed to. "I swear to you that if you try to use that wyvern poison on me, I will cleave your head from your shoulders," Vexir warned Kaedyn.

He sighed and closed his eyes. "What did I vow?" he asked her.

"You swore to kill us all if we started to turn," she told him.

Kaedyn looked at her and held her gaze. "I said, 'I promise that IF I AM ABLE TO, I will make sure that if we start to turn, we will drink this poison. If you don't want me to use it on you or anyone, I suggest that you do something to make sure I'm not able to. It's in the group inventory, after all. So...'"

"Don't get me wrong," said Ryth-Shan as he looked at Kaedyn, "I do not want to turn into a ghaik. I'd rather die than have that. However, there is too much of a chance that we won't even know if one of our own group starts to turn. I don't want anyone just deciding that they are going to kill us if there is still hope we aren't really turning yet. We need to truly be careful here." From the looks on everyone else's faces, they all agreed.

Just then, a soft female voice interrupted their conversation. "Um. Excuse me." Everyone turned to see another druid standing near the corner of the south alcove. It was obvious that she'd been hiding there and was eavesdropping not only on their conversation with Nettie, but the conversation they had afterwards.

She was a human female in her twenties with brown hair parted slightly off-center and to the left. Her hair was cut in layers and framed her face nicely, starting as wavy at the top and curling more at the ends, covering her ears on both sides. Though if straightened it would likely have come down to her shoulders, because it was curly, it sprang up to just below her hairline in the back. She had soft green eyes and wore brown leather armor with green vine and leaf decorations, a green snake-skin belt, a plain scimitar at her left hip, and a wooden shield on her back.

Everyone was instantly ready to pounce. Only Kaedyn did not show a sign of aggression. "Hello," he said before the others could do anything further. He walked towards her, palms open. "I'm Kaedyn. Who are you?"

She straightened and stepped out further into the open. She was about half a head shorter than Kaedyn, but she was physically toned. He could see, because her arms were bare, that she was built like a gymnast; both muscular and agile. In fact, she seemed a good balance of the two. "I'm Wynari Nell," she replied. She seemed a bit timid and awkward, as if she was not a very social person. "I mean no harm. I..."

She was cut off as that now-all-too-familiar sensation overtook them. The parasite was active once more, connecting their minds. They saw druids gather under a full moon, mourning a lost member. They glimpsed the deepest parts of a snow-covered landscape, riddled with frozen bodies; one of which was a vampire baring his fangs. A white dragon flashed in their minds, along with a crystal shard, a drow with a green cloak and twin blades, and a dark alliance.

"For the love of..." said Vexir as she recovered. "Another one!"

"What was that?" asked Wynari. "What just happened?" She did not hide her fear.

"Our minds connected because of the mind flayer parasite we have in our skulls," explained Kaedyn. He then turned to Vexir. "Didn't I say it? Didn't I say that Tyr would guide us to the right person. Here she is. Here is a druid who is afflicted, just like us. Doesn't it make sense to get her help?"

"We know nothing about her," said Vexir. "No, it doesn't make sense."

"You were kidnapped by the mind flayers too? You were on the flying ship?" asked Wynari. Fear turned swiftly into relief. "Oh, thank the gods! I was in Icewind Dale when I was kidnapped. That's where I lived for a

while; near Kuldahar. There were some things going on there; unnatural things. This crystal shard was causing all sorts of chaos. It's a long story, but basically there was this mage named Akar Kessel. He had this shard that gave him lots of power. He was defeated, and all at once hordes of powerful creatures invaded the northern region in an attempt to locate the dumb shard thing."

Then she seemed to realize that she'd been about to say something she didn't want to. She became more subdued, and it was clear to everyone that she was not being totally honest as she said, "I tried to ambush a group of monsters and... well... things get a bit fuzzy after that. I... I'm not sure what happened."

She switched back to eagerly telling her story. "The next thing I knew, I was on the flying ship. They put that nasty, disgusting worm-thing into my eye. Then there was fighting, my pod was thrown out of the ship and crashed in the river." She pointed off towards the east. "I barely got out before it sank completely. Thank Silvanus for my ability to change into an animal. Being a bear helped me swim to the shore against the strong undertow."

"What have you been doing the last few days?" asked Ryth-Shan. He thought she was somewhat odd, but he had a good feeling about her.

"I've been trying to carefully determine who might know about what happened to me and if they could help," she replied. "I immediately got a bad vibe about this place. The druids who came out to investigate didn't seem very friendly. They asked me all sorts of questions like I was a suspected criminal. They didn't seem to believe me either when I told them about Icewind Dale and such, and they acted like I was crazy. Ever since I arrived, they've been watching me, like they expect me to rob them or something. So, I decided not to tell them too much about the ship and what happened on it. I found out more from the tieflings about this place than the druids. Isn't that strange?"

Ryth-Shan nodded and glanced out the doorway to make sure no one was able to listen to what they were saying. "We have our suspicions."

Wynari sighed. "Anyway, I was told about some elf named Halsin. He is supposed to be the First Druid of this grove and a great healer, so I got all excited until they told me that he ran off with some stupid adventuring party over a month ago. They then told me I could ask Nettie for help, but she sounded like an apprentice and not likely someone who could help with THIS." She pointed to her head.

"Hmph," said Vexir bitterly. "You were right about that."

Wynari glanced at her but went right back to her story. "Well, I decided my best hope was to find this Halsin guy, so I turned into a cat, for stealth purposes, and tried to head out towards this temple place he went to. Goblins were swarming everywhere. I spotted them fighting things off to the south by the flying ship. There's a ruined village to the west of this place, and they're all over it. They call it Bogrot. Then you have to cross over this bridge, and there's a goblin outpost there. Finally, you can wind your way around to the temple, but you still have to go past like twenty goblins or so to get to the bridge that spans the river that leads into the main courtyard. It's nuts."

"This was all on the first day after the crash," she explained. "I crept around the goblin camp, eavesdropping on their conversations. There's some weird stuff going on there; a cult they're all a part of. The goblins that were sent off to the flying ship were searching for a weapon, I guess. Then I learned they were also searching for any survivors. 'Capture everyone you find and bring them back to the camp at once,' is what they said. They tortured any survivors they brought back, always asking about the weapon. And there's this weird goblin priestess. She was branding cultists with some sort of Mark of the Absolute."

Then she seemed to realize she was going off on a tangent, and she said, "Anyway, so I slept in this hole in the wall in the temple that night. The next day, I did some additional sneaking around and eavesdropping. That's when I learned about the adventurers."

"Wait," said Kaedyn. "So you know what happened to them?"

Wynari nodded but shrugged at the same time as if she thought she knew but wasn't completely confident. "From what I could piece together, the adventurers and their bear companion, I'm assuming that's Halsin, went to the temple to find it crawling with goblins. This was not what they expected based on information they got from a wizard who hired them in Baldur's Gate. Apparently, there was only supposed to be a lesser tribe of goblins living there; not a horde of them plus bugbears, ogres, spiders and drow. Oh! And there's a hobgoblin warlord and maybe a few other things. I can't remember."

"How do you know about what they expected to find?" asked Ryth-Shan.

"The goblins had captured one of them and was interrogating him on a torture rack," Wynari explained. "There was a huge commotion late in the day. I had no idea what was happening until they brought the prisoner into the torture area. He was quick to tell them whatever they wanted to know. I wanted to rescue him, but I knew there was no way I could do so. I'd have just gotten myself killed in the process. I had to leave him." She looked like she felt quite guilty about this.

But then she cast the feeling away and continued. "Hold on. Let me back up a bit. I think I got ahead of myself." Then she took a deep breath and started again. "The adventurers showed up, and they knew they wouldn't be able to take on the horde. Therefore, they carefully searched the whole area to find a way to sneak inside. They found some sort of path just south of Risen Road - don't ask me where that is - and they dropped down into the temple courtyard from above. No one expected intruders, least of all from whatever direction they came from, and they came at night. So, they were able to get in undetected. Then they made their way to the lower levels."

"I guess they went unnoticed for some time down there," she went on. "Most of the inhabitants live outside in the courtyard, so the ruins itself is only sparsely populated. On top of that, most of those that dwell in the actual building live on the main floor. Few actually go into the catacombs."

"Good to know," said Wyll. He was soaking up everything she had to say.

"They lived there for almost the entire time without being discovered," she said. "Sounded like they were living off rations, some mushrooms, and some underground river that flowed through damaged sections of the place. Meanwhile, they searched around for a sealed entrance into the Underdark, but they never found it. I guess they needed to get into the Underdark to find some sort of artifact the wizard from Baldur's was looking for. The prisoner they caught thought maybe they'd been lied to and that the place never really existed at all. Halsin, I guess, assured them that it was real, but they were probably looking in the wrong place."

"Then one of them, a dwarf named Brian, got greedy. I guess they were running out of food, and the goblins were cooking something that smelled better than the mushrooms in the catacombs. I can tell you that it was NOT something he would have wanted to eat; the fool! I saw what it was. The goblins had dragged survivors and fishermen back from the flying ship. After being given the go ahead, they were allowed to cook them." Wynari was thoroughly disgusted by the memory.

"Any... unusual victims?" asked Wyll, and everyone looked at him curiously.

Wynari also gave him a look. It pretty much said that she thought he was quite strange in her opinion.

"They were people. That's not unusual enough for you?"

"Of course it is," said Wyll, and he grinned sheepishly. "I was only thinking it was some of them squiddies or brain things. That's all. Goblins'll eat just about anything, you know?"

Wynari obviously didn't believe him, but she let that go. "Anyway," she said. "So, the dwarf tried sneaking up to the main level while his companions were sleeping, and he was spotted. That's what caused the commotion that night. The goblins spotted the dwarf and sounded the alarm. Then they chased him down to the catacombs where his friends were."

"The adventurers barred the doors into the catacombs to keep the goblins out, but hours later, they busted in with the help of some of their ogres. Sounded like the catacombs were maze-like, so the adventurers escaped deeper into them. The prisoner, however, was caught at that time and dragged up to the interrogation area."

"And so we come full circle," said Vexir. "How did they get out?"

"From what I could tell, the goblins continued to hunt for them in that warren of passages," said Wynari.

"The drow... er... drows - what's the plural form... ah whatever - the dark elves even sent spiders down there to help. This one dark elf, one of the leaders of the goblins - I think her name was Minth... Minthrarara... er... something like that - she led them. I guess the spiders are her pets."

"Finally, not long after dawn, the adventurers were discovered. They were trapped near the underground river they'd been using as a water supply. With nowhere to run and nowhere else to hide, they followed the bear into the river which carried them out beyond the temple."

"So, Minthrar-rara sounded the alarm and gathered a raiding party to chase them. Since I figured Halsin was with them, I followed the raiding party as they chased the adventurers all the way to the grove gate. By the time the raiding party found them, the adventurers had come out of the river by some waterfall not too far from Bogrot. There was a big fight at the east gate of the ruined town, for the goblins had cut the adventurers off. That was where Brian was captured, and so was Halsin."

"How did a bunch of goblins capture a First Druid?" asked Ryth-Shan in disbelief.

"That Minthrahara lady was leading them," Wynari told them. "There were a huge number of them, at least fifty, and her spiders pounced on Halsin from all sides. They kept biting him with their poison and hacking him up with their blade limbs. She has sword spiders and giant spiders both. He took out a number of them before he succumbed to the poison."

Then a thought struck her as odd. "You know what I found very curious, though?" said Wynari.

"What's that?" asked Kaedyn.

"Halsin never changed into his elf form," she told them. "He was a bear the whole time. He could have done so much more against them. Why didn't he transform and use his spells and such? That made no sense to me. It was almost as if he WANTED to get caught."

“Good question,” said Ryth-Shan. “Hopefully, we’ll get a chance to ask him.”

Wynari smiled. “Yeah. Here’s hoping.” Then she remembered that she was telling them about the adventurers, and she snapped back to the story. “The leader of the adventurers was a stinking coward,” she said, her face displaying her anger. “He just turned and fled as soon as he found an opening. He and two others were the only ones to actually escape. There had been like eight or nine adventurers besides Halsin, I guess, in the beginning. One was captured in the catacombs, Brian was bludgeoned over the back of the head, and he and Halsin and one other were dragged off back to the temple. Three or four others died just outside the village. Then the bulk of the raiding party returned with their prisoners and their fallen while the rest chased after the last three adventurers.”

“What did you do?” asked Vexir. “Did YOU help them at all?”

“Of course I did!” said Wynari, a bit offended by her question and the way she asked it. “I turned back into my human form and started hacking the crap out of them from behind. I tried desperately to get to Halsin to help free him, but there was nothing I could do. In the end, I transformed back into a cat and fled when it looked like I was going to be overwhelmed. I took the waterfall entrance on my way back, so I completely skirted around the main gate.”

“Waterfall entrance?” asked Ryth-Shan. “Where’s that?”

“On the west side,” she told them. “It’s fairly well hidden, and you have to climb a steep slope to get up to the path. It isn’t too hard for a cat.” She grinned. “There are some statues there that are made to protect the path. They’ll blast anything when the right power word is spoken. Fortunately, the druids don’t activate it unless they have to. A lot of animals and druids come and go from the grove along that path, and it is now being guarded by the tieflings.”

“So how did you get in here ahead of us?” asked Ryth-Shan. “The door was closed.”

Wynari became a bit anxious about this, and she withdrew just a bit. She even brushed her hair behind her right ear; a nervous habit. “Well... I... that is... When I got back into the grove, I kinda-sorta spotted you all moving around and talking to people. I was curious about you and... well... I spied on you.”

Vexir’s eyes became slits. Her hands gripped her axe tighter. “And what, pray tell, did you witness?”

Wynari looked about to run for it. “I... might have... followed you into the secret tunnels.”

“You saw us!...” Vexir began loudly, but then she caught herself and lowered her voice to barely a whisper. “You saw us in the tunnels?”

“I know you helped the goblin get away,” she confessed. She looked almost like a schoolgirl who was being reprimanded by her strict teacher. “But I totally understand why you did it. I was listening to your conversations. I know your plan. I think it’s smart.”

“How in all the world did we not see this dumb cat running around?” asked Vexir, clearly beside herself with frustration. After everything they had done to avoid someone spotting them, they had, in the end, failed.

Wynari winced. “I had changed into a rat. I noticed that they were scurrying all over the place, so I figured you wouldn’t notice one more.”

Vexir swore, but Kaedyn intervened. “Well, then,” he said. “At least you’re admitting to us that you were spying on us. So back to the previous question. How did you get in here before us?”

Wynari pointed to the door in the southwest corner of the chamber they were in. “In the secret tunnels, there’s a door that leads to that door. You know, it was the door by the storeroom area where you found that staff.”

Ryth-Shan now cursed. “She’s seen everything,” he said.

Wynari was quick to assure them. “I’m not going to tell anyone about the things you’ve done. I swear.”

“So you grabbed a Circlet of Nature and used it to open the door near the storeroom and that door, and then you slipped in here and hid just before Nettie led us in here,” said Kaedyn, summing it up.

“Right,” said Wynari. Then she saw the drow lying on the stone table, and she concluded her tale. “I saw this drow here, and then I read some of the notes and such on the desk. Suddenly, all of you showed up and I hid because I was afraid Nettie would be upset that I was snooping through her things. I overheard what you were saying and decided it best to see if I could get your help. It sounded like you knew more of what was happening, and I’d really like to get this thing out of my head and to know what is happening to me.”

“Please don’t be angry,” she pleaded. “Seriously. I mean you no harm. I just want to join you. I want to work with you to save Halsin and figure out how to get cured. I’m just as desperate as you are. And look! Now you know all about me. What can I do for you... so that... you know... I can get your help. I don’t mind helping you in return. That’s kind of how things are supposed to go... I think. I’m not very good with social situations. I’m mostly on my own most of the time. I belong to the Circle of the Moon. We tend to be loners.” Then she abruptly stopped talking, staring at everyone in the party as if she was trying to determine what they were thinking.

A few moments of silence passed between them as they took time to process everything she'd just told them. It was a lot of information all at once. Then, out of nowhere, Vexir said, "Wait a sec! Did you say 'Akar Kessel?' I mean. Are you saying that you were alive at the time Akar Kessel acquired Crenshinibon?"

Wynari's expression displayed the instant fear she was feeling inside. "Yyyyes? Why do you ask?"

Vexir was unable to hide her disbelief. "Akar Kessel was defeated about a hundred and thirty years ago. It's the Year of Three Sailing Ships, 1492 DR."

Wynari felt her knees give way. She slumped down on the stone table the dead drow was on. "Over... a... a hundred... thirty years? What... that's... What happened to me?"

"Creatures do not age when they are in the Astral Plane," suggested Ryth-Shan. "You could have been kidnapped and kept there."

"Unconscious for over a hundred and thirty years though?" asked Vexir. "That's rather unbelievable."

"Well, regardless," said Ryth-Shan. "She was captured, kidnapped, and infected by mind flayers. That much we know. If her story is true, then we must consider the possibility that whatever is happening to us, it may have started a long time ago; during the Time of Troubles. Whoever is behind this may have been working on this plan for over a hundred years and thirty years."

Another silence fell between them. Then, Kaedyn said, "I think she should join us. The druids will certainly believe their own more than they'd believe us."

"They don't even know her, though," said Vexir. "And she said that they don't trust her. It helps us little."

"She's one of us," said Kaedyn.

"So are these goblins, maybe, and that dead drow there, apparently," Vexir pointed out.

"Let's take a vote," said Gale.

"Bah!" said Vexir. "I'm outnumbered here. Fine. We'll bring her along with us, for now. She knows too much anyway, I guess." Then she confronted Wynari up close and personal, using her intimidation tactics on her. "Mark my words, though. Cross me, and I won't show you mercy." Wynari swallowed hard. Vexir utterly terrified her.

"I... I won't double-cross you. I promise," she muttered.

Vexir enjoyed her fear. "Do I frighten you that much, Girl?"

Wynari nodded. "I'm currently pissing myself right now," she replied. "Figuratively." She smiled nervously.

Vexir grunted. "She's useless." Then she walked towards the exit. "Come on. We've wasted SO much time here."

Kaedyn sighed heavily. He looked at Wynari sympathetically and spoke quietly so Vexir couldn't hear. "Try to ignore her," he said with a smile. "She's like that with everyone. She's like a dog marking her territory. She's gotta piss all over everyone and everything to claim them as her own." Everyone else laughed at this. It made Wynari relax at least a little.

When Vexir noticed that they were not following, she spun around to face them. "Well?" she asked. "What are you all doing?"

"We're coming," said Kaedyn. "Gods grant me strength," he muttered to himself. And then, he led the others to join her. They were, once more, a party of six.

Chapter 41 - Stealthy Maneuvers

The party returned to the central meeting area of the druids, and they were immediately approached by Rath. He glanced over his shoulder to make sure that Kagma was nowhere around - she was in her own chamber again - as he said, "You did well to speak up for the girl. That snake is fickle. A tragedy prevented. Thank you."

"That Kagma seems dangerous," remarked Ryth-Shan who was testing to see if Rath could be trusted.

"Well-seen. Well-spotted," said Rath as he nodded his head emphatically. "We've let a snake replace our leader." He said this with intense feeling.

"Snake? Really?" whispered Wynari to Gale as she tilted her head towards him, groaned, and hid her face behind the palm of her hand. They were both at the back of the party. "Where do these people come up with this stuff? The druids in this grove really like to use those corny metaphors." Then seeing that Gale was giving her a scolding look, she became a bit more defensive. "You know - cause she's got a snake companion. Don't you think that was a corny metaphor?"

"Just... don't," mouthed Gale at her as he winced and shook his head.

"How did Kagma take over the whole grove?" asked Wyll, trying to divert Rath from Wynari's comments. He was standing in front of her and could hear her, and he wasn't at all sure if Rath could or not.

"She was named First Druid in Halsin's absence by Halsin himself. With him caught - or dead - by goblins, none may gainsay her," said Rath. He showed no sign of having heard her. "We have a rigid hierarchy here."

"Who is next in line after her?" asked Vexir, her mind already scheming.

"I am," said Rath. "I could challenge her to take her place, but I honestly don't think I could defeat her in a trial." Then he seemed totally frustrated. "But more will die if her ritual is finished. I doubt those exiled by the rite will survive long outside."

"We're going to look for Halsin," offered Kaedyn.

"You are?" said Rath, hope and relief flooding across his face. "I would give anything to see Halsin return home."

Wyll then added, "No need to fret. I'll find him." He even patted his chest to emphasize his words.

"Silvanus' blessing upon you, and my gratitude as well," said Rath. "Halsin is an elf with the presence of a bear even when NOT in bear form. Trust me when I say that you will not even think he is an elf except for his pointed ears. I mean, he has a twinge of fey about him, but he seems more like a barbarian human than an elf."

"There he goes again! 'Presence of a bear?' Really? I can't take this guy seriously," said Wynari to Gale in even quieter tones this time. "Is no one else hearing this?"

"Shhh," hissed Gale sharply, but she detected a hint of amusement.

"But... does Halsin only ever take bear form because he's some huge guy?" she asked. Gale only patted the air in her direction instead of answering. "Doesn't he take any other form?" she continued. "It's just a wee bit cliché. Don't you think?"

"Not now. Not here," Gale cautioned into his hand at her, but in that moment, she saw that he cracked a smile and tried to hide it.

"We get it," said Vexir sharply to Rath. Whether she heard Wynari's remarks, no one could be sure, but she seemed annoyed regardless. "Big elf. Lots of muscles."

"Yes. Well," said Rath, feeling a bit awkward after her snippety words. "He left west with those adventurers. You won't mistake the First Druid for anyone else."

Then Ryth-Shan dared to ask, "If we present you with evidence that Kagma is... well... let's just say we learned that she couldn't be trusted and she shouldn't be leading the grove, would you be willing to take a stand against her?"

Rath was completely caught off guard. "Not... to be trusted? What?"

The others in the party looked at him with sharp expressions except for Wynari who just looked at him blankly. Ryth-Shan was taking an awful risk. If Rath responded poorly, things could go wrong very quickly. Ryth-Shan explained, "Something is not right here in the grove, agreed?"

Rath did not even need to consider this. "Agreed. I have sensed it, as have others. What are you suggesting?"

Ryth-Shan looked around to make sure no one else was eavesdropping. "We have no real stake here in the grove, so hopefully you can trust me when I say that we have found some evidence that shadow druids are involved with Kagma."

Rath's eyes bugged out of his head. "What? Shadow druids? What evidence is this?"

Ryth-Shan handed him the note and the shadow druid doctrine. "We are going to investigate this location to see if we can gather further evidence to support our suspicions. Kagha is not acting like a true druid, wouldn't you agree? That and these documents seem to be fairly strong proof."

Rath nodded as he held them. "Strong indeed. You are right, though. We'll need something a little more substantial. I could be accused of fabricating these to try to dethrone her and take her place. She could even turn it on me and say that I'm the one who is a shadow druid. Did you really find these amongst Kagha's things? How?"

Ryth-Shan decided the truth was best. "I've been suspicious since before we arrived. Zriek, my raven here, warned me that there was something not right happening here in the grove. I might be gith, but Silvanus has been like a father to me. I am a ranger. When I was young, my people were slaughtered, and I was alone in the wilderness. The wild is my home, not the Astral Plane. I would see this land purged of the Shadow." He seemed quite sincere, and everyone present was unsure how to respond to his intense devotion. They knew he was a nature-lover, but they had no idea just how strong his feelings were.

Rath was impressed. "Your devotion is admirable. Your words strongly portray your love for the Oak Father. Still, you have not told me how you have acquired these things."

"They were in Kagha's possession," said Ryth-Shan. "They were in her chest behind the bookshelf. In my zealotry to seek out the truth, I admit that I committed the offense of searching her possessions without permission."

Rath's expression turned hard. "You have admitted fault. That is, once again, admirable, and it gives me strong reason to believe you. However, you need to try to put them back," he told the gith. "It will be a much stronger evidence against her if we search her things and find them amongst her personal belongings. If you present these before the other druids and it comes out that you stole from Kagha to get them, it will only hurt your arguments."

Kaedyr couldn't help but agree. "I should have thought of that myself," he said. "I am a cleric of Tyr, but I still have much to learn. In this situation, you have proven a wiser man than I in the ways of justice."

"Kaedyr likes to throw around that he's a cleric of Tyr, doesn't he?" Wynari asked Gale, again in a hushed voice.

Gale and Wyll both snorted derisively. "Yes," Gale hissed back.

Rath appreciated the complement, and Kaedyr's words added to the level of trust he had for the party. "I will do what I can to distract Kagha while you return those," he said. "Please, make it quick." Then he immediately headed off for Kagha's chamber.

As soon as he was beyond earshot, Wyll said to Ryth-Shan, "Well done! I must say, your actions were beyond valiant. You are both humble and brave to admit you stole from the guy's leader. Now that's the stuff of legends. That's the stuff heroes are made of. Everyone makes mistakes, but heroes own up to them. You've truly inspired me."

Wynari also wanted to join in on making him feel good. "Your love for the wild and for the Oak Father is like my own," she said. "I, too, am an orphan. I felt as if the Oak Father was like my very own. I would do anything to see his ways not only preserved but magnified across the face of Faerun."

Kaedyr patted him on the shoulder. "You are a good companion, Ryth-Shan," he said. "I'm glad we are traveling together. You truly handled that well."

Then Vexir said, "Yes. Yes. You did great. He's right, though. We need to get those documents back in the chest, and he already said that we needed to hurry. So get moving already. He's distracting her right now."

With that, Ryth-Shan made his way to Kagha's chamber. Rath was talking with her, but he had positioned himself in such a way so that she had to turn sideways to face him. Therefore, Ryth-Shan was just at the edge of her line of sight.

He slipped around behind the bookshelves where the chest was, and he made his way to the lock. The chest, thankfully, clicked open without an issue. He slid the two documents inside back where he thought he'd found them at the bottom of Kagha's things. Then he quietly closed it and locked it once more. Finally, he slipped back out where the others waited for him. "Done," he said, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Good," said Vexir. "Now she won't be the wiser."

"And, as Rath said," Wyll added, "we can now bring up the evidence and have the druids find it themselves. She won't be able to get out of that one."

"Well," said Vexir, "we've wasted enough time in here. Let's get moving." And with that, they began to make their way towards the exit.

Ryth-Shan glanced back at Kagha and Rath one last time. He was grateful that Lae'zel was nowhere around. He really didn't want her to know how he felt about Silvanus. She might view him as a traitor to their

people. He cared about his people, but he didn't really approve of their devotion to a Lich Queen. Vlaakith was anything but natural. She was, in fact, a direct affront to it.

Little did he know, but Shpri was observing everything the party did. She overheard everything they said. When the party split, Lae'zel had ordered Shpri to follow the others; to keep an eye on them from the shadows. She did not trust them, and she wanted to make sure she knew everything they were doing and planning. Later, when Shpri returned to the camp, she told Lae'zel all that had occurred. The gith warrior was not at all pleased to learn of Ryth-Shan's devotion to anyone other than Vlaakith. Indeed, she began to wonder if he was nothing but a traitor and an infidel.

Chapter 42 - The Emerald Grove

As the party made their way towards the exit to leave the inner sanctum, Wynari stopped them. She ran up to Ryth-Shan and pointed at a plaque and a mural beyond. "Did you notice this?" she said excitedly. "I figured you'd like it if you hadn't seen it yet."

Ryth-Shan paused and glanced in the direction she indicated. "No," he said. "I hadn't taken the time to read it." Then he examined them more carefully. "'The forest rose with claw and tooth to tear the darkness from its roots,'" he read straight from the plaque. "Druidic orders often fight dark forces, but I do not recognize the events depicted here. The mural depicts a purge, a sacred cleansing of the land on a scale I've never seen before."

"Me either," said Wynari. "So this didn't happen over the last hundred and thirty years? I guess if you don't know about it, though, it could have occurred at any time." She then pointed at another plaque and mural. "There's another one there, too. And two more over there."

"Can we just go?" asked Vexir, not interested in the slightest.

Ryth-Shan shook his head. "Could be important. We can't rule out anything." Then he went over to the second plaque. "'By claw and tooth, from root to thorn, The Old Oak's grove, to wildlings sworn.'"

"The druids are elders of a circle, I think," said Wynari. "This place is a divine sanctuary."

Ryth-Shan nodded. "Seems so. No wonder the druids here revere it so much. It could be why the goblins and their leaders want to destroy it so badly. It could be that they are out for revenge, if the darkness had to do with them."

"Oh? You think it's about goblins and their leaders?" said Wynari. "Nah. I think this grove was once a place of power for someone like Shar, or maybe the Shadow Druids of Cloakwood."

"Really?" asked Kaedyn. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"'The forest rose with claw and tooth,'" said Wynari, "'to tear the darkness from its roots.' Doesn't that sound like the servants of nature had to come and defeat the darkness before they could settle here? So, I was thinking that a long time ago there was some sort of evil lurking here. Like I said, maybe it was the Shadow Druids of Cloakwood, or maybe it was just Sharites." Then she paused for a moment to consider. "I actually assumed they were Sharites because there's another mural over there that suggests Sharites were involved, at least."

"But, anyway," she continued, "I think the first druids came here and purged the grove. Then they established it as a place of power for Silvanus. Then, based on the second mural, I think that Silvanus granted the druids sanctuary here and made them the caretakers as their reward."

"The darkness could mean anything," said Ryth-Shan, now deep in thought. "Could be goblins, drow, Sharites, shadow druids, you name it. Either way, I think it's connected to us."

"Wait," said Wyll, confused. "You think that the gobbos attacking, the problems with the grove here, and the brain bugs are all a part of some grand scheme of some kind? They're all connected? Am I missing something? How does that make any sense?"

Kaedyn met his gaze. "We've found a number of potential clues. Bhaal, Bane and Myrkul might somehow be a part of this, along with Jergal, Shar, Selune... who knows? We are finding a lot of coincidences and connections."

"Right," said Ryth-Shan. "Coincidence? Selune was worshipped heavily in this area. She has a ruined temple in the west. The goblins have taken that temple as their camp. Those same goblins carry shields with a symbol that looks like the blending of the three symbols of Bhaal, Bane and Myrkul. We've recently discovered that the dead drow in the chamber with Nettie had a tadpole in his head, and he was leading some of those same goblins."

"And there's an old crypt of Jergal to the south of here," Gale added. "There, we found a book that is currently, magically recording which gods were dead and have now been made alive by the Second Sundering. There's even been hints of Shar's involvement in the area, and Harpers too."

"And now this," said Ryth-Shan.

"Wait!" said Wynari. "Yes! The other murals indicate Shar and Harpers too. Come on. Take a look." She led them over to the next one. "'In darkest hour, a concord made, twixt harp and wild against the shade.' Harp and wild? Do you recall the old stories of an alliance between druids and the Harpers?"

"A bit, but the details are vague," admitted Ryth-Shan.

Gale took a proud stance, for he, it seemed, knew all about this topic. "Of what alliance are you referring to?" he asked with an air of superiority. "As one really delves into the history of the Harpers, one realizes that they were, in fact, founded by rangers and druids back in the Year of Freedom's Friends, 324 DR - Dale Reckoning, that is. Myth Drannan elven military leaders joined forces with these few trusted human nature-lovers and formed the organization. At the head was Elminster Aumar, renowned mage and, frankly, a friend of mine, actually. He's like a

mentor to me. He currently resides in Waterdeep, where I'm from, and he is both aiding the newly appointed Open Lord of Waterdeep, Laeral Silverhand, and he is uncovering a string of murders involving some sort of Masked Lords. I was hoping to help him, but... well... I became caught up in my own personal affairs. And then, all this happened."

He waved that aside. "Anyway, as it stands, druids have a long history with the Harpers," Gale continued. "For example, on the twenty-seventh of Flamerule of 720 DR, at a druid grove in High Dale, known as the Dancing Place, a large congregation of dryads bid the druids to make welcome the priests of many different gods who started to arrive before finally Elminster appeared to explain why they had all been called. This was the First Reformation. They were all called to help fight back against the faithful of Bane, Bhaal, Loviatar, Malar and Myrkul."

"Again," said Gale, pausing from his dissertation, "here we bring up the Dead Three. Yes? And, I might add, that the priests who came were priests of Corellon, Mielikki, Mystra, Oghma, Selune, Silvanus, and Tymora. They possessed their own followers during that council to speak through them so that they could make it plain they all needed to work together. That night was known as the Gathering of the Gods."

Vexir was, for once, intrigued. "I suppose you're right. Again, it does seem like we are at the heart of some sort of new God-War. Many of those same gods seem connected to what we are going through."

"So, I wonder if the mural is referring to that event; the Gathering of the Gods," said Kaedyn.

"I doubt it," said Gale. "The murals here seem to imply only an alliance between Harpers and the druids at this grove."

"Are there any other alliances that might fit better?" asked Wyll.

"Let's review the last mural first," said Gale. "It might give better clues."

They moved over to the last mural. Several druids nearby took notice of them, but they seemed totally uninterested. They were too busy arguing over Kagma's decision. Some were pleased that Kagma had released Arabella, and some seemed quite upset by it. Those upset by it expressed their frustration towards the mooching tieflings and their fears that they might not survive the winter because their supplies were being depleted.

Ryth-Shan read off the last plaque's inscription. "'The towers seized, the battle done, the moonrise broke the Darkest One.' Look!" He pointed to the mural. "Wynari's right. The mark of the dark goddess Shar on the broken helmet. This army marched in her name."

"'Moonrise' must be a reference to Shar's divine sister, Selune," said Kaedyn. "So, once again, we have Shar and Selune involved in this area."

"I wonder if all this has something to do with the battle of Shar and Selune over the streets of Waterdeep," said Gale as he thought aloud. "In the Year of Shadows, 1358 DR, the Time of Troubles, magic went crazy. The gods were forced to walk the Realms in mortal form."

"That's two years after... I mean... that's roughly when I was taken," said Wynari.

Gale didn't even seem to hear her. "Selune was already in mortal form as Luna. Long story short, Shar pretended to be Selune and tricked a lot of people. In the end, the truth was discovered, and Selune battled Shar over the streets of Waterdeep. Her light blasted away Shar's darkness while she reminded her of their unceasing battle and the balance they must uphold. Shar vanished, and the avatar of Selune became Luna once more."

"After this encounter, Selune was free to do as she wished. She made new alliances in her unending war against Shar. It could be that, at that time, she came to this grove and made an alliance here," Gale suggested. "That would be roughly around 1360 DR. Other than this, I can't think of anything in the history books that relates here. There's a library in Waterdeep, though, and one in Baldur's Gate as well, that might shed more light on this. I recall these libraries had a plethora of books on Selune."

"All very interesting," said Ryth-Shan. "We'll have to keep these things in mind as we proceed."

"Sure," said Vexir. "Are we done here, then?"

Kaedyn turned to her and smiled. "You know. You are truly refreshing. We can always count on you to keep us moving and on track."

Vexir's eyes narrowed at him. "Didn't I tell you before that flattery will get you nowhere?"

Kaedyn chuckled. "Who's flattering? I tell the truth. I don't do flattery."

Vexir held his gaze a moment longer as if unsure how to respond. Then, she rolled her eyes and turned to head for the door. "I'll be waiting outside," she said.

"No need," said Ryth-Shan. "I think we're done here." Then the party followed her out the door and back out into the heart of the grove.

Chapter 43 - The Storyteller

As the party left the inner sanctum, the bright sun was well on its way off to the west. Their plan was to leave the grove, at that point, and head back to camp. However, Ryth-Shan spotted a boar nearby, and he remembered Bomrush. "If you all want to head back without me, that's fine," he said, "but I just want to see if anyone knows anything about Bomrush."

"Bomrush?" asked Vexir. At that point, she had forgotten all about the boar.

"My boar friend," said Ryth-Shan. "Remember? He was with us just after we met Astarion. He ran off when we got past the ghaik ship."

Vexir regarded him for a moment. Then, she said, "We should probably all stick together. I don't trust anyone around here."

"Agreed," said Kaedyn. "What are we going to do back at the camp anyway?"

Then Ryth-Shan turned to Wynari. "Can you cast Speak with Animals? I'm afraid I've exhausted my own abilities. If not, maybe we can ask another druid to help."

She nodded. "Sure. I can do it." She seemed happy to help. So, she performed the ritual to cast Speak with Animals. They then made their way around the grove. Wynari translated for the animals, and they spoke to several druids as well. They learned that Bomrush had not come to the grove. He was still roaming about the forest beyond, most likely. Ryth-Shan was disappointed, but he was happy to hear that Bomrush was most likely okay.

Finally, the group once more came upon the unusual sight of the bearded human man with the puffy dark blue hat who was attempting to talk to a brown bear. He wore checkered padded armor with cross symbols in each checkered square, and he held a book with a feather pen. His outfit was mostly light blue and white with a frilly white collar. "I see," he said thoughtfully as he wrote in the book. "Most interesting."

"What in the world are you doing?" asked Ryth-Shan as they came upon him.

"One moment, please," said the man.

Wynari then talked to the bear to see if she could learn something from him. "Hello there," she said with a smile. "May I ask what you're doing?"

"Just a moment," said the bear. "This man is recording my story." He looked back up at the man. "I. Am. Far. From. Home," he told the man. As the colorful man started to scribble, the bear took a quick look at the page. His brow furrowed. Incomprehensible squiggles surrounded a crude sketch: a bear disemboweling a clutch of tieflings. "Come on. All the druids can understand me. You can," he said to Wynari. "Why can't the man with the pen?"

He tried once more to get the man to understand him. "I. Traveled. A. Long. Way." The man nodded thoughtfully and added another dismembered limb to his sketch.

"Hold on," said Wynari. "Let me try to talk to him. What's your name?"

"Bosk," said the bear. "That would be wonderful, if you could make it clear to him what I'm trying to say. I would love to have my story written down and told."

"So where are you from?" she asked him. "Do you know the name of the place, or do you just know that it is far away?"

"Just far away," said Bosk. "It's been a hard journey. Many evil things invaded my home. Many animals were forced out of the land because of it. I came to the grove here in hopes of gaining help from the druids."

"Most interesting," said Wynari. "Anything else you can tell me?"

"Um," said Bosk. "Lots of running and I was really scared, but those horned ones he is drawing had nothing to do with it."

"Okay," she said. "I'll let him know." She then told the strange man with the pen everything Bosk had told her.

"Oh! How wonderful!" said the man. "Thank you so much for the translation. That was very helpful." He then scribbled all the more on the page. He seemed like a very high-strung individual.

As Wynari looked over his shoulder, she was appalled to find that he was still drawing the bear mauling tieflings. The only things he added were a few notes. "From far away," he muttered as he wrote. "Evil tieflings invaded. Vicious devils. Animals slaughtered many. Archfiend arrived. Bear fled." Then he dotted the page sharply. "There! Perfect. Thank you. That will make a great story."

Then, it seemed as if he recognized who he was talking to. "Ah, my good friends! It's you! Most excellent! You were at the gates not long ago; no? When the goblins came? You saw them up close? A few questions, if you please. There's no overstating my interest."

Wyll stepped forward with a smile. "Are you a storyteller? Are you interested in writing up people's adventures?"

The man was emphatic. "My boy! I am ALWAYS eager to put any adventure on page. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Volothamp Geddarm, renowned author and illustrator of many guide books and maps of Faerun."

Surprisingly, everyone knew something about Volo. He was a rather renowned travelling scholar and minor wizard who was frequently at odds with Elminster. Elminster, after all, liked some things to be kept hidden and secret, while Volo loved to sprout off every detail of every story with many embellishments. He was most known for being too curious and for presenting information that was half-accurate. One of the most curious mysteries about him was that he was born almost two centuries ago. Thus, even Wynari knew of him. And yet, he was human. "How are you still alive?" asked Wynari.

He laughed. "My Dear, that is an amazing tale. The long and short of it is that I was trapped by an imprisonment spell and released only after a century passed at the end of the Spellplague. Sometime in the late 1480s... or was it the early 1490s... Bah! I can't remember. Anyway, I went to Port Nyanzaru, visiting taverns to promote my new book and to set up audiences with the seven merchant princes. I recently returned to Waterdeep to start working on my next work; Volo's Guide to Spirits and Specters."

"Trapped by an imprisonment spell?" asked Wynari, more to herself than anyone. It seemed she was wondering if something similar had been used on her.

Volo didn't even notice that she'd spoken. "But then I heard rumors about things happening out here in the Western Heartlands," he continued.

"Oh! Finally!" said Ryth-Shan. "We know roughly where we are. A few others mentioned we were maybe ten days out from Baldur's Gate. So we are east of Baldur's Gate in the Western Heartlands. That makes sense."

"Yes," said Volo. "We are just south of the Risen Road. The river that flows all about this area is the Chionthar. Elturgard is east along the Risen Road. There was a small village here called Moonhaven, but it seems that it was destroyed some time ago. Dreadful affair!"

"ANYway!" said Volo, transitioning back to his questions. He didn't even need them to tell him to proceed. He asked anyway. "How would you describe that particular batch of goblins that you ran into at the gate? Size? Nature? Distinguishing qualities?"

Ryth-Shan described the goblins. He gave an exact description of them; even detailing the symbol on their gear. "Goblins... were... of... rare... gem-colored... hue... and... wielded... magic... blowguns..." As he spoke, Volo wrote the words in his journal. He then stabbed the page sharply with his pen. "Right!"

Kaedyn withdrew a bit. "A myth-weaver. So, it is true. You don't have any respect for the truth."

Volo disregarded him completely. "And the... dragon they had marching at their rear. Was it of the Brass or Silver variety?"

"Dragon?" asked Vexir with a laugh. "Are you serious? This place would be rubble and ash if a dragon had been with them." Her usual harsh demeanor was shattered by his ridiculous manner. "We'd all be dead right now."

Volo gave her a look of disdain. "Witnesses... failed... to... notice... OBVIOUS... dragon..." he said as he wrote the words pointedly. Then, content with his version of the story, he continued much more joyfully. "Last question, and you'll be quite free. Did the attackers rally to 'the Absolute' when they fell upon the gates?"

Wyll then replied. "Yes. They called out the name like a war cry?"

Volo was amazed. "They did, didn't they? Oh-ho! Curious. Curious indeed. I've interrogated one; a captive in this very camp. As soon as the battle was finished, they threw her in the prison. I rushed to meet her before anyone else could get to her. She reports that they've abandoned their god Maglubiyet in favor of someone called 'the Absolute.' The scandal!" He nearly growled out the last bit.

"What is your interest in all this?" asked Vexir, now suspicious of him.

"Never you mind," said Volo. "I'm on my way to their camp as we speak. I always knew my studies in Ghukliak would come to some use."

"You're going to the goblin camp?" asked Kaedyn in alarm. "That seems rather unwise. Goblins aren't known for mercy."

Volo laughed lightly. "Never you mind. Who needs mercy when you've a quick tongue?" Then, almost as if he was an actor on stage, he voiced his thoughts as if no one else could hear him but his audience. "And an invisibility potion stashed in one's back pocket." Then he returned to speaking to them. "Until we meet again! Farewell, friends!" And with that, Volo was off without so much as a glance back.

Vexir shook her head. "Weirdo," she commented.

"For once, we agree," said Kaedyn. Then he spotted a book on a bench not far away. He rushed to it and picked it up. "He must have left this behind. I should try to return it."

Then he noticed the title of the book. "'A Primer on Mythical Beasts.' How curious!"

Ryth-Shan was then interested and came to look at it himself. He took the book from Kaedyn and flipped it open to a bookmarked page. "Chapter 5. Miniature Giant Space Hamster?" He looked at the others with a raised brow. "Very little is known about this particular cryptid, though stories say they tend to choose well-muscled human males as their steeds when they deign to visit this plane. According to legends, this creature retains a wellspring of indescribable power known only to self, though it provides its steed with perhaps mystical, perhaps mundane courage. Unsubstantiated rumors claim the creature has a taste for human eyes."

"Ridiculous," said Vexir. "Just grab it. The man's long gone now, and he said he's going to the goblin camp. If we run into him again, and we even bother to remember it, we'll return it. Otherwise, we'll chuck it somewhere."

Ryth-Shan shrugged. "Sure. Might be a fun read regardless. Could help pass the time at camp."

"We probably could catch him," said Kaedyn.

"There's a shortcut to the gate over there," said Wynari. "We could use the lift and reach the gate before him. We're leaving anyway, right?"

But then, the sound of a lute playing and a female singing interrupted them. It was awful, and all thoughts of Volo soon vanished from their minds. The woman sounded grieved and like she was struggling to find the right notes and lyrics. "Lloth end me!" said Vexir. "What is that? It sounds like it would make a great interrogation tool." Nearby, one of the wolves howled, their ears metaphorically bleeding.

"Sounds like someone in pain," said Kaedyn, and once again he was off to help without consulting anyone.

Vexir sighed. "Here we go again. Just when I thought we were going to head back to the camp to rest."

Chapter 44 - The Shrieking Harpies

Through the entrance off to the east, up onto the cliffs, there was a ridge that ran to a dead end overlooking the river to the south and the whole grove to the west. It was a beautiful spot full of trees and bushes and flowers. The party could see their camp and the Ruins of Jergal's Crypt. They couldn't make out any details, such as party members moving about the camp, but they could make out its location.

There, sitting on a boulder, was a tiefling female with long, dark purple hair and soft, blue skin. She wore a purple skirt over pink pants and a pink top with jester bells on her shoulders and at her hips. Her face was painted with make-up but not heavily applied, and her orange eyes popped because of the darker eyeshadow she used.

As they approached, the woman seemed to hardly notice them. Two squirrels were sitting at her feet. They seemed to be clutching their ears painfully. Wynari immediately talked with them. Before she could even say a word, though, the female squirrel said, "It hurts! It hurts!"

The male then joined in. "Please, make it stop!"

"Slow down," said Wynari. "What's wrong?"

"Can't you hear it?" said the female. "Her singing. It's awful!"

"Terrible," said the male.

Wynari chuckled. "It is pretty bad. It's quite a racket. You could just spare your ears by leaving."

"We can't!" said the female. "Our brains are melting!"

"Corinna, drag me away!" the male pleaded. "The big one is right. We should go, before it's too late."

"With my last strength, Spar," said Corinna. "I will save us both! Away! Away!" And the two rodents fled.

Wynari told the others in hushed tones, "Even the animals agree."

Kaedyn decided to spare everyone's ears. He approached the tiefling bard as she half-sang/ half-screamed, "Dance upon... the stars tonight. Smile and... pain will... fade away. Words of mine... will change - no! Become - ugh!"

"What's the tune you're singing?" Kaedyn asked, trying to be as friendly as possible.

"More like BUTCHERING," gasped the tiefling bitterly. "Don't know why I bother."

"Are you all right?" asked Kaedyn, his expression soft and caring.

"No," said the tiefling. "I'm moments away from a grisly death... at the hands of this bloody song! I can't... nothing fits, you know?"

Kaedyn forced a smile. "That's the creative process for you. Agony and ecstasy. Mostly agony." This last part he said a bit too forcefully.

The woman winced. "True. And when you finally perfect a song... there's nothing like it. But when you're stuck, and it's just getting worse - ugh. I started out in the camp, but my friends kicked me out. 'Alfira!' they cried. 'Go torture someone else.'"

"Torture is right," said Vexir.

"I know," whined Alfira. "I'm awful; nothing like my mentor."

"Can we... help you finish the song?" asked Kaedyn.

"You want to HELP her finish the song?" asked Vexir. "I'd like to end the song immediately forever."

Kaedyn turned to her. "She's just struggling with it. Can't you see? She has a beautiful voice. She's just grieving about something and fighting against the emotions."

Alfira's expression was full of pain. "Hmm. It can't hurt. I have her... I have an extra lute, if you want?"

Kaedyn looked at the others. "Anyone know how to play?"

"I'm not bad at the lute," said Ryth-Shan, surprising everyone. He walked over and picked up the instrument sitting near Alfira. "So, first things first. What's the song about?"

"My teacher," said Alfira. "Her name was Lihala. She loved dancing. Had two left feet, mind."

This brought sympathy to everyone, even Vexir. "Was? I'm so sorry," said Kaedyn. "No wonder you're struggling."

Alfira then seemed lost in her own thoughts. "I remember waking up one night on the road and seeing her dancing beneath the stars... a huge smile on her face. Thinking of it now, my heart hurts and my words just seem to crumble... like ash." Then, that seemed to trigger something. "Wait! Words of mine will turn to ash... That's perfect!"

Ryth-Shan strummed a bit on the lute to make sure it was tuned appropriately. He had perfect pitch, meaning he could determine if something was off key just by listening to it. "Keep going. What would you say to your teacher, if she was here right now?" He strummed again, tuning the lute to perfection.

"That... that it's okay. That I'll be okay," said Alfira. "And thank you - for everything."

"All right. That's what your lyrics need to say," said Ryth-Shan. "Now close your eyes and paint a picture with your words. Paint the picture of your mentor dancing under the stars and moonlight. See her in your mind once again. She's right there before you, dancing in the moonlight. Tell her what's in your heart."

"Moon... Moon reminds me of your grace... All the love I can't repay... Wait," said Alfira, eyes shooting open. Then she stood and began to strum the tune as she hummed. Ryth-Shan listened to her play for a moment. Then he joined in by playing the harmony.

Unbeknownst to all, Ryth-Shan loved music, and he used to own a lute - before the mind flayers abducted him and he'd lost everything he'd once owned. He used to spend many hours, usually in the evening, relaxing and playing deep in the forest. The music would fill the treetops, and it was as if all of nature was his audience. Those were such peaceful days. Those were the days he longed to return to.

"Dance upon the stars tonight
Smile and pain will fade away
Words of mine will turn to ash
When you call the last light down

Moon reminds me of your grace
All the love I can't repay
Rest and know that I will pray
Farewell my dear old friend"

Then the music began to build as she sang the chorus. The now beautiful, sweet melody echoed throughout the entire grove, temporarily soothing tensions and softening hearts. What once had sounded like a shrieking harpy was now the most heart-warming voice. The pain in Alfira's heart gave her newfound strength; fueling a fire inside her she didn't even know existed. Her voice became powerful and confident as her bardic magic set the wind ablaze. It gripped the souls of everyone for a mile or so around and in every underground cavern.

"Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace
Faith. Care. All the love I can't repay
Moon, sun, all remind me of your grace
Faith. Care. All the love I can't repay-ay-ay."

Then the tune became subdued once more as she and Ryth-Shan continued to strum softly. Still, the chords and lyrics echoed through the grove. Tears began to form in the eyes of every listener as they began to think of those they had lost. Many of the tieflings, especially, had endured so much in the last six months. First, the Descent into Avernus. Then many had died on the road. Many had lost those dearest to them. Even Aradin and his surviving adventurers mourned for those friends they had lost to the goblins.

"Dance upon the stars tonight
Smile and pain will fade away
Words of mine will turn to ash
When you call the last light down

Moon reminds me of your grace
All the love I can't repay
Rest and know that I will pray
Farewell my dear old friend

Dance upon the stars tonight
Smile and pain will fade away..."

Then Alfira broke down, unable to continue. The emotions tore through her like a flood. She slumped back down on the boulder she'd been sitting on as she shielded her face with her hands. "Sorry," she barely managed to mumble out.

"That song was beautiful," said Kaedyn as he wiped tears from his own eyes. "Worthy of a few tears."

"Heh. Thanks," said Alfira, still unable to stop crying. "That's the first time I've played since Lihala died; my teacher. She was playing her lute. We... didn't hear the gnolls coming. There was so much blood. I - I can still smell it."

"I'm sure your teacher would be proud to see you now," said Ryth-Shan as he set Lihala's loot down next to Alfira. "Thank you for giving me the honor of playing her lute."

"Heh," Alfira said as she tried to smile. "She'd yell at me for that clunky verse and make me play till my fingers were raw. And that's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to finish 'The Weeping Dawn' - for her. I've a long way to go, but thank you. I... I needed this."

Then she looked up at Ryth-Shan and caught his hand. "Wait. No. Please. Take her lute. You played it so well. I... I think she'd have wanted someone to have it who could play it like you did."

"I'm not a bard," said Ryth-Shan. "I used to play more, but my lute's gone. I..."

"No. Please. I insist," said Alfira. "She always said that if something happened to her, she wanted me to make sure her lute was in the right hands. She wanted her lute to inspire someone else to play. You were incredible, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate both of you for inspiring me to finish that song."

Ryth-Shan then took the instrument back. "I... I'll honor her memory by playing it as often as I can," he told her. Then he opened his magic pocket and stuck it inside. "It was my pleasure to play it with you." Then she smiled and returned to her own lute, strumming away and working on writing more lyrics.

As they headed down the path back towards the heart of the grove, none found the words to speak. In one way or another, the song had profoundly impacted them. Even Vexir was moved beyond words. She found herself unable to even comprehend what it was that she was feeling.

Suddenly, the group froze. A haunting reprise of Alfira's song tickled their ears. It wasn't the melody. It was almost as if backup vocals were singing various parts of the harmony. They could barely hear it, but it was there, nonetheless. It caught their attention because it was utterly enchanting. It was as if a quartet of beautiful maidens had been singing along to her song and had continued on after she had concluded.

They followed the song along the path away from the grove and towards the river's edge. As they wound their way down a number of cliffs to the water, they were surprised to see a tielfing boy standing by the water's edge. The enchanting voices continued, echoing all around them. Reality began to blur.

The boy looked up at Kaedyn as he approached. "Can you hear it? It's so beautiful. Isn't it? It makes me... I just want to... I need to... get closer. Just a little closer." Then he started out into the water. Everyone else followed, totally charmed.

Chapter 45 - The Harpy Battle

Wynari and Kaedyn moved into the water, and immediately they snapped out of the trance. Just then, a harpy landed on a small rocky island not far away, singing and beckoning them to come to her. Both were stunned by what was happening, neither reacting immediately.

Wyll still followed along with the boy, as did Gale even as a second harpy flew up and over the rocky outcroppings to land on a path not far away to the south. This harpy seemed quite eager to join in on the fun. Then Wyll snapped out of it, and it took him a moment before he collected himself as well. Shortly after, Gale also came to his senses, but by then a harpy had flown into range. Neither human reacted in time.

As for Ryth-Shan, he was lost in the spell. The luring song of a harpy was a magical melody, and every humanoid and giant within three hundred feet had to fight to resist it. Zriek was not a humanoid. Neither was Shpri, who was still following from behind in secret. Gale's cat Will-o'-wisp was also not charmed.

And so, Zriek acted on his own to protect his friend. He flew down and pecked him on the head. It was just enough to snap Ryth-Shan out of it. The gith then immediately assessed the dire situation. He moved up to Vexir and slapped her in the face. She blinked rapidly and snapped out of it as well. She was about to bash Ryth-Shan with the flat of her axe, but then he pulled out his two shortswords and turned away from her. It was then that she knew they were in trouble.

A third harpy had flown up over the cliffs to join the rest just in time to see Ryth-Shan free Vexir from the lure. The monstrous, practically naked female-bird recognized that their prey were not just walking to their deaths. They were breaking free. She flew as fast as she could through the air and landed right next to both Ryth-Shan and Vexir. As she did, she brought her raking claws down to slash the drow across the face.

Vexir recovered just in time. Her eyes narrowed at the creature, and she attacked instinctively before she even knew what the monster was. Her axe sang as she slashed upward with a fierce and menacing shout. The blade tore a gash in the harpy, right up the center, and she staggered backwards from the force of the blow. Her claws raked at Vexir, but they completely missed the mark.

But Vexir quickly followed up by bringing the axe back down. The harpy braced it with both arms just inside the blade against the weapon's shaft. Vexir had swung so hard, that even though the harpy had blocked the blow, the hungry edge almost struck the creature's head. The harpy could barely feel its arms afterwards.

As this was happening, a fourth harpy flew out of hiding from behind the cliffs to the south. He landed near the second harpy that had appeared. This harpy was a male, but what most didn't realize was that male and female Harpies looked very similar. Males even had breasts. The only way anyone could tell the difference was if they looked down. Harpies did not wear clothes.

Wynari finally joined the fray. She became a grizzly bear almost in an instant. With a vicious roar and a bite from her jaws, she tore the third harpy's throat out as it tried to recover from Vexir's attacks. Then she threw the harpy into the stone wall of one of the cliffs, and she ran up the trail to try to wind her way around to where the second harpy was perched.

As she did, Kaedyn pulled out his crossbow and fired at the first harpy who was closest to the tiefling child. The harpy saw the bolt coming, and she dove to the side. The bolt grazed her wing painfully; nothing more. In retaliation, she ceased singing, releasing the tiefling boy from her hold on him. She then flew to land right next to Vexir. Shrieking in fury as she descended, she slashed with the claws on her feet and then brought her club down with both hands. Vexir tried to block the claws first, but her timing was off. Both feet tore into her left arm, splattering blood on the path below and leaving her exposed.

The creature's club bashed Vexir in the head. Because of her leather helmet, the blow was softened to some degree, but it was not nearly enough. It didn't crack her skull open, but it did daze her pretty badly. Blood flowed down into her face as she fell to one knee. Wyll witnessed this and cried, "Leave her alone!" Then he cast the Hex spell and attacked with his rapier. The tip of the blade punctured the harpy's left thigh, jabbing down to bone. She shrieked again and instinctively fell back.

At the same time, Gale cried out and pointed at Wynari. "Follow her," he ordered his cat, and Will-o' took off after the bear. Then he cast Witch Bolt on the harpy who had just wounded Vexir. He was at the back of the group, and so he was not in danger. He timed his attack just right, and a beam of crackling, blue energy lanced out toward the creature, forming a sustained arc of lightning. The harpy jerked and spasmed as the magic danced all over her body. Still, she did not fall.

The second harpy then began to sing as she flew down to attack Vexir. Once again, everyone was caught in the entrancing spell-song. Everyone but Gale and Wynari, that is. Gale managed to shake it off this time, and Wynari wasn't humanoid anymore. So, it had no effect on her. Still, they could not react in time. The harpy landed with both clawed feet right on top of Vexir's head. She smashed the drow into the ground. Then she took her club

and swung. Fortunately, she stumbled a bit, and her weapon hit the ground inches from Vexir's already battered skull. If her aim had been just a bit better, she would have surely killed her.

Ryth-Shan just stood there as if numb. He had a huge, dopey grin on his face as if he was totally enamoured by the bird-woman. So Zriek attacked him again. The raven pecked at him once more on the top of the head, but this time he didn't break free of the spell's hold.

But Vexir was free. Once again, she just swung in the direction of a perceived enemy. She could barely see, for the blood was in her eyes, but she hacked as hard as she could. Her blood-thirsty blade connected with the first harpy's chest, digging in deep and spraying blood everywhere. The harpy shrieked in agony and fell into the water, blood continuing to pour out of her into the river. Then Vexir took a moment to catch her breath as she tried desperately to figure out what to hit next. As she did, the fourth harpy shrieked angrily and grabbed a stone. From his perch, he hurled it at her head. Vexir detected it at the last second and rolled away. The stone hit the path a split second later.

Wynari charged back and pounced on the second harpy who was still hovering over Vexir and about to hit her again. Her jaws snapped, clipping the harpy's arm with her teeth. She then followed up with a swipe with her claws and a roar. The harpy was too fast, however, and she bounded away to safety, narrowly avoiding the powerful paws.

As for Kaedyn and Wyll, they were still lost in song, for the harpy continued to sing even though Wynari had tried to tear her apart. They just stood there, staring dreamily at the naked, winged, woman-bird creature that was barely covered in feathers in certain places. But Gale was free, and so he launched magic missiles at her. She saw them coming at the last second and sacrificed her left arm by batting them away. The missiles pierced her feathery flesh and burned holes into her. She screamed in pain, but she'd avoided death.

Then she retaliated. The vicious woman-bird decided to thin the numbers. She raked Ryth-Shan with her clawed feet while he was still caught in her spell, but although she swiped him, his armor protected him so she didn't draw blood. She then took her club and cracked him upside the head. He spun to the ground, and like Vexir, he was bleeding profusely all over his face.

Zriek decided that attacking Ryth-Shan was a bad idea at that point. His friend was hurting badly from being battered by the harpies. Therefore, he flew at the nasty monster. With wings fluttering wildly, he pecked and pecked at her, but she batted him away each time so that he was hardly doing anything to her.

This was enough to distract her from Vexir, however. She saw the movement and took a swing. She aimed it right for the harpy's chest in such a way that she hoped to send her flying away from her companions, should she not kill her at the same time. The harpy didn't see the attack coming, and Vexir rammed her blade into the creature's stomach, throwing her back fifteen feet. Vexir then pursued.

But that was when the fourth harpy dove from the cliff and landed near her. Like the others, he slashed her with claws and then tried to smack her with his club. His claws raked her armor but failed to penetrate. Then his club struck her in the left shoulder plate. The blow, fortunately, didn't do much more than bruise her.

As soon as Vexir had sent the last female flying, Wynari once more charged. She tore through the water to where the creature landed, and she pounced. The monster gurgled in pain, for she was already suffering from a huge gash in her belly. Wynari bit down on her arm and held tight. Then she rose into the air, taking her with as she raked her with her claws. Blood gushed from the harpy's flayed body as Wynari ripped her to pieces and then tossed her into the river like driftwood.

Now, only the male harpy remained. The song ended. Everyone was free from its spell. Kaedyn, Ryth-Shan, and Wyll all blinked rapidly to clear their heads and their vision. Then Kaedyn saw the harpy, and he attacked with his Dragon's Grasp Handaxe. The harpy tried to bat the weapon away, but it clipped his right shoulder. That was enough to set his shoulder on fire, for the axe's magical ability was that if it connected with an enemy, it could potentially set it on fire. The Harpy shrieked like the others as the flames lit him up.

Then Gale cast Magic Missile again, and they pummelled the harpy's right side, searing holes in him. As this was happening, Zriek flew up in the air above Ryth-Shan, no longer sure what to do. Ryth-Shan remained at a range from his opponent, not daring to get closer on account of his injuries. He fired his longbow, but the arrow only grazed the harpy's left leg.

Finally, Vexir swung her axe. She roared in fury, echoing Wynari's vicious cries. The harpy panicked. He turned to try to flee, but the flames began to spread. She shrieked one more time from the pain, and he fell into the water; his brain shutting down. Vexir then came up from behind and finished him off with a swing of her axe to the back just as he fell.

"So," said Ryth-Shan as he nursed his injuries, "now the grove is infected by harpies as well."

"Can we get out of here now and get back to camp?" asked Vexir. "I'm done with exploring this wretched place. We need some rest."

"I think we had one more stop to make, actually," said Ryth-Shan. "Shouldn't we find out more about Aradin's expedition? He might be able to give us more intel. I know it's a huge pain, but if we don't do it now, he may leave before we get the chance."

"Let's get the boy back to the tiefling camp," said Kaedyn. "There could be more of those harpies around. You okay?" he asked the boy.

The boy was now crouched into a fetal position with his hands over his ears. The water where he crouched came up to his chin. He was so scared. "I... I think so. I... A-are they gone?"

Kaedyn came to the boy and stooped down next to him so he could look him eye-to-eye. He put his hand on the boy's head. "It's okay. They're gone. Are you all right?"

The boy looked at him with such desperate eyes. "No-yes- I mean... I don't know!"

"Take a breath, deep and slow," said Kaedyn. "You're safe now."

"Th-that's what the voice said. I almost got to the nest, but the singing..." Then, it was as if he finally snapped back to reality. "Oh no! I need to get back. Mol will be so mad. Wait, umm... You should meet Mol. She'll be grateful you helped me. Find a boy called Doni. Tell him you want to see the 'Dragon's Lair'. He'll know, then, that you are welcome there." Then the boy was upright and running away. "Thanks again," he said while waving and fleeing towards the grove.

Kaedyn stood upright. "Well, that was odd. Who do you think this Mol person is?"

"Ah!" said Gale as he came to stand next to Kaedyn. He put his hand on Kaedyn's shoulder. "That scamp reminds me of myself when I was a nipper. Always getting into trouble."

Wyll joined them and laughed. "Yes, somehow I can imagine you as a handful."

"Comes with the territory," said Gale. "One time my parents denied me a kitten, so I summoned myself a tressym. Dear old Tara. Beautiful creature. Benefits of a wizard's education, you see. Of course, my considerable talent didn't hurt either. Well... That depends on who you ask, I suppose. I may have summoned things rather more exotic than a winged cat."

"Such as?" asked Wynari. She had returned to human form and joined them also.

"There was that magma mephitis once," said Gale after a moment's thought. "Nice fellow - we kept in touch. Of course, in walked the housekeeper; screaming, yelling, panic, and before you knew it - fire everywhere!"

He then waved off the memory and turned to face the rest of the party. "Anyway. I'm glad we got that boy out of his predicament. Poor lad would have been harpy feed if it wasn't for us."

"That's what heroes do," said Wyll with a happy grin. "I hope he spreads our name about the camp. It'll only help our cause, you know. Some people don't like fame, but fame is important. The more you have of it, the more influence you have. That's good, you know. A lot of people see it as arrogant, but it's not necessarily. It can be, but it depends on the person."

"And it's vital for leadership," Wyll continued. "A person who does not have fame cannot be a leader at all. Everyone needs to know who is leading them, or there is nothing but confusion in the ranks. Without fame, you can't have a good reputation. Without a good reputation, you cannot truly lead at all because no one will trust you."

Then he patted Kaedyn on the back. "That's what makes Kaedyn, here, such a good leader. He's doing pretty well at earning fame and a good reputation. Everyone is learning to trust him already both in the tiefling camp and in the druid's circle."

Kaedyn blushed. "I... I didn't really think I was the leader here."

"And modest too!" said Wyll boisterously. "Man! I am really glad we teamed up. I have a good feeling about our group. I think we're going to do great things."

Vexir cleared her throat loudly to get their attention. She had removed her helmet and was washing her face and head to clean off all the blood. Ryth-Shan was doing the same. Both were barely standing, feeling like they had one foot in the grave.

"I'm so glad you guys can take your time to have some male-bonding there. Meanwhile, Ryth and I are bleeding out of every crevice in our skulls, some of which aren't supposed to be there. Thanks for your concern!" Then she stormed up the path while pressing the palm of her hand against the worst of her injuries. "Can we leave now? Seriously. I'm done. If any more harpies are around, I'm not sure we'll survive it."

She didn't even look back. Whether they followed or not, she didn't care. She was furious. She'd nearly died multiple times. In fact, she wasn't even sure how she was still alive. Did they care? No. They just stood around talking like they'd visited the beach on holiday.

Kaedyn then hurried up to her and stopped her. "Vexir wait! I'm sorry. You're right. That was incredibly insensitive of us." She then paused, still holding her head as she glared at him. Her skull was pounding. He put his hand on top of hers. "Here. At least let me bandage you up."

Then, deciding that her head hurt too much to argue, she let him take her back down to the river. Then she sat down, let him clean her wounds and wrap them. Then he did the same for Ryth-Shan.

While they were waiting, Ryth-Shan sent Zriek and Gale sent Will-o' to check out the cliffs nearby to see if there was anything else in the area they should know about. Much to their relief, there were no more enemies. Also, Zriek discovered a harpy's nest with some items in it, and he led them to it once Vexir and Ryth-Shan were up for it. There was a chest they found hidden by the rocks that they opened and looted. The items they found in the harpy's nest and the chest were: fifteen gold, a Ring of Color Spray, which gave the user the ability to cast Color Spray three times a day, a bloodstone, a suit of magical Studded Leather Armor and a note.

As Gale cast Identify on the armor and ring, Kaedyn read the note. "'Miriam. I'm sorry it's been so long since I've written. A lot has happened. First, some good news. Maggie Two-Fingers won't be bothering you anymore. I paid her back in full. I'm sorry - she should never have got your name in the first place. Now, for the bad news. My love, I'm not coming home. Not for a while, at least. The money came from a mercenary group (probably best I don't give their name) and I've agreed to a couple jobs in the Icewind Dales in return. They paid me up front because... gods, it's so strange to write it... Because they needed a warlock. They needed me. I took the deal the cambion offered. I'm not going to say I had no choice, because that would be a lie. But I don't regret it. I'm a new man. I feel strong for the first time in my life. Aside from being awoken in the middle of the night by the smell of sulfur (he likes to drop by to 'see how everything is going') I have no complaints. If you don't reply to this letter, I understand. And if you don't want me to come back at all, well, I understand that too. I love you, Miriam. And I want you to be happy, even if it's not with me. Edmund.'"

"Looks like Edmund won't be going home ever," said Vexir. "I'm assuming those bones in the nest are his, since the letter was near."

"The armor's probably his too," said Wyll. "Poor guy. Poor Miriam."

"Anyone who makes a deal with a devil deserves death," said Vexir callously.

"Hey," said Wyll a bit too defensively. "You don't know the man's circumstances. Who knows what led him to make a deal with a cambion." Then, it seemed he realized he was defending the man too strongly. "Still, I get what you mean." He smiled. "Cambions are notorious for treachery."

Then, after Gale identified the ring, Vexir asked, "Who should take it?"

"I don't want it," said Kaedyn.

"I'll take it, if no one else wants it," said Wyll. No one argued, so he slipped it on his finger. "Nice gem. Tell me. Does it make me look prettier?" He held it up to his face with a joking smile.

Kaedyn chuckled. After everything they'd just been through, it felt good that Wyll was lightening the mood. "Beautiful. The light purple really makes your eye pop."

"Hah!" said Wyll. "Good one. But which eye were you referring to?"

"The false one, of course," said Kaedyn.

Wyll laughed again. "You know that's my good eye."

Finally, Gale completed the spell to identify the armor. "It's Studded Leather Armor of the Warlock," he told them. "It provides any warlock with extra magical energy, allowing them to cast one more spell than normal."

Wyll jumped all over it. "I'll take that too, if you don't mind. My armor is leather. Studded leather is much better. I mean, unless we come upon a warlock somewhere. Do you guys mind?"

Kaedyn, Wynari and Gale all got the hint that Wyll was, in fact, a warlock. Not only were there clues from their touching his mind, but he was a bit too defensive about the warlock that was killed and a bit too eager to take the armor. They knew he could cast spells, for he used Misty Step, but he was no wizard. That much was clear. The only thing that made sense was that he was a warlock. He had made a deal with a devil.

But none of them chose to say this to him. They simply let him have the armor. He removed his leather armor and replaced it with the new set. "Ah!" he said with another one of his usual, jovial grins. "That's better. Thanks. I feel more protected already."

And with that, the group left the cliffs and returned to the grove. They informed a few druids that there were harpies lurking on the shores, and they sent out some animals to keep a better watch. Then the group left the heart of the grove and made their way towards Aradin and his adventurers within the tiefling camp.

On their way, they ran into Doni, a tiefling boy who was mute. He showed them the way into the Dragon's Lair, which was little more than another set of caverns hidden from everyone else by loose stones spread over a wooden hatch beneath some bushes. Tiefling children had made it their base of operations, and Mol was their leader. Mol was a child as well with an eyepatch over her left eye. The party discovered that Mol was the one who had sent Arabella to steal the idol. Apparently, she was trying to build for herself her own little Thieves' Guild, and most of the tiefling children were her minions. Deciding the entire business was none of their concern, they accepted Mol's thanks and left to find Aradin.

Chapter 46 - Auntie Ethel and the Adventurers

The party returned to the main camp of the tieflings and began to ask around for where Aradin and his companions might be. There were two women in an alcove that were chatting and cooking meals for the entire camp. One of them, a tiefling older woman with wrinkly blue skin, offered them a bowl of nasty-smelling something. They weren't sure what it was, and they refused.

The other woman was an aged human with white hair parted down the middle and pulled back into two tightly braided buns at the nape of her neck. She had a warm smile and was a bit hunched over. She actually seemed a bit out of place amidst all the refugees, for her outfit was clean and pressed and finer looking. She wore a tunic with cream colored waist and darker green bust and shoulders with a high, wide collar. On her lower half, she wore brown slacks and leather boots. She had no weapons or equipment on her personally, but she wore leather bracers that covered her entire forearm.

And she had all sorts of potions around her on tables and shelves and she called out to them, interrupting their conversation with the tiefling woman. "Ah, if it isn't the talk o' the camp?" she said, her accent thick. "Thank goodness you came along when you - oh! There isn't a bit of color in those cheeks, Petal! Are you hurt?" Cold? Feverish?" She was talking to Wynari. "Auntie Ethel will sort you out. I've lotions and potions galore!"

Vexir immediately didn't trust her. She remembered Pandirna who had said she got a potion from a woman in the camp. "There's no need. We're fine. Really."

"Sorry, love. I just lose the run of myself sometimes," said Auntie Ethel sweetly. "I must say, though, don't you think she's looking mighty peaky?" She turned to Wynari again. "Are you all right?"

Wynari found herself quite uncomfortable. She was not used to this much attention. "I-I've been better. It's... difficult to explain."

"Oh, I've seen it all! I once had a fella who'd been caught dabbling with a dryad. The wife was none too pleased and introduced him to a pot of boiling oil." She was practically laughing while telling the tale. "But worry not! I fixed him up and, depending on the lighting, he looks good as new! My point is - whatever ails ya - I promise I've seen worse. So, what is it, petal? What's wrong?"

Wynari blurted it out before anyone could stop her. "I've got a mind flayer parasite in my head." Vexir grit her teeth, as did Ryth-Shan. Then Wynari told Ethel everything she had been through, rattling it off so fast that no one could really stop her.

Ethel nodded along, eyes wide. "You poor pet. My heart goes out to you, truly. I see no sign of a tentacle yet, but that could change in an instant. You need help; SERIOUS help. I've ne'er a potion or lotion here that could do it, but..." She paused as if a thought suddenly struck her brain. "Yes! I may have something at home!"

Now Kaedyn was interested. "Such as?" he asked.

"I've collected some... interesting bits'n'bobs over the years. You'll have to stop by my house; just at the edge of the forest. Let me mark it on your map. I'll be heading back soon, so I can meet you there. Now, do you need anything? I have a few odds and ends for sale."

Kaedyn then noticed her healing potions. "What harm?" he said to the others. Then to Ethel, he said, "Show me your wares."

"Nae bother," she said, waving her hand at him. Then she stepped aside to let them have a look. They sold her Wyll's original leather armor and with the money they already had, plus Wynari's gold, they managed to buy one more lesser potion of healing.

As they pocketed the potion, they bid Ethel farewell. "Be careful on the road," she called to them as they walked away. "I'd hate if something happened to you. Take care, petals."

Vexir was about to scold Wynari for telling their business to a complete stranger, but they were interrupted yet again. The same tiefling adventurers they had run into briefly near the entrance were arguing nearby. "I care about our lives; our FUTURES!" the male wizard tiefling was saying to his two companions.

"You're at it again?" asked Kaedyn. "What's the issue now?"

"We're adventurers," said the only female of the group. "We agreed to stay and help the tieflings, but Rolan here is changing his mind again. All he cares about is his precious Baldur's Gate."

"We should have left by now," said the wizard tiefling named Rolan. Then he cursed. "Instead, we're just sitting here practically begging to be attacked. Staying is a mistake."

"You're doing the right thing," said Kaedyn. "Your fellow tieflings need help."

Rolan sighed. "And what about us? There's every chance we've doomed ourselves by helping these people. We will end up fodder for some goblin's blade - all because Lia insists on helping every wounded foal we see, and Cal has no spine." He gestured at the other tiefling of their group, a fighter with spear and shield and

leather armor. He was not very intimidating. "Our best chance to make it to Baldur's Gate is on our own. This place is lost."

"Hold on," said Wyll. "Why are you so eager to reach the city?"

"You are looking at Lorroakan's newest apprentice," said Rolan. "Yes - THAT Lorroakan; the Greatest Wizard in Baldur's Gate."

Gale then spoke up. "I've heard that name before. A young man, yes? Lives in Ramazith's tower in the upper city?"

"The very same!" said Rolan, glad someone recognized the name.

Gale's grin was mocking. "Word in Waterdeep has it he's a bit of a cad, but you say he's an accomplished wizard?"

Rolan was indignant. "Of course he is! The greatest spellcaster along the Sword Coast. As if I'd settle for a lesser mentor."

Gale made it obvious he was only pretending to be apologetic. "In that case, I'd very much appreciate it if you could arrange an introduction should we reach the city." Rolan continued to eye him with a heated expression.

Then Wyll cut in. "I've heard stories about Lorroakan; not all of them good."

"Common gossip! The by-products of ignorance and jealousy," said Rolan. "I've admired Lorroakan for years. Never dreamed he'd answer my letter. But I've worked myself to the bone for this. Few can match me - in either magic or talent. The names 'Rolan' and 'Lorroakan' will be known far and wide. You'll see."

"Fine. Fine," said Kaedyn, patting the air. "We'll be sure to visit you in Baldur's Gate when this is over and meet the rising star before he gets too big for us to even be noticed."

Rolan brightened again. "Right. Exactly. Good."

"There!" said Vexir who was still quite irritated. She had been scanning the camp for signs of Aradin and his crew while this pointless conversation occurred. "I think the adventurers are over there. It looks like they're itching to leave. We'd better hurry." Then, before anyone could stop her, Vexir jogged towards her destination. She was eager to be done with the grove and to return to the camp to rest. In her mind, if she didn't get away from the wretched grove soon, she was going to just start swinging at whoever was nearby.

The rest of the party bid the tiefling adventurers farewell. Then they hurried to catch up. When they arrived, Vexir had already taken the lead in the conversation with Aradin. "If it ain't the friendly drow," said Aradin to his two friends. "Thought you was with the goblins when you showed up at the gate. Glad you weren't. You fight well. Not like them bloody tieflings."

Vexir smirked. "I think they like you less than they like me. It's almost impressive."

Aradin's expression portrayed intense sarcasm. "Thanks, Mum. Now please do \$#@ off!"

Vexir matched his expression. "\$#@ off yourself. I saved your skin back at the gates, Hhuman." She emphasized the "H" hard to imply that being human made him quite beneath her.

Aradin clenched his fists, and he decided sarcasm was the way to go. "Yeah, you really saved the day, swooping in and playing the hero. Now I'm gonna take the blame for leading the goblins here, and losing track of the bloody druid."

"NOW you're gonna take the blame? Wait a minute," said Vexir, her knuckles turning white as she gripped her axe. "Are you somehow suggesting that we're at fault; as if because we came and saved your sorry butts that NOW you're gonna take the blame? Where did the goblins come from? Was it not the goblin camp in the old Temple of Selune? Were you NOT the ONLY ones who went there with Halsin? Were you NOT the ONLY ones who got spotted, and then weren't YOU the ONLY ones THAT LED THE GOBLINS TO THE GROVE? Am I missing something? Who the flip else could POSSIBLY be at fault BUT you?"

She wasn't finished. "So don't go acting all like because we saved your \$#@ that for some asinine reason you AREN'T to blame. You are taking the blame because you ARE to blame. You're a @#\$#@, got caught, and abandoned the druid. End of story."

"And PLEASE lose your temper right now and attack me. I beg you," she concluded, hefting her blade. She was VERY ready to kill him where he stood.

Aradin was definitely more subdued. An angry drow female with a bloody greataxe had a way of doing that. She still hadn't cleaned it after the harpy fight. "They chased us all the way from the ruins, yeah. We was pokin' around in there," he said. "It was a bloody nightmare."

"And is that where you lost track of the druid?" asked Kaedyn, hoping to move on from the heated moment.

"Aye. His name's Halsin, and if he's still alive, he'll be cursing the day he laid eyes on me," Aradin snapped. "We've got a contract to track down some relic, and he wanted in on the job. Eyes lit up when he heard about it. Didn't work out, though. Goblins got 'im when we was turning tail. He's either diggin' latrines or boilin' in a cookpot by now."

"And that's somehow HIS fault?" snapped Vexir. She was still itching to kill him. "Why will he curse the day he laid eyes on you? How is any of it anyone's fault but YOURS!"

"Vex," said Kaedyn suddenly in a sharp tone as he laid his hand on her shoulder. "This isn't helping."

She glared at him, ready to cut him down. "No. This prick's dead. I'm done."

"And then what?" asked Kaedyn.

"I'll feel better, and the whole grove will thank me," she replied.

He leaned in and whispered into her ear. He tried using a different tactic. "Or, we might be able to persuade him to give us his contract. The relic he's after? Could be important and we're going there anyway. Right?"

Before she could reply, Aradin piped in again. "So what's her deal anyway? She on the rag?"

Kaedyn had to physically restrain her, and Aradin's two companions finally stepped in to help.

"Aradin! What are you trying to do?" the female of the group snapped. "Why are you picking a fight with everyone? Are you trying to get us killed?"

"Vex! Vex! Please! Walk away. Cool off," Kaedyn was saying, getting in her face and forcing her back. She let him push her away, for she really didn't have the strength to fight. Besides, deep down, she knew it would only cause them more headaches.

Ryth-Shan then got between them. "Look. We just need some information. Then we'll be out of your way," he said to Aradin. "We're going into that temple, and we need as much information about it as we can get."

Aradin shot him a dirty look. "Oh, I get it. You're all just after the contract yourselves. Bloody, greedy bastards. That's what this is all about. Well here." He ripped the piece of paper out of his pack and handed it to the gith. "Job's all yours, if you got a death wish. There's a wizard in Baldur's Gate that'll pay goblods for a relic, supposedly buried round these parts. But gold ain't any use if you're too cold to spend it." With this, he shot another challenging look at Vexir.

Ryth-Shan took the contract and examined it. "Just tell me where to find the relic," he said, no longer even looking at him.

"It's called the Nightsong," said Aradin, pointing to the name of it on the contract. "Supposed to be hidden under the temple where the goblins jumped us. I'd give you the map and wish you a happy funeral, but my mate Brian kept hold of it like his own todger."

"What's a todger?" asked Wynari, who was not familiar with the term.

Wyll winced and blushed. "Well. Um. It's sort of a man's... ahem."

Wynari's eyes bugged out of her face, and she turned away, blushing brightly.

"Goblin made short work of the fat old chunk," Aradin continued, oblivious to the little exchange. "All I've got's the contract. It'll show you where we turned back, if you feel like dying."

Ryth-Shan looked up at him now in confusion. "'It'll show you where we turned back?' What do you mean? I don't see how the contract would show us where you turned back."

Aradin jabbed the contract with his forefinger. "Read it, Gith! The little note there in the margin says, 'Couldn't find the \$#@#\$ seal. Not in catacombs.'"

Ryth-Shan folded it and slipped it into his magic pocket. As he did, he never once looked away. His gaze was locked with Aradin's. "Thanks," he said through gritted teeth. "Sorry I needed you to translate. I'm fairly certain it was in a foreign language, because no one but you could read that chicken scratch."

Then he turned and walked away without another word. Vexir decided to join him. They were both officially done with the fool. Everyone else glanced at one another as if questioning whether they wanted to ask any additional questions, but each seemed content to walk away as well. If Wynari hadn't given them her account, they might have asked for more details, but it was clear that she was not lying to them. Sure, Kaedyn, Wyll and Gale were hoping to learn more about where Aradin and his companions went and so forth, but it was clear that continuing to try to have a conversation with him was hopeless. He was beyond insulting to everyone and everything.

"He's probably just blaming himself for the loss of his friends and the druid," Wynari said to Gale and Wyll as they followed the others. "So he's acting like a jerk because deep down he's beating himself up."

"That's a clever observation," said Gale. "Very wise indeed."

Wyll smiled at her. "Seeing the best in people. I like that." Then he lowered his voice. "It's a far better quality than just blowing up at people, or wanting to slit their throats."

"Slit their throats?" asked Wynari.

"By that, he's referring to our traveling companion, Astarion," Gale answered her quizzical expression. "He's back at camp. A rogue."

"Ah," she said with a nod. "The white haired elf guy. Yes. I saw him. Do you trust him?"

“Not as far as I can throw him,” said Gale. “Like some, I am only putting up with him because I have to. For some reason, we’re all in this together, and until we can find a cure, we’ll just have to keep putting up with certain unsavory individuals.”

“Amen to that,” said Wyll. “But Wynari, you are not one of those unsavory types.”

“Not so far, anyway,” said Gale with a grin.

She blushed and looked away. “Thanks, I guess. I... don’t know how to respond to that.”

Both gentlemen laughed. “Don’t worry about it,” said Wyll, putting his arm around her shoulders. “We’ll help you loosen up a bit.”

Gale shot him a sideways glance. “Claiming her as your own already, eh?” He wore a sly grin.

Wyll pulled his arm away, and Wynari stared at Gale in shock, her face turning even more red. Wyll said, “Whoa! Is there competition here? I thought you and Shadowheart maybe. I saw the way the two of you were checkin’ each other out when we first met, and you’re always walking together. I just assumed...”

Gale shrugged. “Merely making an observation. I wasn’t staking a claim of any kind.”

Then Wynari, feeling uncomfortable beyond her limit, said, “Well, I am not a claim to be staked. I am not land or property, and I am not a possession. Thank you, and good day.” Then she jogged away from them to the front of the group near Ryth-Shan.

Both men looked at one another and shrugged. “Well,” said Gale, “that ended well.”

“I don’t think either of us made a particularly good impression on her, do you?” asked Wyll.

“We just showered her with too much attention,” said Gale. “But you were coming on a bit strong. ‘We’ll help you loosen up a bit?’ That was a bit too much.”

Wyll shrugged and shook his head. “Ah well. Better luck next time, I guess.”

Gale shook his head. “Good luck. You’re gonna need it. Looks like I’m not your competition.” Then he gestured to the front where Wynari was walking next to Ryth-Shan. The two were talking in low tones so no one could hear.

Wyll’s eyes narrowed. “Lady-killer,” he said more as a joke than anything. “How does he do it? He’s got Lae’zel and Wynari now eating out of his hand.”

Gale laughed lightly. “I have no idea. Must be magic.”

And with that, they left the Druid’s Grove and returned to the camp where the others were already relaxing. They informed them of everything they’d learned and what they’d accomplished, though they left out many things that they didn’t want the others to know about. Still, Lae’zel knew all, for Shpri had returned before them and had informed her. Nevertheless, she kept her secret knowledge to herself, deciding she would pretend she was completely oblivious.

At one point, Ryth-Shan went to the chest that Astarion had already picked, the one that had the gauntlet inside, and he finally got it open. He didn’t even notice that it had previously been picked. They were thrilled to discover more magic pockets. Now everyone in the group could wear them and use them to exchange items quickly and easily, even over distances. They had pockets to spare. Not a soul suspected that Astarion had found anything else in the chest. He showed off his new items that he’d “purchased” from the merchants, but he hid the gauntlet so that the gith wouldn’t see it up close and personal. He wanted to make sure he used it carefully so that they would not recognize it as some mind flayer weapon. He figured Lae’zel especially would not approve.

And so, the party rested for the remainder of the day, ate and enjoyed one another’s company... until...

Chapter 47 - The Devil You Know

That night, as the party sat around the fire waiting for dinner to finish cooking, all at once Zriek cawed in alarm, Will-o'-wisp hissed, and Shpri skittered about frantically to gain Lae'zel's attention. Out of the darkness behind Kaedyn, a human materialized as if out of the very shadows themselves. Everyone was on their feet in a moment, weapons out and ready.

The nobleman, a brown-haired, handsome man who appeared to be in his late thirties with a pointy nose and fancy clothes, seemed completely unaware that they looked about ready to attack him. He wore a friendly smile as he combed his hair back with his right hand. It had sort of a feathered look about it. He wore a mostly blue tunic with red sleeves and gold trim. Silver bracers were wrapped around his forearms, and he wore blue pants and leather boots. He was completely unarmed.

He glanced around the camp with his dark brown eyes as if concerned for everyone's welfare. "My. My. What manner of place is this? A patch of ground to call home. Some rest for the wicked after all. What would suit the occasion? The words to a lullaby perhaps?"

Then he met Kaedyn's gaze and held it fast. "The mouse smiled brightly. It outfoxed the cat! Then down came the claw, and that, love, was that." He chuckled in a way that sent shivers down everyone's spines. "They do know how to write them in Cormyr, don't they?" Then he bowed politely. "Well met. I am Raphael; very much at your service."

"Are we talking to the mouse or the cat?" asked Vexir. Her grip on her axe was so tight that once again her knuckles were white. She certainly was not up for a fight with anyone, and though Raphael looked unimpressive, she could sense that he was so much more than what he appeared to be.

Raphael chuckled again. "Neither. The fox, rather," he said with sinister delight, "hiding in a word: a silent observer - about to break the silence. Of course, what I have to say merits some privacy - as well as some more... let's call it... refinement." His smile widened. "Yes!" His eyes lit up as if he'd gone insane for a moment. Then he reverted to his usual, noble self. "This encampment is decidedly too middle-of-nowhere for my tastes. Come."

Then he took a step back and waved his hands. Everyone moved to attack, but then the world around them exploded with bright light and clouds and smoke. The smell of sulfur hung in the air. They blinked rapidly, fighting to see. Then the smoke cleared and the light faded.

They were no longer in their camp. Instead, they were in some dimly lit banquet hall. There was a massive spread of foods of every kind. The delicious smells enticed them, for they had yet to eat dinner. Not only that, but the food was of the highest quality. It certainly promised to be more appetizing than the meager food they'd scrounged up on their adventure.

The dark hall was lit by a giant fireplace and candles. Around were tapestries and statues and suits of armor standing against walls and in corners. The ambiance was pleasant, but somehow it felt twisted. They each believed that evil was the air itself that they breathed. Shadows cloaked everything, and it seemed as if they were being watched by many unseen eyes.

Raphael stood before the fireplace, and he drew their attention with flair and drama. "There. Middle-of-somewhere."

"Can you be more specific than 'somewhere'?" asked Kaedyn. His stomach was in knots. How could this be happening? They had just been in the camp in the middle of nowhere east of Baldur's Gate. In a moment, they were transported into a lavish mansion, the gods only knew where. Was it an illusion? Was it real?

"The House of Hope," said Raphael with a wave of his hand. "Where the tired come to rest, and the famished come to feed - lavishly." He then gestured to the table of food. "Go on. Partake. Enjoy your supper. After all..." His voice and entire demeanor became decidedly more wicked, "... it might just be your last."

Ryth-Shan stepped forward, blades ready. "Are these theatrics leading somewhere?"

Raphael's smile never faded. "Are you not entertained?" Then he laughed again. "Well, far be it from me to disappoint." Then, all at once, he transformed before their very eyes from man into cambion. It was then that they noticed the portrait of a devil hanging above the fireplace. It was clearly Raphael.

As he completed his transformation, Raphael spread his arms and wings wide as if saying, "Tada!" Then, he said, "What's better than a devil you don't know?" He paused to allow them to answer. When they didn't, he said, "A devil you do." His eyes stared at them hungrily. "Am I a friend? Potentially. An adversary? Conceivably. But a savior?" He spread his arms again. "That's for certain."

Vexir swallowed hard. She'd recovered only a little. There was no way she could fight a cambion in her state. She fell into an attack stance and brandished her axe, but she felt woozy. "I suggest you take us back to our camp at once," she threatened, forcing herself to act confident and strong in spite of how much her head still hurt.

Raphael feigned fear. "Easy. Easy. I'm here to help, not harm. Consider your predicament. One skull, two tenants, and no solution in sight. I could fix it all like that." He snapped his finger.

"You're mad if you think I'll make a deal with a devil," said Kaedyn. He was ready to back Vexir up if she even remotely made a move to attack him. He was scared, but he was ready to overcome that fear if he had to.

Raphael could not contain his amusement. "And what is madness but a denial of reality? Still, I've a feeling you'll change your mind... before it's changed for you..." He let those words hang in the air, still making no move to defend himself. It was as if he was totally unafraid of them; as if he could snap his fingers again and they'd all be dead.

Then he said, "By all means. Try to cure yourself. Shop around - beg, borrow and steal. Exhaust every possibility until none are left. And when hope has been whittled down to the very marrow of despair - THAT'S when you'll come knocking on my door. Hope. HAHAAHahaha! Such a tease."

"I'll rip out your mocking tongue," vowed Vexir.

"Ah, yes. The tongue. Yet another piece of pleasurable anatomy you'll soon have to do without. All those pretty little symptoms - sundering skin, dissolving guts - they haven't manifested yet, have they? One might say you're a paragon of luck. I'll be there when it runs out." And the last thing they remembered was his wicked face, grinning ear to ear in triumph. Then, all at once, a strange darkness engulfed them, and they woke up in their camp. Supper was still on. It was ready. They hadn't been gone long.

They sat up and looked around, bewildered. Shadowheart was the first to speak up. "Blood hells! Literally! Just when I think I've got a grasp on our dilemma, a devil shows up. No matter. We've dealt with every other oddity thrown at us lately. We can handle this one too. Now, as for this 'Raphael'... He knows our secret. He claims he can help... What do you make of him?"

Kaedyn answered immediately. "He's a devil. We shouldn't trust him; simple as that."

"No doubts at all?" asked Shadowheart. "He seemed powerful and very knowledgeable about our problem... Not the worst prospect we've stumbled across. As long as you can look past what he is."

Vexir then chimed in. "I'm not going to just change my mind on this either. We can't trust Raphael."

Shadowheart was then quite relieved. "Good. That's what I wanted to hear. I know people who work much like our new acquaintance does. You don't need a scourge or a rack to break people. Fear and self-doubt are sufficient. When actual pain comes, the victim's already done the heavy lifting for their torturer. There were no right answers with that devil. He was toying with his food - us."

"Who the hells are these people you know, who do such things?" asked Ryth-Shan curiously.

Shadowheart tried to play it off as if it was nothing. "Cunning people, private, and very dangerous, at times. Perhaps you'll meet them one day... See? Sowing doubt is an old trick. Watch out for it, and for Raphael."

"I don't know," said Gale as he took the food off the fire. He began to dish it out to everyone. He seemed more pleased than upset; unlike his companions. "Am I the only one? Do you feel as flattered as I do? A CAMBION came courting us."

"You have a strange definition of courtship," said Wynari, her expression displaying her thoughts. She thought Gale was presently a madman.

"Oh believe me," said Gale as he handed her some fish and potatoes. "That was a devil's equivalent of serenades and roses. Don't let his bluster fool you. All that talk of desperation? It merely illustrates his own. I think he wants something from us. Badly. And in that knowledge lies our opportunity."

"But what is it that this devil wants so very badly?" asked Kaedyn.

Gale's voice lowered. "Our souls. But I suspect that's but his opening offer. Let me play the devil deal's advocate." He handed the others their dinners. Then sitting down to eat, he continued. "The man is too eager. Do not dismiss his offer out of hand. Raphael is a cambion, which makes him part human."

"And what is human, is fallible," said Vexir, finishing his thought.

"Exactly!" said Gale.

"And how do you propose that we beat a devil at his own game?" asked Ryth-Shan.

Gale was positively glowing. This was his arena. This was where he excelled. "By figuring out his true intentions. Fact one: there's something very strange and very powerful about our tadpoles. Fact two: a devil offers to take it away. What if the tadpole is what he really wants instead of the customary price that is our souls? If I'm right, there's a mighty bargain to be made. Remember his Cormyrian rhyme? 'Down came the claw.' Perhaps we should start growing our nails."

"Don't be a fool," said Lae'zel as she noisily ate. "This devil, Raphael, flaunts his paltry wings, as if he wants to impress us. You saw the red dragons slaying his infernal kin above Hell's fires, did you not? Next to a dragon, the devil's a gnat. When I am kith'rak, I will take my Queen Vlaakith his head as a trophy."

"Kith'rak?" What does that mean?" asked Wynari. She knew absolutely nothing about githyanki.

Lae'zel looked at her as she talked around the food in her mouth. "Githyanki knights. The riders that chased the nautiloid. They are the commissars and enforcers of my Queen Vlaakith's will. Vlaakith bestows no greater honor. To wield a kith'rak's silver sword is my destiny. I will earn my Queen's favor, and I will conquer every layer of Hell, should she command it."

"Why were they chasing the mind flayer ship?" asked Wynari. She was intensely curious.

"The ghaik are my kind's mortal enemy. It is not unusual for the kith'rak to give chase. To penetrate the Hells? This is unusual. But I am not one to question the wisdom of my Queen. I can see but to the horizon. Vlaakith's sight pierces the many planes."

Astarion then rose to his feet as if utterly panicked. He had obviously not been paying much attention to anyone else. He seemed almost like a cornered animal. "Now there's a bloody devil trailing after us? This gets better and better. 'Shop around', he said. He seems sure we won't find anything. And he might be right. We've had no luck so far."

"He's not," Kaedyn encouraged. "We still have options."

"Maybe," said Astarion, "but all that 'take your time, I'll wait' nonsense? He's playing with us." Then, for the first time since they'd known him, Astarion seemed to diminish. It was as if he became a frightened child. "It reminds me of Cazador, taunting his slaves with hope when he knew the game was rigged."

Then, much to everyone's surprise, Astarion turned to Wyll. "You're a warlock. You understand how dangerous the wrong deal can be."

Everyone looked at Wyll to see how he would respond. Wyll nearly choked on his food. No one had told Astarion that they thought Wyll was a warlock. He had somehow figured that out on his own... or was it... somehow he just knew. Somehow, they all just knew.

Yes. They could see it in each other's eyes, and Wyll could see it also. Everyone knew certain things they shouldn't know about one another. Astarion was hiding things from them; things he was hiding in his own secret pockets. Wyll was a warlock with a much darker past than he was letting on; something about a devil woman.

Gale's secret could, in fact, utterly kill them all. He was not exaggerating. He had played with magic beyond his ability to control. He had flirted with power greater than they could imagine. They needed to keep him alive at all costs, or everyone in the entire area would die.

Shadowheart wasn't a cleric of Melira Taralen. She served someone far darker and more deceptive. They didn't know exactly who, but they had a pretty good idea. She'd given it away far too many times. Her reactions to things and her mannerisms had virtually laid it all bare.

Lae'zel was desperate. It was the only reason she was with them at all. Why wasn't she abandoning them to run to her kin alone? Why did she even care what the rest of the party did or what they thought? It was clear to everyone. She had done something terribly wrong; something her people would not approve of. She was afraid that they would somehow discover the truth. She was concerned that once they tried to cleanse her, her secrets would be exposed. She needed people to back her up. She needed them to help her should the need arise.

And Wynari. Oh yes. Wynari was not telling all her secrets either. She knew what had happened to her. She had caused it, somehow. She had taken a terrible risk, and she had made a critical mistake. In an effort to try to prevent tragedy, and to get her revenge, she had caused even more.

Ryth-Shan was no better. His hatred for the ghaik who killed his people had led him to make many compromises. It became clear that his passion to right the wrongs of the grove might just have something to do with his own sins. To make amends for his past wrongs, Ryth-Shan was trying to become the champion of the Emerald Grove.

And Vexir... hard, cold, calculating and manipulative Vexir... Oh the secrets she held deep within! How many walls had she put up to keep the truth imprisoned in a dark cell at the core of her being. The things she had done to sabotage Lloth and her own people; her own family...

Then there was Kaedyn; good, kind, gentle and innocent Kaedyn. Champion of the Truth! Champion of Justice! Oh no! Not Kaedyn. No indeed. Just like the rest of them, he wore a mask to hide his sins. What he had done... what he had been... Oh sure, he was burdened by guilt. He worked hard to make recompense for his crimes. But if they all knew the full truth, what would they think of him then... of what he had been... of what he had done?

The moment passed. Wyll shook his head. "We're already in danger - trapped between devil and mind flayers," he growled.

Astarion recovered as well. They were all trying to pretend that what had happened had, in fact, not. "You're not wrong. We have to figure out what's going on. Why we aren't changing, what's planned for us, and why a devil is suddenly taking an interest. If we can answer those questions, we might have a chance. And if not - well, we'll be exactly where this Raphael wants us."

Silence fell once more over the group. The atmosphere weighed heavily upon them. Finally, as he stared into the fire, Wyll said, "'The Devil With The Silver Tongue.' An old fairy tale my father read to me; the kind with a hero, a villain, and a moral. A farmer made a deal with a devil, so the story goes. In exchange for the farmer's dearest fruit, the devil granted him a bottomless coinpurse. The farmer's dearest fruit, naturally, was no apple, nor peach, but his beloved daughter." He looked up at them. "We can learn a lot from fairy tales, don't you think?"

Vexir was not in the mood. She felt as if her entire self had just been put on a clothesline for everyone to see. She felt as if nothing was sacred. "Spare me the parables. I've no intention of bargaining with the likes of Raphael."

"Good," said Wyll with great sincerity. "He'll require of you only what you're least ready to part with." Then he paused to emphasize the next thing he was going to say. "And then require more still. Listen to me; all of you. You might think you'd give up anything for a cure, but the devil won't take just anything. He'll take EVERYTHING."

And with that, Vexir had enough. She stood, tossed her garbage in the fire, and strode off without a word. She didn't stop until she had reached the river; the furthest point from the camp without leaving it. That was the end of their little dinner meeting. With her departure, no one else spoke. No one wanted to. They were too upset by what had happened; not just about Raphael, but more about how they were now sharing one another's secrets. They didn't yet know all the details about what each of their companions was hiding, but they had vague ideas. They also understood that it wouldn't be long before nothing was sacred between them. Somehow, for some reason, the tadpole was creating within them a collective consciousness.

From that time onward, even when they were separated, each and every party member knew what the others were doing and what they were saying; even what they were thinking. It wasn't true for every single moment, but for those things that affected the party as a whole, they were laid bare. Thus, relationships would be affected, and it would be SO much harder for any of them to keep things from one another.

Chapter 48 - Dream Lovers

That night, they slept poorly away from each other. Zriek kept watch, along with the familiars, so they were able to get some much-needed rest. As they tossed and turned, they all began to dream. It was the same dream, but there was one difference between them. The person who spoke to them was the person each dreamed about at night; the same person they'd envisioned when the voice had asked them.

"Chosen, let me come to you," the voice said in a whisper. "I can help you."

Their eyes opened to reveal a serene and grassy landscape. There were clovers all around. They were lying in the grass as if awakening from a good night's sleep. The scenery was amazing, like a glittering paradise. There were stone columns nearby that formed a circle around the outskirts of the garden. There were vines and such all over them. There were flowers and bushes and a stream. A waterfall cascaded down from a rocky ledge not far away. There was a fine mist in the air so that although the temperature was warm, it was pleasant.

But each was alone. They did not see one another. Even though they were experiencing the same thing, the person they were speaking with was different, and they were speaking with them alone. "I know that voice," they each said as if they were of one mind. "I heard it on the nautiloid."

"I've been searching for you. You're always so far away," the Dream Lovers said softly. The lure of the voices was overpowering.

"Come here," the companions each answered with yearning. "Come to me."

Then, all of a sudden, there the person was; the person they dreamed of at night. "You frown in your sleep," said the Dream Lovers with absolute love and concern on their faces. "There must be so much on your mind." Each of them leaned closer to the person, unable to resist the attraction. The Dream Lovers' fingers were warm against their cheeks, softer than expected.

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

"Who are you? WHAT are you?" they each asked, acting as if they were still in one accord.

The Dream Lovers continued to hold their gazes; the adoration and compassion the Dream Lovers had touched the very core of their beings. "You know. I think in your heart, you know. We wouldn't be here like this if it weren't destiny."

Then, their visions seemed to blur. They fought to clear their heads. As they opened their eyes, the Dream Lovers were gone, but the Paradise Garden they were in was still all about them. They searched with longing for their Dream Lovers, but they were not there.

Or were they? A warm body pressed up against their backs. There the Dream Lovers were, behind them, embracing them as lovers do. The Dream Lovers were inches from their faces; seductively close. They couldn't help themselves as the Dream Lovers thread their legs between theirs. They leaned into the Dream Lovers, accepting them.

"Come now," said the Dream Lovers. "I'll make you feel better." Then the Dream Lovers danced their fingers over their shoulders playfully. This was followed up by tender kisses on their backs. "Let yourself go. Lean back." They complied. "So eager. Hungry. But..." said the Dream Lovers as they continued to kiss their backs and shoulders lovingly.

Something in each of them stirred and twisted, recoiling like wounded beasts. Whatever it was inside, it wanted the Dream Lovers gone. The Dream Lovers seemed wounded. "... you're not ready." It tore their hearts out. They wanted to turn around and assure the person that they were sorry for rejecting them. The Dream Lovers smiled with hope. "I will return when you are." Then the Dream Lovers leaned closer with a devious grin on their faces. They were only a breath away from the nape of their necks; whispering into their ears. "But I do have a parting gift." And with that, the Dream Lovers were gone.

Emptiness and despair filled them. There was a void in their souls now that they could hardly endure. They woke, all at the same time, in various secluded places throughout the camp. None of them saw the others, nor did they want to. Their faces were flushed. They were breathing heavily. Each clutched their hearts, feeling as if they had vanished from their chests. And they each wept bitterly.

But then, they were both comforted and disturbed at the same time. Something awoke within them. It was not threatening. Instead, it was something dark and seductive; enticing and inviting. It was warm and comfortable. It felt so good. They each gained a new power.

Kaedyn and Shadowheart gained an ability called "Survival Instinct." With it, they could infuse a creature with psionic force so that if it looked like they were about to die, they would be healed instead. A death blow would instantly be turned into a new spark of life. Vexir and Lae'zel gained "Psionic Pull." This gave them the ability to pull one creature or object towards them. Ryth-Shan gained "Force Tunnel." He could charge forward and push all

objects and creatures in his path fifteen feet away from him. Astarion gained "Inkblot" and was able to create a cloud of magical darkness in a ten foot radius. Creatures within the cloud were heavily obscured and blinded. Creatures could not make ranged attacks at all into or out of the darkness, giving him the ability to dash out of the cloud, attack, and then dash right back into it for safety and protection.

As for the others, Gale gained "Reflective Shell." He could basically put up a protective shell that would envelop him. It would reflect any projectiles targeted at him to their point of origin. It didn't affect creatures that didn't rely on sight or that could see through illusions. Wyll gained "Supernatural Attraction." He was a part of a greater whole. He could concentrate on his connection to teleport to another infected creature.

Finally, Wynari gained "Wild Shape: Intellect Devourer." She could now transform into an intellect devourer instead of a cat or bear or other animal. She would have ALL the abilities of an intellect devourer including resistance to various weapons and such and the ability to devour someone's intellect and steal their bodies.

As this knowledge sank in, each of them began to ponder what it might mean. What were they becoming? Should they use their new abilities? Should they reject them? Should they reject the Dream Lovers? Should they discuss it with the others?

So many questions flooded their minds, and as the dawn of the fourth day came, a sense of foreboding hung in the morning air. What would the new day bring, and how would it change them...forever...